POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AS SITUATED DIALOGUE: A CASE STUDY OF RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION (RTI) IMPLEMENTATION USING A PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTIC FRAME

by

AMANDA LEIGH SMITH SAILORS

Under the Direction of William Wraga

ABSTRACT

Education policy implementation is a complex endeavor, and successful implementation often depends upon the local context and the people involved in implementation. Policies are often adapted to fit the local context. The term "Response to Intervention" refers not only to a theoretical framework for early intervention and prevention of academic and behavior problems, but also to the inclusion of a provision in IDEA 2004 for states to use a process of Response to Intervention as part of eligibility for special education services. While the research literature has explored components of a successful RTI framework, as well as whether or not the implementation of an RTI framework can improve student achievement, little attention has been given to the factors that influence the successful implementation of an RTI framework at the district level. The purpose of this study was to engage in a dialogue around RTI implementation in a local school system in an effort to understand how the system has worked to implement an RTI framework that is adapted to the local context. In this case study of RTI implementation in Cannon County, interview transcripts, organizational documents, and entries in a researcher

journal were analyzed, using a philosophical hermeneutic lens, in order to ascertain how the reconstruction of one school system's implementation of the theoretical RTI framework can help us to understand the conditions for its adaptation. The findings, constructed partly as a creative nonfiction dialogue and partly as a thick description, reveal that implementation of the RTI framework was helped by the district's efforts to break from the previous intervention process, a focus on how RTI impacts instruction for all students, an effort to implement the framework with fidelity by establishing processes and procedures, and by the work of formal and informal leaders. RTI implementation was hindered by resource barriers related to personnel, intervention materials, scheduling, and funding. Implementation at the secondary level was more problematic than at the elementary level. Implications for the implementation of RTI, as well as other curriculum reform policies, are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: response to intervention, policy implementation, curriculum policy implementation, philosophical hermeneutics

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AMANDA LEIGH SMITH SAILORS

A.B. 2000 The University of Georgia

M.Ed. 2002 The University of Georgia

Ed.S. 2006 Georgia College and State University

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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AMANDA LEIGH SMITH SAILORS

Major Professor:	William Wraga
Committee:	Melissa Freeman Sally Zepeda

Electronic Version Approved:

Julie Coffield
Interim Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

To Mrs. Barbara Davis, my 7th grade English teacher:

I will never forget the encouragement I found in these words: "Dedicate your first book to me!"

To Mama:

Because of all the sacrifices you made in your career and life so that I could be in this place. Because in your time, it made more sense for a smart young lady to be a nurse than a doctor. Through your sacrifice, you made me. This is a dream fulfilled for both of us.

To Chad:

You gave me freedom—to be a student at the same time that I needed to be a wife and mother. You allowed me to purse this dream at a time in our lives when it didn't seem to make sense. I love you—thank you for loving *all* of me—including the part that needed to do this.

To Katie and Tucker:

More than you know—or will remember—this three year journey has been hard for us. You had to share Mommy with class, with papers, with professors. You endured my exhaustion and impatience. Yet, you cheered me on. Because of you, I pressed on toward the goal. Regardless of the mountains I climb or the dreams I fulfill, the two of you are the greatest accomplishments of my life. I hope that I have taught you to dream big. You can do and be anything you want—and I will be your biggest fan. I love you—Dr. Mommy.

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Finally, I am grateful for the school system and group of educators who participated in this research. My goal was to engage in research that highlights the intersection of education policy with the real world of classrooms and school districts. Your voices have brought that world to life in this research, and I can never repay you for your time and willingness to add to the conversation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 2004, it was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)[1] and included a provision for states to use a process of measuring how a student responds to research-based interventions in the determination of eligibility under the category of specific learning disability: "In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention" (20 U.S.C. §1400)[2]. This provision banned the requirement of a discrepancy model[3] in the identification of students with specific learning disabilities. Instead, the legislation allowed for the use of a process "based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention" (Duffy, 2007, p. 2). This process is most commonly referred to as Response to Intervention, or RTI. By 2007, a year after the regulations for IDEA were finalized, all but three of the 50 states were in some phase of implementing RTI frameworks (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). In fact, Georgia's department of education wrote very clear

[1] Although the legislation was renamed at the time of reauthorization in 2004, it is still widely referred to in the literature and practice as IDEA. The addition of the word "Improvement" is significant, in light of the new focus on student outcomes rather than merely on equal access. However, throughout the rest of the paper, I will refer to the law as IDEA, as that is the widely recognized acronym.

[2] For additional language from the legislation, see appendix A.

[3] Previously, a student was found eligible for a specific learning disability through the use of standardized measures of mental ability and achievement to determine if a discrepancy existed between the two.

language related to RTI due to the connection of the RTI process with the longstanding Student Support Team[4] process (Zirkel, 2011a).

While RTI in federal policy is connected to IDEA eligibility, the model predates the reauthorization of IDEA, and RTI is more than a means to evaluate students for a learning disability. RTI, in its broad sense, is a term used to refer to a "practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying child response data to important educational decisions" (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 3). In essence, RTI is a problem-solving model—a method for approaching academic and behavior problems as they arise in schools (Wedl, 2005). When fully implemented, RTI can be a model for comprehensive reform of curriculum and instruction based on scientifically validated methods of integrating "instruction, intervention, and assessment" (Mitchell, Deshler, & Lenz, 2008, p. 53).

Problem Statement

In spite of the promise that RTI holds as a model for comprehensive reform, and in spite of clear policy from the state of Georgia, school districts in the state have not implemented RTI frameworks with systematic fidelity (L. Pennington, SSTAGE Executive Director, personal communication, July 19, 2013). RTI frameworks, when implemented with fidelity, affect the core of teaching and learning and require teachers to rethink the links between curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and how these are used to benefit students (e.g.,, Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; White, Polly, & Audette, 2012). Thus, like many other education policies that attempt to "mandate what matters"

[4] Student Support Teams are legally mandated in Georgia as a result of a court case, *Marshall v. Georgia*, related to the disproportionality of students of color who were identified for special education. The SST is also an early intervention process, but the framework of RTI provides a much more structured early intervention process than what is mandated by SST.

(McLaughlin, 1990, p. 39) by coming close to the core of teaching, RTI is often "absorb[ed]" and "convert[ed]" into a "routine add-on compatible with existing practices" (Cuban, 1991, p. 217). Systems may comply with RTI requirements when questions arise related to special education eligibility, but fail to implement a systematic early intervention process that would benefit all students. The implementation of RTI in Georgia has varied from district to district and is influenced by the local context in which the implementation occurs.

Purpose of the Study

The Cannon[5] County School System is a winner of the SSTAGE (Student Support Team Association of Georgia Educators) STAR Award for Promising Practices related to Response to Intervention implementation. The purpose of the current study is to engage with stakeholders in a dialogue around RTI implementation in this local system in an effort to understand how the system has worked to implement an RTI framework and how the idea of "intervention" is adapted to and practiced in a local context. This dialogue helps to inform my own understanding of RTI and how it is experienced, and will hopefully allow others to expand their understandings as the experiences of educators in Cannon County collide with the experiences of others as we seek to understand the conditions that allow education policy to be interpreted and adapted in local contexts.

Research Question

How does the reconstruction of one school system's implementation of the theoretical RTI framework help us to understand the conditions for its adaptation?

The following subquestions contribute to an understanding of the overarching question:

1. What processes were implemented at the building and system levels?
2. How is the framework of "intervention" constructed at the building and system

[5] Pseudonym for the school district.

levels—what does it mean to "intervene"?

3. What conditions in the local context influenced the implementation of the RTI framework?

To answer these questions, I propose the use of the Cannon County School System as an "educational" case study (Bassey, 1999, p. 28), using the theoretical lens of philosophical hermeneutics in an attempt to understand the interpretive act of RTI policy implementation in the district.

Theoretical Frame

Those who study education policy are increasingly aware of the situated and contingent nature of policy implementation (Fullan 2007; Honig, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006; McLaughlin, 1990). Policy implementation not only depends on the infrastructure and "capacity" (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 36) of the local context(s) in which it is implemented (Fullan, 2007; McLaughlin, 2006), but also on the people responsible for implementing the policy (Fullan, 2007; McLaughlin, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). McLaughlin (2006) explains that policy implementation is "not about mindless compliance," but it is about how educators engage in a "process of sense making" that is anything but linear: "On the ground, implementation involves interplay of change and continuity, getting started and going deeper, learning and relearning as midcourse corrections are made" (p. 217). Thus, policy implementation is a learning process for educators, as they work to integrate new understandings about practice with current understandings, and as they incorporate new practices into existing practices.

Studies of the implementation of education policy must seek to understand the manner in which local schools and educators engage in a process of interpreting policy. As the literature suggests, the concepts and "definitions" embodied in education policy are ultimately interpreted

by local practitioners; thus, studies of implementation must probe the act of interpretation as it happens in local contexts: "[W]hen we treat definitions as interpretations . . . we venture into the contingent understandings that are situated in lives, relationships, contexts, and histories" (Moules, 2002, p. 4). As local districts in Georgia, and around the country, have worked to implement a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, the idea of "intervention" has been interpreted and understood in a myriad of ways. To understand why RTI implementation is problematic, we must seek to understand the complex interaction of policy with the context of the local school system and with the people responsible for implementing the policy at the local level. What we learn from an attempt to understand why RTI implementation is problematic can inform our understanding of the conditions that affect how education policies, on the whole, are implemented.

The current study is built on a philosophical hermeneutic frame (see Chapter 3) due to the premise that educational policy implementation is an interpretive act. The interpretation of policy is intertwined with the context and the backgrounds and beliefs of the interpreters. It is impossible to understand the implementation of educational policy in a "generalized" sense. Implementation depends on the capacity of the local context and the understandings of the local implementers. Policy implementation is not a story of how educators either act or refuse to act on policy; rather what is important to apprehend is "what they understand themselves to be responding to" (Spillane et al., 2006, p. 49). What is interesting about the meaning-making process for educators is that it is often a collective, or shared, process (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Spillane et al., 2006). Teachers do not make sense of new policies in isolation; rather meaning is made "in the fields of social interaction between people," or in a "community of practice" (Coburn & Stein, 2006, p. 28). Gadamer (1994) underscores this shared nature of meaning-

making or understanding: "So, too, understanding is no method but rather a form of community among those who understand each other . . . hermeneutics encourages not objectification but listening to one another" (pp. x, xi). Policy does not come as a "text" with a meaning, as Taylor (1982) would say, that exists "in vacuo" (p. 159). Rather meaning is made as individuals interact with the policy, with each other, and with their local contexts, and a "fusion of horizons" occurs (Linge, 1976, p. xxviii).

The goal of philosophical hermeneutics is to open a space where scientific understandings and the understanding of lived experience can exist together. Using this perspective allows us to engage in a dialogue to create meaning around "texts" or phenomena. The current case study of RTI implementation in Cannon County School System seeks to open this type of space and dialogue. RTI implementation in the case study system has been described as successful, as evidenced by the recent SSTAGE award. Theoretically, there are factors that allowed for the successful adaptation of the RTI framework to this local context (Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992). The study seeks to understand the conditions that allowed for that successful adaptation, as scientific understanding of how policy implementation occurs is fused, in the interpretive act of the implementer, with lived experiences.

Role of the Researcher

A philosophical hermeneutic frame also underscores the role of the researcher, as a fellow learner and interpreter. The "findings," or "understandings," generated through this educational case study are *my* understandings, as my horizon is fused with the data. When I chose to engage in a study using a philosophical hermeneutic frame, I had to recognize my own role in the interpretation of a problem, in the nature of the questions that are asked, and in the process of interpreting "data" as answers to those questions. I had to remain aware of my own

"prejudices," not in an attempt to lay them aside, but so that I could engage in a process of self-reflection and "self-critique" (Prasad, 2002, p. 24) as I entered into a dialogue with others and with the research subject. I was also cognizant of the fact that I chose to engage in an inquiry into educational policy implementation, specifically RTI implementation, because the topic had "addressed" me, has "caught me in [its] regard" as something I wish to understand (Moules, 2002, p. 27). Thus, prior to formulating a problem statement, questions, or methodologies, the research process began with a self-reflection and examination of my subjectivities, which is included in its entirety in Appendix B.

Overview of Research Procedures

The current study is an interpretive inquiry, which focuses on data collected via documents and participant interviews in an attempt to further the "dialogue" around RTI frameworks at the point of implementation. In contrast to a positivist methodology that would seek to validate a hypothesis or draw conclusions from research, the researcher does not "have a goal in mind in regard to an answer for the topic" (Freeman, 2011, p. 547). Instead, the researcher seeks "to hold open the door of possibilities, keeping the conversation going, as long as is possible" (Freeman, 2011, p. 549). It is through the conversation and the sharing of our "horizons" that meaning is made and that we come to understand in a new way, inviting "the topic to say what it has not yet said about itself" (Freeman, 2011, p. 550).

The current research is interested in RTI policy as well as how it is interpreted and implemented in the lived experiences of educators in local contexts. Thus, the methodology is employed inside of a case study design, which allows for an in-depth look at how a phenomenon is interpreted and understood in a real-world context (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1994; Swanborn, 2010; Thomas, 2011a; Yin, 2009). Data were collected in the form of organizational documents

related to RTI implementation, interviews with stakeholders in the district, and a researcher journal to record my ongoing "dialogue" with the data. Using the idea of parts and wholes as conceptualized in the hermeneutic circle (see Chapter 3), data were analyzed initially using categorizing strategies to look for similarities across documents and transcripts (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). While categorizing initially allowed me to focus on the "small matters" (Geertz, 1973, p. 21) as described by the practitioners, the analysis process continued as I worked to create a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 310) of RTI implementation in Cannon County. Thick description allowed me to reconstruct the story of RTI implementation in Cannon County so that the result leaves the reader with the impression that he or she, too, has experienced RTI implementation—that he has been there (Ponterotto, 2006).

Assumptions

The study is built on the assumption that there is something to be learned from the implementation of an RTI framework in Cannon County. Because the Cannon County School System has been recognized by a state-wide association as implementing "best practices" in RTI, the assumption is that this district *is* an "educational case" (Bassey, 1999, p. 28). A closer look at the story of implementation in this district allows us to learn about, nay experience for ourselves (Stake, 1994), RTI implementation in context.

Approaching the research from a philosophical hermeneutic frame also assumes, as previously mentioned, that the implementation of RTI policy, or any policy, is necessarily impacted by the beliefs, experiences, and "fore-understandings" of the implementers: "[U]nderstanding . . . always finds itself within pregiven perspectives that guide its expectations of meaning" (Grondin, 1994, p. 95). Thus, an assumption is that a true "fidelity" model of implementation (Snyder et al., 1992), which conceptualizes implementation as a straight-forward

process by which teachers implement a policy as written and as intended (see Chapter 2), can exist in theory only. Policy will be interpreted differently in different contexts and by different actors.

Rationale and Significance

The theoretical RTI model has been linked to improved student achievement. In addition, it is my contention that the theoretical model of RTI is the type of solution that policymakers should consider, because it is a "hypothesis . . . stated as principles [and] general aims" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 83). The philosophy behind the theoretical RTI model is that all students should be provided with effective learning experiences, and when students struggle in school, they should receive additional support and attention so that they can be successful. While the standard-protocol approach—the application of a specific "treatment," or intervention, with fidelity to address an issue—is more commonly used (due to the strong link between RTI policy and compliance with IDEA), another approach to RTI exists, which allows for local educators to engage in a problem-solving process as they work to address student learning needs (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Basically, the theoretical RTI model does not attempt to mandate anything—except that students be given adequate instruction and more support when they are not successful. When implemented in a comprehensive manner, an RTI framework based on problem-solving around student skill deficits has been linked to increased achievement (see Chapter 2). Thus, a better understanding of how this theoretical model can be implemented in real-world contexts is warranted.

The current case study explores one context in which RTI implementation has been successful. Honig (2006) recommends the use of the "strategic qualitative case" as a means to build knowledge of successful implementation (p. 22). This qualitative case study of Cannon

County can add to our understanding of how the local context, as well as the capacity and will of the district and its educators, impact successful RTI implementation. Additionally, this type of case study research can provide information on factors affecting implementation in the district—e.g.,, to what extent did the district focus on standard-protocols versus a problem-solving approach to RTI—and how those factors may inform implementation in other locations.

Limitations

The study is limited to one school district in rural north Georgia. The data collected and interpretations made are context-dependent, and they are not generalizable to other schools in a traditional sense. The data collected is limited to a set of organizational documents, interviews with eleven practitioners in the district, and a researcher journal. While collection of data in these three ways allows for the analysis of multiple perspectives, it is impossible to collect data that would cover all possible facets of RTI implementation in the district.

Case study research, by its very design, is limited (Flyvbjerg, 2006); thus general, theoretical knowledge is not the aim of this study. As previously noted, implementation of education policy is context-dependent (Honig, 2006). Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that "predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge, is therefore, more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals" (p. 224). What the case study design allows for is an in-depth look at an example of a phenomenon in a real-world context. The case study provides a vicarious learning experience. The hope is that what we learn from RTI implementation in Cannon County can be fused with our other experiences, and we would generalize our past experiences, including the vicarious learning experience gained through the case, to new situations (Bassey, 1999).

Further, the study is limited to a focus on understanding how the district interpreted and adapted an RTI framework to the local context, and is not interested in judging whether or not the system implemented components correctly or with "fidelity" as described by the RTI literature. There is much debate in the extant literature regarding the theoretical RTI construct, and some of this debate is outlined in Chapter 2. However, this study was not focused on this debate. The analysis of data and the reported interpretations focused on the core objective of understanding RTI implementation in context in Cannon County. While there are other ideas and other paths related to RTI and in the data that could be explored related to this district and its context, this study is limited to a focus on the implementation of RTI in the district.

Finally, the interpretation of data and the understandings that emerge related to RTI in the district are limited by what participants were willing to address. Davey (1999) points out that the meaning inherent in our language is influenced by what was said, but also the "unsaid" (p. 24). While I attempted to minimize any negative impact of my prior relationship with the district, my role as a colleague almost certainly influenced what participants were willing to discuss with me. However, as I interacted with participants and later analyzed the data, I did strive to listen for the "unsaid," as a philosophical hermeneutic analysis understands that the "meaning of what is actually said depends upon the unsaid" (Davey, 2012, p. 89). The final interpretations were influenced by this willingness to listen for allusions to the unsaid.

Definition of Terms

Curriculum—definitions vary, but I define curriculum as a process of determining learning objectives and targets and the practice of teaching and designing learning experiences around those objectives.

Curriculum Policy—"the formal body of law and regulation that pertains to what should be taught in schools" (Elmore & Sykes, 1992, p. 186).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—"the nation's federal special education law that ensures public schools serve the educational needs of students with disabilities. IDEA requires that schools provide special education services to eligible students as outlined in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP)" (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)—the new name for IDEA when it was reauthorized in 2004; in practice and in much of the literature, the legislation continues to be referred to as IDEA.

Progress Monitoring—Progress monitoring is a systemic approach to student assessment. To implement progress monitoring, the student's current levels of performance are determined and goals are identified for learning that will take place over time. The student's academic performance is measured on a regular basis (weekly or monthly). (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY), 2012)

Research-Based—"The U.S. Department of Education says scientifically based research applies rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to evaluate whether a program is effective . . . The U.S. Department of Education backs research employing randomized, controlled trials that assign subjects to an experimental group or a comparison group to test a program's effectiveness— an approach commonly used in medicine, but less often in education" (Dahlkemper, 2013, para. 4).

Response to Intervention—a term used to refer to a "practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make

decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying child response data to important educational decisions" (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 3).

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)—Learning disabilities refers to a group of disorders that affect the brain's ability to receive, process, store, respond to and communicate information. The "hallmark sign of a learning disability is a distinct and unexplained gap between a person's level of expected achievement and their performance" (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014).

Universal Screening—typically done three times per year in elementary schools; brief assessments on targeted skills (e.g., reading decoding) that are "highly predictive of future outcomes" (Hughes & Dexter, 2011).

Organization of the Dissertation

The current study seeks to engage in a dialogue around RTI implementation in a case study district, which has been recognized for RTI implementation, to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that allow for the successful adaptation of the theoretical RTI model to a local context. The current chapter outlines the contingent nature of education policy implementation and proposes the use of a philosophical hermeneutic frame for a qualitative case study that seeks to understand how one local district and its practitioners make sense of RTI policy.

The review of literature, Chapter 2, outlines background literature related to the RTI framework, as well as empirical literature related to the impact of RTI on student achievement and the factors that contribute to the implementation of RTI. Chapter 2 also includes a review of literature related to policy implementation, focusing on how the implementation of education

policies that seek to change the core of teaching and learning requires a different conceptualization of the policy process.

Chapter 3 further outlines philosophical hermeneutics as the theoretical frame for the study and provides a description of the qualitative case study methodology that was used to engage in an inquiry related to the research questions. The chapter underscores the rationale for the choice of case study design, as well as provides an outline of and rationale for an analysis process using categorizing and connecting strategies (Maxwell & Miller, 2008) prior to building a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of RTI implementation in Cannon County.

Chapter 4 is comprised of a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the data related to RTI implementation in Cannon County, focusing on the conditions that allowed for the adaptation of RTI policy to this local context and how the framework of "intervention" was constructed in the system. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings, relates the findings to the extant literature, and suggests implications for practitioners and policymakers. The discussion concludes with implications for future inquiry, as a means "to hold open the door of possibilities, keeping the conversation going, as long as is possible" (Freeman, 2011, p. 549).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

While those who study public policy see the process of developing and implementing policy as a straightforward, linear process (Anderson, 2011), the implementation of education policy, especially a policy like Response to Intervention (RTI) that seeks to reform curriculum and instruction, is anything but simply straightforward. At the level of implementation, success or failure depends on the interaction of the policy with the local context and people responsible for implementation. Thus, a study of the implementation of RTI policy must begin, not only with an understanding of the theoretical RTI framework and policy, but with an understanding of how the traditional policy process relates to the implementation of education policies that seek to touch the core of teaching and learning.

The purpose of this literature review is to outline the extant literature related to the theoretical RTI model, its impact on student achievement, and its implementation in schools; as well as the literature related to the policy process, particularly the implementation of curriculum policies in education. The review is divided into four sections. First, the theoretical Response to Intervention (RTI) framework is described, and the components of the framework, as outlined in the literature, are discussed. Factors that contributed to the inclusion of an RTI component in federal legislation are also explored. The second section reviews the existing empirical literature related to the impact of RTI on student achievement, the literature related to RTI implementation, and factors that help or hinder the implementation process. This section concludes with a discussion of the implications for future research based on the empirical

literature, as well as limitations of the RTI framework and the promise that it still holds for improving student outcomes. The third section looks at literature related to the theoretical policy process, as outlined by Anderson (2011), as well as literature related to the implementation of curriculum policies. Because of the premise that the implementation of education policy is a contingent and situated process (Honig, 2006), particular attention is paid to several curriculum policy implementation frameworks. The fourth section discusses the need for an enhanced view of Anderson's (2011) policy process in light of the complexity of implementing educational change policy, as described in the literature. This section concludes with a summary of implications of this enhanced view of the policy process for the implementation of RTI policy. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature and implications for the current study.

What is Response to Intervention?

Response to Intervention is a broader concept than that defined by IDEA 2004. Shinn (2007) makes a distinction between "big RTI" as a process for making decisions about special education eligibility as allowed by IDEA 2004, and the larger framework of "rti" as a process that serves all students (p. 611). This larger framework predates IDEA 2004. Batsche et al. (2006) trace the origins of the current RTI framework to two theoretical models from the 1970s: Deno's "data-based program modification model" and Bergen's "behavioral consultation model" (p. 7). Both of these frameworks aim to apply a problem-solving model to education.

Deno applied his problem-solving model to academics and created "precise, direct measures of academic skills that were sensitive to growth" (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 7). The idea was that teachers would have ongoing formative data that could "be used to change instruction or raise goals, depending on results" (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 7). Rather than a specific protocol to collect data, Bergen's model relies largely on "[c]onsultation methods" and the "consultant's

verbal behavior as a means to guide problem-solving" (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 7). Data are gathered through observation and comparison of the subject to "peers" in the "natural setting" (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 8). Both Deno and Bergen's models include several key components: a step-by-step process of problem identification, application of interventions, data collection on the results of the interventions, and further intervention based on outcome data. These two early models set the stage for the RTI framework and elements of the framework espoused in the current literature.

Key Components of the RTI Construct

Intervention models, like those developed by Deno and Bergen in the 1970s, are based on a scientific approach to solving educational problems and were designed to address the needs of all students—not just those who might qualify as learning disabled. Wedl (2005) describes the "Problem Solving Model" implemented in Iowa, which is built around four key questions: "What is the problem; Why does the problem exist; What should be done to address the problem; Did the intervention work and what's next" (p. 7). In its most basic form, RTI is the scientific method applied to education.

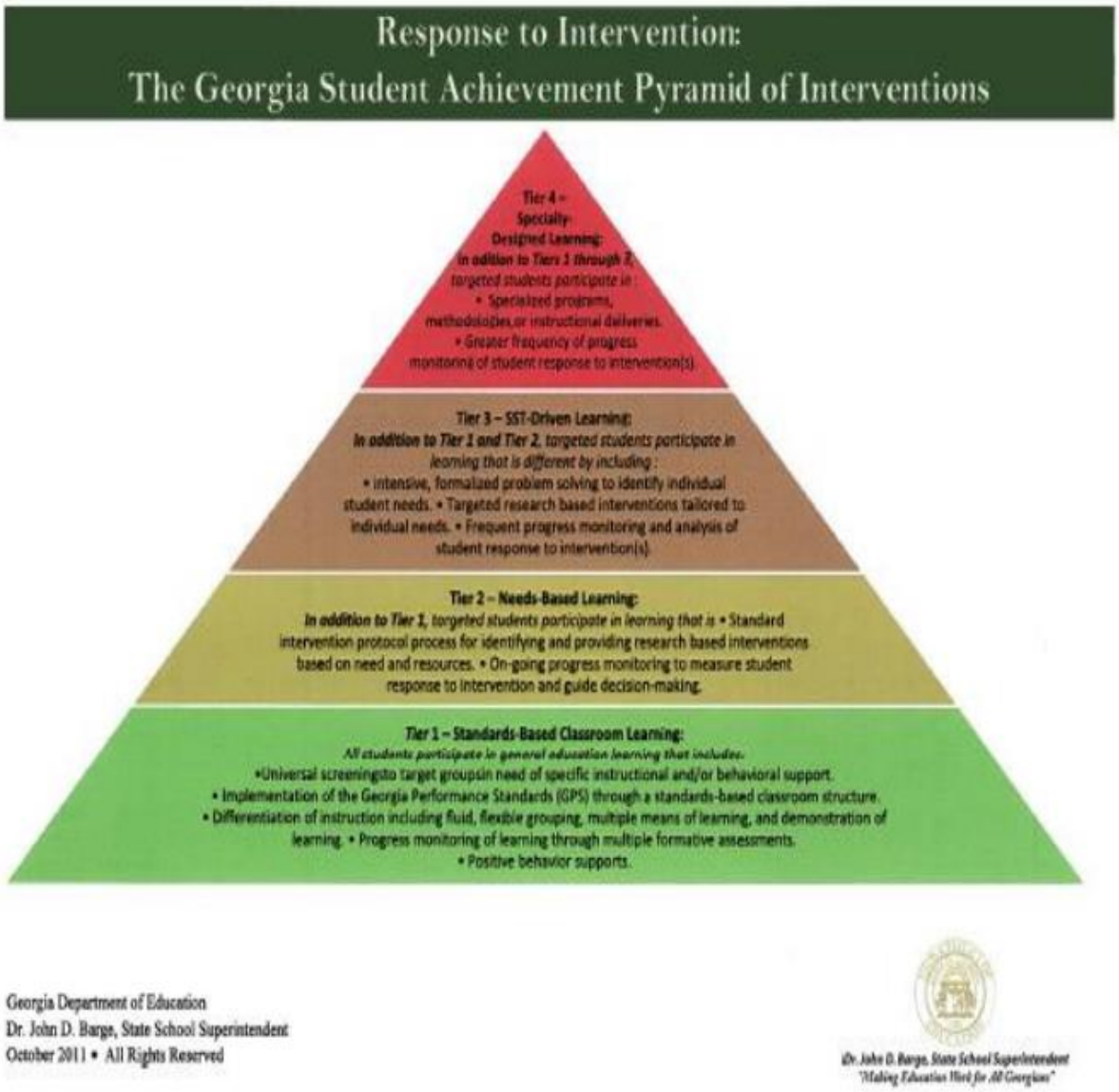
Because "Response to Intervention" is not a specific program, but a construct or model built around problem-solving in a scientific manner, different models include different components. When the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) offered assistance with interpretation of the 2006 regulations that accompanied IDEA 2004, they defined several core characteristics of an RTI program: high-quality, research based instruction in general education, progress monitoring, academic and behavior screenings, and multiple tiers of support with progressive intervention (Zirkel, 2011a). The literature surrounding RTI as a construct and its implementation in schools would support these components as outlined by OSEP (Duffy,

2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; National High School Center, 2010; Painter & Alvarado, 2008; Wedl, 2005), as well as add two additional components: data-driven decision making (National High School Center, 2010) and the notion that two approaches can be taken to RTI implementation—the standard protocol approach or the problem-solving approach (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Zirkel (2011b) notes that RTI "has definite characteristics that differentiate it from its various less systematic and not distinctly research-based prereferral predecessors within general education," including those characteristics espoused by other literature ("research-based instruction, universal screening, continuous progress monitoring, multiple tiers"), but also the "increasingly recognized" component of "fidelity" (p. 242).

While RTI can be presented as a complex system of components, Ciolfi and Ryan (2011) succinctly provide a view of the underlying idea behind RTI "in a nutshell," when they share, "The essential idea is that all students should be given adequate instruction. Those who are not keeping up should be given extra help in small groups. If that extra help does not do the trick, they should be given even more intense and individualized assistance" (pp. 310-311). While the literature supports this as the essential idea, Zirkel's (2011b) assertion that the RTI construct is more "systematic" and "research-based" is key in understanding how RTI programs are construed and implemented (p. 242). One key component of the "systematic" approach is the multi-tiered system of interventions—increasingly intensive research-based interventions offered when students are unsuccessful. There is no defined number of tiers, but the most commonly accepted number of tiers is three, and the models that do include four tiers, such as the Iowa Model or the model currently in use in Georgia, connect that tier with special education eligibility (Wedl, 2005). Most models of the tiered system of support are visually represented through a triangle—showing that the majority of students achieve in the core classroom and

remain at the base of the triangle, while smaller numbers of students need more intensive support (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Taken from "Response to Intervention: Georgia's Student Achievement Pyramid of Interventions 2011". Used with permission.

Tiers of support. One of the underlying tenets of RTI is that students must have access to "high-quality, evidence-based primary, or core, classroom instruction" (National High School Center, 2010), which occurs at the first tier of the framework. Ciolfi and Ryan (2011) go so far as to say that if the instructional quality is poor, "it is impossible to identify why any particular student might be struggling. The student might have a learning disability or . . . be suffering the consequences of poor teaching" (p. 313). Painter and Alvarado (2008) point out that the Tier I instruction should "be effective for 80-85% of students" (p. 26), and if at least 80% of students are unable to meet expectations for achievement at the Tier I instructional level, educators need to revisit the instructional components of Tier I (Educational Research Service, 2010). Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2010) assert that for Tier I to be successful for the majority of students, "differentiation" is not optional: "teachers must scaffold content, process, and product on the basis of student needs, setting aside time to meet with small groups of students to address gaps in learning" (p. 3).

An important activity that must be part of Tier I is "universal screening" of all students to identify "a subgroup of at-risk students . . . from which nonresponders are likely to emerge" (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 93). Universal screening occurs when all students are administered brief skill-based probes, typically in reading and/or math, to determine their performance in relation to benchmarks or their grade-level peers. Students whose performance on the screening measure is below expectations can continue to be monitored in the Tier I classroom for a period of time, but if they continue to demonstrate inadequate progress, these students can be moved into more intensive monitoring and intervention in the "multi-tiered" system (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 94).

When students are unsuccessful in Tier I, the school must provide a more intensive intervention, which is achieved in a variety of ways: "using more teacher-centered, systematic, and explicit . . . instruction; conducting it more frequently; adding to its duration; creating smaller and more homogenous student groups; or relying on instructors with greater expertise" (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 94). This is Tier II. The literature would support two different approaches to intervention at this stage: standard protocol interventions or problem-solving interventions (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011; Duffy, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). These two approaches can be seen in the different ways that Deno and Bergen's models conceptualize intervention. Deno applied a standard curriculum-based measure and standard intervention; Bergan used observation and verbal data collection to solve the problem in an individualized manner. In a standard protocol approach, all students who do not perform well on a pre-test or universal screening measure for a specific skill are given the same treatment protocol and progress is monitored (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). In a problem-solving approach, which Ciolfi and Ryan term "contextual and ad hoc" (p. 313), the intervention is more tailored to the individual child and seeks to "personalize assessment and intervention" (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 95).

The key components of the RTI construct that are visible at Tier II are the presence of a more intense level of intervention than anything offered in Tier I for all students, as well as the continued progress monitoring and data collection to determine if the intervention is working: "Tier 2 provides increased intensity and frequency of instruction, increasingly individualized and explicit instruction, with more specific assessment measures and increased frequency of progress monitoring" (Painter & Alvarado, 2008, p. 26). Again, an important difference in the RTI construct and other types of intervention programs in general education is that the materials and

methods used must be "scientific research-based and delivered by appropriately trained professionals" (Painter & Alvarado, 2008, p. 27).

Much of the literature would support that students who are not successful after receiving Tier II interventions should receive more "personalized and intense instruction" (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011, p. 313) or "intensive, individualized interventions focusing on targeted skill areas" in Tier III (Painter & Alvarado, 2008, p. 26). Tier III differs from Tier II in the more individualized nature of the intervention, but also in the "level of intensity" of the intervention and the "frequency" of the progress monitoring (Painter & Alvarado, 2008, p. 26). The intensity of the intervention can be increased by providing a smaller group, increased duration, or increased frequency (Buffman et al., 2010). Further, the intervention at this level is more targeted to a "specific, identified area of need" (Painter & Alvarado, 2008, p. 26), and rather than relying on a standard protocol, the literature would support relying more on the data collected regarding the individual student's needs. Buffum et al. (2010) point out that students who reach Tier III will have multiple, complicated needs, and they advocate the creation of a school-level team to address the implementation of Tier III interventions: "[M]any of these students are like knots, with multiple difficulties that tangle together to form a lump of failure . . . a school focused on meeting the needs of every student would develop a problem-solving team, composed of a diverse group of education experts who can address the students' social, emotional, and learning needs" (p. 4).

While the various models in the literature and being implemented by the states differ slightly, it seems a common feature that Tier III is linked in some way with Special Education: "At some time right before, during, or after a period of time in Tier 3—models differ on this point—students may be evaluated for special education placement" (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011, p.

313). It is also at Tier III that all of the key components of the RTI construct should be most visible. At Tier III, students should receive intensive, scientific, research-based interventions. The progress of students should be monitored frequently to measure their response to the intervention. In addition, students should still be receiving high-quality, research-based instruction in their regular classroom, as the RTI intervention should be in addition to, not in place of core instruction (Buffum et al., 2010, p. 4).

Factors Leading to RTI as Policy

The addition to IDEA 2004 of this provision for measuring a student's response to intervention differs vastly from the original provisions for identifying students with a specific learning disability (SLD) in IDEA. Ramanathan (2008) notes that the focus prior to the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA remained on "monitoring and enforcement" rather than on instruction or outcomes (p. 283). When IDEA was reauthorized in 2004, the policy environment was affected by three separate factors that led to the inclusion of the RTI provisions: a new focus on the research related to teaching young students to read effectively, a long history of dissatisfaction with the method by which students were being identified as SLD, and a new focus on accountability for all students due to the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB).

First, the National Reading Panel had released a report on research-based reading practices (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The panel outlined the research that supported very specific instructional strategies for teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension and the effectiveness of these strategies for students who struggled with learning to read. The national reading panel made recommendations for teacher training and instructional practice that included scientifically validated methods, as well as continual monitoring of progress for students.

In addition, there was a history of dissatisfaction with the traditional SLD construct as outlined in IDEA and the method of identifying students with SLD, which required a discrepancy between measured mental ability and academic achievement. Researchers have long found the use of the discrepancy model problematic for reasons relating to validity and variability in how the construct is applied by different states (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Some even lament that the discrepancy model became the sole construct for identifying students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) when that was not the indention of the original construct of a specific learning disability or of the law (Ofiesh, 2006; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006). Further, standardized test data are not always reliable for varied populations, which may lead to the over-identification of some minority groups (Burns, Jacob, & Wagner, 2008; Painter & Alvarado, 2008; Laing & Kamhi, 2003).

Finally, the reauthorization of IDEA occurred at the height of the accountability movement, as embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002. Under NCLB, schools are held to a higher standard for the achievement of all students. Because of requirements for all subgroups to make "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP), schools are required to "deal with less proficient students" (Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008, p. 138). Historically, IDEA was focused on equal access and equity; however, in the age of NCLB, the reauthorized IDEA 2004 demonstrated a shift in educational policymaking from focusing on equity to focusing on ensuring quality outcomes for student achievement (Batsche et al., 2006; Wells, 2009).

Ongoing problems with the identification of students as SLD in IDEA and the political climate in the early 2000s that focused on student outcomes and led to the passage of NCLB collided and allowed for the inclusion of RTI provisions in the reauthorized IDEA of 2004.

Connecting RTI to the identification of students with learning disabilities seemed to be the answer for addressing new requirements for accountability for all students: "[T]here is growing consensus that adopting models of prevention can help more children in our schools and reduce base rates of failure" (Kratochwill, Clements, & Kalymon, 2007, p. 25). The RTI framework, implemented with fidelity, ensures that *all* students will receive additional support when they demonstrate a lack of progress in the classroom. Rather than a "wait to fail" model that only provides support and intervention when there is enough discrepancy between student ability and student achievement, RTI—when implemented as a "model of prevention"—ensures an early, systematic process of intervention "that averts the development of a disability" (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009, p. 142).

RTI Implementation: Review of Empirical Literature

While there were early studies of RTI's impact on student achievement (e.g., Ardoin, Witt, Connell, & Koenig, 2005), much of the early literature on RTI implementation was more theoretical than empirical. Early literature focused on structural components of the theoretical framework, as discussed in the preceding section (Batsche et al., 2006; Berkeley et al., 2009; Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007; Duffy, 2007; Educational Research Service, 2010; National High School Center, 2010; Sawyer, Holland, & Dantgen, 2008); or on the purpose of RTI and the problematic nature of modifying the methods by which we identify disabled students (Batsche, Kavale, & Kovaleski, 2006; Burns et al., 2008; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Kavale et al., 2008; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008; Kratochwill et al., 2007; Sparks, 2011; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006). However, some of the more recent literature, from 2010 and later, has explored Shinn's (2007) "little rti" and how RTI frameworks have impacted student achievement on the whole. Further, as RTI is increasingly implemented in our schools, research attention has turned to the

process of implementation and the impact it may have on those at the front lines, e.g.,, teachers (Nunn & Jantz, 2009). The literature review that follows is focused on studies related to RTI's impact on student achievement at the school level and on implementation at the school and/or district level.

Data Collection

McDaniel, Albritton, and Roach (2013) recently conducted a review of RTI research, which included 53 citations and a chart with 47 sources coded for the RTI components discussed: universal screening, tiered interventions, progress monitoring, and evaluation. The review began with those sources, which were limited by removing sources that discussed behavior intervention primarily, speech intervention primarily, or did not appear to address RTI in the broad sense related to teaching and learning at the first tier of intervention (e.g., the article was primarily about special education or tier III services).

In addition to the sources identified from that recent review, three separate searches for additional resources were conducted. McDaniel et al. (2013) found that most of the studies related to RTI are published in journals of school psychology, so the first two searches were conducted in PsychINFO. The initial search used a search term "response to intervention," along with the following limiters: peer-reviewed journals, English language, qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and tags to the education field. Eighteen results were returned. The second PsychINFO search used three search terms: "response to intervention," "implementation," and "methods" (attempting to limit results to articles that mention some type of research methodology). The same limiters were used for the second search as the first. Nineteen results were returned. Finally, a third, broader, database search was done from the University of Georgia's main library start page using the following search terms: "response to

intervention," "implementation," and "methods." Additionally, this search was limited to articles in English and peer-reviewed journals. Forty-three results were returned.

In all, the three database searches generated a list of 93 unique articles. These were further limited to remove the following: 1) Articles that primarily addressed behavior and social/emotional interventions; 2) Articles that primarily addressed pre-school populations; 3) Articles that were about RTI in places other than the United States; 4) Articles that were primarily about interventions with an extremely narrow focus (e.g.,, interventions related to "idioms" or using video games in a science classroom); and 4) Articles that primarily addressed a very narrow group of students (e.g., borderline intellectual functioning). This first culling generated a list of 82 unique articles. These were further limited based on the scope of my research question, which is focused on the conditions necessary for the successful implementation of RTI at a district level, and in a way that positively impacts instruction and learning for all students. Thus, I further culled articles using the following criteria:

1. Articles related to the impact of RTI on student achievement were kept *if* they seemed broad in scope (e.g., articles that only addressed phonological awareness in kindergarten were excluded) and discussed implementation factors that seemed to affect student achievement.
2. Articles that seemed to focus primarily on data to support or refute RTI as a diagnostic tool for special education eligibility were excluded.
3. Articles that were introductions to special issues of journals focusing on RTI were excluded because they were outlines of studies rather than literature reviews, meta-analyses, or empirical studies in their own right.

This generated a list of 58 unique articles. These articles were classified into two groups: those primarily about the impact of RTI on student achievement and those primarily about the implementation of RTI. One last review of the list was completed to ensure that articles kept were broad in scope:

1. Achievement articles were kept if they addressed the impact of RTI on students in a broad sense (e.g., articles targeted narrowly to a subgroup of students were excluded) and discussed implications for implementation. However, one article related to the effects of RTI on low-income children was retained due to the demographic makeup of the students in the case study district, and a literature review related to RTI and culturally diverse students was retained due to its broad implications.
2. Implementation articles were kept if they were broad in scope (e.g., articles focused on a single component of the RTI process—only progress monitoring—were excluded).

A list of 55 articles was kept for review: 18 related primarily to the impact of an RTI framework on student achievement outcomes and 37 related primarily to the implementation of an RTI framework. After these 55 articles were reviewed in-depth, additional articles were culled based on the outlined criteria. Forty-one articles remained. To these, two additional studies related specifically to RTI implementation in rural schools were added (Dykes, 2009; Shepherd- & Salembier, 2011), again, due to the characteristics of the case study district. Thus, a final list of 43 studies was retained (see Appendix C).

Data Analysis

Forty-three studies, ranging from quantitative studies to case studies to literature reviews, were reviewed and organized by the following categories: research methods, grade level(s) of

focus, and subject/skill focus (see Appendix C). Further, a brief summary of the study and the findings was generated, including a summary of factors that were outlined as important for RTI implementation. Essentially, these summaries are a method of "categorizing" (Maxwell, 2013), as they were used to record "units or segments of [the studies] that seem[ed] important or meaningful in some way" (p. 107). After generating the brief summaries, I sorted these units of "data" thematically. However, as I worked to understand factors that affect RTI implementation, I began to see that the factors are so interconnected, so woven together in the larger framework that I struggled to separate them into components. Therefore, I employed connecting strategies (Maxwell, 2013; Maxwell & Miller, 2008) in an attempt to understand the *whole*—to understand "the relationships among the different parts" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 112). In the movement between categorizing parts—separate articles, codes, and themes—and the whole—the story of RTI implementation represented by the body of literature as a whole—my goal was to look for "meaningful and relevant passages," as well as themes and "patterns" that emerged across documents (Bowen, 2009, p. 32) so that I could better understand the story of RTI implementation and its impact on student achievement.

Findings

The findings are organized as answers to the following questions:

1. When implemented as a comprehensive model, what impact does RTI have on student achievement?
2. What factors help or hinder implementation of an RTI framework at the school and/or district level?
3. Based on the empirical research conducted thus far, what are the implications for further research related to RTI implementation?

When implemented as a comprehensive model, what impact does RTI have on student achievement? An RTI model, when the components are implemented in a systematic manner, can have a positive effect on student achievement (see Table 1). However, the direction, to date, of the research on RTI related to student achievement has been narrowly focused, highly controlled, and only recently, have studies related to school-based implementation and scalability been conducted.

Table 1: Empirical Studies Related to RTI's Positive Impact on Student Achievement

Authors	**Level of Focus**	**Subject/Skill Focus**
Ardoin, S.P., Witt, J.C., Connell, J.E., & Koenig, J.L. (2005)	Elementary	Math
Denton, et al. (2010)	Elementary	Reading
Dougherty, K.A., Stahl, K., Keane, A.E., & Simic, O. (2013)	Elementary	Reading
Graves, A.W., Brandon, R., Duesbery, L., McIntosh, A., & Pyle, N.B. (2011)	Secondary—Middle Grades	Reading
Kerins, M.R., Trotter, D., & Schoenbrodt, L. (2010)	Elementary	Reading
Marston, D. (2005)	Elementary	Reading
Mellard, D.F., Frey, B.B, & Woods, K.L. (2012)	Elementary	Reading
Murray, C.S., Woodruff, A.L., & Vaughn, S. (2010)	Elementary	Reading
Pyle, N.B. & Vaughn, S. (2012)	Secondary—Middle Grades	Reading
Shepherd & Salembier (2011)	Elementary	Reading
Simmons, D.C., Coyne, M.D., Kwok, O., McDonagh, S., Harn, B.A., & Kame'enui, E.J. (2008)	Elementary	Reading
Tran, L., Sanchez, T., Arellano, B., & Swanson, H.L. (2011)	Meta-Analysis Mostly elementary	Reading
VanDerHeyden, A.M., Witt, J.C., & Gilbertson, D. (2007)	Elementary	Reading and Math
VanDerHeyden, A.M., McLaughlin, T., Algina, & Snyder, P. (2012)	Elementary	Math
Vaughn et al. (2010)	Secondary—Middle	Reading

The research on the effects of an RTI framework on student achievement has been narrowly focused on elementary reading and has typically taken the form of tightly controlled quantitative studies. Of the 43 studies reviewed, 26 are focused on the elementary level. In addition, 21 of the 43 studies discussed reading interventions exclusively (see Appendix C). Of the 14 studies listed in Table 1 that most specifically discuss the impact on student achievement, 11 are focused on the elementary level, and 8 of those discuss reading achievement exclusively. Two additional studies focused on implementation with middle school students (Graves et al., 2011; Pyle & Vaughn, 2011). Given the origins of the RTI framework, this focus on early reading and preventing reading difficulties is not surprising:

> Response to Intervention (RTI) was initially conceived as a framework for early intervention among students at risk of reading failure . . . On a concurrent timeline the concept expanded in scope as special educators and others began to see student responsiveness could contribute important information in the identification of specific learning disabilities (SLD) and behavioral disorders . . . The literature is virtually silent about measures of the schoolwide effects of RTI on student achievement. (Mellard et al., 2012)

Thus, while it is true that an RTI framework can impact achievement, the bulk of the evidence, to date, relates to reading achievement in the primary grades.

The most correct statement is that a well-implemented, and researcher-controlled, RTI framework has the capacity to improve reading achievement for young students. In a longitudinal, qualitative study of at-risk readers from kindergarten to third grade, Simmons et al. (2008) found that an early intervention framework impacted the trajectory of reading achievement. Kindergarten students who were below the 30th percentile on a test of reading ability were defined as at "risk," and researchers found that early intervention led to "changes in risk status" that "were generally sustained over time" (Simmons et al., 2008, p. 158). Early intervention in reading led to later success for these students: "[T]he present study suggests that

even for children identified at risk of reading difficulty in kindergarten, strong positive reading trajectories established by the end of kindergarten and enhanced in first grade beget later reading proficiency" (Simmons et al., 2008, p. 171). Studies of RTI implemented in the primary grades to target reading skills have continued to support the findings of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000)—that research-based instruction in reading can improve reading achievement.

There is an awareness in the research that other grades and subject areas lack the research-based interventions that are a necessary component of RTI implementation. Researchers have recently begun to study the effects of an RTI framework on mathematics achievement. VanDerHeyden et al. (2012) designed a quantitative, experimental study of the effects of a supplemental mathematics intervention on the achievement of 4th and 5th grade students in a single district. They found that intervention in mathematics did make some difference on state test results and on brief measures of mathematics ability, and they recommend "fluency-based intervention" in math as a "useful supplement to core instruction" (VanDerHeyden et al., 2012, p. 1276). While this foray into studying the effects of math interventions is promising, the empirical literature related to RTI continues to focus on the elementary level and skills related to fluency with basic math facts rather than complex problem-solving tasks.

Implementation of RTI frameworks at the secondary level remains problematic. While acknowledging the potential for RTI to impact achievement, Sansosti, Noltemeyer, and Goss (2010) point out that principals at the high school level lament the lack of "evidence-based interventions for students within secondary schools and a lack of systematic data collection systems" (p. 292). The sentiment was shared by directors of special education, who are often

responsible for overseeing RTI implementation: "[M]ore clarification and guidance in translating theory and research related to elementary-based applications of RtI into procedures and structures within secondary schools [is] needed" (Sansosti, Goss, & Noltemeyer, 2011, p. 13). The few studies conducted at the secondary level have shown that RTI, in the form of "intensive instruction," can "produce significant changes in the reading abilities of students" (Graves et al., 2011, p. 84). Graves et al. (2011) studied the effects of a literacy intervention on sixth grade students labeled as "far below" or "below" the "basic level" in literacy in a large urban middle school (p. 73). In a setting where 100% of the students were considered economically disadvantaged and 90% of the students were labeled as English learners at some point in their school careers, the provision of a targeted, "evidence-based" (p. 73) reading intervention led to improvements in achievement for students. Further, "students with learning disabilities benefited as much or more than other struggling sixth graders" (Graves et al., 2011, p. 73). Because the implementation of an RTI framework has been shown to produce improved outcomes in reading for secondary students, secondary principals perceive the RTI framework to be important (Sansosti et al., 2010), even given the lack of tools available at the secondary level: "It may lead to the prevention of dropouts, appropriate referrals for learning disabilities, and improvement of low student self-esteem due to lack of success" (Graves et al., 2011).

Because of the potential impact on student achievement, many states jumped at the chance to implement RTI models after the reauthorization of IDEA, but implementation has been a challenge due to the "limited experience of [implementing RTI] on a large scale, across all academic areas and age levels" (Bradley et al., 2007, p. 10). At the time that RTI provisions were added to IDEA 2004, "policy [preceded] . . . research and development" (Bradley et al., 2007, p. 11). Researchers have worked to maintain pace with implementation practice, and

studies produced in the last three to four years have attempted to address implementation across grade and subject areas (Denton et al., 2010; Dougherty et al., 2013; Dulaney, 2013; Dykes, 2009; Greenfield et al., 2010; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Martinez & Young, 2011; Mellard et al., 2012; Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox, 2012; Pyle & Vaughn, 2012; Sanger, Friedli, Brunken, Snow, & Ritzman, 2012; Sansosti et al., 2011; Sansosti et al., 2010; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; White et al., 2012; Wilcox, Murakami-Ramalho, & Urick, 2013). Much more is known today than even two years ago about how to implement an RTI framework that has the potential to impact student achievement—across grade levels and subject areas.

What factors help or hinder implementation of an RTI framework at the school and/or district level? Recent research on RTI implementation has expressed a concern that many of the early studies of RTI's impact on solving problems related to student achievement were highly controlled by university researchers and "fewer empirically-based studies have investigated the implementation of RtI in authentic school settings" (Shepherd & Salembier, 2011, p. 3). Thus, researchers have begun to focus on closing the "research to practice gap" (Ruby, Crosby-Cooper, & Vanderwood, 2011, p. 234) and exploring "contextual influences" (White et al., 2012, p. 76) on the integrity of an RTI framework as it is implemented at the school or district level. Qualitative and mixed methods case studies of implementing schools and/or districts have underscored the complexity of the implementation process, and added to the knowledge base regarding implementation of RTI (Dougherty et al., 2013; Dulaney, 2013; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox, 2012; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; White et al., 2012).

Further, researchers have recently begun to explore the "impact" that RTI implementation "may have upon those at the front lines" (Nunn & Jantz, 2009, p. 599). Of late, qualitative or

mixed methods studies have probed the perceptions of practitioners responsible for implementing RTI frameworks and their roles as the framework is implemented (Dykes, 2009; Easton & Erchul, 2011; Greenfield et al., 2010; Martinez & Young, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2012; Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox, 2012; Sanger et al., 2012; Sansosti et al., 2011; Sansosti et al., 2010; Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, & McKenna, 2012; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009; Wilcox et al., 2013). This body of research related to implementation of RTI in schools and districts, and the critical role of the practitioners during implementation, has led to a better understanding of factors that help or hinder the implementation of an RTI framework. Note that while these factors are discussed separately—for ease of organization—they are all interconnected, and categorizing them simplifies a complex process of implementation. For example, "establishing a vision and purpose" and "leadership" are discussed separately, but one does not occur without the other. Parsing the various factors out is akin to separating character from plot or setting in a literary analysis. While the factors affecting RTI implementation are easier to analyze when separated, they are all interconnected parts of a story of policy implementation.

Establishing a vision and purpose for RTI. Many studies of RTI implementation underscore the importance of establishing a vision and purpose for RTI that is linked to the achievement of all students (Bolt, 2005; Detgen, Yamashita, & Davis, 2011; Dulaney, 2013; Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox, 2012; Ruby et al., 2011; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; Stepanek & Peixotto, 2009; VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Barnett, 2005; White et al., 2012). Essentially, schools that have focused on the theoretical model as a means to improve the achievement of all students, rather than as a method for collecting data related to special education eligibility, have experienced more success in the implementation process. In their cross-case analysis of three rural schools implementing RTI, Shepherd and Salembier (2011) found that a "key component"

of the implementation process was the "emphasis on viewing RtI as a general education initiative linked to an overarching vision of school improvement" (p. 13). In a separate case study of implementation in a middle school, Dulaney (2013) found that the setting of a "shared vision" prior to RTI implementation was critical: "First and foremost is that school leaders need to take time to build consensus so that understanding is shared concerning the *why* and *how* of implementation in order to prepare their school for systematic improvement" (p. 62, emphasis in the original).

The importance of a shared vision and purpose for RTI is further highlighted by research implications that discuss what occurs when there is a *lack* of understanding of the purpose of RTI (Ardoin et al., 2005; Bolt, 2005; Ruby et al., 2013). In an early, researcher-controlled study of the effects of an intervention model including intensive, tiered interventions, Ardoin et al. (2005) discovered that teachers who did not fully understand the link between instruction and the interventions were reluctant to allow students to attend intervention sessions:

> Teachers did not allow students to miss classroom instruction, despite knowing that they were benefiting greatly from intervention but little from classroom instruction . . . It will be necessary for schools to realize that the purpose of assessment and intervention is not strictly to classify students but rather to determine how to provide students with instruction that will enable their success. (p. 378)

The lack of understanding and reluctance to allow students to access interventions occurred in spite of the fact that the study was designed with school-based practitioners in mind and using procedures that researchers felt classroom teachers could reasonably accomplish (Ardoin et al., 2005). Researchers realized that in addition to designing procedures that were teacher-friendly, they also had to work to make sure teachers understood the purpose of the additional assessment and intervention.

In another early look at the state-wide Heartland problem-solving model of intervention in Iowa, Bolt (2005) related the perceptions of a school psychologist who observed that "the problem-solving message can lose credibility and momentum when it is assumed that all academic and social-behavioral problems can be *entirely* solved" (p. 76, emphasis in the original). Some general education teachers seemed to see qualification for special education services as a panacea that would address the struggles of a student. Bolt (2005) is quick to argue for an RTI framework that is focused on improving achievement rather than on special education eligibility:

> Perhaps a more motivating way for educators to think about the process is as a way to improve the learning of students who struggle. General educators are not often familiar with the lack of data to support special education effectiveness, and therefore can often assume that special education is *the* solution for struggling students. It is important for general education teachers to recognize that their efforts may result in more effective programming for struggling students . . . The communicated focus or goal of such an approach should be to improve learning rather than to solve problems. (p. 76)

Descriptive studies of implementation in various geographic regions of the United States report that states have gotten the message—implementation is focused on RTI as a general education initiative that can improve the achievement of all students (Detgen et al., 2011; Stepanek & Peixotto, 2009).

Linking RTI to core curriculum and instruction. Just as setting a vision for RTI improves the likelihood of implementation success, underscoring the link between RTI and core curriculum and instruction can lead to more systemic changes. RTI, when implemented correctly, is more than a process related to collecting data to inform IDEA eligibility decisions. Rather, RTI is a curriculum policy, aimed at the core instructional program, with a goal of ensuring that all students have access to quality core instruction (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011; National High School Center, 2010; Painter & Alvarado, 2008). Further, teachers use data gathered

through formative assessments to gauge the "response" of their students to the core program, and students who are not successful are provided with additional learning opportunities. This tight link between assessment, instruction, and provision of differentiated instruction is a hallmark of the RTI framework, and what can differentiate systemic implementation from superficial procedures to aid in compliance with IDEA.

Several studies of RTI implementation and the perceptions of practitioners assert that implementation of an RTI framework does indeed affect the nature of teaching and learning in schools (Carney & Stiefel, 2008; Chapman, Greenfield, & Rinaldi, 2010; Denton et al., 2010; Graves et al., 2011; Greenfield et al., 2010; Hill, King, Lemons, & Partanean, 2012; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2012; Murray et al., 2010; Sanger et al., 2012; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; Swanson et al., 2012; White et al., 2012; Wilcox et al., 2013). In their cross-case study of three elementary schools, Shepherd and Salembier (2011) reported that the RTI framework had increased the use of formative assessment data to inform instructional decisions, increased collaboration among teacher teams as they discussed instruction, and increased the focus on students. Teachers described a more "'intense, purposeful, and systematic' approach to assessment and instruction," and a renewed emphasis on "student needs" versus teacher desires (Shepherd & Salembier, 2011, pp. 8, 10). Other studies also highlight the data-driven nature of instructional planning that occurs when an RTI framework is implemented (White et al., 2012; Greenfield et al., 2010; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Murray et al., 2010; VanDerHeyden et al., 2012).

When teachers use assessment data to determine student needs, there is less "superficial adaptation" and "more comprehensive intervention" (White et al., 2012, p. 86). In addition, using data to determine student needs leads naturally to differentiated instruction in classrooms,

as teachers learn "how to modify classroom space and schedules to accommodate differentiated instruction" (White et al., 2012, p. 84). Further, Nunn and Jantz (2009) found that when an RTI framework is implemented, teachers perceive that they are better able to address academic skill and motivation issues. Finally, Dulaney (2013) points out that in an RTI system, teachers must have training to "use best practices and differentiate instruction" (p. 62); moreover, when teachers are trained to provide high-quality core instruction, fewer students need tiered interventions and supports (Kerins et al., 2010).

While it is evident in the literature that RTI does impact core instruction, some studies have found that provision of research-based instruction is one component of RTI where practitioners struggle with implementation (Greenfield et al, 2010; Wilcox et al., 2013; Dougherty et al., 2012). Teachers reporting on RTI implementation agreed that they use data to inform "instructional planning," but also "report[ed] difficulties in selected [*sic*] appropriate best practices or identifying what was working or not" (Greenfield et al, 2010, p. 53). Wilcox et al. (2013) discovered that teachers had received more training on assessing students, but were less prepared to implement "instructional strategies to increase student achievement" (p. 89).

Even when students do receive research-based interventions in Tier II or III, their progress is affected if they are not given the opportunity to connect the targeted learning to the skills required in the core classroom (Dougherty et al., 2012). Hill et al. (2012) point out that Tier I instruction has not received the attention in the research that Tiers II and III have; thus, perhaps it is not surprising that teachers struggle with how to modify instruction in general education classrooms based on assessment data. Further, Sansosti et al. (2010) stress the lack of research-based materials for assessment and instruction at the secondary level. Implementation is more successful when RTI is seen as a philosophy about curriculum and instruction, but

attention should be paid to providing teachers with training and materials instead of just new ways to assess students.

Collaboration. In addition to a new emphasis on data-driven instructional planning, studies of RTI implementation report that successful RTI implementation increases collaboration among teachers (Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; Sanger et al., 2012; Dougherty et al., 2013; Johnson & Smith, 2008). Teachers in the case study conducted by Shepherd & Salembier (2011) recognized the importance of their new level of collaborative decision-making and expressed a desire for more common planning time. These teachers saw the importance of team structures that "provided a forum for reviewing student specific data to determine when to initiate, revise, or terminate interventions . . . for monitoring school wide performance, considering changes in core curricula, and identifying professional development opportunities" (Shepherd & Salembier, 2011, p. 13). The researchers go so far as to assert that based on their case study, "strong teams are a necessary condition for implementation of an RtI approach" (Shepherd & Salembier, p. 13).

Johnson and Smith (2008) similarly found that a culture of collaboration was essential for implementation success: "Without the implementation of RTI and the focus on developing a professional learning community, the school would not have seen the concerted effort on implementing such instructional practices as differentiation across the entire school" (p. 51). Sansosti et al. (2011) even note that the prevalence of co-teaching models—special education and general education teachers collaborating to teach content and provide interventions and accommodations—is one positive factor that supports implementation at the secondary level. One of the theoretical RTI models, the problem-solving model, relies on the team structure as a key component of implementation (Bolt, 2005; Carney & Stiefel, 2008), and the use of

collaborative teams of teachers to review data and discuss instructional planning is a component of RTI that is strongly supported in practice.

The necessity of professional development. Because of the changes that the RTI framework brings to the nature of teaching and learning, as well as the necessity for teachers to learn to work as part of a professional learning community, nearly every study of RTI implementation discusses the importance of training and professional development (Detgen et al., 2011; Dougherty et al., 2013; Dulaney, 2013; Dykes, 2009; Easton & Erchul, 2011; Greenfield et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2012; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Marston, 2005; Martinez & Young, 2011; Mitchell et al, 2012; Murray et al., 2010; Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox, 2012; Nunn & Jantz, 2009; Ruby et al., 2011; Sanger et al., 2012; Sansosti et al., 2011; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; Stepanek & Peixotto, 2009; Sullivan & Long, 2010; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007; Vaughn, et la., 2010; Werts et al., 2009; White et al., 2012; Wilcox et al., 2013). In general, states, districts, and/or schools provide teachers with training on how to use assessments to generate data and on progress monitoring methods for measuring student responses to intervention. Some training is focused on instructional methods to meet a variety of student needs, but as previously noted, perhaps not enough time is spent on instructional strategies (Greenfield et al, 2010; Wilcox et al., 2013; Dougherty et al., 2012).

Shepherd and Salembier (2011) found that teachers implementing RTI in three rural elementary schools described their professional development, in the form of common planning time and job-embedded professional development through collaborative teams, "as a critical component of their initial implementation," and they welcomed the "provision of ongoing technical assistance" from their state (pp. 10, 11). Greenfield et al. (2010) generated similar findings in a previous study of teachers' perceptions of RTI implementation in an urban setting,

in which teachers were provided common planning time, training on literacy instruction, and the opportunity to extend the implementation of professional learning communities and collaboration among teachers. These teachers "perceived professional development opportunities as instrumental, positive, and informative at the school-wide and grade levels; the professional development meetings allowed teachers to discuss instructional practices" (Greenfield et al., 2010, p. 54). A well-implemented RTI framework brings with it changes in how teachers plan, instruct, and assess students, and the literature recognizes the importance of ongoing, authentic professional development for teachers.

Some studies discuss the critical areas of training that may be lacking in some implementation plans. In their study of the perceptions of teachers during the implementation of an RTI framework, Wilcox et al. (2013) found that teachers in Michigan and Texas "would like additional professional development in intervention techniques to increase their ability to differentiate the curriculum and meet students' needs" (p. 86). In a related finding, Werts et al. (2009) shared the perception of special education directors that typical RTI "training" focuses on "what RTI is and less on how it is to be implemented" (p. 253). Thus, teachers may walk away from professional development understanding terms like "progress monitoring" and "universal screening," but not truly understand how to implement data-based decisions to guide instruction in their classrooms. Professional development is important, but professional development must be planned around the other factors that affect implementation: setting a vision; linking instruction, assessment, and intervention; and collaboration among professionals.

Leadership. Because RTI implementation, when done well, brings with it changes to the nature of how teaching and learning is organized and carried out in a school or system, another critical factor in RTI implementation is leadership. Many of the recent case studies of

implementing schools have stressed the role of the principal—as someone who sets the vision, manages resources, and ensures training—in the implementation process (Dulaney, 2013; Dougherty et al., 2012; Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox, 2012; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; White et al., 2012; Sanger et al., 2012).

Several recent studies specifically highlight the role of the principal. In a study including several urban elementary schools, Dougherty et al. (2012) found that the principal's role as the building leader was critical: "Each school was led by an effective principal with decades of classroom experience . . . In establishing a new RTI paradigm, a strong, visionary administrator seems to be an essential element" (p. 374). In another implementation case study, Murakami-Ramalho and Wilcox (2012) specifically looked at the role of the principal through an application of change strategies outlined by Fullan (2007). In schools where RTI implementation was successful, they found the principal to be someone who defined the "literacy achievement gap," engaged "everyone to work together on the reading goal," provided "additional training in intervention instruction to support students," leveraged leadership, and built "internal accountability" through curriculum-based measures linked to "external accountability (state assessments)" (p. 494). Shepherd and Salembier (2011) noted that during RTI implementation in their three case study elementary schools, there was a noticeable shift in the role of the principal to that of "instructional leader" (p. 11). As with other types of reform that bring systemic change to schools, the principal—and the extent to which he or she is perceived to be "'on board'" (Sanger et al., 2012, p. 104) with an RTI framework—is a key factor in implementation.

Systems Change. What the preceding findings suggest is that RTI implementation brings systems change to a school. Perceived success of RTI implementation in schools depends on the

extent to which the school is prepared for the level of change that RTI brings, recognizes RTI as a systems change, and/or works to identify potential barriers and resources during the implementation process (Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; Greenfield et al., 2010; Dulaney, 2013; Dougherty et al., 2012; Sansosti et al., 2011). Dulaney (2013) noted in her case study of RTI implementation in a middle school that the school had already established "a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility for student achievement . . . through . . . professional learning communities and collaborative teaming structures" (p. 58), which aided them as they began to implement an RTI framework. In their study of implementation in three rural elementary schools, Shepherd and Salembier (2011) recognized the "complexity of the change process" for schools that perhaps had not established a collaborative culture previously, and noted that some schools made more "systemic changes" (p. 13) than others, which affected the process of implementation. In a study of teacher perceptions of RTI implementation in an urban setting, Greenfield et al. (2010) found that educators do realize that RTI implementation affects other components of the organizational system in schools, and recommended a "problem-solving model that integrates professional development, collaborative practices, and maximizes school structures" (p. 58). Sansosti et al. (2011) observed a "strong theme" related to systems factors "that emerged from the focus group data" in their study of special education director perceptions of RTI at the secondary level. These directors recognized "the importance of systems structures in RTI implementation;" however, they also perceived most of the current systems and processes at the secondary level to be "barriers" that had been resistant to change (Sansosti et al., 2011, p. 13).

RTI implementation appears to be made more feasible when schools consider their "readiness" for change (Shepherd & Salembier, 2011, p. 14). After studying implementation in

an urban setting, Dougherty et al. (2012) recommend "mapping implementation phases over a three to five year period (p. 374). Dulaney (2013) also recommends that leaders map resources: "School leaders must identify available resources, both human and capital, to build and sustain the RTI infrastructure, and they must schedule the necessary time to collaborate and implement RTI processes that support this infrastructure" (p. 62). Optimistically, Hernandez-Finch (2012) points out that RTI, as an overarching framework for organizing teaching and learning, could be used "to organize all of the competing mandates and policies to which schools must adhere and thus make possible the achievement of policy coherence" (p. 286). For RTI implementation to lead to this type of coherent system within a school or district, however, it requires some thought on the part of school leaders and teachers as they work to integrate the framework with other systems and practices.

Recognizing the need for flexibility and adaptability. Perhaps one of the most encouraging themes that emerged from the recent empirical literature on RTI implementation in schools is the need for the framework to be flexible and adaptable to local needs. While one of the components of an RTI framework in the literature is "fidelity" in relation to implementing research-based instruction (Zirkel, 2011b), studies of implementation have recognized the power in teachers having some flexibility and ownership of the process. In the rural elementary schools studied by Shepherd and Salembier (2011), teachers were able to "engage in informal communication and sharing about what each was doing, what was working and not working for individual students, and what changes might need to be made to improve literacy instruction" (p. 8). Greenfield et al. (2010) also found that teachers perceived some ownership during the RTI implementation process, as RTI allowed them to use data to "make appropriate intervention and assessment decisions" (p. 48). Greenfield et al. (2010) go further to say that RTI is "unique" as a

federal policy, in that "it offers the possibility for teachers to use their professional judgment within the context of a federal top-down reform effort" (p. 47). In fact some implementing states highlight the flexibility of RTI because it "does not require specific materials or programs," but instead "lends itself to local adaptation" (Stepanek & Peixotto, 2009, p. ii). Schools and practitioners who have been successful with implementing RTI frameworks have recognized the need for the system to be flexible enough for teachers to make data-informed professional decisions about teaching and learning.

What is interesting about the literature is that quantitative researchers, who would typically argue for positivist, empirical methods of research-based instruction, have also recognized the need for RTI to be responsive to local contexts and to teacher judgment. Denton et al. (2010), in a study of the effectiveness of a reading intervention program when scaled up, probed the effectiveness on a larger scale of a reading intervention program that had been deemed effective through a small, controlled study. They found that "even when implementation varies somewhat due to factors such as the inevitable variation in teacher skill and school resources," there were positive effects on student reading achievement (Denton et al., 2010, p. 412). Thus, they argue that in spite of adaptations to local context, "RTI models can ultimately be validly implemented in a variety of contexts" (Denton et al., 2010, p. 412). VanDerHeyden et al. (2012) even encourage the selection of interventions based on the local needs of the system. In a very pragmatic statement about the realities of day-to-day life in schools, VanDerHeyden et al. (2007) argue for a realistic balance between empirical methods and practical application:

> There are certainly more complicated ways than less complicated ways to solve problems, but complicated methods are not likely to be implemented or implemented with integrity in schools with many competing responsibilities, demands, and contingencies that often do not support correct implementation of intervention in classrooms. In politically charged environments such as has often been the case in education, empiricism has much to offer as a vehicle for evaluating the utility of what

> will surely be different applications in evolving models of identification, service provision, and outcome analysis. (p. 254)

This statement underscores the importance of research and what it has to offer schools and educators who strive to make the best use of resources and provide students with the best possible outcomes. Yet, it also puts the idea of "research-based" in a proper context—as a means to evaluate different applications of theoretical models in varying local contexts, which is what the literature related to RTI implementation has done in recent years.

Based on the empirical research conducted thus far, what are the implications for further research related to RTI implementation? The direction of research related to RTI implementation the past few years is promising. While the early literature focused more on the components of the model or the ultimate purpose of the model, recent research has begun to look at the more practical questions related to implementation in the actual context of schools. However, many of the implementation studies are still focused on the elementary level (Chapman et al., 2010; Denton et al., 2010; Dougherty et al., 2013; Dykes, 2009; Greenfield et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2012; Mellard et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2012; Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox; 2012; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011). A few case studies have been conducted of implementation in middle schools (Dulaney, 2013; Graves et al., 2011; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Pyle & Vaughn, 2012), but to my knowledge, there are no published case studies of RTI implementation at the high school level or at the district level[6].

There have been some studies of the perceptions of high school educators and leaders related to RTI (Sanger et al., 2012; Sansosti et al., 2011; Sansosti et al., 2012), but again, no case studies of implementation at the high school level. Future research should address this gap in the

[6] No case studies of RTI implementation at the high school level or on the district level were found in peer-reviewed journals using the search methodology outlined in Appendix C.

literature by focusing on implementation of RTI at the secondary level, at the district level, and across the academic content areas.

In addition, while many of the implementation case studies have used interviews, focus groups, observations, and mixed methodology in the form of surveys, few case studies (Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox, 2012; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011) specifically mention including school documents in their data. Prior (2003) asserts that an organization essentially lives in its documents, as "organizational features are . . . created and sustained almost entirely in and through the documentation" (p. 60). Future studies of RTI implementation must consider the use of organization documents, along with perception data in the form of interviews and surveys, to paint a clearer picture of implementation of this complex framework in schools.

Finally, case study methodology has been used heavily in recent studies of RTI implementation in context (Carney & Stiefel, 2008; Dulaney, 2013; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox, 2012; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; White et al., 2012). This methodology seems particularly suited to the continued study of RTI implementation. As noted earlier, Honig (2006) recommends the use of the "strategic qualitative case" as a way to "build knowledge about little understood and often complex phenomena," such as the implementation of education policy (p. 22). The literature underscores RTI as a particularly complex policy that requires systems change, but is defined loosely enough for teachers and leaders to have some voice in the process of implementation. Thus, educators can adapt RTI based on their local needs and contexts. Flyvbjerg (2006) points out the role of case study as a means to explore this type of context-dependent knowledge: "[I]n the study of human affairs, there appears to exist only context-dependent knowledge, which, thus, presently rules out the possibility of epistemic theoretical construction" (p. 221). Future research on RTI implementation should continue to

explore how local schools and systems adapt and define the core components of the RTI framework to meet their needs.

General Limitations of the RTI Model

The literature review has focused on empirical studies related to RTI's impact on student achievement and related to the implementation of RTI in school settings. It has, essentially, ignored the debate which rages in the literature around the purpose of RTI and its impact on identification for special education services. RTI, in its purest form, is a problem-solving model that requires sound curriculum and intervention when students are struggling. However, due to the connection of RTI with identification of students as learning disabled, there are political and procedural implications related to the implementation of RTI that deserve some discussion. When discussing the merits of an RTI framework, it seems to matter whether one is discussing Shinn's (2007) "big RTI," which is connected to eligibility under IDEA, or Shinn's "little rti," which is a problem-solving, prevention model for all students.

The literature highlights "limitations" related to "big RTI." Academics and researchers who seem opposed to RTI implementation ground their opposition in the fact that an RTI framework is an inadequate means of determining eligibility for special education (Burns et al., 2008; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008; Ofiesh, 2006; Sparks, 2011). What RTI does is allow for the identification of significantly low-achieving (SLA) students as students with specific learning disabilities (SLD), and Kavale and Spaulding (2008) point out that making adequate yearly progress (AYP) might serve as a motivation for schools to identify more students: "NCLB provisions allow states to define alternative academic achievement standards for students with disabilities and, more specifically, are permitted to include alternative assessment results to demonstrate AYP" (p. 172). Following this line of reasoning, even states that are implementing

systematic RTI frameworks may find more students eligible for special education because RTI makes it easier to use intervention data to qualify low-achieving students as SLD. Sparks (2001) asserts that RTI models were never intended to be "diagnostic," and further points out that the RTI model is experiencing an "identity crisis" (p. 16). Texas A & M University professor emeritus of educational psychology Cecil R. Reynolds agrees with him: "'[N]ow a lot of states are saying, 'Well, if a kid doesn't respond to interventions, that means the kid has a disability.' People are taking what was intended to be an early-intervention and prevention model, and trying to make it into a diagnostic model, and it's not" (cited in Sparks, 2011, p. 16).

Vaughn and Fuchs (2006) sum up the disagreement in the literature regarding RTI as a means to identify students under IDEA. On one side, researchers are more concerned with how "RTI will affect the integrity of the LD classification" (p. 60); on the other side, researchers are more concerned with "RTI as a prevention mechanism" (p. 60). Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) argue that "big RTI" as a policy solution related to correcting issues of SLD identification has failed:

> RTI inevitably will suffer from the inconsistencies in measurement models that also plagued severe discrepancy analyses . . . RTI lacks a consistent means of determining responsiveness and the application of different methods identifies different children . . . These are nontrivial concerns; the lack of consensual, scientific resolution will inevitably cause clinicians in different locales to identify very different groups of kids as in need of or eligible for special education and will also fail to identify different groups of students who are struggling readers. (pp. 134-135)

The need to revamp the way in which students are identified as learning disabled is a very different policy goal from the need to shift focus to achievement outcomes. A procedure for identifying students as SLD is a compliance issue. RTI has, according to many researchers, not worked as a policy solution for the compliance issues related to SLD identification. Those who are critical of RTI provisions see it as problematic in relation to SLD identification and seem to

favor a "distinction between RTI as a prereferral and prevention model versus RTI as an identification model," favoring the former (Hernandez-Finch, 2012, p. 290) as a means to improve student achievement outcomes.

Even if one focuses less on identification of students for eligibility under IDEA and more on RTI as a means of improving outcomes for all students, there are limitations of the current literature in regard to the evidence of impact on student achievement. As previously mentioned, many of the studies of RTI's impact on student achievement have been done with young students and in a highly controlled manner. Further, there is some question as to whether or not the impact of the interventions has reached a level of statistical significance: "The effect sizes reported for research studies of RTI are less consistent than many of its supporters profess and those studies reporting strong results are highly likely to have levels of treatment fidelity that are atypical of what is attained in day-to-day real life educational practice" (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009, p. 131). Because of a narrowly defined concept of what constitutes "research-based,"[7] the existing research related to RTI and impact on achievement has been narrow in scope and conducted in a very controlled manner.

Further, as the discussion of factors related to implementation of an RTI framework has previously revealed, there has not been enough focus on *instruction* during the implementation of RTI frameworks. In highly controlled, positivist, research studies, there is a focus on measuring, in a valid and reliable way, improved student outcomes; thus, much research has been done on the validity and usefulness of screening measures, such as curriculum-based measures in reading (Madelaine & Wheldall, 1999). Further, due to a need to control variables and measure achievement, some critics argue that researchers have focused more on what is "easy" to

[7] Much of the research related to RTI has been funded by Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) grants. The Institute of Educational Sciences has an extremely narrow, positivist view of what constitutes research methodology. For example, see http://ies.ed.gov/funding/resources.asp

measure rather than what is important to measure. Marcell (2011), for example, points out that while there is a link between reading fluency and comprehension, we spend more time measuring fluency because it is easy to parse out, at the risk of neglecting a focus on reading comprehension: "It would appear that the attention given to fluency's quantifiable measures—rate and accuracy—has usurped prosody and comprehension (p. 245). Further, the research done on what works for the teaching of reading with younger children does not always translate to older students, who need access to a classroom that combines "literacy instruction and content-area material" (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2009, p. 275). Jones, Yssel, and Grant (2012) point out that while "scientifically validated instruction" is a key component of an RTI framework, there is "widespread uncertainty" about what this looks like in the classroom (p. 210). An RTI model that focuses on intervention for struggling learners rather than procedures and compliance related to IDEA eligibility must result in "a new focus [on] all curricular practices and should result in more targeted, meaningful practices, including at Tier I" (Jones et al., 2012, p. 211).

The Promise of the Model

In spite of the limitations of the current research, the potential of the RTI framework has yet to be tapped. I agree with Mitchell et al. (2008) that when fully implemented, RTI can be a model for comprehensive reform of curriculum and instruction based on the integration of "instruction, intervention, and assessment" (p. 53). Further, RTI gives schools a means to actually use data on student performance in a meaningful way—rather than only looking at accountability measures that are reported at the end of the year, as we do under state and federal accountability requirements, when it is too late for them to impact instruction. While the use of an RTI model is extremely problematic when we think of eligibility under IDEA, there is

promise in the use of an RTI model as a structure for implementing a problem-solving process to impact outcomes for students in general.

The assessment that is done within an RTI framework is very different from the type of assessment for accountability that is required under current federal legislation. It is formative assessment used to make instructional decisions. Research supports the use of curriculum-based measures (CBM), which are the measures often used in universal screening and progress monitoring processes, over the use of standardized tests or even teacher-made tests (Madelaine & Wheldall, 1999). A curriculum-based measure is a brief assessment, targeted to a specific skill (e.g., multiplication fluency). While standardized tests have been shown to be problematic for many reasons[8], curriculum-based measures are extremely useful for instructional decision-making because they are quickly administered and teachers can obtain data, weekly if desired, on how students are performing on a specific, targeted skill.

The RTI framework is undergirded by a philosophy of using assessment to impact instructional decisions. John Hattie (2005) argues that instead of basing accountability around standardized tests, "we [should] form the accountability model around providing teachers with excellent diagnostic and formative evidence" (p. 14). An RTI framework provides a structure for using diagnostic and formative assessments, such as CBM, to guide instructional decisions. Implemented for the purpose of problem-solving, an RTI framework can, as Hattie (2005) advocates, "move the discussion away from data towards interpretations, from student outcomes to teaching successes and improvements, and from accountability models located about schools to located first in the classroom to support evidence-based teaching and learning" (p. 19).

[8] Madelaine and Wheldall (1999) outline several reasons why standardized tests are problematic: issues with construct validity, inability to measure small gains in progress, the summative nature that leaves no room for impacting instruction. Further, Madelaine and Wheldall note that standardized tests were not designed to inform instructional decisions, but were often meant to measure "relative standing in a group" (p. 72).

RTI, when implemented well and for the purpose of integrating curriculum, instruction, and assessment in meaningful ways to improve outcomes for students, comes very close to Hattie's (2005) idea of locating the accountability model in the classroom. Yet, this strong link between the assessment and the instruction has not necessarily occurred as RTI frameworks have been implemented. One reason lies in the fact that RTI is connected to IDEA eligibility, and in many ways, the framework has become, like IDEA as a whole, a system of compliance. Another reason lies in the potential impact that RTI may have on teachers and classrooms. Those who research education policy know that policies and innovations that come close to the core of teaching and learning often fail to get "past the classroom door" (Cuban, 1991, p. 242). Thus, it should be of little surprise that the RTI framework has not been systematically implemented in Georgia, or that it has failed to come close to living up to its potential to impact student outcomes. To engage in a study of the implementation of RTI policy in local school districts, and why implementation is so problematic, one must not only understand the theoretical model and what the literature reveals about RTI implementation; one must also understand the theoretical policy process and the literature related to the implementation of curriculum policies.

Attempting to "Mandate What Matters": Policy and Education Policy Implementation Literature

This section of the literature review outlines the theoretical policy process, which is often conceived of as a top-down, linear process (Anderson, 2011). In addition, the section explores the literature related to the implementation of curriculum policies, including outlining several frameworks for thinking about policy implementation (Snyder et al., 1992). The review of literature related to policy sets up a discussion in the following section of the need for an enhanced view of the policy process in relation to education policies.

The Policy Process

Anderson (2011), along with others who study public policy (Birkland, 2011), speaks of public policymaking as a "process" that includes five phases: setting the policy agenda, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation, and policy evaluation (p. 4). While all of these steps may be influenced by street-level voters and private organizations, the steps are primarily the responsibility of government agencies and officials, and policymaking is seen as a top-down act. Essentially, Anderson's (2011) policy process begins with an identified policy problem, or a "situation that produces needs or dissatisfaction among people and for which relief or redress by governmental action is sought" (Anderson, 2011, p. 85). Not all perceived problems merit the address of government, however. Only problems that rise to the policy agenda are considered by policymakers.

Policy agenda. To receive consideration for a policy solution, problems must reach the policy "agenda," or the set of problems that "policy-makers choose to or feel compelled to act on" (Anderson, 2011, p. 95). Many factors influence what problems reach the policy agenda. Various actors, such as the president, political parties, and interest groups, can influence the policy agenda. Kingdon's agenda-setting model (Anderson, 2011, p. 93) represents the idea that the agenda is often set by the convergence of an ongoing problem, a policy proposal, and the political context. For example, the ongoing "problems" related to public education collide with the proposed solutions in a "policy window," which opens when the political climate is favorable, or perhaps when the right political party takes power (Anderson, 2011, p. 93). While this policy window is open, conditions are favorable for the problem to be addressed with one of the potential solutions available at the time. Birkland (2011) asserts that these policy windows are opened when "indicators," or statistics, related to a problem change, or when there is a

"focusing event," or an event that "generates attention" to a problem (p. 179, 180). In education, policy windows often open when indicators such as achievement test scores decline or when there are focusing events, such as a school shooting. Even when a policy window is open, an acceptable course of action must be available, or formulated, for the problem to move past the agenda stage.

Policy formulation. Policy formulation involves "developing pertinent and acceptable proposed courses of action . . . for dealing with public problems" (Anderson, 2011, p. 107). While Anderson (2011) has put policy formulation sequentially after agenda setting, it is rare that policymakers "start from scratch" (p. 108) when addressing a current policy problem. There is a "vast pool of policy ideas" waiting for the right problem (p. 108). Further, proposed policy changes are often "incremental" in nature (Anderson, 2011, p. 108), meaning that they make small changes in existing policies rather than requiring major change. This pool of policies that is available, or those that are written to address a current problem specifically, are typically developed by government actors, including the president, executive agencies, legislators, or special commissions appointed by the president (Anderson, 2011). It is interesting to note that elected officials are often not responsible for formulating the language of the policy. This task is handled by "staff members [who possess] expertise" in the "policy area" (Anderson, 2011, p. 111). Also, various interest groups and think tanks[9] work to formulate policy proposals. In the same way that legislators rely on staff members to draft policy language, they often rely on these interest groups and think tanks for research, statistics, and policy ideas because the elected officials lack expertise in the field (Anderson, 2011).

[9] "Think tank" is a term used to refer to a private research organization. Many think tanks related to education policy exist, including the Fordham Foundation, Achieve, and the Broad Foundation.

Critical to policy formulation is a consideration of the feasibility of the policy. Not only do policymakers consider "what, if anything, should be done about the problem" (Anderson, 2011, p. 112), they also must decide on a course of action and ponder how effective it might be: "Is it directed at the problem's causes . . . [and] to what extent is the proposal likely to resolve or ameliorate the problem?" (Anderson, 2011, p. 108). Further, those who formulate policy must think about the cost of the proposal, and whether or not the proposal will be amenable in the political environment and acceptable to the public. It is because of these practical considerations—what policy will be affordable, amenable, and acceptable—that "it is often difficult to separate policy formulation from policy adoption" (Anderson, 2011, p. 119). Policy formulators must think about the feasibility of their policies being formally adopted.

Policy adoption. The third stage of the policy process, as outlined by Anderson (2011), is policy adoption. Policy adoption refers to the formal process of making a decision to "adopt" or "enact" a policy (Anderson, 2011, p. 125). Again, it is difficult to separate policy adoption from policy formulation because those who formulate policy often consider the likelihood that the policy will be adopted. As a policy moves toward the adoption stage, formulators often work to ensure adoption by revising the policy proposal: "[D]ifferences will be narrowed; bargains will be struck, until ultimately, in some instances, the final policy decision will be only a formality" (Anderson, 2011, p. 125). Typically, the adopted version of a policy does not include everything that one political party or the other would have liked, but it is the version of the policy that is adoptable. Many factors affect the decisions of policymakers related to policy adoption. Each legislator's values—personal, professional, and policy values—affect the decisions he or she will make. Further, legislators also make decisions based on their party affiliation and the needs and wants of their local constituencies.

Policy implementation. While legislative decision-makers spend time focusing on the feasibility of policy adoption, once adopted, a policy must be implemented. Anderson (2011) notes that the language of the policy is often "rudimentary and requires much additional development" (p. 209). For example, IDEA 2004 includes little more than the following sentence related to RTI: "In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention" (20 U.S.C. §1400). The details for implementation of public policy are left up to "administrative agencies" that are "often delegated discretion or latitude to issue rules and directives that will fill in the details of policy and make it more specific" (Anderson, 2011, p. 210). In Anderson's (2011) policy process, implementation is a top-down approach.

A top-down approach focuses on a process in which policy is adopted and then official actors and agencies are charged with implementation: "[P]olicy implementation is formally the province of a complex array of administrative agencies . . . Administrative agencies collect taxes; operate the postal system, prisons, and schools; regulate banks . . . and perform many other tasks of modern governments" (Anderson, 2011, p. 216). The official agency responsible for implementation may be pressured or influenced by any one of the three branches of government, political parties, interest groups, or the media; however, the agency is ultimately responsible for implementation, which is seen as a linear process of putting the adopted policy into action. These agencies have many "techniques" at their disposal for implementing policy and ensuring that local-level bureaucrats and citizens comply with the policy.

While many local actors will comply with policy based on respect for authority or because the policy is seen as reasonable, government agencies often use other means to ensure compliance with policy: inspection, licensing, contracts, provision of loans or subsidies, and

taxes or other forms of monetary sanctions are a few ways in which agencies produce compliance with policies (Anderson, 2011). In Anderson's top-down approach, the focus is on the actions of government agencies as they write the language for implementation and use reward or sanction techniques to enforce policy.

Anderson (2011) also briefly describes the bottom-up approach to implementation, in which implementation is actually the province of "street level" officials, and occurs as these "lower-level officials . . . interact with their clients" (p. 211). Further, a bottom-up approach does not necessarily see the implementation of policy as a linear process; rather implementation is affected by "state and local economic conditions, the attitudes of local officials, and the actions of clients" (Anderson, 2011, p. 211). While much research has been done on bottom-up approaches and the complexities related to implementation of education policies at the local level (Honig, 2006), Anderson (2011) takes " a more traditional approach," focusing on the role of the administrative agencies and "implementation techniques" used to produce "compliance" at the local level (pp. 211 & 216). Anderson essentially ignores the bottom-up approach to policy implementation. However, a bottom-up approach argues that "goals, strategies, activities, and contacts of the actors involved in the microimplementation process must be understood in order to understand implementation" (Matland, 1995, p. 149). Rather than focusing on the actions and strategies of those in government agencies, a bottom-up approach asserts that implementation is dependent on the local context, and "on the skills of individuals in the local implementation structure who can adapt policy to local conditions" (Matland, 1995, p. 149).

Implementation is especially problematic when policy is ambiguous, and a bottom-up approach would encourage variation in how policy is implemented at the local level (Matland,

1995). Those responsible for the implementation of policy at the local level would have discretion, especially with ambiguous policies, to make implementation decisions as appropriate.

While a bottom-up approach to implementation would expect and encourage "street-level" decision-makers to exercise discretion in the implementation of policy that is adapted to local contexts, Anderson's (2011) top-down approach sees any deviations during implementation as "noncompliance" (p. 258). When local officials do not comply with policy, a top-down model sees this as an issue with the policy: "[T]here are structural defects in the law and its administration, and from ignorance and lack of understanding of the law, as well as from behavior that is more consciously or deliberately deviant" (Anderson, 2011, p. 260). A top-down approach to implementation views implementation failure as a top-down issue: there was a problem with how the policy was structured or there was a failure to communicate. If those two factors are ruled out, local actors must be "deviant" (Anderson, 2011, p. 26). Why this top-down approach is problematic when applied to educational policy, in particular policies that affect the roles of teachers and students, will be discussed in subsequent sections.

Policy evaluation. The final step in Anderson's (2011) policy process is evaluation, which "involves the estimation, appraisal, or assessment of a policy, its content, implementation, goal attainment, and other effects" (p. 271). Those who evaluate policy look at "outcomes," such as whether or not the policy addressed the problem, what intended or unintended consequences resulted from the policy, whether the policy negatively impacted a group of citizens, and the direct and indirect costs of the policy. Government groups, such as Congress or the Government Accountability Office (GAO), engage in policy evaluation. Policies are also frequently evaluated by unofficial actors: the media, university scholars, and research organizations. For example, many education policies are evaluated by private think tanks, which may have

incentive to generate biased evaluations[10]. Evaluations of policy, especially unbiased ones, can not only generate information about a particular policy, but can also help us to understand the conditions related to problematic implementation of policy.

Unfortunately, it is often difficult to evaluate policies empirically due to a variety of factors: uncertain policy goals, difficulty in determining causality, diffuse policy impacts, and difficulties in acquiring data (Anderson, 2011). Yet, when evaluation reveals "shortcomings, loopholes, or other defects in the policy" (Anderson, 2011, p. 321), legislators make "incremental" adjustments to the policy. Thus, Anderson (2011) concludes that "once underway, the formation of policy on most problems is continuous" (p. 321). This continuous revision of public policy can be seen in major education policies like the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), in its current form as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, as well as in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, in its current from as IDEA 2004. Anderson (2011) sees this need for continuous revision as part of a top-down process of addressing structural defects in the original law. However, when these top-down education policies have undergone continuous revision for several decades, is it not time to look past structural defects in the policies? Scholars who study the implementation of education policy, particularly curriculum policies, would argue that Anderson, and public policymakers, should turn a magnifying glass on the critically important, and problematic, step of implementation.

Curriculum Implementation

Historically, curriculum, which I will define here as a process of determining learning objectives and targets and the practice of teaching and designing learning experiences around those objectives, was not a policy issue; teachers were given much leeway in the choice of

[10] For a discussion of how think tanks and interest groups produced biased evaluations related to charter schools, see Jeffrey Henig's (2009) *Spin Cycle: How Research is Used in Policy Debates*.

objectives, materials, and methods they used and in the planning of learning experiences for students (Snyder et al., 1992). Yet, since the 1960's, policymakers in the United States have increasingly involved themselves in the design and implementation of curriculum in public schools. Elmore and Sykes (1992) define curriculum policy as "the formal body of law and regulation that pertains to what should be taught in schools" (p. 186). However, implementation of policy related to "what should be taught" has proven problematic, to say the least.

Curriculum policy research, to date, has noted the "disconnect" between policies and "on-the-ground" curriculum implementation, as well as the "difficulties of making curriculum policy so far from the seat of curriculum practice" (Short, 2008, p. 421 & 423). Very different from policies relating to the regulation of the postal service or even taxation, curriculum implementation is fraught with ambiguity. Early on, policymakers learned that they could not expect a straightforward implementation process due to the myriad of variables that affect the implementation of teaching and learning (Fullan, 1993; Snyder et al., 1992). Over time, the curriculum implementation literature, like Anderson (2011), has conceptualized implementation as either a top-down, fidelity-driven process or a bottom-up process characterized by adaptation of policy to fit local contexts (Snyder et al., 1992).

In contrast to Anderson (2011), however, the curriculum policy field has increasingly realized the complexity of the process and advocated a more bottom-up approach that accounts for the complex, context-dependent nature of policy implementation (Elmore, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Fullan, 1993; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977; McLaughlin, 1995; Honig, 2006). In their review of the literature on curriculum implementation, Snyder et al. (1992) provide an overview of three approaches to curriculum implementation: a fidelity perspective, which mirrors Anderson's (2011) top-down approach; an enactment perspective, which would be an exclusively bottom-up

approach; and a mutual adaptation perspective, which falls on a "continuum" between the two (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 73). Each perspective grew out of the need to focus on the complex implementation stage of curriculum policymaking.

Fidelity perspective. The first approach, termed the "fidelity perspective," looks at curriculum policy implementation based on "the degree to which a particular innovation is implemented as planned" and "the factors which facilitate or hinder implementation as planned" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 67). This perspective rose out of a realization that implementation of curriculum policy was an important, and often ignored, step in the educational policy process: "There [was] a singular lack of curiosity about what happened to an innovation between the time it was designed . . . and the time that the consequences became evident . . . The whole area of implementation, what the innovation actually consists of in practice was viewed as a 'black box'" (Fullan & Pomfret, 1977, p. 337). When policymakers realized the problematic nature of curriculum policy implementation, with greater variations in level of implementation within school or district sites than across sites (Snyder et al., 1992), they concluded that policy effectiveness could not be measured without looking in the "black box":

> Before declaring a program a failure . . . it is first necessary to determine whether the program was really implemented. To do so, the innovation needs to be clearly defined so that those charged with implementing it will know what to do. The properties of the innovation need to be clearly identified so that researchers can determine to what degree each characteristic is being implemented. (Snyder et al., 1992)

Just as Anderson's (2011) top-down approach sees noncompliance with a policy as a structural or communications issue, the fidelity perspective focuses on factors that hinder implementation as planned.

Once factors that hinder implementation are found, those working from a fidelity perspective would attempt to address those barriers to ensure successful policy implementation.

Researchers working from this perspective, for example, have worked to identify such factors as "teachers' lack of clarity," "teachers' lack of skill," and "incompatibility of organizational arrangements with the innovation" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 69). The idea is that when these barriers are identified, they are addressed through additional clarity in the innovation process, professional learning for teachers, and through modifications to the infrastructure to address organizational barriers. The role of leadership, at the district and school level, is underscored, as the principal and central office staff are charged with providing training and technical support for teachers, as well as addressing organizational barriers (Snyder et al., 1992).

The fidelity perspective would also view the teacher—as someone who can "'adapt the programs to their own needs, making changes that may leave out key components'" (Hall & Loucks, 1981 cited in Snyder et al., 1992)—as a barrier to successful implementation. Even though policymakers would like for teachers to implement a curriculum policy with fidelity, teachers often do not automatically implement curriculum policy as written. The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) was developed to "describe individuals' perceptions, feelings, motivations, frustrations, and satisfactions" as they work through implementation of a curriculum innovation, and it has been termed "the most sophisticated and explicit conceptualization of 'the fidelity' orientation" (Fullan & Pomfret, 1977, p. 355).

CBAM seeks to quantify the level of implementation based on assigning various users a level from 0 (nonuse) to 6 (renewal). In using CBAM, the researchers noted much variability between different teachers' concerns about curriculum innovations, as well as variability in what they understood the innovation to be (Snyder et al., 1992). Thus, the fidelity perspective recommends additional policy clarity:

> It requires identifying the essential operational components of an innovation, as well as acceptable and unacceptable variations. These essential components and acceptable

> variations are identified by the program developers and facilitators in the planning stages . . . [I]mplementation problems often occur because designers and policymakers have not considered [practical implementation]. (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 71)

While the fidelity perspective recognizes that teachers will attempt to implement policy differently and adapt it to their needs and context, the recommendation is that this should be addressed in a top-down manner by defining the "acceptable" level of "variation" prior to implementation. Essentially, any decision-making power of teachers is co-opted, as those who design the curriculum policy constrain teacher creativity by defining parameters for variability in advance.

Curriculum enactment. At the opposite end of the spectrum from the fidelity perspective is an approach to curriculum policy termed "curriculum enactment" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 81). This approach views "externally created curricular materials and programmed instructional strategies" as "tools for students and teacher to use as they construct the enacted experience of the classroom" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 81). Curriculum implementation is not something that can be designed in a top-down manner. Rather, curriculum is enacted as teachers and students interact and experience learning together: "The role of the teacher, then, is as a curriculum developer who, together with his or her students, grows ever more competent in constructing positive educational experiences" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 81). This perspective first grew out of experimental programs, such as the Eight Year Study, that exchanged "externally prescribed input in the form of standardized and regulated courses of study" for "whatever the local school people, students, and community felt would be best for their students" (Snyder et al., 1992, pp. 419-420). Over time, other studies have supported the notion that "curriculum knowledge includes situated knowledge, created in practice when teachers engage in the ongoing processes of teaching and learning in classrooms" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 425). Essentially, an

enactment perspective views curriculum as the interaction between teachers, students, and curricular tools in the classroom. Curriculum innovation or change only happens through a "process of individual growth and change in thinking and practice rather than an organizational procedure of design and implementation" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 425).

While this perspective sees curriculum implementation as an individualized, context-specific process, those who work from this perspective have identified a plethora of factors that help the enactment process, including, but not limited to time for teachers to collaboratively plan; involvement of many stakeholders, including parents and students; "cooperative coordination"; research, "both general findings and specific local conditions"; the setting of "valid objectives"; continual evaluation of the program; and collaboration between leadership and teachers (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 421). Further, the enactment perspective views outside curricular materials and programs as "tools" for teachers "to collaboratively develop their skills, knowledge, and attitudes in context-specific environments," rather than as means to "control through attempting to standardize classroom experiences" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 427).

While teachers may choose to use an externally developed curricular program, the teacher maintains the power to "enact" that program, or parts of it, in the manner that best fits the needs of the students and the context. From an enactment perspective, policymakers have no role in the classroom, except, perhaps, as providers of material resources for teachers. In a bold statement, Cho (1998) even argues that the term "implementation" is a "misnomer" that signifies "an unnecessary application of top-down bureaucracy" (p. 4). He argues that an enactment perspective redefines the concept of "curriculum":

> In this perspective, different priorities for 'successful' implementation can be made while the teacher and students enact the curriculum. In this respect, 'curriculum' is not necessarily the taken for granted notion of 'a document.' Nor is it captured by the *a*

> *priori* instrument by which researchers are able to measure the enactment of the curriculum in light of predetermined goals and objectives. (Cho, 1998, p. 4)

The enactment perspective is the only one of the three models discussed by Snyder et al. (1992) that does not start with an external notion of what successful implementation looks like. Rather, the goals and objectives of the curriculum are constructed in the interaction between teacher, student, and context (Cho, 1998).

Mutual adaptation. A third perspective on curriculum implementation discussed by Snyder et al. (1992) is mutual adaptation, which falls on a continuum between "complete fidelity in implementation of a curriculum" and the opposite concept of "enactment" (p. 73). The idea of mutual adaptation grew out of the reality in the early 1980s that "more was known about how to fail at implementation of curriculum innovation than about how to succeed" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 74). The term "mutual adaptation" was coined in the Rand Change Agent Study, a study commissioned to look at federal programs that supported change in schools. The authors of the study, Berman and McLaughlin (1975) noted that "problem-solving projects . . . that were highly complex and required considerable behavioral change on the part of teachers and administrators" (p. ix) were often adapted by the local implementers. One of the findings of the Rand Study was that "effective implementation" involves a "process of mutual adaptation" (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975, p. xi). Related findings, that local systems vary in their "capacity to deal with innovations" and that implementation depends on the "receptivity of the institutional setting," point to the need for mutual adaptation of external policies and innovations (p. xi).

Policymakers focused on the adoption stage miss the role that the local context and motivation to change play in the implementation of curricular innovation. Like the fidelity perspective, the mutual adaptation perspective is concerned with identifying factors that hinder the implementation of innovative curriculum policies; however, not to address those barriers so

that policy can be implemented with fidelity. The mutual adaptation perspective seeks to identify factors that influence the process so the entire process—from the policy to the organizational structure—can be improved: "Mutual adaptation research . . . tends to see curriculum knowledge as one facet of a larger, complex social system that cannot be taken for granted. Who initiates curriculum knowledge is secondary in importance to understanding the constellation of factors that influence any innovation" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 412). Working from this perspective, one does not focus on fidelity to a policy or the power of teachers to enact curriculum at the classroom level. Rather, researchers working from a mutual adaptation perspective are concerned with the interaction of policies with the local context and work to understand the conditions that allow for the successful implementation of an innovation as it is adapted to the local contexts.

Because the mutual adaptation perspective studies the interaction of policy and the local context, research in this vein has provided us information on a myriad of factors that affect the implementation of curriculum policy. Foremost, research has shown that the success or failure of a curricular innovation is dependent on the "unique configuration of social, historical, political, and ideological factors that make up the school and its social, community context" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 416). This idea that implementation of curriculum policy is situated and contingent on context has continued to run as a strong current in educational policy research (Fullan, 2007; Honig, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006): "[I]mplementability and success are the product of interactions between policies and . . . participants in implementation and their starting beliefs . . . and the place or contexts that help shape what people can and will do" (Honig, 2006, p. 2). Further underscoring the importance of the local context, researchers working from this perspective have noted the importance of local leadership—their support for the innovation and

their ability to plan for an adoption process, provide staff development and engage in an ongoing process of evaluation related to the innovation (Snyder et al., 1992).

Additionally, research has highlighted the importance of "collegiality, trust, support, interaction, and open communication" between teachers, as well as teachers' sense of "efficacy" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 417). Those working from a mutual adaptation perspective would argue that policymakers must consider these factors as they design policy, understand that they must work with local educators, and design policies that are adaptable to local contexts and needs.

What the synthesis of curriculum policy implementation literature provided by Snyder et al. (1992) reveals is that the implementation of curriculum policy is not a straight-forward act. Teachers and educational leaders are not local implementers of policy in the same sense as the clerk at the social security office. Policy implementation in the classroom does not involve strict adherence to a set of rules and regulations; rather, "curriculum is shaped through the evolving constructs of teachers and students" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 404). Because of this, Cho (1998) argues that "curriculum implementation as a field of study should relinquish the notion of the fidelity perspective (p. 1). Because the marriage of the curriculum and policy fields is bound to be a lengthy union, due to the proliferation of education reform policies designed to improve the core of teaching and learning, it is essential that policymakers, who still cling to a top-down, fidelity perspective (Anderson, 2011), understand the problematic nature of the implementation phase and design an enhanced version of the policy process that respects the role of "street-level" educators as "policymakers" (Cuban, 1991, p. 221).

Adapting the Policy Process to Curriculum Policy

While policymakers may see the policy process as a rational, linear model with steps along a line from formulation to adoption to implementation (Anderson, 2011); the research on

the implementation of education policy (Fullan, 2007; Honig, 2006; Snyder et al., 1992) has continually asserted that education policies aimed at affecting the core of teaching and learning are not implemented as written, nor in a linear manner. Therefore, the policy process must shine a light on the implementation stage of the process. This implementation step in the policy process is viewed by Anderson as occurring when government agencies flesh out the rules and regulations that accompany adopted policies. Anderson's idea of "implementation" may work very well when policies are black-and-white with answers to simple questions—how much do stamps cost, when will the mail be delivered. Yet, education policy is more complex, and "implementation" truly occurs at the local level: "[L]ocal choices about how (or whether) to put a policy into practice have more significance for policy outcomes than do such policy features as technology, program design, funding levels or governance requirements" (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 36). Because of this contingent nature of implementation, policymakers must begin to focus less on what "works" in education, and more on "what works for whom, where, when, and why" (Honig, 2006, p. 2). The focus must shift from policy formulation and adoption to policy *implementation*.

Based on the contingent nature of implementation as policies interact with local contexts, Anderson's (2011) policy process must be revised when applied specifically to curriculum policies so that the implementation stage is highlighted and enhanced by the ideas of mutual adaptation and enactment. A fidelity perspective is not feasible because it would seek to hold fast to what "works" and attempt to modify each local district so that "what works" will work *there*. The mutual adaptation perspective, with its focus on the "constellation of factors that influence innovation" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 412), aligns closely with recent research on education policy implementation (Honig, 2006, McLaughlin, 2006). In the education policy

process, implementation is influenced specifically by the local context and the local actors—teachers and leaders—charged with implementing the policy. After a brief discussion of the impact of local context and local actors, I will further outline the need for the policy community to consider the notion of "enactment," especially in relation to the implementation of a theoretical framework such as RTI.

The Context of Implementation

When formulating policies for adoption, policymakers must acknowledge that local schools and districts will have a "site-specific" response to the policy: "[T]he agency's capacity, internal administrative structures, and norms of action . . . surface important explanations for how implementation unfolds" (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 213). In other words, each local district will react to policy in different ways—not because they are "deviant" or "noncompliant," but because districts have varying levels of capacity for implementing policy. Policymakers who focus merely on the formulation and adoption stages of the policy process doom policies to failure. Their ideas will never "get past the classroom door" (Cuban, 1991, p. 242) because they have not considered how their policy ideas are to be implemented in the myriad of contexts represented by schools and school districts. The level of match, or mismatch, between policy goals and the capacity of a district to implement the policy represent "an important source of variation in policy implementation" (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 214). The context of implementation trumps any policy silver bullets, incentives, or rewards that might come along with policy implementation: "What matters most to policy outcomes are local capacity and will" (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 36). Thus, policymakers must come to understand that their policies will be adapted to local contexts based on the capacity of the district as it works through

implementation. Further, "capacity and will" depend, not solely on fiscal or policy resources, but on those who work within the school district.

The Implementers

Early on, researchers studying curriculum policy implementation recognized the critical role of the teacher in implementation (Snyder et al., 1992). Research has shown that teachers rarely implement policies with fidelity as written. Rather, teachers adapt policies so that they can be "absorb[ed]" into existing practice (Cuban, 1991, p. 217). Curriculum implementation research has continued to explore the role of educators in policy implementation. Again, teachers, on the whole, do not fail to implement policies because they are "noncompliant." Rather, policy implementation is, in many ways, a meaning-making process that depends on the backgrounds, beliefs, and understandings of the individuals responsible for implementation. When educators interact with a reform policy, especially one that "demands significant shifts in teachers' practice," they use their "prior knowledge and experience to notice, make sense of, interpret, and react" to the policy (Spillane et al., 2006, p. 48). As educators engage in this "process of sense making," the policy process becomes anything but linear:

> On the ground, implementation involves interplay of change and continuity, getting started and going deeper, learning and relearning as midcourse corrections are made. Despite this understanding, though, too many implementation research designs continue to adopt a "pathway" model, rather than deal directly with the actual simultaneity of different implementation tasks. (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 217)

Thus, implementation is a *learning* process—often a *shared* learning process (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Spillane et al., 2006)—for educators, as they work to integrate new understandings about practice with current understandings, and as they incorporate new practices into existing practices. When curriculum policy implementation takes into account the idea that implementation involves learning, the policy process must shift focus from adopting clear policy

language and providing fiscal resources for implementation to addressing other factors related to the organizational capacity to promote teacher learning.

The Concept of Enactment

While the terms "fidelity" and "mutual adaptation" grew out of studies beginning with the goals and objectives of an external curriculum innovation (Cho, 1998), the idea of "enactment" grew out of the curriculum field. While mutual adaptation is seen as occurring on a continuum between pure fidelity and pure enactment, the genesis of the original term was in relation to why innovations were not being implemented with fidelity. Thus, "the authority of the developer [of the curriculum innovation] must continue to be respected by the user, and at the same time, the setting should be modified by the project" (Cho, 1998, p. 10). Enactment starts with a different locus of control and purpose altogether: "The use of the term *curriculum enactment* invites an active involvement of students and teachers who bring their own background knowledge to the classroom . . . the priority in implementing something is located in the very context where evolving meanings are shaped" (Cho, 1998, p. 12). Because of the proliferation of policies aimed at the core of teaching and learning at the state and national level, it is difficult to conceptualize a situation in which the "priority" is completely located in the local context. However, the policy process, in relation to curriculum policy implementation must be revamped to include an implementation stage informed by the concepts of mutual adaptation and enactment: "To be sure, both adaptive and enactment perspective may be interwoven in some ways" (Cho, 1998, p. 29).

What this means for the policy process is that policymakers must come to terms with the fact that they cannot "mandate what matters to effective practice" (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 39). The policy process cannot mandate local "capacity and will," nor can it force teachers to "engage

in a process of sense-making." Rather, policymakers could focus on the implementation stage, as they work to understand how policy can "enable and facilitate" effective practice in local contexts" (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 39). Policymakers could begin to construe policy as a "hypothesis" related to what may work (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 83), and focus on providing the fiscal and monetary resources for educators to engage in a process of learning as they test out hypotheses and adapt policies and programs to work in their specific contexts, perhaps through a process of "enactment." Finally, as policymakers come to understand the critical role of the capacity of implementers in the policy process, they must begin to discuss how policy can be used as a tool to enhance teacher capacity and provide time for teachers to engage with and use policy as a tool to improve student achievement.

The Enhanced Policy Process and RTI Implementation

The paper opened with an acknowledgement that, in spite of clear policy language at the state level, Response to Intervention implementation has been problematic in Georgia. To understand why, I have engaged in a review of what the literature can teach us about the policy process, specifically in relation to the implementation of curriculum policies. While the factors affecting successful RTI implementation are, in reality, as varied as the number of local school districts in the state, several key themes emerge related to why implementation has not been as systematic and systemic as hoped for.

Curriculum policies are rarely implemented systemically with fidelity. As the research reveals, the hope that a statewide framework would be implemented systematically with "fidelity" is far-fetched. Because of the context-dependent nature of curriculum policy implementation (Honig, 2006), RTI implementation is expected to vary from district to district. The state of Georgia focused on adopting RTI and on providing clear policy language, but

implementation of RTI frameworks has varied based on the "capacity and will" of local educators (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 36). While RTI is mandated in the state of Georgia, it has, in many districts, been "absorb[ed]" and "convert[ed]" into a "routine add-on compatible with existing practices" (Cuban, 1991, p. 217), such as the existing SST process. Further, RTI is mandated in the sense that it is required as part of a process of considering eligibility for Special Education services. Thus, districts do implement RTI insofar as it applies to specific students who are in the process of evaluation, but the theoretical model—which would provide a framework of additional intervention and support for all students—is less likely to be implemented.

Policies that attempt to "mandate what matters" in classrooms meet with resistance. Response to Intervention is a broad term used to refer to a "practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying child response data to important educational decisions" (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 3). As previously mentioned, the theoretical model predates IDEA 2004, and without considering the policy implications, the philosophy of RTI is that "all students should be given adequate instruction. Those who are not keeping up should be given extra help in small groups. If that extra help does not do the trick, they should be given even more intense and individualized assistance" (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011, p. 310-311). Most educators would not argue with the idea that students should receive "adequate" or "high-quality" instruction, or that they should receive "extra help" or "interventions matched to [their] needs" as necessary. The issue comes when RTI is seen as a means to "mandate" what "adequate" or "high-quality" looks like.

The language in IDEA 2004 and that in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 are similar: "Both stress the use of professional, sound interventions and instruction based on defensible research, as well as the requirements to deliver effective reading and behavior programs that will result in improved student performance" (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 17). Thus, the curriculum is no longer defined by local educators who enact learning experiences in classrooms; rather, the curriculum becomes "research-based." When providing instruction or intervention for students, RTI, as constructed in the policy, requires that the materials and methods used be proven empirically, rather than proven through teacher experience. Thus, an RTI framework, implemented with fidelity to the adopted public policy, would mandate curriculum, which the previous review of curriculum policy implementation literature would argue is a mandate doomed to fail. As the research tells us, what "works" is context-dependent. While an intervention might be "research-based," research on educational policies that try to mandate the core of teaching and learning reveals that what works depends on "what works for whom, where, when, and why" (Honig, 2006, p. 2). Controlled research studies of effective educational strategies and interventions fail to understand the role of the local context and the myriad of variables affecting the teaching and learning process.

The clear policy language related to RTI in Georgia did not come with the same clear focus on building organizational or teacher capacity for implementation. Research on educational policy implementation has pointed to the importance of the capacity of the organization for implementation, as well as the capacity, efficacy, and will of local educators to implement the new policy (Elmore, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Honig, 2006; Snyder et al., 1992). RTI implementation in Georgia, however, did not focus on building this additional capacity. While the state has provided an RTI manual (Georgia Department of Education, 2011), there is

currently no one assigned to oversee RTI implementation or support local districts at the state level. Further, little is provided in the way of resources for RTI implementation, placing the burden of locating and purchasing universal screening tools (to identify potential learning problems), research-based interventions, and progress monitoring tools squarely on the shoulders of local districts. Again, because local districts will vary in their capacity to implement, it comes as no surprise that, with so little focus on providing support for implementation, RTI implementation has varied around the state.

The state of Georgia, also, has provided little in the way of professional development and learning opportunities related to RTI for teachers and leaders. Because of the connection of RTI to Special Education policy, many practicing educators view the RTI framework as a means to document the need for special education, rather than a model to support all students. The best opportunity for teachers and leaders to engage in a process of learning around RTI is provided by the Student Support Team Association of Georgia Educators (SSTAGE); however, the organization is not widely known outside of those for whom RTI is a daily responsibility—RTI coordinators, Special Education leaders, and school psychologists. In fact, the organization originally grew out of a small coalition of school psychologists who gathered to collaborate on RTI implementation—due to the lack of state-level support. Classroom teachers, those most responsible for implementing the high-quality, research-based instruction and intervention for students, are likely not involved in learning opportunities provided by SSTAGE. Thus, the capacity of teachers to implement RTI effectively will depend on the capacity and will of their local district to provide professional learning opportunities.

Summary and Implications for Current Research Study

This chapter has outlined several bodies of literature related to the current research study. First, I outlined the theoretical framework of RTI, the key components of this framework, and several factors that led to the inclusion of RTI in federal policy. Second, I outlined the empirical literature related to RTI's impact on student achievement and the literature related to RTI implementation and factors that help or hinder that process. After this concentrated look at RTI, I then outlined the literature related to the policy process, and took a focused look at what the literature has to say about curriculum policy implementation. Next, I argued for an enhanced version of the policy process in relation to curriculum policy implementation, noting that the implementation stage in the curriculum policy process must be informed by the concepts of mutual adaptation and enactment. Finally, I outlined several reasons why, based on the literature related to curriculum policy implementation, the implementation of RTI frameworks in school districts in Georgia has proven problematic.

What the literature related to RTI tells us is that RTI holds promise for improving student achievement, particularly in the area of reading. Further, this promise is not only for improved outcomes as measured by state-mandated tests, but is related to improved outcomes on very specific formative measures related to reading skills and/or math skills. The literature does not tell us much about the impact of a systematic intervention process on the achievement of older students, but the few studies that have been done (e.g.,, Graves et al., 2011) highlight the need for additional research at the secondary level.

What the literature related to education policy implementation tells us is that implementation is not a straight-forward act. Implementation is highly contingent on the local context and practitioners, and it is a process in which teachers, as enactors of curriculum, have

the power to adapt—or resist altogether—curriculum policies in their classrooms. This power to "change" an innovation or policy at the point of implementation is not necessarily negative, but the existing policy process must be cognizant of the ways in which teachers and students do adapt policies to fit their needs in the classroom.

The current case study of a district in Georgia that has been recognized as using "best practices" in RTI implementation fills a gap in the extant literature. Few case studies of RTI implementation have been conducted at the district level. Further, while case studies have explored RTI implementation, mostly at the elementary level, few have been conducted that look at a local context in which RTI has been implemented for several years, and in what has been described as a "successful" manner.

In addition, the current case study sheds light on the theoretical curriculum implementation perspectives: fidelity, mutual adaptation, and enactment. RTI is unique as a curriculum innovation because there are two different theoretical approaches: standard-protocol and problem-solving. Prior to conducting this research, I argued, as does Cho (1998), that the fidelity perspective should be discarded due to the aforementioned contingent and context-dependent nature of implementation. The standard-protocol approach, in which a specific intervention is prescribed based on specific assessment results, seemed to lend itself readily to analysis using the mutual adaptation perspective. In what ways do educators adapt the standard-protocol approach to fit their needs and contexts? The problem-solving approach, which relies on collaborative teams who look at student data and plan individualized interventions, is more akin to an enactment perspective. The findings of the current study, discussed in detail in Chapter 4, highlight how Cannon County has adapted RTI to the local context and how educators have become more adept at enacting the problem-solving approach over time. However,

"fidelity" of implementation appears to have been critically important as well, especially during the early stages of implementation.

Finally, the current case study opens a space where the research, the perspectives of the practitioners, the organizational policies and procedures, and the thoughts and understandings of the researcher are put into dialogue. The study does not seek to verify one approach—standard-protocol or problem-solving—over the other. The study also does not seek to verify any one curriculum implementation approach over another. The study seeks to understand the conditions that allowed for the implementation of the RTI framework in Cannon County. By dialoguing around RTI implementation in this case study district, the hope is that RTI has been allowed to "say something new" (Freeman, 2011, p. 547) and that those who read this study will come to understand something about RTI implementation as if they had experienced it for themselves (Stake, 1994).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology I have used in this "educational" case study (Bassey, 1999, p. 28) of the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) policy in Cannon County, using philosophical hermeneutics as a theoretical frame. The purpose of this study was to engage in a dialogue with stakeholders around RTI implementation in Cannon County in an effort to understand how the system has worked to implement an RTI framework. The overarching research question addressed how the reconstruction of Cannon County's implementation of the theoretical RTI framework could help us to understand the conditions for the framework's adaptation in the local context.

The chapter is organized into three main parts. The first part expands on the theoretical framework of philosophical hermeneutics, which was discussed briefly in Chapter 1, and its application to qualitative research. The second part provides a review of case study design and its appropriateness for a study of education policy implementation. The rationale for the use of philosophical hermeneutics as a frame and case study as a design for the current study is woven into these sections. The final section outlines the methods used in this case study of RTI implementation in the Cannon County School System.

Policy Implementation as Interpretation and Dialogue: Philosophical Hermeneutics

What is Hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics, in the most general understanding of the term, refers to the art of interpretation. The word "hermeneutics" is "derived from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, which

means to say or interpret" (Moules, 2002, p. 3). In one of its earliest applications, hermeneutics was used as a method to interpret scriptures and other ancient texts—a method to analyze these "divine" messages from another time and place so that they could be understood in a new context (Prasad, 2005; Smith, 1993). In its classical sense, hermeneutics was applied with the belief that a "true" meaning could be gleaned from a text, and the interpreter functioned as a "messenger" who could, through a logical, analytical approach to reading and translating the words, bring this message to the surface. The idea was that the author of the "text" wished to convey a specific message, and the "hermeneutical task was seen as that of putting oneself in the place of the author in the sense that one would be able thereby to reconstruct the thinking of the author" (Smith, 1993, p. 188).

Over time, the notion that an interpreter could arrive at a "true" understanding of a text was challenged by several scholars. Chief among them, Schleiermacher acknowledged the difficulty of trying to interpret texts, noting that it is easy for interpreters to have "misunderstanding" (Grondin, 1994, p. 70) about what the author intended. However, he asserted that arriving at the meaning of a text might still be possible if interpreters could "enter both the linguistic world and the psychological mindset of the text's author" (Prasad, 2005, p. 32). This could be done through a "critical, methodologically controlled interpretation" (Linge, 1976, p. xiii) that worked to "reconstruct [the text] from the ground up" and in the end, understand it even better than the author (Grondin, 1994, p. 71).

Dilthey also believed in an objective hermeneutical process that relied on an understanding of the author and the author's context; however, Dilthey's vision was that hermeneutics could be used as a method to understand more than written texts and could become the underlying theory driving methodology for the human sciences in general (Kinsella, 2006;

Prasad, 2005; Prasad, 2002; Smith, 1993). Dilthey saw the application of hermeneutics—of interpreting "lived experience" (Ramberg & Gjesdal, 2005, p. 8)—as a means of adding legitimacy to the human sciences. Like Schleiermacher, Dilthey maintained that the act of interpretation could be objective and controlled, which, he argued, is possible only when "an interpreter is able to stand outside of her own history as she interprets the meanings of others" (Smith, 1993, p. 189). Dilthey set the stage, with his expansive notion of hermeneutics as a "general theory of human life and existence" (Ramberg & Gjesdal, 2005, p. 9), for the evolution of philosophical hermeneutics and the acceptance of the situated "prejudices" (Prasad, 2005, p. 33) of the interpreter.

The Development of Philosophical Hermeneutics

While Dilthey could see the application of the hermeneutic perspective to the human sciences in a broad sense, he agreed with Schleiermacher that the interpreter must attempt to remove biases—the "interpreter must transcend" (Linge, 1976, p. xiv) his own perceptions and biases to arrive at a correct interpretation. Classical hermeneutics is methodological, and this focus on methodology and removing oneself as much as possible from the interpretive act was challenged by the development of philosophical hermeneutics.

Rather than being concerned with "method, methodology, or practice," philosophical hermeneutics is focused, not on the "true" meaning of a "text," but on the act of interpretation and understanding (Moules, 2002, p. 17). Heidegger (1889-1976) and his student Gadamer (1900-2002) were both interested in how this act of interpretation takes place and the role of the interpreter in the meaning-making process. Heidegger asserted that our experiences cannot be separated from our contexts, and he refers to this reality as "*Dasien*," or "the human condition of being-in-the-world temporally and historically" (Freeman, 2011, p. 544, emphasis in the

original). We are all a product of our context and our personal histories. For Heidegger, understanding is "ontological" (Moules, 2002, p. 14), which means that understanding is possible only through lived experiences and is not necessarily a fixed notion. Thus, because our understandings are a product of our lived experiences, we all approach "texts" with "certain presuppositions . . . which shape our eventual interpretations with the text itself" (Prasad, 2005, p. 33). For Heidegger, it would be impossible for an interpreter to, as Schleiermacher and Dilthey prescribed, lay aside his "biases," to have "ontological neutrality" (Moules, 2002, p. 14) because our ability to understand and interpret "texts" lies in our lived experiences—in our very "biases".

A student of Heidegger, Gadamer expanded the concept that one's prior understandings are the basis of interpretation. Instead of viewing an interpreter's biases or "prejudices" (Prasad, 2005, p. 33) as negative, Gadamer saw them as an unavoidable fact due to the nature of how we construct meaning and understanding in an ontological manner. The interpreter's "own present situation is already constitutively involved in any process of understanding"; therefore, Gadamer viewed the space between "the knower's boundedness to his present horizons and the temporal gulf separating him from his object to be the productive ground of all understanding rather than negative factors or impediments to be overcome" (Linge, 1976, p. xiv). Gadamer (1976), instead of arguing that the interpreter must remove him- or herself, asserts that "our being" is "fundamental"—"neither arbitrary nor manipulable by us"—and "simply demand[s] our respect" (pp. 3-4). For Gadamer, it is impossible for the interpreter to be completely objective, and because our lived experiences "have nothing to do with method and science but lie beyond science" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 26), what is impossible is also unadvisable. Instead, Gadamer would recommend that we embrace our prejudices by engaging in "self-critique," a "working

out" of our preconceived thoughts (Grondin, 1994, p. 111), so that, as Gadamer explains, "'the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings'" (as cited in Grondin, 1994, p. 112).

Gadamer's "aim," according to Linge (1976) is to shine a light on "the human context within which scientific understanding occurs" (p. xviii). Thus, the interpreter, with his or her situated understandings and biases, is an essential part of the interpretive act. This is the defining perspective for philosophical hermeneutics. One cannot just apply a hermeneutical methodology in an attempt to come to a "scientific" understanding of a "text". Philosophical hermeneutics is a way of thinking about our interpretations. Gadamer "shift[ed] the focus of discussion away from techniques and methods of interpretation . . . to the clarification of understanding as an event that in its very nature is episodic and trans-subjective" (Linge, 1976, p. xxviii).

Classical hermeneutics is about the interpretation at which we arrive after applying a hermeneutical method. Philosophical hermeneutics is about the art of interpretation and how the interpreter, the text, and the context are all a part of the interpretive act. Rather than the text "speaking" a fixed, "true" message; the interpreter, the context, and the text enter into a dialogue. Gadamer asserts that the goal of hermeneutics is not only to "let what seems to be far and alienated speak again" but also to "bring it near so that it speaks in a new voice . . . in a *clearer* voice" (Gadamer, 1980, p. 83) as we fuse its voice with our current contexts—with the "'personal knowing' of individual 'experiences'" (Gadamer, 2006, p. 48).

Dialogues and Horizons: Key Constructs in Philosophical Hermeneutics

Several key constructs are used in philosophical hermeneutics to metaphorically describe the art of interpretation that fuses the text with the interpreter and the context. One of these, the hermeneutic circle, is an enduring construct used in all of the hermeneutical traditions. The

others—the idea of interpretation as a dialogue and the notion of interpretation occurring as a merging of horizons—are more readily traced to Gadamer specifically.

The hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle makes visible the idea that the "text" one attempts to interpret can only be understood in the relationship of the parts to the whole. For example, all of the aforementioned scholars recognize that the text is a product of its context and "the meaning of any text can be discerned only if we look at the conditions that go into its constitution" (Prasad, 2005, p. 35). Schleiermacher and Dilthey would recognize the influence of the author and the author's context as "wholes" that influence the interpretation of the text while claiming that the context of the interpreter must be ignored. Heidegger and Gadamer would argue that the influence of the interpreter and the interpreter's context are unavoidable additions to the "whole". In addition to the outside influences on the understanding of the text, the hermeneutic circle understands the "text" itself in terms of parts and wholes. The structure of the language, the connotations of the words that are chosen, and the "subtexts" created are considered to be "layers of text" (Prasad, 2005, p. 36) that influence the interpretation of the text as a whole.

In a classical sense, the hermeneutic circle is a "methodological process . . . coming to understand the meaning of the whole of a text and coming to understand its parts were always interdependent activities" (Kinsella, 2006, para. 15). Heidegger and Gadamer would argue that the idea of circular understanding is not a methodology, but "an essential feature of all knowledge and understanding" (Kinsella, 2006, para. 17). In a classical sense, the movement between part and whole as represented by the hermeneutic circle would cease when understanding is reached. Gadamer, however, would assert that the circle is never complete—"the circle of whole and part is not dissolved in perfect understanding, but is most fully realized

in the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter" (Kinsella, 2006, para. 17). Thus, understanding is not a "logical and analytical process" (Prasad, 2002, p. 18), but a circular process. The idea is that understanding is never complete, as there is a need for us to keep ourselves open to new information and new situations that would affect our understanding of a "text".

Understanding as dialogue. Because philosophical hermeneutics sees understanding as situated and as a continuous process, Gadamer represented the interpretation of a text as a "dialogue" between interpreter, text, and context. Any act of interpretation takes place in the context of a "continuous dialogue" that is occurring in the world around us: "As we have always been a participant in the world and the world is itself in continuous dialogue, we have been, as it were, thrown into an ongoing dialogue that we neither began nor will end" (Freeman, 2011, p. 545). Because the interpreter and the text are both part of a larger "conversation" of meaning and understanding that are occurring continuously in the world, Gadamer, again, would argue that the "preunderstandings, prejudices, and traditions" of the interpreter and the text, that have been "carried forth through time, history, and language," inform and shape the dialogue of interpretation that occurs (Freeman, 2011, p. 545). The metaphor of a dialogue, as opposed to the classical notion of a text delivering a message that is "divine," underscores the give and take between the text and the interpreter, as meaning and understanding are negotiated.

In a dialogue, both conversational partners are equals. This metaphor of interpretation and meaning-making as a process by which the interpreter brings just as much to the "conversation" as the text is radically different from classical, positivist methods of thinking about interpretation and knowledge:

> What Gadamer wants us to understand is that we have been taught to think of understanding as something we acquire from elsewhere and that this something is

> measureable. As a result, we do not know how to think of ourselves as 'linguistic beings who understand'. His focus on conversation is to reorient our way of being as one of supporting the way of language and, in doing so, bring to our awareness our relationship to our own understanding. (Freeman, 2011, p. 547)

Gadamer's notion of a dialogue includes the interpreter's voice. Furthermore, the end goal is not to come to a "right answer for the topic" (Freeman, 2011, p. 547), but rather, to keep the door open for continual dialogue, as the text is given the opportunity to "say something new . . . in regard to present-day issues and traditions" (Freeman, 2011, p. 547). The dialogue is never concluded, as meaning continues to be made when new interpreters and new contexts interact with the text.

Perhaps the best way to describe the dialogue that occurs in a philosophical hermeneutic inquiry is as a series of questions and answers: "[T]he hermeneutic conversations between the interpreter and the text is a dialogue in which the interpreter puts questions to the text, and the text, in turn, puts questions to the interpreter" (Prasad, 2002, p. 19). Grondin (1994) underscores that this conversation is always situated and contingent on the questions that the interpreter asks of the text: "A text is given voice only by reason of the questions that are put to it today. There is no interpretation, no understanding, that does not answer specific questions that prescribe a specific orientation" (p. 117). The questions that one person asks of a "text" may be different from another's questions. The answers found in the "text" today may be different when the text is viewed through a different lens tomorrow. When working from a philosophical hermeneutic frame, understanding is seen as a continual dialogue between the interpreter and the text that is influenced by the context, or the temporal and historical location of the interaction.

Fusion of horizons. Gadamer referred to the collision of viewpoints and contexts of the "text" and the interpreter as a "fusion of horizons" (Linge, 1976, p. xxviii). Horizon, in the physical world, refers to the imaginary line that we perceive between earth and sky, but another

meaning of the word "horizon" refers to the limits of one's understanding. Gadamer, believing that meaning is developed through the interaction of an interpreter with a text, saw the "dialogue" as a means to "[open] new understanding as an event that brings together multiple horizons, times, and traditions in an effort to advance different connections to the subject matter" (Freeman, 2011, p. 548). As an interpreter dialogues with a text, meaning is created out of the "fusion" of the text's horizon—or limits of perception and understanding— as it merges with the interpreter's horizon—or limits of perception and understanding. In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer explains that the interpreter's horizon is continually colliding and fusing with the "texts" he encounters:

> The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. (as cited in Kinsella, 2006, para. 9)

Gadamer again underscores the notion that the interpreter's background, and "prejudices," should not be ignored; rather, they are an integral part of the horizon that must be navigated and negotiated as the interpreter works to understand "texts."

Research as Dialogue: Application of Philosophical Hermeneutics

If understanding occurs through dialogue and through the fusion of the researcher's interpretation with the text, the context, and the understandings of others; research takes on a different form. Using philosophical hermeneutics as a theoretical perspective allows a researcher to privilege not only multiple "texts" and voices in a given situation or context, but to also acknowledge his or her own voice as part of the research process. When the researcher's underlying assumption is that understanding occurs as in a dialogue and when his own understanding fuses with the words of a "text" and with others involved in interpreting that text,

the research design is less focused on process and validity in the scientific, linear connotation and more focused on increasing the space in which the dialogue can occur.

Gadamer (1976) wrote that philosophy should "mediate" between science and "the totality of our experiences of life" (p. 3). Gadamer's (1976) goal is not for "hermeneutical reflection" to "break from positivist understanding" (p. 31); rather, the goal is to open a space where our scientific understandings and the understanding of lived experience can exist together. Hermeneutics attempts to understand "everything that can be understood" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 31). Using this perspective allows a researcher to engage in a dialogue to create meaning around "texts" or phenomena. In contrast to a positivist methodology that would seek to validate a hypothesis or draw conclusions from research, the researcher does not "have a goal in mind in regard to an answer for the topic" (Freeman, 2011, p. 547). Instead, the researcher seeks "to hold open the door of possibilities, keeping the conversation going, as long as is possible" (Freeman, 2011, p. 549). It is through the conversation and the sharing of our "horizons" that meaning is made and that we come to understand in a new way, inviting "the topic to say what it has not yet said about itself" (Freeman, 2011, p. 550). Researchers working in the philosophical hermeneutic tradition must be comfortable with engaging in the research with an attitude that their own understanding is not superior or complete (Freeman, 2011), and comfortable with ambiguity as they open a space for dialogue (Freeman, 2011; Kinsella, 2006).

Designing for a Dialogue: Case Study Design

Working from a philosophical hermeneutic lens, the context—time and space—of interaction between a "text" and the interpreter(s) is critically important. Philosophical hermeneutic inquiry is not interested in studying the ideas of a vast number of participants, as would be done through a quantitative survey. Rather, it is interested in the interaction of

participants, text, and context. As Thomas (2011b) asserts, if we are interested in the fusion of "horizons," we must be interested in examples of lived experiences:

> I am talking about example *viewed and heard* in the context of another's experience (another's horizon) but *used* in the context of one's own (where the horizon changes): the example is not taken to be representative, typical or standard, nor is it exemplary in the sense of being a model of an exemplar . . . Rather, it is taken to be a particular representation given in context and understood in that context. (p. 31)

Thus, within a philosophical hermeneutic frame, case study design is particularly appropriate to a study of the interaction of education policy, the local context, and the practitioners responsible for implementation.

Although often referred to as "methodology," Stake (2005) asserts that "case study" refers less to the methodological choices made by the researcher, and more to the choice that is made to study a particular case:

> Case study is . . . a choice of what is to be studied . . . by whatever means we choose to study *the case*. We could study it analytically or holistically, entirely by repeated measures or hermeneutically, organically or culturally, and by mixed methods—but we concentrate, at least for the time being, on the case. (as cited in Thomas, 2011a, p. 512)

The literature on case study design, while not "vast," is relatively "homogeneous" (Swanborn, 2010, p. 12), and there is agreement in the literature on the idea that "case study" refers to *what* is being studied more than *how* it will be studied (Bassey, 1999; Stake, 1994; Swanborn, 2010; Thomas, 2011a). In choosing to engage in a "case study," I have chosen to specifically define the "who" and "what" of the study—the Cannon County School System and the implementation of the RTI framework there. It is within the case study design that I employed the methodologies outlined subsequently in this chapter.

Thomas (2011a) asserts that defining the "what" to be studied in a case study requires a consideration of two elements: the subject and the object (p. 513). The subject is the actual "case," or what Smith (1978) would call the "bounded system" (as cited in Stake, 1994, p. 236).

This subject, which can be defined as narrowly as a singular person or as broadly as a complex organization, is seen as a "system" whose integrated parts cannot be separated: "[I]t has working parts, it probably is purposive, even having a self. It is an integrated system. The parts do not have to be working well, the purposes may be irrational, but it is a system. Its behavior is patterned" (Stake, 1994, p. 236). A school district, as an integrated organization, fits this definition of a "bounded system". A case study, further, necessitates an "object" to be studied (Thomas, 2011a, p. 513). The goal of the study is not to study the organization, but to study a specific subject or "contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context" (Yin, 2009, Chapter 1 Abstract, para. 2). Thus, case study is a study of a specific phenomenon, using a specific *case* as an example.

Yin (2009) asserts that a case study design is a relevant choice when one is investigating a phenomenon that is presently occurring, and when the research question is focused on explaining the how or why of the phenomenon. Swanborn (2010) recommends the use of case study design when "we are interested in the ways several individuals and groups of stakeholders interact with each other and interpret each other's behavior, and the way they cope with problems . . . to clarify the intricate web of social relations, perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors" (p. 41). In effect, case study allows for a "deep understanding" (Woodside, 2010, p. 16) of the subject and how it interacts with the "object" or phenomenon. Swanborn (2010) makes a distinction between the case study as an "intensive" research design, due to this interest in "depth," and an "extensive" design, such as a survey, which is interested in "width". When one employs a case study design, the goal is not to generalize findings, but rather, to understand deeply why and how something is occurring in a specific context. Education policy

implementation, as a contingent process influenced by the local context, seems the perfect phenomenon for the application of a case study design.

Various scholars have outlined different types of case studies, which depend on the overarching purpose behind the investigation of the subject and phenomenon. Stake (1994) uses the following classifications: 1) intrinsic case study, the goal of which is to better understand a specific case "in all its particularity and ordinariness, this case itself is of interest"; 2) instrumental case study, the goal of which is to use a particular case to "provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory"; and 3) collective case study, the goal of which is to study several cases simultaneously with the hope that "understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases" (p. 237). Thomas (2011a) uses different delineations, including the "key case," which is similar to Stake's (1994) intrinsic case because of the focus on the "inherent interest" in the case, or its "difference, its *outlier* status" (p. 514).

Thomas (2011a) also speaks of the "local knowledge case," which allows a researcher to explore in-depth due to intimate knowledge of the case: "In one's own place of work, one's placement, or even one's home, there will be intimate knowledge and ample opportunity for informed, in-depth analysis—ample opportunity for identification and discussion" (p. 514). Focusing on the underlying purpose of the research, Bassey (1999) outlines several types of case studies mentioned in the literature, including the evaluative, action research, and educational case studies. An evaluative case study is undertaken "with the purpose of providing educational actors or decision makers . . . with information that will help them to judge the merit and worth of policies, programmes, or institutions" (p. 28). Action research case studies are conducted with a similar goal of providing feedback to the case, but rather than being evaluative, they seek to

"contribute to the development of the case . . . by [providing] feedback of information which can guide revision and refinement of action" (p. 28). In contrast, the educational case study is "concerned neither with social theory nor evaluative judgment, but rather with the understanding of educational action . . . to enrich the thinking and discourse of education" (p. 28). The educational case study, as outlined by Bassey (1999), is similar to Stake's (1994) instrumental case study, as the goal of both is to study a case to learn and apply learning to new situations.

While case study design has been widely applied across social science disciplines (Swanborn, 2010), many would criticize the use of a single case in research design. Flyvbjerg (2006) discusses common "misconceptions" related to case study design, most of which relate to the nature of the context-dependent knowledge that comes from a case study (p. 222). If one values general, theoretical knowledge, and believes in the possibility of generalization across contexts, then case study is, perhaps, not the best research design. However, as previously noted, the current literature on education policy would argue against a generalized method of policy implementation (Honig, 2006). Implementation happens in a real-world context, with a myriad of variables that cannot be controlled. As Flyvbjerg (2006) states, "predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge is, therefore, more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals" (p. 224). Thus, a case study design is necessary for understanding how phenomena occur in real contexts:

> For researchers, the closeness of the case study to real-life situations and its multiple wealth of details are important . . . it is important for the development of a nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule-governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning process. (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223)

Flyvbjerg (2006) discusses the reality that experts or "virtuosos" learn based on their knowledge of "concrete cases" in their fields (p. 221). For example, a chess player is expert, not from reading a manual of generalized rules on how to play chess, but from the experience of playing a multitude of chess games. A surgeon does not become renowned in his field from study of generalized theories of practice in medical school, but through experience in the real-world context of a hospital operating room. Thus, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that there is a "limitation of analytic rationality" (p. 222); we become expert only through our experiences of reality, our experience of the *case*. Our research, then, is a process of learning, and it "becomes clear that the most advanced form of understanding is achieved when researchers place themselves within the context being studied" (p. 236), or when they experience the phenomenon first-hand.

The literature on case study design would support Flyvbjerg's (2006) assertions about the type of knowledge that is produced by the case study. Stake (1994) argues that a case study allows for "propositional and experiential knowledge" where:

> The reader comes to know some things told, as if he or she had experienced them. Enduring meanings come from encounter, and are modified and reinforced by repeated encounter. In life itself, this occurs seldom to the individual alone but in the presence (if not proximity) of others . . . We come to know what has happened partly in terms of what others reveal as their experience. The case researcher emerges from one social experience, the observation, to choreograph another, the report. Knowledge is socially constructed . . . and thus case study researchers assist readers in the construction of knowledge. (p. 240)

In essence, the case study provides a vicarious learning experience for the readers, who are able to fuse the experiences as outlined by the researcher with their own experiences in a learning process. Stake would call this a different type of generalization—a "naturalistic" process that occurs as "we individually acquire concepts and information and steadily generalize them to other situations as we learn more" (Bassey, 1999, p. 33).

As Flyvbjerg (2006) notes, "formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas 'the force of example' is underestimated" (p. 228). The case study design allows for the force of example and the in-depth learning that can occur from a focus on a particular subject and its interaction with a phenomenon in a real-world context. The value of this type of knowledge requires that we think about learning and understanding in a different way. Educational policy implementation requires that we look beyond trying to figure out how to hypothesize, generalize, and scale up. We must begin to see understanding of policy as an act of interpretation in a local context. The case study provides the design for an in-depth study of the phenomenon of educational policy implementation in a local context. Employing this design within the frame of philosophical hermeneutics allows for a design that seeks to understand how the act of interpretation at the local level influences implementation.

A Case Study of RTI Implementation in Cannon County: Methodology

As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of the current study is to engage in a dialogue with stakeholders and organizational documents in Cannon County to better understand RTI implementation in this local system, as well as better understand how the idea of "intervention" has been adapted to and practiced in this local context.

Again, the methodology outlined in this section was employed inside of a case study design. Case study design, as described above, is appropriate for the study due to nature of the research questions, and the desire to understand "how" RTI has been implemented (Yin, 2009). Further a case study design allows for an in-depth look at how a phenomenon is interpreted and understood in a real-world context (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1994; Swanborn, 2010; Thomas, 2011a; Yin, 2009). In addition, case study design complements a philosophical hermeneutic frame because a case study allows the researcher to focus on how meaning is developed: "[C]ase

study presents a unique opportunity to focus on social interactions and the developing meanings that participants in the system attach to each other . . . Another object of our attention is the existence of multiple realities: the different, and sometimes contrasting, views participants in a system have, and their diverging interpretations of events and conditions" (Swanborn, 2010, p. 16). Data collection methods were chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the case and how RTI policy has been interpreted and adapted to fit the needs of the local system and implementers.

Research Questions

How does the reconstruction of one school system's implementation of the theoretical RTI framework help us to understand the conditions for its adaptation?

The following subquestions contribute to an understanding of the overarching question:

1. What processes were implemented at the building and system levels?
2. How is the framework of "intervention" constructed at the building and system levels—what does it mean to "intervene"?
3. What conditions in the local context influenced the implementation of the RTI framework?

Context of the Study: Site Selection, or "The Case"

The Cannon County School System is a recent winner of the SSTAGE (Student Support Team Association of Georgia Educators) STAR Award for Promising Practices related to Response to Intervention implementation. SSTAGE is a state-wide organization in Georgia that provides learning opportunities and collaboration to improve student "competency" (Student Support Team Association for Georgia Educators). The awards for promising practices are given at the district and school level, and serve to recognize districts that are implementing an RTI

framework and can document how the framework has impacted student achievement. The district has been working to implement an RTI framework since 2006. As a STAR award winner, the Cannon County School System can be considered an instrumental case study (Stake, 1994) or an educational case study (Bassey,1999), the goal of which is to use a particular case to learn something about an issue and apply that learning to a new situation. The system is also a "local knowledge case" for me (Thomas, 2011a, p. 514). Due to my existing relationship with the school system, I have "intimate knowledge" of the current status of RTI implementation in the district, and "ample opportunity for . . . discussion" of the early days of implementation with district staff (Thomas, 2011a, p. 514). This existing relationship allowed for what Bates et al. (1998) describe as a deeper analysis of "the actors, the decision points they faced, the choices they made . . . and the manner in which their choices generated events and outcomes" (as cited in Thomas, 2011a, p. 514). These factors—the recognition of the system by SSTAGE for RTI implementation and my relationship with the school system—positioned the Cannon County School System as an ideal case for the current research study.

The Cannon County School System serves approximately 4,500 students in rural north Georgia. While the student population is comprised mainly of white students (82%), the percentage of students who qualify for free and/or reduced lunch is high (67%). Further, the percentage of the population that qualifies for special education services is 15%. A demographic breakdown of the students served in Cannon County is provided in Table 2, and a breakdown of the percentage of students who qualify for free/reduced lunch is provided in Table 3.

Table 2: Cannon County School System Demographics[11]

Total Population	**4,479**
White	3,674 (82%)
Black	402 (9%)
Hispanic	442 (10%)
Asian	66 (1.5%)
American Indian	4 (0%)
Pacific Islander	1 (0%)
Two or More Races	190 (4%)
Special Education	688 (15%)
Economically Disadvantaged (Free/Reduced Lunch)	3,000 (67%)

Table 3: Cannon County School System Free/Reduced Lunch Rates[12]

School	**Free/Reduced Lunch Rate (FY14)**
Cannon Elementary	65.93%
Garrison Elementary	59.85%
Crawford Elementary	64.67%
Stone Elementary	71.35%
Bond Elementary	60.66%
Cannon County Middle School	63.18%
Cannon County High School	57.28%

Statistical information about Cannon County reveals that education, historically, has not been a priority in the community. Data from the *2013 Georgia County Guide*[13] indicate that the education level of adults in the community lags behind that of Georgia as a whole. Twenty-seven percent of adults age 25+ in Cannon County did not complete high school, compared to 16.5% in Georgia. Further, the percentage of adults with a bachelor's degree in Cannon County, 8%, is less than half of the total percentage of adults with a degree, 17.5%, in the state. Due to a

[11] Demographic information is based on an FTE ("full-time equivalent") Count of students from the 2013-14 school year.
[12] Based on counts from the 2013-14 school year. Names of schools are pseudonyms.
[13] This is a publication from the Carl Vinson Institute of Government and the Georgia Cooperative Extension Service, both located at the University of Georgia.

low graduation rate, which averaged 63.8% in the 5 years from 2003 to 2008[14], Cannon County High School was considered a "needs improvement" school in several consecutive years under the *No Child Left Behind Act's* Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) calculation. Further, early universal reading screening conducted in Cannon County with elementary school students, reveals that less than 50% of 3rd and 5th graders were considered on track for oral reading performance in the 2004-05 school year[15].

It was in this context that system personnel worked to implement a comprehensive Response to Intervention Framework beginning in the 2006 school year. In the Cannon County School System today, approximately eight years after the beginning of RTI implementation, statistics look quite different. The graduation rate improved to 78% in 2013, which is above the state average. The system's scores on the state's new accountability measure, the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI)[16], surpass state averages at all three levels—elementary, middle, and high. On the spring 2014 administration of the Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCTs) in grades 3-8[17], Cannon County's average pass percentages were higher than the state averages in every subject and in every grade. Student achievement data, as well as graduation rate data, paint two very different pictures of the Cannon County School System prior to and after RTI implementation. Because of this notable change, this system, as a

[14] Graduation rate information for the system was obtained from the archived School Reports on the Georgia Department of Education's website, http://archives.gadoe.org/ReportingFW.aspx?PageReq=211&PID=61&PTID=67&CTID=217&SchoolId=ALL&T=0

[15] In 2004-05, the Cannon County School System began to screen all elementary students using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessments.

[16] Georgia is one of the states that applied for and received a waiver from *No Child Left Behind*. In place of AYP requirements, Georgia developed the CCRPI accountability measure. Additional information about the indicators for school accountability in Georgia can be found at http://www.gadoe.org/CCRPI/Pages/default.aspx

[17] Georgia's 3-8th grade students take CRCT tests in 5 subject areas: reading, language arts, math, science, and social studies. This assessment system will be replaced by the Georgia Milestones Assessments in the spring of 2015. For more information on the CRCT tests, please visit http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Pages/default.aspx

"case," piques my curiosity about RTI implementation and how the system implemented the framework in order to improve teaching and learning.

Data Collection

Case study design literature recommends collection of data in a variety of forms to aid in triangulation (Yin, 2009). Data for this study were collected in three main forms: documents related to RTI implementation, interviews with stakeholders in the district, and a researcher journal to record my ongoing "dialogue" with the data. Collecting data in various forms allows for "triangulation" of the data and for the development of "more secure understanding of the issues" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 102). Further, because a main tenet of philosophical hermeneutics is that our understandings are situated and dependent on our history and context, collecting data from a variety of sources allows for a richer dialogue around the concept of RTI: "The movement created in dialogue opens up understanding as an event that brings together multiple horizons, times, and traditions in an effort to advance different connections to the subject matter" (Freeman, 2011, 548). The documents—historical and current—related to RTI in the district, as well as the current voices of practitioners who have lived the experience of RTI implementation for the past eight years, serve to bring together these multiple horizons and times. The space that I am hoping to create with this research—where a dialogue can occur as various stakeholders fuse their understandings of RTI at the point of implementation and as it was adapted over time—is dependent on collecting documents, stakeholder views, and my own interpretations and views.

Documents

Prior (2003) asserts that an organization essentially lives in its documents, as "organizational features are . . . created and sustained almost entirely in and through the

documentation" (p. 60). In addition, organizational documents are "created in the context of socially organized projects in such a way that word and deed belong together" (Prior, 2003, p. 10). What is recorded in the organization's documents not only prescribes reality, but also reflects the reality, as stakeholders attempt to document what is done and what should be done. A document "constitutes a . . . phenomenon of which it is itself a part" (Prior, 2003, p. 68). Prasad (2002) stresses that anyone engaging in hermeneutic inquiry in an organization must "develop a thorough familiarity with the historical aspects of the phenomenon of interest" (p. 24). Documents are interpretations of the thinking of the organization at the point of creation, and guide interpretations in the future.

In order to reconstruct RTI implementation in Cannon County, I began with collecting documents that have been created by the organization to communicate and sustain the RTI framework. Documents serve a specific role in the philosophical hermeneutic inquiry, as they can provide "data on the context . . . Bearing witness to past events, documents provide background information as well as historical insight" (Bowen, 2009, p. 29). From a philosophical hermeneutic perspective, understanding the context—the temporal and historical (Freeman, 2011) nature of our understandings—is essential. When stakeholders use organizational documents, there is truly a "fusion of horizons" as stakeholders—in their present temporal context—interpret the documents created by predecessors in the organization—from within a historical context (Prior, 2003). However, it is how these documents fit "into the entire network of activities and agents" in the organization that is crucial (Prior, 2003, p. 168). Beginning the study with an analysis of the organizational documents provided the temporal and historical frame for further dialogue with practitioners regarding RTI implementation in the district, and the document analysis informed the interview questions.

District documents related to RTI implementation in Cannon County were housed in two places: on the system's website or in an "RTI Implementation" binder containing documents from 2006-07 to 2011. This binder is housed in the Office of Curriculum and Instruction. In addition, stakeholders in the district worked during the summer of 2014 to revise documents related to RTI implementation. I was able to participate in meetings to discuss revisions, and a draft RTI Manual was shared with me. While the district has many documents and forms related to the components of the RTI framework—documentation forms for meetings and interventions, data collection forms, fidelity forms—documents were chosen for inclusion in the study based on the following criteria:

1. Because I am interested in how policies are adapted and changed at the local level, the Response to Intervention Pyramid created by the state of Georgia was included as a reference point (this pyramid also figures prominently in the collection of outside documents collected in the district's RTI Implementation binder from 2006 to 2011).
2. District documents chosen for inclusion had to be related to RTI implementation and/or the theoretical framework as a whole.
3. District documents that seemed to be for the purpose of communicating information about the system's implementation of RTI framework at the district level were included.
4. Two school-level documents were chosen—an elementary pyramid of interventions and a high school pyramid of interventions—because of the additional data that they provided related to broad descriptions of interventions in district-level documents.

5. District documents that were obviously created for the purpose of documenting actions related to interventions and data collection were not included. In other words, procedural forms were not included.

The final data set included 19 total documents, including the Georgia Pyramid of Interventions. Ten of these documents are in use currently in the district. Nine of these documents are historical in nature. For a list of documents included in the data set, with a brief description of each document, see Appendix D[18] .

Interviews and Participant Selection

Interviews were conducted with a variety of stakeholders in the Cannon County School System. Interview participants were chosen using an "information-oriented" approach (Flyvbjerg, 2006), as I sought "participants who have lived experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and who are diverse enough from one other to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience" (Laverty, 2003, p. 29). Participants were initially selected based on the following criteria:

1. School system employee in one of the following roles: teacher, administrator, or school psychologist. The roles themselves are less important than ensuring that a *variety* of perspectives were obtained.
2. Employed by the school system when the RTI framework was first implemented (or first implemented at the grade level for secondary), and, preferably, employed continually since implementation.
3. Demonstrated a willingness in past conversations with the researcher to speak openly and candidly about RTI policy and its implementation.

[18] The Georgia Student Achievement Pyramid of Interventions is referenced by actual name. Other document titles have been modified to include the district's pseudonym, Cannon County, but may have been further modified if an internet search of the title might link the document to the district.

Participants were recruited initially via an email asking if they would consider involvement in the project (see Appendix E), and further through a face-to-face conversation about the project and its purpose. Participants received detailed information about the project, including notification of any risks and benefits, by reading through an outline of the study as provided in a consent form approved by the review board of my university (see Appendix F). As interviews were conducted and as the participants referenced names of stakeholders involved in moving RTI implementation forward in Cannon County, I sought out additional participants with whom to speak. In total, I interviewed eleven participants about RTI implementation in Cannon County.

As the school system is small, and confidentiality could be threatened by a detailed description of participants, I have chosen to outline—below—the participants' characteristics as a group rather than as individuals. Not describing these participants in detail as individuals may be a weakness of the study, due to the fact that their personal beliefs and contexts could shed light on the interpretation of their thoughts related to RTI implementation. However, I have not chosen to analyze perspectives on RTI based on groups—teachers versus administrators versus psychologists. Rather, my research questions and analysis were focused on the act of implementation and what factors affected how the RTI framework was construed and implemented in the context of Cannon County. Thus, it is not the characteristics of the individual participants that are important; rather it is the dialogue that is created when they bring their various backgrounds and experiences to bear that leads to a rich analysis.

Description of participants. Interviews were conducted with a total of 11 participants. These participants represent a range of age groups—from mid-30s to over 60. In addition, the group is representative of both male and female stakeholders in Cannon County. All participants

were white; however, the personnel in the district do not represent a diverse population. As of 2010-2011, when Georgia last published the demographic data for teachers in Cannon County, approximately 2% of the personnel were black and less than 1% of the personnel were Hispanic. I did attempt to recruit a black participant for the study, but that person declined to participate. The participants, as a group, have served the Cannon County School System for many years. The range of time employed by the school system is from 6 years to 32 years. The average number of years of employment in the school system for the participants as a group is 15.5 years.

The participants as a group represent the various grade levels and roles of the Cannon County School System. Five of the participants have served at the elementary level, and five of the participants have served at the secondary level—two at the middle school and three at the high school. Two of the participants have only served in district level positions. In all, four of the participants have served at the district level, either serving in an administrative capacity or serving as a school psychologist. Six of the participants have served as teachers in the system, two of the participants have served as counselors in the system, six of the participants have served as building-level administrators in the system, and two of the participants have served as district-level administrators in the system. Six of the 11 participants have served in 2 or more roles since RTI was first implemented, enriching the perspective that they have to offer in the dialogue around RTI implementation in Cannon County.

As I recruited participants, I did have a difficult time obtaining consent from participants who are currently serving in the role of teacher in the district. Perhaps this is due to my position in the district. While I do not directly supervise or evaluate employees, and I am considered a support position for the district, some teachers, perhaps, perceived a power differential due to my administrative role. In the group of 11 participants, only 3 were serving as teachers at the time of

the interview. However, six of the participants in all have served as teachers in the system, and five of those were serving as teachers when RTI was first implemented. Three of those six have since moved into administrative roles, which conceivably increased their willingness to speak openly with me about their perceptions of RTI implementation. To increase the chances of an open dialogue, and decrease any perceived power differentials, I positioned myself in each interview as a learner. I have only been working with the district for two years, and I positioned myself as someone who wants to learn more about the history of RTI implementation in the system. My newness to the district, as compared to all eleven participants, allowed for them to serve as experts on the history of RTI in Cannon County.

Table 4 below does provide a correlation between participant pseudonyms that are used to present findings and the level—elementary or secondary—of the participant. If a participant has experience at both levels, I have indicated that. Because the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4 do outline some differences in RTI implementation based on the elementary versus secondary level, the information about which level participants represent will better help readers understand the findings.

Table 4: Participants for Elementary versus Secondary

Carol	Elementary
Chloe	Elementary
Daniel	Secondary
Dennis	Both
Donna	Both
Lois	Secondary
Marie	Elementary
Rachel	Secondary
Rebecca	Secondary
Robert	Both
Sarah	Elementary

Description of interview procedures. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour, during which the participant and I discussed RTI implementation in Cannon County, as well as how the framework has evolved over time. The conversations were relaxed, and each participant chose the location of the interview—all choosing a location in the school district, either their own office or classroom, or a multi-purpose room at the district office.

Working from a philosophical hermeneutic perspective, the interviews took the form of a "conversational dialogue": "The idea that there is a dialogic intersection (fusion of ideas) is taken from Gadamer's (1975) work and is used to describe the integral interaction between two worlds, perceptions or stances" (Vandermause, 2011, p. 369). During each interview, I attempted to co-construct knowledge with the participants, as we "work[ed] together to generate an understanding as narrative text emerge[d] and language [was] interpreted" (Vandermause, 2011, p. 369). I entered each interview with the same semi-structured protocol (see Appendix G), but due to the dialogic nature of the questioning, the interview proceeded as a professional conversation—developing in the manner and direction of a non-scripted dialogue. Data collection was richest when the participant and I were both involved in questioning and answering each other, "co-constructing" the story of RTI implementation—at the point of origin and as it continues to be implemented in the district today.

I personally transcribed all interviews, which aided in the subsequent analysis process. When transcripts were finalized, they were sent via email to each participant, and the participant was invited to share further comments or clarifications. After transcripts were analyzed and preliminary themes generated, each participant received an email thanking them for their participation and outlining the preliminary themes. Participants were invited to comment on the

themes and to, again, share observations. In essence, I attempted to "hold open the door" (Freeman, 2011, p. 549) by inviting participants to continue the conversation.

By sharing preliminary findings with participants, I also engaged in a form of "member checking" (Sandelowski, 2008), which allows for participant review of findings to ensure that they do justice to the accuracy of participants' experiences and the meaning of the experiences for them. In a philosophical hermeneutic frame, there is no objective truth; therefore, I did not engage in "member checking" in order to ensure that I had reported the "truth" according to the participants. The "member checking" was my way of increasing the space in which the act of interpretation and meaning-making could occur. This process allowed for greater "movement" (Kinsella, 2006, para. 17) in a circular process of understanding. If the circle is never complete, as Gadamer would argue, then the conversation with the participants did not end when our interviews concluded. By "member checking," I attempted to continue the dialogue, allowing participants the chance to engage in a "continuous dialogue" that we "neither began nor will end" (Freeman, 2011, p. 545), and I increased the ability of participants to engage me in reflection around my own interpretations of RTI implementation in Cannon County.

Researcher Journal

Finally, data were collected via a researcher journal. Gadamer (1976) asserts that the interpreter cannot remove herself from the research—it is impossible to be completely objective. The interpreter—or the researcher—is an essential part of the interpretive act, and instead of seeing the researcher's preconceived notions, "prejudices," or context as limiting factors; Gadamer claims that our very ability to be interpretive lies in "our being" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 3). The researcher journal allowed me to engage in an ongoing dialogue as current understanding of RTI was fused with the understandings of others. It also allowed me to continually examine my

own subjectivities as I engaged in the process and ensured that my attempt to understand and interpret was a "self-reflexive and self-critical process" (Prasad, 2002, p. 24).

I did not write journal entries on a regular basis, although, as I reflect on the process, this is, perhaps, a weakness of my method. However, I chose to write only as I felt the need to record a reflection or the need to trouble my understanding. The researcher journal was kept electronically on a password protected computer. I wrote journal entries after several interviews, reflecting on information that was shared that surprised me or that I wanted to wrestle with after the conversation ended. I also wrote several journal entries as I analyzed data, reflecting on the process and on my early thoughts regarding themes and answers to my research questions. In addition, I wrote journal entries when seminal work occurred in the present in relation to RTI implementation in the case study district. For example, I participated in several meetings with stakeholders over the summer and as the school year began in which documents and procedures related to RTI were reviewed and updated. This work added to the ongoing conversation of what RTI implementation means in Cannon County, and I reflected on the place of the current conversations and review work in the story of RTI implementation.

In addition to the entries in the electronic researcher journal, I also saved several email communication threads generated as I communicated with participants. As previously described, I invited participants to review their interview transcripts and the preliminary themes that were generated after data analysis. One participant in particular engaged me in a conversation via email regarding one of the themes. I considered our reflective conversation as part of my "research journal," because it seemed to most fit with the type of self-reflection that I have included there.

Data Analysis

Prior to describing the specifics related to how data from documents, interviews, and the researcher journal were analyzed, I find it necessary to discuss the process of data analysis within a philosophical hermeneutic frame. As the aforementioned discussion alluded, philosophical hermeneutics is less concerned about the methodology of study and more concerned about the art of interpretation. Moules (2002) cautions that, when we are "attentive" to the topic, the topic will guide the inquiry:

> Gadamer (1989) suggested that it is not possible to determine a way to proceed without being guided by the topic. At the beginning of the interpretive work, there is necessarily a deliberate showing of questionableness . . . For even though it is not method, one can cultivate hermeneutics and the questionableness becomes: how can I turn my attention to human life and my topic and not require methods which render it to something else; how can I avoid betraying it and not delivering it unto itself; and how do I preserve its character without reducing it? (p. 26)

From the outset, I was determined to let the data guide me—to lead me where it would. I resisted a linear process of "coding" or "categorizing" data (Maxwell & Miller, 2008), finding it difficult to break apart threads of conversation or sections of interviews. Before I began analyzing data, I reflected on principles that should guide data analysis within a philosophical hermeneutic frame.

Guiding Principles for Data Analysis

Philosophical hermeneutics, while allowing that the interpreter's "prejudices" and background will influence the process of interpretation, does not allow for an "anything goes" approach to analysis. Rather, as the interpreter, I had to continually seek a fusion of personal insights with understanding of texts and contexts: "But a hermeneutic science cannot but rely on insight. It requires that one have the sensibility and understanding necessary to be able to make and comprehend the readings by which we can explain the reality concerned" (Taylor, 1982, p.

180). Thus, it was my responsibility as a researcher to continually seek understanding of "readings"—through further dialogue with printed texts or with stakeholders. It was my duty to resist closing the door to meaning by relying on my own insights and to continually seek validation through dialogue. This is something I attempted to do by sharing my thoughts related to the district documents with stakeholders and by asking interview participants to review transcripts and preliminary themes.

Further, the analysis process had to remain cognizant of the connection of data to the context: "[D]ata never stand alone; their meanings are always dependent on the researcher and the reader" (Moules, 2002, p. 29). So, while the hermeneutic circle would appreciate the development of understanding as one considers parts of data, such as is done through the use of categorizing strategies (Maxwell, 2013) that identify "units or segments of data that seem important or meaningful in some way . . . reading the data and developing . . . coding categories, based on what data . . . seem most important" (p. 107), this could not be the sole method. Connecting strategies (Maxwell, 2013) had to be employed in an attempt to understand the *whole*—to understand "the relationships among the different parts" (p. 112).

Further, while categorizing strategies often look for repeated information to construct themes, Moules (2002) asserts that in philosophical hermeneutics, what makes something "true" is not that it is "repeatable, but that it lasts, lingers, and even changes" (p. 23). Hermeneutics "pays attention to the instance, the particular, the event of something that does not require repetition to authenticate its arrival" (Moules, 2002, pp. 29-30). Thus, while categorizing strategies were useful in my attempts to better understand the implementation of RTI in Cannon County, I categorized not when information was merely repeated, but in an effort to "listen for

echoes of something that might expand possibilities of understanding" (Moules, 2002, p. 29) of the interaction between policy, people, and place.

In addition, the data analysis process had to proceed in a manner that did not lose sight of the situated and context-dependent nature of understanding. The goal was for the data to help me to understand something about how *this* district interacted with, interpreted, and adapted RTI policy. The idea was that a description—in the form of "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, 310)—of how *this* system has implemented policy could allow RTI to "say something new" (Freeman, 2011, p. 547) about itself and could help others engage in a process of interpretation as understandings from Cannon County fuse with their lived experiences with policy implementation.

Finally, Smith (1993) describes the data analysis process in the same manner that Gadamer describes interpretation as a dialogue: "The encounter . . . is a dialogical encounter in which the interpreter questions the text and the text questions the interpreter. This is an 'open' encounter that cannot be distilled into a series of how-to-do it rules" (p. 196). Instead, just as in an everyday encounter in which we seek to understand, to interpret meaning "one does what seems reasonable given the situation at any given time and place" (Smith, 1983, p. 197). When I work from an understanding that research is a dialogue into which I enter, I make a commitment from the beginning to engage in a process of continuous dialogue—not only with the documents and stakeholders in the district, but with the literature on various methodologies. Thus, as the analysis process unfolded, it unfolded as a dialogue—a continuous dialogue with stakeholders, with documents, with theory, with myself, and even with critical friends and professors of whom I asked questions as I analyzed data. At every turn, I was not focused on

rules, but on following the ongoing dialogue and seeking for RTI to tell me something new about itself as I sought to understand the lived experience of implementation in Cannon County.

Initial Steps: The Hermeneutic Circle and Understanding Parts and Wholes

Prior to beginning the process of data analysis, I revisited a key construct of hermeneutics—the hermeneutic circle—as I considered how to approach the process of making sense of my data. As described previously, the hermeneutic circle makes visible the idea that the "text" one attempts to interpret can only be understood in the relationship of the parts to the whole: "The meaning of any text can be discerned only if we look at the conditions that go into its constitution" (Prasad, 2005, p. 35). According to Gadamer, the idea of the hermeneutic circle and circular understanding is not a methodology; it is "an essential feature" of how we understand and make meaning (Kinsella, 2006, para. 17). Understanding is not a "logical and analytical process" (Prasad, 2002, p. 18), but a circular process.

While most theorists refer to this idea of circular understanding as a "circle," in reality, the process of understanding, as conceptualized by Gadamer, is *not* a closed circle. Our understandings are never complete, and we are continually in dialogue with multiple "texts" as we work to understand. The "text" of RTI implementation is not a closed circle; rather, this implementation is influenced by many other "texts"—the beliefs and backgrounds of the participants, as well as the context of the local school system and the educational system in general. The "texts" include our own historical and temporal context and the historical and temporal context of the phenomenon that we attempt to understand. Further, as I conduct research and enter into dialogue with the participants, the "circle" of understanding enlarges to include their contexts and understandings as separate "circles" of parts and wholes.

This idea that we understand by constant movement between parts and wholes of multiple texts, and their horizons, has been visually represented in a variety of ways.[19] Some have used concentric circles, with the original phenomenon or object of study as the middle, and layers of context and "texts" radiating out. Other sources use the infinity loop to demonstrate the point of interaction between interpreter and text, as well as the idea that the process of understanding is never-ending. Finally, several sources represent the hermeneutic circle as a spiral process, as meaning is made when we begin with the phenomenon, but then spiral out from there to dialogue with the larger temporal and historical context.

My data analysis process would most closely resemble the spiral, especially as Fahraeus (n.d.) has conceptualized it. This visual includes the spiral, but it is bisected by lines representing other "horizons," such as my perspective versus the participants' perspectives or theory versus practice. Coding and categorizing data, as I have described in detail below, is a way to begin in the center of the spiral, but the process of understanding spirals out as themes emerge and as a thick description is developed. Throughout this process, the analysis is influenced by these bisecting lines, as analysis of the "parts" and "wholes" of RTI implementation in Cannon County is influenced by various contexts, beliefs, and other understandings. Keep in mind, too, that there are many spirals of meaning, as "texts" in the form of documents, dialogues, and context continually influence my understanding of the process of RTI implementation in Cannon County.

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[19] While there are many interesting representations of the hermeneutic circle, some interesting examples can be found in the following resources: Concentric circles of meaning: http://internalexternal-2010.blogspot.com/2012/10/hermeneutic-circle-type-experiment-4.html; http://www.texascollaborative.org/LiteTech/_instructional-graphics.htm; Infinity loop: http://www.sfu.ca/media-lab/cycle/presentation/design.html; http://margithstrand.blogspot.com/2011/01/double-hermeneutics.html; Spirals: http://people.dsv.su.se/~evafaahr/lic/lic.pdf; http://staffweb.hkbu.edu.hk/ppp/tp4/top06.html

Initial data analysis using coding and categorizing to understand "parts." My data analysis process began with reading through the documents and interview transcripts in their entirety, paying homage to the "whole" of the document. As I read through a second time, I engaged in an initial coding process, which Maxwell and Miller (2008) describe as a process during which "the data segments are labeled and grouped by category" (p. 465). I consider this initial coding process very open, loose, or fluid. During this reading, I made notes in the margins, attempting to be as brief as possible, identifying specific ideas represented by the texts. I also did not code line by line; rather, I coded chunks of data that seemed meaningful.

After coding transcripts or a set of documents, I often stopped to engage in a reflection on the process and the categories that were emerging from the data by using the researcher journal to engage in "memo writing," as recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967), as a means to "tap the initial freshness of the ideas" (p. 107). Memo writing after analyzing interview data allowed me not only to record the "fresh" understandings about the data, but to reflect on the process of data analysis as well.

Starting to piece together wholes. After generating initial codes and categories, I reviewed the codes and the transcripts again in an effort to "integrat[e] categories" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 108). I was looking for connections between the different codes. In this round of analysis, I was seeking to piece together the isolated "parts" or chunks of data into larger categories. After integrating some of the codes into categories, I read the data again. In this reading, I sought to integrate some of the codes into larger themes, as described by Maxwell and Miller (2008): "Thematic analysis is also a categorizing strategy, although the units categorized as similar or different are usually larger than those typically involved in coding data" (p. 466). For example, all of the codes related to RTI as a means to close gaps, avoid "slipping through the

cracks," and supporting students in the regular classroom were combined under the following category: "Surface goal of RTI to close gaps and support students in Tier I."

This process of combining codes into increasingly larger categories was difficult, as I felt it necessary to honor the totality of the data by including all of the initial codes in some way, but realized that some codes did not seem to "fit." I engaged in this process separately for documents and interviews. The categories and themes generated for the documents were kept in a separate file from those generated from interviews. I did this in order to later analyze how the themes generated from documents, as official organization constructs of RTI, might differ from those generated by practitioners. At this point in the analysis process, I did not begin to analyze the researcher journal. The journal was still kept as a separate document, and I continued to reflect in the journal as the documents and interviews were analyzed.

After combining codes under larger categories, I looked for connections across the initial themes—what larger themes were beginning to emerge? Could I draw any connections from these tentative themes? Again, this process was done separately for documents and interviews. When analyzing the documents, I had 15 distinct "categories/themes" after the first round of combining codes into categories, and these were further combined into five final statements or themes related to RTI implementation as evidenced by organizational documents. When analyzing the data generated via interviews, I initially had 17 distinct "categories/themes" after the first round of combining separate codes into larger categories. After looking across these 17 "themes" for similarities, I was able to develop five final statements or themes about RTI implementation in Cannon County. Appendix H includes a visual representation of the following for both the documents and the interviews: the set of initial categories/themes that were generated from grouping codes together (15 for the documents and 17 for the interviews),

and the 10 larger statements that were generated after looking for connections across these categories—five for the documents and five for the interviews. The themes and categories are color-coded.

After comparing the themes generated from the documents and the interviews, I realized that the two data sets did generate similar themes, and I color-coded the themes that seem to coincide. After doing so, I had five unique themes that were generated from the data. Appendix H illustrates the five themes, color-coded to correlate findings from interviews and findings from documents. However, as I began to craft Chapter 4, I found the need to separate a theme related to "factors that impacted implementation" into two separate themes related to leadership and resource barriers. Further, a theme related to the different experience of implementation at the secondary level is really interwoven into all of the other categories, so this is not discussed as a separate theme in Chapter 4, but is discussed in conjunction with each of the other themes. The thematic findings outlined in Chapter 4 reflect this additional reorganizing of the themes in Appendix H related to RTI implementation in Cannon County.

Next Steps: Thick Description as a Method of Fusing Data and Interpretation

As noted previously, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics does not see the hermeneutic circle as representative of a process where complete understanding is reached through understanding how parts contribute to the whole—or understanding these five separate themes related to RTI implementation in Cannon County. Rather, understanding is a circular process, and the hermeneutic circle can be used to represent "the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter" (Kinsella, 2006, para. 17). Any understandings that I draw from the research data represent this "interplay" between the data, the context, and my interpretations of both. Thus, the "findings" generated from the study cannot stop with a

"thematic description" (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). To capture the interplay of data, context, and my interpretations, I must seek to offer what Sandelowski & Barroso (2003) call an "interpretive explanation":

> In contrast to findings that survey topics and themes without linking them, or that conceptually and thematically describe elements of experience without explaining them, interpretive explanations offer a coherent model of some phenomenon, or a single thesis or line of argument that addresses causality or essence. (p. 914)

Geertz's (1973) concept of thick description allows for this interplay, as data analysis and interpretation fuse and occur simultaneously.

What is thick description? The term "thick description" was first used by Gilbert Ryle, who contrasted "thick" as opposed to "thin" descriptions of phenomena (Ponterotto, 2006). Geertz (1973) took Ryle's term and applied it to anthropology, as a method of analyzing and interpreting culture: "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (p. 311). A "thick description" seeks to provide an analysis and description of "context and meaning as well as interpreting participant intentions and their behaviors and actions" (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 539). The idea is that the analysis would describe the phenomenon in such a way that the reader feels as if he has been there—"there" in terms of action, but also in terms of recognizing the significance of the action and interaction. Thus, what makes a description "thick" is not only the level of detail, but the interpretive nature of a description that focuses on significance of action and on drawing connections between actions and interactions in order to understand "webs of meaning" (Geertz, 1973, p. 311). According to Geertz (1973), the ethnographer observes, records, and analyzes, but these are not separate acts. Interpretation is inextricably intertwined in the process of data collection and in the final representations, or findings, generated from the data: "Anthropological

writings themselves are interpretations . . . they are, thus, fiction . . . they are 'something made,' 'something fashioned'" (p. 317). When constructing a thick description, data analysis is synonymous with interpretation.

The fusion of data and interpretation that occurs when we "venture in" via thick description (Geertz, 1973, p. 312) echoes Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic conceptualization of the act of interpretation (Freeman, 2014). A thick description of a phenomenon, that attempts to construct "webs of meaning" out of participants' perspectives and the interpreter's understandings, *is* a hermeneutical analysis, as Freeman (2014) asserts, "In other words, it requires hermeneutics: 'According to its original definition, hermeneutics is the art of clarifying and mediating by our own effort of interpretation what is said by persons we encounter in tradition' (Gadamer, 1977, p. 98)" (p. 4). If we approach the construction of a thick description as a process of interpreting "webs of meaning" (Geertz, 1973, p. 311), we are approaching our data hermeneutically (Freeman, 2014).

Data representation via thick description. I began this phase of data work by reviewing the overarching themes that were generated as I worked to piece together "wholes" from the parts of coded and categorized data. Even during the process of coding and categorizing, I resisted categorizing, and now I understand that I was resistant to a process that asked me to untangle Geertz's (1973) "webs of meaning." Something is lost in the data when it is parsed out into categories and themes, akin to unraveling a knitted scarf—threads remain, but the scarf does not. Thus, the codes, categories, and themes generated in the first step of analysis were an unraveling—the components of RTI implementation in Cannon County remained, but the idea of implementation did not.

So, my goal was to recreate, or "re-construct" (Freeman, 2014, p. 14), the "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973, p. 311) from the data. The initial process of coding and categorizing was helpful, in that it allowed me to follow threads and better understand individual threads. However, to understand implementation of RTI in Cannon County, the threads had to be reconnected to represent the phenomenon as a whole. I had already begun to reconnect the threads when I grouped codes into categories and categories into overarching themes. To further reconnect the threads, I started with the overarching themes and then went back to the interview transcripts to reconnect the data to the themes.

I generated a word document in which I listed each of the themes related to the interview transcripts, and then I went through each transcript again, cutting and pasting sections of text under each theme. This process allowed me not only to "re-construct webs of significance," but it allowed me to validate my final themes. If and when I found data that did not seem to "fit" my themes, I had to pause, to question, to wonder why I had not considered it important or to modify the wording of my theme so that the re-constructed webs of significance and the final themes were brought into alignment. This document, in which I cut individual transcripts apart and organized sections of text thematically also allowed me place the voices of my participants—and my voice as interviewer—into a dialogue.

Because of the Gadamerian idea of interpretation as a "dialogue" between text and interpreter, I have chosen to begin the presentation of thematic findings in Chapter 4 by incorporating the words of the eleven participants, as well as myself, into a dialogue that introduces a thick description of each of the five themes. I have given each participant a pseudonym. To show how these practitioners talk about RTI implementation in Cannon County, I have used excerpts from their interview transcripts to create a dialogue between them. I

characterize this dialogue as creative nonfiction.[20] Where I could use the participants' own words, I did so and italicized those. However, the words may not be in the original order, as I have attempted to juxtapose thoughts that help to form a "web of significance" (Geertz, 1973, p. 311). To further set apart the participants' words, I have single-spaced their dialogue. After presenting the participants' own words, I engage in a process of thick interpretation of their words, as *I* dialogue with their thoughts and my own interpretations and create a thick description that not only describes, but begins to interpret RTI implementation in Cannon County (Ponterotto, 2006). The result is truly a fusion of data with interpretation, as I attempt to reconstruct RTI as a framework for improving teaching and learning.

Generalizability

The goal of a case study is not to generalize in the traditional sense. Again, the implementation of education policy, especially policies that affect the core of teaching and learning, is context-dependent (Honig, 2006). As Flyvbjerg (2006) states, "predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge is, therefore, more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals" (p. 224). Thus, a case study design is necessary for understanding how phenomena occur in real contexts. The case study provides a vicarious learning experience for the readers, who are able to fuse the experiences as outlined by the researcher with their own experiences. Stake (1994) would call this a different type of generalization—a "naturalistic" process that

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[20] Creative nonfiction is a writing genre that merges the boundaries between literary art (fiction, poetry) and research nonfiction (statistical, fact-filled, run of the mill journalism). It is writing composed of the real, or of facts, that employs the same literary devices as fiction such as setting, voice/tone, character development, etc. This makes if different (more "creative") than standard nonfiction writing.

occurs as "we individually acquire concepts and information and steadily generalize them to other situations as we learn more" (Bassey, 1999, p. 33).

Validity or Trustworthiness

Butler-Kisber (2010) points out that while validity is a positivist term denoting "the truth," the idea of "trustworthiness" indicates, not whether "the truth" was found, but the study's "persuasiveness by including a coherent and transparent research process and illustrating an adherence to researcher reflexivity and reflection" (p. 14). I seek to add trustworthiness to the study by engaging in a reflection on my own role as research (see Chapter 1), by keeping a researcher journal during the study, and by providing, not only a "thick description" of findings, but a "thick description" of the research process and procedures (Ponterotto, 2006).

Because philosophical hermeneutics recognizes understanding and interpretation as a process, validity or trustworthiness cannot be seen in a linear sense—controlled for at a single time or through a single method in the research design:

> Hermeneutically, there is no method that can ascertain that an interpretation is correct or incorrect, true or false . . . [U]nderstanding anything requires understanding and misunderstanding and these are simply ways of taking note of how our prejudices, and, therefore, our conceptions of validity, are being put into play as we interact with others and the world . . . Gadamer seeks for us to hold off on validating because to accept that which makes most sense to us closes the conversation . . . To open up the conversation requires questioning of our own thinking and an assessment of how well we are allowing the topic to develop in conversation. For Gadamer, truth is not something we arrive at . . . it is . . . part dwelling, part keeping domestication at arm's length, always inviting the alien in. (Freeman, 2011, p. 549)

Therefore, the researcher's journal is not only a method of data collection aimed at collecting the researcher's "dialogue" with RTI implementation throughout the study. The journal serves to "hold open the door" (Freeman, 2011, p. 549), to allow the researcher to "trouble [her] own understanding, open [herself] up to the ideas of others, and keep searching for ways to invite the topic to say what it has not yet said about itself" (Freeman, 2011, p. 550).

The validity or trustworthiness of this research should be measured by how well it meets the overall purpose of dialoguing about RTI policy at the point of implementation and what factors about the context surrounding implementation help or hinder the success of the policy. The validity or trustworthiness of the research should be measured by how well the case study "takes the reader to a place that is recognizable, having either been there before, or in simply believing that it is possible" (Moules, 2002, p. 34).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study was to engage with stakeholders in a dialogue around RTI implementation in Cannon County in an effort to understand how the system has worked to implement an RTI framework and how the idea of "intervention" is adapted to and practiced in the local context. My hope was that the dialogue would help to inform my own understanding of RTI and how it is experienced in a local context, as well as allow others to expand their understandings of RTI and implementation of education policies as the experiences of educators in Cannon County interact with those who read these findings. The case study of RTI implementation in Cannon County was guided by one main research question:

How does the reconstruction of one school system's implementation of the theoretical RTI framework help us to understand the conditions for its adaptation?

The following subquestions contribute to an understanding of the overarching question:

1. What processes were implemented at the building and system levels?
2. How is the framework of "intervention" constructed at the building and system levels—what does it mean to "intervene"?
3. What conditions in the local context influenced the implementation of the RTI framework?

This chapter presents the key findings obtained from analysis—using a philosophical hermeneutic frame—of 19 documents related to RTI implementation in the Cannon County School System, interview transcripts from in-depth interviews with 11 practitioners in the

system, and entries in a researcher journal that was used to record my ongoing dialogue with RTI and with the data throughout the study. Five major findings emerged from this study:

1. As RTI was implemented, Cannon County recognized the need to break from the previous mandated intervention process, and now the concept of "intervention" includes data-based decision-making and research-based components.
2. In Cannon County, there is a focus on the link between the RTI framework and the core of teaching and learning, as the goals of RTI are described in terms of closing gaps and improving instruction and student achievement; however, the place of special education in this new context is problematic.
3. Early implementation of the RTI framework focused on developing and adhering to processes and procedures, but also allowed for a process of continuous improvement over time as the understanding, capacity, and buy-in of teachers increased.
4. Formal and informal leaders in the district played a crucial role in the implementation of the RTI framework, and continue to play a role in the sustainability and adaptation of the framework over time.
5. Barriers to RTI implementation in Cannon County, particularly resource barriers, have been ongoing but continually addressed.

In addition to these five themes, a sixth theme related to implementation at the secondary level is woven throughout the findings. Implementation, while district-wide, has differed at the secondary level, due to a less-well defined process, less clear idea of what it means to "intervene," and additional resource barriers not experienced at the elementary level. As each theme is discussed, a differentiation is made between the elementary and secondary level, as

experiences at Cannon County Middle School and Cannon County High School were different from the elementary level.

Following is a discussion of the findings with details that support and explain each theme. Due to the Gadamerian idea of "dialogue," each thematic finding is anchored by a constructed dialogue that incorporates the words of the eleven participants[21]. By juxtaposing the words of the various participants, as they hit on the same themes in their responses, I have worked to reconstruct the "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973, p. 311) that make up RTI implementation in Cannon County. These dialogues, as well as the thick description supported by additional quotations that follows, allow participants to speak for themselves, but also serve to capture the richness and complexity of a dialogue around education policy implementation. For ease of organization, I have chosen to discuss each theme separately; however, as previously mentioned, these "threads" of meaning are interconnected. Chapter 4 presents a thematic thick description of findings related to RTI implementation in Cannon County. It is my hope to further weave the story back together as the significance of these findings is discussed in Chapter 5.

The Before and After of RTI: A Change in What it Means to "Intervene"

As RTI was implemented, Cannon County recognized the need to break from the previous mandated intervention process, and now the concept of "intervention" includes data-based decision-making and research-based components.

When I came to Cannon County, approximately two years ago now, I had already experienced an attempt at implementing an RTI framework. As an assistant principal at the high school level in a different school district, I was responsible for determining how to implement

[21] Table 4, found on page 106 of the document, provides information on whether each participant in the dialogue represents the elementary or secondary level.

RTI when the regulations for IDEA 2004 were released in 2006. Looking back, I can see that implementation did not go well for several reasons. I became an administrator and was charged with learning about special education, Student Support Teams (SST), and Response to Intervention (RTI) all at once. In 2006, I did not understand the difference between SST and RTI because, for me, there was no "before and after." There was only the SST/RTI process. I did not understand how this new framework made the idea of "intervention" different. As I immersed myself in the context of Cannon County and spoke with practitioners, this idea of "before and after" the implementation of RTI emerged as a key component in their conceptualization of RTI and what it means to "intervene."

All of the interview participants discussed the changes that RTI implementation brought. They did so by talking with me about how RTI brought changes to the SST process and to the concepts of instruction and intervention for struggling students.

Sarah: [RTI] *was a huge change because SST was more of what we would consider now to be tier I common, best practices in the classroom. The change with RTI brought about the need for research-based interventions that were proven.*

Chloe: [Right. Before RTI was implemented], *we didn't have specific things available. We didn't have specific people who were trained to implement it. And schedules had not been set up so that there was time in the day to do it. We would go into an* [SST] *meeting and it was a hand-wringing. Sometimes we would try strategies for running meetings, so it wouldn't be just hand-wringing for an hour. It would be 15 minutes. Come in, and you've got 5 minutes to state your problem, and we're going to go around the group and come up with some solutions, and you go try it and come back.*

Lois: *SST, sometimes, felt to me that it was a band-aid. And, it's like, okay, try this, try this, try this—but there really wasn't any data to back it up or anything to look at to see if there really was growth or anything.*

Sarah: [Because we weren't really doing interventions.] *We might reduce the spelling list in an SST meeting from 10 words to 5 words. We might do sight word checks daily or what we now called folding in, and those were "interventions."*

Carol: [I remember that!] (Laughs) *We would have an SST meeting,* and *we would have the parents there. We would have suggested that they have fewer spelling words, that the parapro help them fill out the answers to the workbook pages, that they sit in front of the teacher. It wasn't really helping address the area of weakness.*

Robert: *I just remember,* [as a teacher], *feeling helpless a little bit. I remember reaching, grabbing for straws, grasping for help outside the classroom—help me with this child. I just didn't feel like I had a lot of tools at my disposal. You know, you would just have those conferences that were kind-of scheduled and then hope for the best!*

Rebecca: [At the high school level], *it was almost silly interventions. Like moving their seat and giving them a copy of the notes. You know, really lower end accommodations that didn't really affect what the kid was struggling with.*

Marie: [RTI] *was an adjustment for us as teachers because back when it was just SST rather than response to intervention, it was kind of like, you knew to collect samples—various samples of data—and it was basically quiz grades or homework grades. And then, we met as an SST team and kind of talked about it and decided in a group, "Oh, I think this child needs to be tested," and the process would continue. Now, you really have to have the data to prove it and you have to do the interventions and give them time to see if it's successful. So that was an adjustment for all of us. It was a hard adjustment because we were used to our own professional judgment.*

Sarah: [I agree.] *I think* [teachers] *struggled with the fact that SST used to be the mechanism for a child to go into special education, and they had to change their mindset on RTI. The premise—the complete premise behind it was to keep a child out if at all possible. Plus the documentation increased. The evidence increased that a teacher had to bring to the table.*

Rebecca: [Yes, SST] *was the steps that you went through to be able to test a child for special education. We didn't even have access to the tools that we have now when we're intervening. And most of the time, once a kid was recommended to the SST team, the teacher expected him or her to be tested. So it was more of going through the process.* [Whereas RTI is] *when you intervene and do something different from just what's happening in the classroom—identifying those struggling students and providing some type of intervention, some type of extra to help them when they are identified as struggling.*

Marie: *Like I said, it was a change coming from SST because it was now more data-driven. Whereas SST, to me, didn't have that piece, not to the point where RTI did. But it was an easy transition here just because our assistant principal took the lead. She really made the transition easier. Even when we would have SST/RTI meetings, she had created the pyramid that broke it down and listed all of the different things that we have in place here. When we met with the parents of these struggling students, she could easily show them what it looked like.*

Chloe: [Yes, I remember that.] *She built her pyramid—it's on a big galvanized metal. And it Has all the* [research-based strategies and interventions] *that are available* [at each tier]. *And she'd say, "Look up there and see what you're doing and how many."*

Sarah: [RTI was different from SST because] *I required teachers to bring me evidence of the practices that they were using. It becomes show, not tell. It used to be just sit around the table and talk. But it became a point where you had to bring evidence to the table.*

Rachel: [It was a shift, but] *I think—at least within our department—it was kind-of a "that makes sense" kind of thinking. This does kind-of make sense that we have some sort of procedural thing instead of just a gut feeling that you got right here* (points to her stomach). *There's a way to kind-of systematically look at where the kid struggles.*

Marie: *And not that* we, [as teachers], *don't have good professional judgment, but we decided that it's important to make sure that the data backed up what* we *were seeing.* [Like I said], *now, you really have to have the data and you have to do the interventions and give them time to see if it's successful.*

Chloe: [And, not just any intervention.] *I think we had to be pretty hard-nosed at first. We were finding, at that time, that people were just pulling this and that and using things that were not research-based and not with any kind of systematic fidelity.*

Robert: [Right. With RTI], *teachers were having to definitely meet the child where they were and either remediate or accelerate and also not lose the kids in the middle. It takes a teacher coming in with that mentality of, where are the children at? And what can I do to get them where they need to be? And how can I recognize that? How can I read the data?*

Chloe: [And not just read the data, but know what to do.] *We were at a level* [in the beginning] *where we couldn't really feel like everybody was a master teacher of reading. So, we needed a system. You need systematic direct instruction.* [Before], *we* [would] *try to just pull the rabbit out of the hat. We didn't have specific things available.* [Now we do.]

Robert: [Yes], *because it's research-based. People are getting more on the same page as far as what to do to provide that child with supports. Rather than acting so frantic about* a struggling student, [teachers are now able to say] *here's what I've got and here's where I think he is, and here's what I think. What do you think? And what can we do?*

Lois: *RTI is more backed by data, really. I like that. And if* you *ask a teacher where are the strengths and weaknesses—the teachers, now, at the high school level, can tell me the strengths and weaknesses. Before, they couldn't have done that.*

Rather than a process of adapting (Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992) the RTI framework to the SST process, practitioners in Cannon County describe a true change, a true before and after. Prior to RTI, teachers were able to come to the SST meeting, state that a student was struggling, and the process would move forward—either with suggestions for strategies the teacher could try to use in the classroom or with testing for special education eligibility. It seems as if the "professional judgment" of teachers was not questioned. It also seems that ideas for how to successfully intervene when students struggled were few and far between—as evidenced by the "hand-wringing," "grasping for straws," and "silly interventions" put in place at the SST meetings. RTI seems to have brought a structure for intervention—embodied by the "galvanized metal" pyramid of interventions that was built by Marie's administrator.

This new structure and process for "intervention" is also represented in many district documents that were developed during the early implementation of RTI. The school plans for RTI (Appendix D, Documents 2-5), as well as the elementary intervention list (Appendix D, Document 6), put a "tiered" intervention framework into place, and designed "research-based" interventions that teachers and SST teams could choose from when working to support a struggling student. Further, each school developed its own pyramid of interventions (Appendix D, Documents 7-8) that provided ideas for the types of interventions that should occur in each tier. The implementation of RTI in Cannon County defined intervention as something other than "silly interventions" whereby a team might "reduce spelling words." The pyramids of intervention built in the system outlined the types of interventions that teachers should be doing even *before* a student is referred to the SST team, such as "differentiated instruction," "flexible grouping," and "tutoring" (taken from Documents 7-8, Appendix D). In addition, there was a requirement that the intervention process include the collection of data and that interventions be

research-based. By the time a child reaches tier III and the "SST" process begins[22] in Cannon County, the team now has a defined sense of what should be done, as described by Donna:

> [Cannon County] had a black and white perspective on what an intervention was [at tier III]. You do this for 20 minutes and this for this many minutes and you better repeat it just like it says and it better be 100% fidelity. And at tier III, you're only going to have a select number of students. It set a bar. I think [we] probably have a better tier III program running than most others in the state. Where, here were our interventions, we identified the people who were going to do them, we trained those people, they had scripts for certain interventions and it was very rote.

Interventions, especially those implemented by an SST team, were implemented based on the protocols described by the intervention program, which had to be research-based. Cannon County focused on training for interventionists to ensure that they implemented with "fidelity." The implementation of RTI changed "hand-wringing" to hand-holding, as teachers and interventionists were given scripted protocols to follow for interventions for struggling students.

This new structure for intervention led to an increased focus on data-informed decision-making. Teachers now have to bring data to the SST meetings, as evidence of the students' struggles. Lois points out that before RTI implementation at the high school level, teachers could not talk about a student's "strengths and weaknesses." Now they can. Not only do teachers have to bring data related to a student's struggles in the classroom, Marie points out that teachers must implement interventions and continue to collect data to see if the interventions help a student. Teachers are "encouraged . . . to have data with them because that way we can all sit down and analyze what we see compared to what they see in the room." Before RTI implementation, the only data needed seems to have been the teacher's word. While teachers "struggled" with the change, because "it took longer" and "slowed the process down," they can see the benefits from it. Robert states that teachers are sometimes too quick to "hit that panic

[22] Remember, the Student Support Team process is still *mandated* in the state of Georgia. Therefore, RTI implementation in the state led to tier III begin synonymous with SST. When a student needs "individualized interventions," the SST team is convened as a problem-solving team (GADOE, 2011).

button," but providing those "supports" is sometimes what is needed rather than a quick jump to "tier III". Sarah echoes the sentiment, stating that sometimes all kids need is "the gift of time and good instruction." The RTI process led to a conceptualization of "intervention" that is more methodical, and more focused on data related to the student's needs and progress. Teachers must allow more time to see if the intervention and targeted instruction work to address a student's areas of weakness before "testing" can occur. This need to gather data and address the student's needs in the regular classroom, as expressed by Lois, led to more focus on the "individual child" at the secondary level, and affected the way that teacher's viewed their content and students, which is discussed further in the next section.

In addition to an increased focus on data-informed decisions, the implementation of the RTI framework required "research-based" interventions. Again, as several participants pointed out, the "interventions" that SST teams mandated would not qualify as interventions under the RTI framework in place in Cannon County today. These SST "interventions"—reducing spelling lists, moving a child's seat, having a paraprofessional help the student complete a worksheet—do not address a student's skill deficit. The implementation of RTI in the district required an understanding of "interventions" in terms of research-based strategies for addressing a student's weaknesses. Rebecca, a secondary participant, describes "intervention" in these terms: "You apply some type of treatment to a struggling student. When you intervene, you identify those struggling students and respond to the fact that they are struggling." Marie, an elementary participant, further hones in by stating that the team must "work with a child to find out exactly what they need in order to meet their need—whether it be a program, whether it be a specific instructional strategy." Sarah and Chloe narrowed the idea of intervention even more by talking about the research that was done during the early days of implementation to ensure that

the district was using research-based resources. Sarah related a story about "dusting off" a program that she found in a closet, thinking it would be a "great tier III intervention," but the research reviews of it were "dismal." So, she could not use it. Chloe, who was a member of the implementation committee, is proud of the fact that the district "only bought research-based interventions and used them with fidelity—the whole program. It wasn't piecemeal."

District documents related to early implementation also contain evidence of this focus on the "research-base" for interventions and instructional materials. The "Pyramid of Intervention Questions for Academics and Behavior" (Appendix D, Documents 16-18) outlines the importance of the "research-based" implementation of curriculum: Entry for Tier 2 is determined only after "all students receive core curriculum which must be implemented with fidelity as instructed by *the publisher*" (Appendix D, Document 17, emphasis added). So "interventions" in Cannon County, under the RTI framework, had to be proven effective as outlined by research and had to address a student's weaknesses as evidenced by the data teachers would bring to meetings. This was a significant change from the interventions in use via the previous SST process. There was a move from privileging the "professional judgment" of teachers in the SST process to privileging the "research-base" of published interventions.

In order to facilitate what Robert aptly calls a "culture shift" from SST to RTI, the system worked to make a clean break with the previous intervention process. Donna describes one of the informal leaders on the RTI committee as having tremendous "foresight" because she saw the need to break from SST:

> In the SST mindset, all kids who were struggling got referred. That was all it took. They got a file, we moved them to the front of the class, that was what we did. And it was something like 3% at every school were "SST." And once you were SST, you didn't get out. They didn't graduate you. Your folder moved up to the middle school and on and on. And she had the foresight to say, if we're going to be required to do all of this . . . then I'm going to take everybody out of SST. And then you earn your way back in by

> not meeting standards. So, she basically went through every single folder, looked through every kid's data, pulled up their grades. . . And so, it just reset everything—how it was done—rather than drag all of our old stuff with us as we were trying to start new. And that was just the smartest thing.

This move, to exit students who were identified as needing interventions under the SST process, was seen as a means to preserve the structure of the pyramid. If all of the students who had been identified via SST had been automatically identified as needing Tier III interventions, then the framework would have crumbled under its own weight.

Sarah shares that elementary teachers had found "comfort in having children in their classroom" on the SST list, so this break with SST by removing students was disconcerting to some. However, others recognized that what students were getting via the SST process was insufficient at best. Robert remembers having to "scratch and claw" to get help form the SST team, and even when students were considered to be in the "SST process" the process was essentially that "you just met on them three times per year." Rebecca, who managed the SST process at her school for a time, relates the lack of a true intervention process for students referred to SST at the secondary level:

> At that time, it was the steps that you went through to . . . determine special education eligibility . . . I didn't even have access to the tools that we have now when we're intervening . . . But most of the time, once a kid was recommended to the SST team—which was me—the teacher expected him or her to be tested. And so it was more of going through the process and then getting all the paperwork together.

Rebecca further spoke with a tone of relief as she described the "permission to untag" some of those SST students when RTI was implemented. She had a file cabinet full of folders that had followed students from their early school days, and she suddenly had the ability to have a "clean break" and have the "slate wiped clean" for students who had demonstrated a pattern of success. Again, the ability to "untag" and re-examine a student's need for intervention allowed the RTI

framework to function as a means to address the needs of students when data demonstrated the necessity.

Interestingly, some secondary participants did not perceive the "break" between SST and RTI to be as monumental as the elementary participants—especially at the classroom level. Rachel, a classroom teacher at the secondary level, reflects that it was not very different because "intuitively" what RTI requires is "the things that you need to do": "It's always been, 'I have a struggling student, what do I do?' And the answer always has to be, 'Well, let's figure out what they're struggling with—what kind of things can you do immediately to help them, and let's get somebody else to help you.'" As discussed in a subsequent section, the things that an RTI framework brings that are fundamentally different from the previous SST intervention process—data-based decision-making and research-based interventions—have been more difficult to implement at the secondary level; thus, the change has not been as striking to teachers. This has more to do with the lack of adequate resources to effectively implement RTI at the secondary level (discussed in a subsequent section) than a lack of effort by Cannon County to make a clean break with the previous SST process.

Closing Gaps: A Focus on Tier I and the Place of Special Education

In Cannon County, there is a focus on the link between the RTI framework and the core of teaching and learning, as the goals of RTI are described in terms of closing gaps and improving instruction and student achievement; however, the place of special education in this new context is problematic.

As outlined in the review of literature, RTI is a curriculum policy, aimed at the core instructional program, with a goal of ensuring that all students have access to quality core instruction (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011; National High School Center, 2010; Painter & Alvarado,

2008). Yet, this goal is complicated by the linkage of RTI in policy to determining eligibility for special education—remember Shinn's (2007) "big RTI," which is connected to eligibility under IDEA, and Shinn's "little rti," which is a problem-solving, prevention model for all students. This tension between the two goals for RTI can be seen in Cannon County, where a focus has been on "little rti," but that focus is complicated by the "big RTI."

Marie: [The purpose of RTI is] *to close the gaps. To identify the gaps of each child, whether it's academic or behavior. To find out where the gaps lie, what they are, and to try to close those gaps in the most efficient way possible,* and *to ensure that they are back in that regular classroom performing at the same level as their peers.*

Sarah: [Comparison to peers is important.] *I would look to see how that child is performing in relation to the peers in the classroom and the peers at that grade level. Because the first thing I would tell a teacher is we need to make sure that the problem is not innate to the teacher nor the curriculum or the practices that you're using.*

Lois: [Agreed.] *I think the intervention starts with the teacher. The teacher is the number one who comes in and looks for the intervention and uses as many strategies she can think of to help that student.*

Rebecca: [Yes!] *With differentiation, teachers should be able to address some of the needs Within the classroom. The teacher recognizes* [that a student is struggling] *through formative assessment and realizes they need some extra help, they need some extra time, they need an extra resource or two. I think a lot of times that intervention can happen right there in the teacher's classroom.*

Sarah: *And let's not forget the number one, research-based, effective* [intervention] *is an effective teacher in that classroom. That's huge. I think the more powerful that you can get the classroom in standards-based practices . . .*

Dennis: [Right, as a teacher, I want the students with me. I am] *picturing back all the number of kids who were pulled out of my classes, and one of my frustrating things was don't pull them out during math! They need math help, but you're not teaching them on the level that they're going to be tested on. So, give them another math block that you help them build those skills, but they need to at least see this stuff!*

Marie: [Agreed!] *That has been the biggest positive is that we do "core and more" so that kids are getting that grade level instruction and they are getting those standards, those common core standards, and then they're getting supplemental based on where they are. Because years ago, it was we didn't have that. If I was the remedial teacher, then I*

would get my kids during the reading block, and what they got with me was all they got. So, my instruction might not have been teaching the standards to the degree they should have been. Now they are getting what everybody else is getting plus more.

Dennis. [Right.] *Because before when they pulled a kid out of math and reading in elementary and they never received on grade-level instruction,* [the student's] *achievement level wasn't going to be very high because* he *had never seen any of the things* [he was being] *tested on*.

Marie: [Whereas now] *they still get their core in the classroom—their regular on grade level instruction—and then they get an additional reading and/or math segment depending on what their need is.*

Carol: *I think that is requiring teachers to differentiate their instruction a lot more.* [Because they have all of those students for core] *they are beginning to understand the difference between modifying the work and accommodating the student. I think we are more focused on our lower achieving students to make sure that they get on grade level.*

Rebecca: *I think teachers still struggle with tier I sometimes, but they're getting better at differentiation. I think that the focus in TKES*[23] *on differentiation is helping the RTI process at the middle and high school. It's giving teachers tools. And data teams are the strongest tool that we gave teachers—with common planning, and set aside time to collaborate and talk about teaching and learning. We have honored that process and we've honored teachers' time to collaborate about subject area, teaching, but most importantly students. Who they are, what* are *the data telling you.*

Donna: Yes, *more focus on formative assessment and data and looking at pre and post data team style. That has changed teaching and learning more than anything.*

Lois: *I think* [high school teachers] *are becoming more aware of the children. I think they look a little closer. Before, it was a closed door kind of thing. I close my door, I do my thing, don't ask me if I have any problems. Now, the doors will open. I get emails about what could we do, or would this help? I think that* [this is only going to happen more] *because now their evaluation every year is going to be based on their student growth model. They're going to be crying for RTI.*

Robert: [I agree. We are] *learning how to look at each child individually. Not painting with broad strokes when it comes to groups of children.* [And formative assessment is important.] *When you can identify a child—where they are and what they need to do to get on grade level, and you know how to progress monitor them, it* [impacts] *achievement.*

[23] TKES stands for Teacher Keys Effectiveness System. It is a new teacher evaluation system in Georgia, which includes a rating on 10 standards related to teaching behaviors. One of these is differentiation. For additional information on the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System, see http://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Teacher-and-Leader-Effectiveness/Pages/default.aspx

Dennis: [But,] *I think a lot of teachers are becoming special education teachers. When you have somebody reading on a second grade level and they are in the 8th grade, you have to modify everything you do. And sometimes it's really difficult.*

Rachel: [I agree, but] *a lot of times you have those students who need interventions in co-teach classes. And we have really good consistent co-teaching situations. That has helped a whole lot. Because now you have two heads in a classroom. I think in the past, we've had some co-teaching things that were very spotty,* [but] *our co-teaching program has evolved a lot over the years, and I think that has been beneficial and helpful to providing interventions for kids.*

Chloe: [Yes, in the past] *it was always special ed.* over *here, and we did Lindamood-Bell*[24] *or something. And, then there's the core—the other kids. The special ed. teachers were not involved in the core, and they weren't knowledgeable of that kind of thing.* [Now they are.] *We've learned to give kids interventions without thinking they're just going to special ed.*

Sarah: [Because] *RTI is not a way of getting a child into special ed. RTI, indeed, is a way to keep a child out of special ed. We want to put as much intervention in place to close the gaps of instruction for that child so they don't need tier IV . . . And it's hard for me as an administrator to say, we've got to let this cook a little bit longer. And it's not because I don't want them to have the support and help. They need time—they need the gift of time and good instruction.*

Rebecca: [Yes, but secondary teachers struggle with "good instruction."] *It's really hard because academic teachers are protective of their time, they're protective of their content, and they certainly don't want anybody pulled out. They are willing to differentiate some, but they feel like they are watering down their curriculum or not adhering to the rigor of the standard. It becomes a conflict.*

Dennis: [Yes, and I find] *frustration in the fact that* [a student who needs "intervention" is left in a class that] *was doing so well* [and then was left to] *deteriorate for the next 12 weeks. And when we finally got the intervention in place where the kid wasn't in the classroom, it went back to what it was before.*

Marie: [Sometimes RTI delays the process.] *Sometimes you know there's that one child that you can try everything with and you know that just in your years of teaching and your experience, you're pretty confident that the child has a true learning disability. So,* [RTI is good because] *it helps you truly know where the kid is and what they need,* [but sometimes that can also hinder because] *it takes longer to get that child the true support that they need.*

Sarah: [Yes, and] *I do like the RTI process, but here is where I get frustrated with it because it*

[24] Lindamood-Bell is a reference to a specific reading intervention program that has a strong research base. It has been proven to be effective especially with students with learning disabilities.

works for those children who have a strength. Who have a true learning disability. But, it's those children who don't have a strength. They're low across the board, but because there is not a strength, they don't qualify for special ed and they don't have that umbrella where they can get those accommodations for standardized testing.

Marie: [I have the same concern.] *Here, we continue the interventions just to give them all the help that we can give them. But, you can only do so many interventions for so long.*

Dennis: [But] *in the past they labeled them slow learner and they didn't get anything. So at least they get something . . .*

Donna: [But, I think what you are not understanding is that when we determine eligibility for Special Education] *we are legally having to say whether or not this student has not made progress even given a research-based intervention that is proven to make progress with students at that level, and so then we're considering that child to be disabled. So that's a big deal to me. You know maybe they are still struggling in the classroom, they might still be failing, but they've gained a whole grade level of reading ability in six months! So, I know they're failing right now, but they're making progress.*

Chloe: [Well, the bigger issue is] *once you go to tier IV. If you haven't been successful at tier III, certainly you need to add something, change something.* [But that's not happening.] *I don't think you can fully implement this inclusion model or push-in model, whatever they want to call it, and also maintain the resource interventions. I don't think you can do both with the resources we have. And our special ed. teachers are not real learning disabilities teachers. Sometimes it's a good idea to use a teacher that's a good reading teacher and let her get certified in special ed. But, just because they can pass* [the certification test?] *I think they have gone in the wrong direction there.*

Carol: *I am not so sure RTI changed special ed. I think co-teaching changed special ed. The majority of your students have to be in the general ed. class. You don't want to pull them out because if you pull them out then you get a poor rating on that CCRPI*[25]*. A child who is in special ed may not be getting anything other than co-teaching. So, they are really not getting what a tier III student is getting on-on-one.*

Donna: [And this focus on Special Education in our dialogue about RTI is problematic.] *I don't like that RTI came out through* [the special education department at the state level.] *To this day many people consider it a hoop-jumping process to get kids into special ed. because it was rolled out of the special ed. department. It should have been rolled out of the curriculum department as the intervention process first. It would have made more sense—it would have been a school improvement process. It's taken nearly a decade for people to* start to *get it—that it's school improvement.*

Marie: [Maybe we are focusing on the wrong thing. But, I still worry about] *putting something*

[25] Georgia is one of the states that applied for and received a waiver from *No Child Left Behind*. In place of AYP requirements, Georgia developed the CCRPI accountability measure. Additional information about the indicators for school accountability in Georgia can be found at http://www.gadoe.org/CCRPI/Pages/default.aspx

> *in place to help those kids who do not have a learning disability. We do everything we can, but then when they leave us and go to middle school, it's just heart-breaking because you don't know how they are going to make it without the layers of support that we have here. They're going to have a hard time.*

The conflict between "little rti" and "big RTI" (Shinn, 2007) is evident in the participants' comments. On the surface, the participants report that RTI is about "closing gaps" and getting students "on grade level." They also mention the need to keep teachers, as Robert says, from "hitting the panic button" too quickly, and providing, as Sarah says, "the gift of time and good instruction." Participants also report the effect that RTI has had on the core of teaching and learning. Now, all students in Cannon County have access to "core" instruction, with "more" for those who need it. The foundation of quality core instruction at tier I was a priority for the team that worked to implement RTI in Cannon County. All of the school level RTI plans (Appendix D, Documents 2-4) discuss "tiers of instruction," and the focus on quality in Tier I: "The core tenet of Tier 1 is to provide high quality instruction . . . The purpose of Tier I is to eliminate poor instruction . . . as a possible cause of academic underachievement." In addition, the district-level RTI committee had concerns about ensuring "integrity and fidelity of core curriculum," and as Chloe points out, there was a time when they were not confident that "everybody was a master teacher of reading." Thus, there was a focus on scripted, research-based interventions to ensure access to a high-quality core curriculum, especially in reading. Notes from a district meeting early on (Appendix D, Document 10) outline "concerns" related to the core instructional program. There was an "inadequate response to core curriculum," because students were "taken out" for intervention programs. So, the concept, as Marie outlined, of "core and more" was implemented. The goal was that all students would benefit from the core

curriculum and be exposed to grade level standards. Their interventions targeted to areas of weakness would be delivered at another time—"more."

This focus on the purpose of RTI as a means to address gaps in student achievement was helped along by the accountability era. As Carol mentioned, schools are concerned with the progress of all students and must leave the majority of students in the general education classroom because of the state and federal accountability systems. Rebecca further outlines how accountability and RTI, coming along at relatively the same time, helped to change attitudes at the secondary level:

> When we first implemented RTI . . . the pervasive attitude at the high school was . . . I put it out there, and the kids either get it or they don't. There was not a lot of responsibility . . . collective responsibility for ensuring that kids got it. And now, I think the conversation is different in that it's really not an option . . . RTI came in about the same time that the high school was on a downward spiral with the AYP designations[26] . . . And so there was a fear factor involved . . . I do think that fear factor helped change some attitudes. It wasn't just RTI . . . it was also, we have to graduate more kids because if we don't, we're considered a failing school . . . Outsiders are going to come in and take over our school.

Rebecca, Daniel, and Lois, all with experience at the high school level, discuss the shifts in attitudes that were brought about by accountability and by RTI implementation. More than anything else, the attitudes of teachers towards students shifted. Teachers now see students as "individuals." Because they are "held accountable . . . something had to be there." As Daniel sees it, the improvements in achievement and the shift in attitude to one of helping students are correlated: "I know we started doing different things . . . That's when our graduation rate started increasing. It was very clear. When we started helping students—instead of just letting them drop off—we started doing something to help them continue making progress." There was more

[26] AYP stands for "Adequate Yearly Progress." Under NCLB, schools had to make "adequate yearly progress" based on student achievement indicators, and based on graduation rate at the high school level. If they did not "make AYP," schools faced sanctions.

buy-in for RTI and intervention programs for struggling students due to increased accountability to address the needs of all students.

Further, it is the connection of RTI to accountability that allowed for a focus on sustaining RTI and intervention programs at the district level. Donna remembers a turning point for RTI in the district, when the position of "RTI coordinator" was moved out of the Student Services Department and to the Curriculum and Instruction Office:

> That was the point when RTI got merged with . . . curriculum things like data teams and strategic planning. RTI has got to be a big part of the basic strategic plan of your school or system, and prior to that it was just a few people—two or three—in the special ed department spinning wheels and running around just trying to shove it in on top of everything else that schools were doing. It wasn't a part of their strategic plan. It wasn't a part of what was really their priority.

Now, in Cannon County, the RTI coordinator continues to work in the Curriculum and Instruction Office. It was when the district included RTI in the functions of the curriculum office that the district implemented "data teams," which are collaborative, problem-solving teams at Tier I. Grade level or course level teams of teachers come together to review assessment data and make decisions about differentiated instruction for students. As Rebecca previously mentioned, data teams have been crucial to the implementation of RTI, and are now considered part of tier I implementation—as the vehicle for provision of differentiated instruction based on data—as outlined in the newly revised RTI Manual for Cannon County (Appendix D, Document 19): "**Data teams** in each subject area or at each grade level use frequent common assessments to **differentiate** instruction based on student needs. Data teams work to problem solve using pre- and post-assessment data" (emphasis in the original). The RTI framework in Cannon County, helped along by increased accountability for the achievement of all students, was constructed with a focus on increased achievement for all students via a strong core curriculum and problem-solving around student data to support achievement.

Yet, the participants still highlight the problematic connection between RTI and the role of Special Education. Participants at the elementary level—Marie and Sarah—voice the concern that some students who need intensive supports are not able to qualify for special education. On the other hand, Chloe and Carol feel that the accountability era has diminished the level of supports that Special Education students get, so that those at tier III actually get more support than those at tier IV. While some participants, like Robert and Sarah, focus on the benefits of slowing down the process and giving time for interventions to work; others, like Marie and Dennis, are concerned about what a slower process does by delaying needed supports for the student who might have a learning disability or to the class of students who is affected by the inclusion of a student who needs a different type of environment. Even Rachel, who said that RTI made sense and did not seem to be very different from what came before, commented on the time it takes for a student to progress through the process:

> I know that you have to do things over time to see if they're working. I wish there was some way that we could speed that up a little bit. Because as we're trying to collect data, the kid's still stuck. And, I understand why the process is like it is, but I still think the bottom line is the kid's not making any progress. So while we're trying to figure out what is working or what isn't working—if it's not working, the kid's still not making any progress. So, I wish the whole thing were a little faster. That way the child gets the help they need more quickly.

In addition, both Rachel and Daniel relate stories of students who "fall through the cracks" at the secondary level due to teachers who do not even start an intervention process. While "special education" is not necessarily the focus at the secondary level, there are concerns about the lack of support that some students are able to access.

Cannon County continues to struggle with the place of special education services in an RTI framework. Even in the newly drafted RTI Manual, tier IV is not addressed in an outline of the tiers. This appears to be due to the focus in the manual on RTI as "an instructional

philosophy . . . a continuous improvement, problem-solving process . . . While RTI is connected in policy to Special Education eligibility, we believe that RTI is about improving academic achievement and behavior for all kids" (Appendix D, Document 19). The precarious role of Special Education within an RTI framework seems to have more to do with the disconnect between policies related to services for students with disabilities and new accountability measures for schools than with a conflict between the tenets of RTI and the purpose of Special Education. A theoretical RTI framework does not deny supports for students who need them based on data, but as Donna highlights, there are legal definitions of what constitutes a disability under IDEA. Further, the supports that even tier IV students get are complicated by accountability policies under NCLB. What is evident from the participants in Cannon County, however, is that teachers, at the end of the day, are more concerned with providing access to supports for students and are frustrated when policies and processes hinder them.

Building the Skeleton: From Fidelity to Adaptation to Enactment?

Early implementation of the RTI framework focused on developing and adhering to processes and procedures, but also allowed for a process of continuous improvement over time as the understanding, capacity, and buy-in of teachers increased.

As previously discussed, the implementation of RTI in Cannon County was a "break" from the previous SST intervention process, and there was a laser focus in the early days on "fidelity" to the implementation of "research-based" interventions. Participants spoke about the rigid nature in which the framework was implemented in the early days. I entered these conversations believing that most educators would view this rigidity in a negative light—that many of them would not support such a drastic move from using teachers' "professional judgment" as "data" to using the "research-base." Their dialogue surprised me.

Sarah: [Our RTI framework is one of the best in the state.] *That first initial year, we made what we call our Bible—a huge binder on RTI. I think the factor that helped us is that we created the skeleton—the timeline. We took the pyramid and we said, you've got to let tier I cook four to six weeks period. Write down everything you do. Document changes. And the same for tier II. We took the time to put an actual process in place—even when it seemed rigid. Now, looking back on it, it probably was too rigid. But we needed that at the time to make the change from SST to RTI. We needed it to be a dramatic change from what it had been in the past and what was accepted in the past to make the change.*

Chloe: *At first, it was just trying to get the mechanics done.* [And several years later, when] *a panel* [came in] *to review our process, they said we had good interventions and people to deliver the interventions. We had trained them and had a structure in place.*

Donna: *I think that what* [they were] *trying to do was lay a really good foundation—so people weren't just willy-nilly doing things. In that process of trying to lay that good foundation, there was some misinterpretation of what an intervention is and how it needs to be implemented, but it did set a bar.*

Rebecca: *I think it's part of the journey. When we first started implementing, there were all these rules—and we took them literally. It was so black and white. So, when we implemented research-based tier I instruction, we took that to such an extreme. Every kid. That basal program was our research-based, standards-based curriculum—everybody had to participate in that basal program for 45, 50 minutes a day. There was not a lot of veering from that.*

Sarah: *But I think it was necessary at the time to make the change in mindset from "show, not tell."*

Chloe: [And remember], *We were at a level* [in the beginning] *where we couldn't really feel like everybody was a master teacher of reading. So, we needed a system. You need systematic direct instruction.*

Rebecca: [But], *what we know about learning is that it's not that neat. But to fit the RTI model, we made things very neat—put them into nice little canisters. We bought a lot of research-based programs. It was almost like we minimized good teaching strategies some to make RTI work.*

Sarah: [But], *I think* [teachers] *feel relief when you can put something in place for a child, period. I think that the practice with having to find that program that was research-based, had a good rating in practice,* [was helpful to teachers. What] *put a lot of angst in people* [was] *I would follow up and sit in on sessions for the intervention to say that it was done with fidelity.*

Marie: *Now, I would say the majority of teachers would still like to have a basal. And it's not that they would use it from beginning to end, but it would be nice to have something that you could use to support your instruction. I know teachers prefer that. I would say that*

[having to use the research-based materials and having to collaborate with our data team]—*all of that combined has made us all stronger teachers.*

Sarah: [Balance is important. My best interventionist] *balanced it. The program and the expectations of the intervention took precedence, and never did she deviate or waver from what she thought she was expected to do.* But, *she did the teacher thing. She would do extra things or she would say I'm going to keep this child five to ten extra minutes because my schedule can allow for it and we're going to do this on the side. She would see what these kids needed.*

Rebecca: [Agreed. Balance.] *We almost kind of worked our way into a moment when it was like, whoa! We were implementing these research-based programs for intervention, and we had kids who just didn't fit that and we didn't know what to do with them. We had to take that moment and step back a little bit and say, okay, what do we truly mean by research-based. Can it be strategies instead of programs? Can the teacher implement some strategies in the classroom without the kid having to go to a computerized program? I don't think we need to swing all the way back to where we were paying no attention to what is research-based methodology. But, we're not so black and white anymore. We have a nice balance.*

Donna: *In the process of trying to lay that good foundation, there was some misinterpretation of what an intervention is and how it needs to be implemented.* [What was described and mandated was what intervention should look like at tier III. We] *probably have a better tier III program running than most others in the state.* [But], *most teachers are not doing tier III interventions in the classroom.* [So, when they were given information about what an "intervention" was, the attitude was] *well, I can't do that. They should be getting this, so I don't want to be doing this over here. You kind of had to break down some of those tier walls—you can do anything you want to in the classroom. If you think it's going to help, please, by all means—our job is to help the kids. I think everyone took RTI seriously. It wasn't a joke or a halfway kind of thing. It was a real good thing. But, I think it was intimidating to teachers, and sometimes led them to make decisions* [that were not in the best interest of kids.]

Marie: [But over time, we have made a shift.] *The more we used* [the curriculum] *the more we as teachers realized that, well, I don't know if I really need to waste my time doing this if I can move on and do something else in its place. And maybe we felt more comfortable or finally got permission to where we felt like we could come away from that more. I don't know if it was anything that really made the shift. It was just over time realizing that you're still using research-based strategies even though you may not be using every component of that series.*

Carol: [There was an increase in] *teachers understanding the interventions that should be done for a student who had that area of weakness. Understanding that the child has this weakness and this is the intervention that we can use without always having to go to the school psychologist. I think knowledge—their own knowledge—and having the interventions there—available—that made the difference.*

Robert: [But], *I like the format—the way that it was organized. The checklist of things that you've got to go through. That helped. In years past, it was just piecemeal—just felt very scattered. Now, there's that definite list that you've got to go by, and you've got to follow these steps to get to here, and these steps to get to here.* [At the same time], *I've appreciated the* [more recent] *ability to have a child float in and out of a tier status. We used to have to write a note home for every move we made. It was confusing to me, and I know it was confusing to the parents—they didn't know what we were talking about. As the years progressed, they know more about what we're talking about, and we can explain it to them in a way that's understandable. It has been a culture shift.*

Sarah: [That shift has occurred because] *I think that you have buy-in for the process from your teachers, and I think that took several years to get. I think that helped to loosen and make the process a little more flexible when it needs to be. I think the process as it was set 6 or 7 years can still work for certain kids. But, I think that* [what flexibility] *does is provides you with an appropriate way to feel okay if this kid is outside the box of what you used to do and you're still meeting that child's needs.*

Robert: [But at the secondary level, it never really became what it was at elementary. It is still a] *deer on roller skates. There were still some things that applied mostly to elementary, and I guess we were looking for ways to make it more user-friendly for middle schoolers. We were still just reaching for things here and there—that term "research-based" wasn't as heavily emphasized.*

Rebecca: [Right.] *There was this moment* [during] *on-site training—this moment of confusion where you really don't understand what it is that you're supposed to do. Changes should be made, but you can't figure out how to make those changes in a high school.*

Rachel: [I think RTI impacts student achievement the most] *if you have real concrete things that teachers can do. When it's a nebulous thing—when you don't have a lot of guidance—it becomes more of a struggle to implement things. It's sometimes hard for teachers to come up with their own way to handle a situation. If you have real good concrete strategies to help a student, it's more manageable at the classroom level. In the early days of RTI* [at the high school level] *it was nebulous. Okay, I could try this—how long do I try this to figure out if it works, and if it's helping the student? And if it's not, then I guess I do this?* [I need someone to] *tell me exactly what I need to do.*

Sarah: [Some structure is still needed.] *Now, I'm a little bit concerned that we might become too loosy-goosy. I'll be honest with you. But, I think I have to look at myself and say, okay, you were there when it was rigid. You were there when it was being constructed. You were there sitting in those meetings when we said we've got to have fidelity—we've got to have research. And I bought into that to such a degree that now I'm concerned that in years to come that it might become what it used to be.*

I had anticipated that participants would speak in a more negative manner about the rigid nature of early RTI implementation in Cannon County. One participant, Donna, did talk about

the "heavy-handedness" with which things were implemented, and she spoke about the narrow definition of "intervention" and how that seemingly handicapped classroom teachers who felt like they could not try other strategies in the classroom. In addition, participants did talk positively about the "relaxing" of procedures over time, as teachers have become more comfortable with what it means to intervene. However, most participants did not speak negatively about the early days of implementation and the rigid framework that was put in place.

Participants talked about the rigid, fidelity-driven implementation (Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992) as a necessary step in a "journey." In those early days the "skeleton" was needed. At the elementary level, where RTI implementation has been more successful in Cannon County, teachers, like Marie, were appreciative of having specific resources, and would still like to have a "basal" to use. Sarah perceives that teachers in her school like to have "something in place for a child, period." At the secondary level, where research-based resources were not as available (discussed in a subsequent section), teachers do not like the "nebulous" feeling. Rachel remarks that she wants to be told "what to do." She wants clear guidelines about how long to try an intervention and how to tell whether or not the intervention is working. Robert, who has spent time at the elementary and middle levels, appreciates the "checklist" and clear guidelines for steps in the process and points out that some pieces of the process were not designed to fit "middle schoolers." Where there was a rigid process and fidelity of implementation—at the elementary level—it was appreciated. Where the process could not be implemented with such fidelity due to lack of resources—secondary level—more guidance was desired. Instead of relishing the ability to use "professional judgment," Rachel asks for "guidance" and "concrete strategies."

This need for clear guidelines and more structure is evident in many comments that the secondary participants made regarding RTI. When they talk about "intervention," there is a less clear idea of what that means for students. They speak in vague terms, such as "provide support . . . we physically do things to try to help a student" (Rachel), or "it's what we do—the actual action that we do to try to help the student" (Daniel). In addition, they speak in vague terms about the process of RTI and how it is supposed to work. Lois, Rachel, and Daniel all talk about the "variation" in the process—the fact that some students get help and support, but some students fall through the cracks. It seems to hinge, as Lois puts it, on "teacher personality." Some teachers, Daniel states, will seek help, but the "philosophy among teachers is mixed." There are some, as Rebecca describes, who still have an "I put it out there" and students should "get it" mentality. Better processes for identifying students and ensuring that they do not "fall through the cracks" are needed at the secondary level. However, participants still struggle with what that might look like. As discussed in the review of literature, there are few models of successful implementation at the secondary level to help them. Rebecca pinpoints the frustrations:

> I think it's hard. [We] have struggled with what process do we have to identify kids at the high school. How do we sweep [universally screen] with 1400 kids? We can't just depend on a teacher to tell us when a kid is struggling, but what is the definition of struggling? We've talked about using some grading periods to pull attendance reports and behavior reports and failing student reports and cast a wider net and do a better process . . . It's hard for somebody to get a really clear picture of who's struggling and who needs that more intense intervention and support.

There is tension between wanting a better process and having an idea of how that looks in a high school—that is three times larger than the largest elementary school in the district. Further, even if there were a good process in place for identifying the students, Daniel worries about what to do with them at that point:

> All of a sudden, you've got a list—even if it's only 50. When you've got 50 students, how are we going to reach all of them? Can you do [individualized problem-solving] when you are talking about 50 or 100 or 200 students who might need some kind of intervention? How do you reach all those students?

Because they did not go through the same type of rigid, structured implementation with fidelity that the elementary schools did, the secondary schools in Cannon County continue to express a need for structure and process. As I participated in reflective conversations at each school during the summer regarding the state of RTI implementation, the middle and high schools focused on the need to better define the process. However, what that looks like at the secondary level is not as clear—it is "nebulous." Lack of knowledge of how a strong RTI process might look in a middle or high school, as well as lack of personnel resource (discussed in a subsequent section), handicap the ability of the secondary schools in Cannon County to move forward with RTI implementation.

However, at the elementary level, there is a move in the opposite direction. Currently, the conversation around RTI in Cannon County's elementary schools focuses on how to relax the rigid nature of the process—carefully and thoughtfully. As Sarah states, there is a fear that the process can be relaxed too much, but there is also excitement about "teacher ownership" of the process. Marie points out that as teachers have become more confident in the curriculum, they know when they don't need to "waste time" on certain aspects of the research-based curriculum materials. Interventionists, when they have the expertise, are able to "balance" fidelity to programs with other things that the student needs. Carol attributes the ability to relax the rigid skeleton of the RTI framework with "teacher knowledge." As the elementary teachers have developed a greater knowledge base regarding research-based teaching strategies and research-based intervention, they do not feel the need to go to the school psychologist. They are able to make decisions on their own about student needs.

Further, the work of the data teams is highlighted by several participants. The collaborative conversations that teachers have about students have served to provide more teacher ownership of student learning, and teams are beginning to make decisions about what students need. Carol describes a new organizational structure for reading instruction in first and second grade, wherein the "core and more" is happening right in the classroom. The entire class receives whole group reading instruction on grade-level standards, but all students also receive instructional-level reading in a guided reading group. Support teachers, special educators and interventionists, "push-in" to the classroom to work with the small groups of students. Instead of "intervention" as a "program" designed by a publishing company, "intervention" is based on the knowledge of the professionals in the classroom, and on data regarding the student's progress over time (teachers are scoring students on reading rubrics every two weeks on instructional level). This shift—from "intervention" as a "program" to "intervention" as "structured differentiation"—has opened conversations in Cannon County about what tier II looks like. In the newly drafted RTI manual (Appendix D, Document 19), there is an effort to clarify the line between differentiation and tier II. The system borrowed a quotation from Allan and Goddard (2010):

> A classroom implementing differentiated instruction and Response to Intervention will first and foremost look like a differentiated classroom. The major component that makes it not just a differentiated classroom but also an RTI classroom is that, in addition to typical classroom assessment (both formative and summative), the teacher keeps detailed records to monitor the progress of students who are struggling and who may need more intensive Tier 2 support. This intense monitoring and documentation facilitates differentiation as well, because it enables teachers to keep a continuous finger on the pulse of students' progress and thus design differentiated lessons more accurately . . . Again, the major difference between structural differentiation and services provided in Tier 2 is that Tier 2 requires more extensive documentation and, perhaps, more frequent assessment than would differentiation. (para. 9-10)

Elementary schools, who have been on the "journey" that began with "fidelity," seem to have developed enough capacity to move beyond rigid rules and processes to a "nebulous" place that is not appreciated at the high school level. Carol, who earlier expressed concerns about the lack of support students with reading disabilities are able to access at tier IV, feels that this relaxed structure will only serve to help students: "I hope the change in that reading program on that instructional level—I'm hoping that will help [the LD child]." As Rebecca described, a "rigid" system puts into place a structure where some kids might not "fit." The move at the elementary level is to relax the structure to better serve the needs of students. While there are fears about "relaxing too much," there is also excitement about "teacher ownership," which is possible because teachers, due to the foundation that was laid, have the capacity and knowledge to use data to make decisions about interventions for students. The structure allowed them to understand the "how" of RTI before they were required to make decisions about the "why."

RTI implementation in Cannon County seems to have been helped by the laying of a rigid foundation with fidelity at the elementary level in the beginning. However, it was also helped by an attitude of continuous improvement and reflection on the process as it unfolded. There is evidence in participant comments, as well as district documents, that district leadership ensured that implementation was not a once and done process. The system sustained a focus on implementation and improving it over time. Nowhere is this focus on improvement more evident than in how the district reacted to the "paperwork burden." Participants describe "paperwork" as a concern for teachers during the early days of implementation. While the paperwork, as Robert points out, served as a guide for what to do, it sometimes stood in the way as well. Rebecca describes how the RTI process—at the point that a student was recommended to the Tier III SST team—really became a paperwork process:

> I'm a paperwork person. I'm a dot the i, cross the t person, and so there was a little process that we went through, and we filled out all the paperwork. Most of the time, once a kid was recommended to the SST team, which was me, the teacher . . . expected him or her to be tested. And so it was more of going through the process and then getting all the paperwork together and turning it in to the SPED department. And then they were tested.

Rachel, from the teacher's perspective, shares how the paperwork is burdensome, and perhaps, prevents teachers from initiating the RTI process for a student: "I think teachers are torn. They understand the need for documentation, but I think that has become more burdensome than helpful. Some are reluctant to go through that process." Donna relates the story of how she volunteered at one point to reduce the paperwork related to RTI:

> When I came on board—and I felt like the SST paperwork was ridiculous in the first place. And when I got here, what was required was a notebook of paperwork—per student, by the time they got to the end of the process. It was not very user-friendly and it was clumsy. And so, after the first year I was here, I tried to say, hey, we've got this new program, I think I can make it a little more condensed, I will keep everything you've got in there . . . we tried to come together and get everything that needed to be there legally and everything that they wanted to be there. And even at the end of that, I thought it was just too much. And probably it was too much. But, it was maybe 20 pages shorter. Not even exaggerating.

The paperwork that was required for RTI represented something larger—the fact that the RTI process had become more about the process than about the purpose. Donna describes how things "came to a head" when the superintendent asked an outside team of consultants to review the RTI process in Cannon County. Notes on the outcome of this review were preserved (Appendix D, Document 11).

The first "theme" reported by the consultant group was that "RTI is viewed as a process, not a philosophy" (Appendix D, Document 11). Theme 2 from the group related directly to how paperwork was involved in the process: "Laborious paperwork involved in process, with little consistency from school to school" (Appendix D, Document 11). The paperwork related to RTI has been continuously reviewed over time, and was most recently updated during the summer of

2014. The ongoing reflection by the district on paperwork, as well as the RTI process in general, demonstrates a continuous improvement mindset—a need for the district to focus on the purpose, the original goals of the RTI framework, over process. Donna sums it up best when describing what really matters in the process:

> In a meeting when I was presenting RTI stuff . . . somebody said, "Why are we doing this?" And I said, "Well, what would you take away? If it seems bad to you what would you take away? And when we went through the steps, they were like, "We need to be doing this." When you put it in that perspective—what should be different—everyone agreed . . . The only thing that anybody really complained about, ultimately when you are looking at the intent of it, was the paperwork . . . Well, I don't give a flip about the paperwork. I really care about whether or not the kid is getting an intervention and whether he's making progress. So, if you can show me that in a chart and then sign off at the end that he got an intervention, I'm good with that. I really don't care about the rest.

While this focus on the bottom line—the "intervention" and the "progress"—is complicated, as previously discussed, by legal compliance requirements at tier III, Cannon County has worked to continuously review the process and maintain focus on the purpose for RTI. Teachers do have to have an understanding of "intervention" and "progress," and the "journey" to a place of "fidelity" was necessary to develop that understanding. The secondary participants still report a need for more fidelity. However, Cannon County has remained open, over time, to reviewing processes and procedures and allowing teacher capacity and professional knowledge to coincide with "fidelity" at the elementary level. Implementation has moved from a "fidelity perspective" to "adaptation" and even—with the implementation of the new structure for reading at grades one and two—to a place of "enactment" (Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992) as teachers built capacity and knowledge.

The Role of Leadership

Formal and informal leaders in the district played a crucial role in the implementation of the RTI framework, and continue to play a role in the sustainability and adaptation of the framework over time.

RTI implementation in Cannon County was helped by a focus on creating a process, but also continuously reviewing that process. In addition, while the process was, and continues to be, complicated by the connection to Special Education, the vision for RTI in Cannon County was on an intervention framework to support all struggling students. This focus—to create a process for all—was sustained by both formal and informal leaders in Cannon County.

Robert: *I think it helped a lot to have administrator buy-in to doing what works and doing it the right way. The leadership at the top* was [key]—*filtering* and *allowing ideas to be shared, freeing up funds to help with professional development, freeing up professional development money for teachers to go and learn more about differentiation. If you don't have a principal who will buy in to an idea, that can be a road block.*

Chloe: [I wanted to be involved.] *There was a group of people at the table that were administrators, and then a few literacy kind of people, and then I got myself invited. I asked to be at the table. We would have meetings, and we were deciding where do we need to go at this point. What's the next step and the next step. That involved everybody from the superintendent down. Dr. George* [references the current superintendent who was a former assistant superintendent for curriculum] *was very supportive. I think that was probably the biggest thing for our success—having administrative support.*

Daniel: [We went to see how RTI was done at the high school level in some other schools.] *Dynamic leadership—that's the biggest thing I remember* [from one school]. *He would tell us the things he was thinking about doing, the things he was doing. The guy was obviously a leader, that's what he was. Our principal* [at the time] *was not necessarily—he went through the motions. We brought* [ideas back], *but nothing happened too much. When we had a change in leadership, that's when things started to happen. It all goes back to the leadership. The leadership makes it happen.*

Chloe: [Yes, it was important for the leaders in the system to support RTI.] *We made a point of expressing what was going to happen. First of all, Dr. George would give an overview of what is coming down the pike. So, we were introducing it to the principals, and then asking them to introduce this terminology to their teachers. Dr. George* [and the

superintendent at the time] *were very knowledgeable—especially Dr. George. He knows how important* [this is]. *He has always been very supportive, and you know,* [in Cannon County], *if he is for something, then everybody's for it.*

Carol: [But, you know what I remember is] *the lead school psychologist* [at the time] *being adamant that this is what we were going to do and not giving up. The school psychologists played an instrumental role. They would not give up. They trained our assistant principals and started working on interventions, pulling interventions, and researching interventions. There were some of our central office staff that were a little negative and didn't think we needed to spend all of that money on students who were having difficulty. So, there was a lot of tension between* [the lead school psychologist and the literacy coach] *and* [some of the] *central office staff. The central office staff felt like they were stepping on their toes, and they didn't like that.*

Donna: [But the lead school psychologist was so determined.] *She would go through kids' files that were not in RTI and say, "This kid's not reading! Give them some intervention!" She would get in your face, and as an administrator, if you weren't doing what was right for kids to help them, to her it was a moral issue. We're keeping them out of prison, literally. It was their life. And she takes it that way. And I think that's the reason that she so staunchly held to the procedures that everyone needs to follow, because if you're not then there are kids slipping through the cracks. That was her intent, but in the implementation, I think everyone didn't have that spirit.*

Lois: [But over time, I think leaders have gotten on board.] *I just met with our superintendent the other day, and he starts talking about the growth model and the first thing he says to me is that, "Well I know all your kids didn't pass EOCT, but I know your kids grew on their Lexile." So, he is aware—he understands that growth is growth. I think they are more aware in their understanding and they are really pushing teachers to look at the individual child. When I first came in, when they were choosing some teachers to do* [reading intervention with special education students], *it was just put somebody in there. This year, they actually are looking at, "Does this person understand how to teach reading?" I've seen that—that's it!*

Marie: *When RTI went into implementation* [at my school], *the assistant principal we had at the time, it was her first year as an assistant principal, but she took it and she ran with it. It was awesome. It was an easy transition here because she took lead on it. She created the pyramid that broke it down and listed all of the different things that we have in place here, so that when we met with the parents of these struggling students she could easily show them what it looked like. We had a great leader who took charge and she had it well organized* and *well thought out.*

Chloe: [Another thing that I think was critical was the alliance that the school psychologist built with the literacy coach.] *As a school psychologist, you're pretty much an outsider. You're not a teacher, and you're not a regular ed. person, and you're not an administrator. You don't have any power. All you can do is try to convince people to do things. And, so* [she] *knew* she *had to align* [herself] *with people in those areas, and in*

reading it was [the literacy coach, who *was*] *from Cannon County, highly respected, and she knew what she was doing.* They *were the perfect team for that because* [the school psychologist understood RTI, but the literacy coach] *had the ear of the people at the top.*

Donna: *And, thankfully,* [the school psychologist] *was a very forward-thinking person. You know RTI—the thought of it had been around for a while—and she had gone to some trainings and really steered that and had gotten all teachers in the district trained on progress monitoring and* universal screening *in particular. That process was up and running pretty fluidly,* and pretty quickly, *for elementary reading.* [But], *a lot of our administrators were not fully on board. Some were, but just different implementation at different schools. We met so regularly trying to get consistency.*

Chloe: [But, really the work the school psychologist was doing should have come out of curriculum and instruction.] *The whole Georgia pyramid of interventions was written in the department of curriculum and instruction, and our curriculum director was . . . she was against it. She didn't believe in curriculum-based measurement. It should have been driven* [by that office]. *She should have been the cheerleader for it. I can remember* [in a meeting where the school psychologist was] *citing something on research, and* [the curriculum director said], "*Hmmm. Statisticians can make anything say anything they want to. If you're going to believe what they say, I don't believe a word any of the research says." And I thought, there we have it. If you don't believe anything research says, we are wasting our time* [with RTI].

Donna: [And that lack of support and buy-in was also seen at the building level. RTI still doesn't work well at the middle school], *but there are middle schools who make scheduling happen, who allow time for other interventions to happen throughout the day, who assign certified teachers to be trained on interventions, and none of that happened. I think that was an administrative downfall more than any other thing.* [The principal] *only gave lip-service to it, and the teachers were frustrated on other levels about other things. So,* [teacher] *concerns about it doesn't fit for us, it's right on the money because administrators didn't make it fit.*

Daniel: [I would agree with that because I saw that happen at the high school.] *When* [the principal changed] *was when things started to happen. Dynamic leadership makes a difference.*

Donna: *I can say that those years during RTI and starting it up from scratch, I learned so much. Not just about RTI and how that works, I think anybody can put the little widgets in place to make that happen. But, navigating schools and teachers and administrators—more than anything, it brought me wisdom. Just going through that.*

Carol: [And that type of informal leadership was so important during early implementation.] *Make sure that your psychologists or your assistant principals or whomever is going to facilitate that at your school have an understanding and a real buy-in to it. Bring your special ed. teachers on board because it seems like at the beginning,* [those are the people who understand intervention and data collection].

Donna: [Agreed. But, that support from the top-level leadership is also important.] *When Dr. Grant came on board, things started to happen.* [The RTI coordinator was moved to curriculum and instruction], *and that's how that progression happened.*

Carol: [Right.] *When Dr. Grant came, she supported* RTI, [and] *it* [was sustained] *when she came.*

From participants' comments, leadership was crucial to the implementation of RTI in Cannon County. However, it was not only the support from formal leaders—such as Dr. George, Dr. Grant, and some of the principals or assistant principals. Implementation seems to have been helped most by the "informal" leadership of a school psychologist and a literacy coach. These two individuals were seen as having the knowledge and determination to implement RTI, in spite of skepticism from the curriculum director and from some of the building-level leaders. Many of the historical documents in the district were written and saved by this one school psychologist (Appendix D, Documents 8, 9, 10, 14, 15) in a large binder related to RTI implementation. These documents show the amount of time and thought that went into implementation, as questionnaires and action plans were completed to think about "next steps" in implementation. Participants, such as Donna and Carol, look back on the sheer determination of this one school psychologist as key to successful implementation. It was going to work because she wasn't going to let it fail.

Yet, due to the naysayers in the district—represented by the curriculum director and some of the building-level principals—Chloe remembers the need for the school psychologist to form an "alliance" with the literacy coach and to have the support of, then assistant superintendent, Dr. George. The alliance with the literacy coach seemed to give RTI a voice from among the ranks, as the psychologist was not a "teacher" or "administrator." In addition, the support of the literacy coach, as well as Dr. George—who are both from Cannon County—seemed to be needed

politically. Chloe remembers the impact of having Dr. George as the voice that presented the information to principals, who were then charged with going back to their schools and sharing information about RTI implementation with their teachers. While there may have been dissention at the top, Robert relates the perception from the building-level that "top-level leadership" supported and allowed RTI to happen in the district.

Regardless of whether or not the curriculum director believed in "research," there seemed to be a unified front, at least at the elementary level. This unified front was aided, almost certainly, by the "hours' worth of conversations about RTI . . . trying to get consistency" that Donna remembers occurring with elementary assistant principals. These conversations did not seem to occur at the secondary level, because as participants relate, the middle and high school principals were not on board with RTI during early implementation, and a leadership change eventually took place.

Participants also alluded to a shift in RTI, which occurred about 4 years ago, and that was predicated by a new leader in the district, Dr. Grant. Just after Dr. George became the superintendent, he hired Dr. Grant as the superintendent of curriculum and instruction. Dr. Grant is the leader whose vision it was to house the RTI coordinator position in curriculum and instruction. This shift led, ultimately, to the sustaining and strengthening of RTI in the district. Now linked to curriculum and instruction, RTI was included in the strategic plan and, as Donna remembers, "merged with . . . curriculum things like data teams and strategic planning." In spite of the fact that the original school psychologist—who had championed RTI to the point of getting "into people's faces"—left the system, the RTI framework remained and has flourished. The initiative for RTI implementation became bigger than one leader, as Dr. Grant had the vision of seeing RTI as the framework that connected other school improvement initiatives.

People, Time, and Money: Resource Barriers

Barriers to RTI implementation in Cannon County, particularly resource barriers, have been ongoing but continually addressed.

Participants in Cannon County, while recognizing that their RTI framework is worthy of study, continue to struggle with barriers. The attitude of continuous improvement and willingness to refine the process has served to overcome some barriers, but others are not so easily addressed, especially at the secondary level.

Sarah: [The success of RTI] *really depends upon the amount of support that you have in your school for adults to be able to do the interventions with fidelity and to do them properly. At* [one of my schools], *we had the luxury of having a fulltime teacher in a paraprofessional position that was completely to assist the assistant principal in RTI. The money is just not here at* [my current school] *for me to be able to make that work.*

Marie: *It hasn't been as big an issue* [at my school because] *we have an intervention specialist here who works on administering those interventions daily with kids.* [But it could be a barrier] *because you need the right person to be able to put those in place, and we've been fortunate to have that part-time interventionist who actual is a retired teacher.*

Sarah: [Agreed.] *You can't stick a new teacher in* [an intervention program]. *It has to be somebody who has that same balance and knowledge and expertise in teaching reading instruction.*

Carol: [Right, it's not just having someone.] *Sometimes* [the interventions are] *a little more involved and you need a teacher to do them—or some of them require a certified teacher.*

Sarah: [We want to serve the students, but] *you cannot maintain something that's reasonable if you're pulling people too thin at times. An extra person would make a tremendous difference, and I think it makes some schools inequitable in the RTI process and what they can do. Some schools just have more things. It's not that* [the personnel I have] *are not willing, it's just that if I had the personnel in place to at least take the load.*

Robert: [I see that need as well.] *In an ideal world, I would say we just need more support. More bodies who can help with interventions, who can help with small groups.* [But we have to get] *people who* [know] *how to speak the language into the building to help out people. Change is never easy.* [We need to get] *personnel buy-in, and also new personnel.*

Rebecca: [Right. At the high school level, we couldn't see how to make it work.] *We didn't have any funds set aside for it. We didn't have any personnel to man it. So my first reaction* [was] *I don't know how to that for y'all. I can't make a schedule like that.*

Daniel: *It's very different* [at the elementary school]. *There's nothing quite like it because they work at a different pace, but there seems to be more support at the elementary level—whether it's paraprofessional, whether it's student services, or something. It seems to me like* [they] *have numerous support staff coming into* [their] *classrooms throughout the day.*

Rachel: *I think this is such an important thing that it really needs to be somebody's primary responsibility* [at the high school], *and not an add-on responsibility. There are only so many hours in a day.*

Rebecca: [Yes], *I think there needs to be a dedicated person* [and] *that's what their job is*—[RTI]. *Beyond even the counselors. Because it's a better fit probably. I think that the assistant principals do it at the elementary schools and the counselors at the middle and high. I don't know who is best—either one of those, assistant principals or counselors, are equally capable. But they're so overworked and they have so many other responsibilities that it doesn't always happen in a methodical way. It happens in a reactive way instead of a proactive way.*

Lois: [But that person needs to understand the process. Because] *day-to-day, teachers still need some education on differentiation.* [One of our] *biggest barriers* is *just the knowledge of what scaffolding looks like. Because* [teachers still say], "*How the heck am I supposed to do differentiation?"*

Robert: [Yes, that's true at the middle school as well.] *I recall a little bit of frustration—them not being quite clear as to how to get a child into tier II or tier III or what supports to help the child out. It* is *a learning process.* [We continue to struggle with] *teachers not ringing that bell early enough that a child was struggling or unmotivated.* [Kids are] *getting their needs met in different ways, and I think another barrier was a lack of communication,* [although it] *was getting a lot better.*

Marie: [Another thing we struggle with is] *finding interventions that meet the needs of all of our kids. That has probably been the biggest* [barrier]. *We've jumped over a lot of those hurdles,* [but] *I think we're still lacking.*

Sarah: [Yes], *one of the first barriers we had was having the correct research-based interventions in place—or being able to find what was the best one. You need to try to* [match the intervention to the skill deficit] *and our early on problem was we could identify what the problem is for the child. Now—what are we going to put* [into place as an intervention] *to match that?*

Chloe: [Right. In those early days, we were] *constantly looking for interventions, but that still is an issue for us, as far as having the research-based interventions.*

Robert: [And if you think elementary struggles with that, what about us?] *We just didn't have a whole lot at the middle school to do academically for a student in the tier process. Other than change their schedule, change their seating chart,* [have a] *teacher who, out of the goodness of their heart, would meet them after school for tutoring.* [We did have] *Reading 180 and math support, and teachers would come to me frantically—how can I get this child into Reading 180 or how can I get this child into math—Voyager math. And we'd have to tell them, sorry they don't qualify.*

Rebecca: [The middle and high school is] *still like the last frontier to really solidify RTI in our system. Because I think we still struggle sometimes with what to do with the struggling high school students. You know we've got reading support classes, we've got math support classes, we've got a couple of behavior interventions that we can kind of try, but we still struggle for the what—other than putting them in a class.*

Robert: [Right.] *At the middle school, there wasn't an after school program. There was math support in the mornings, but that was kind-of it.* [At the elementary level], *it's pretty mapped out what you do. You've got all these resources at your disposal—individual interventions or small group interventions with the* [intervention program] *teachers, and after school tutoring. There's help in the mornings. There's just a lot of support at the elementary* [level].

Carol: [And that was a long time coming at elementary.] *I remember negativity surrounding the whole thing. I was part of that negativity because I thought it would be overwhelming to provide students with 30 to 45 minutes of intervention outside of their instructional time. Determining how that could be done seemed impossible. Plus, we really didn't have interventions that we needed at the time. We knew the process and what we were supposed to do, but we didn't have any tools to work with. And then as time went by and we started getting support and getting interventions and figuring out how we could serve students, then it was much better.*

Rebecca: [Well, and what you] *struggled with back then* is what we *struggle with now—in that the high school is on a very set schedule. You can't just pull kids out and work with them on an intervention because you're taking them away from a credit bearing class if you do that. And we don't have any extra teachers to make extra sections. I can't collapse classes. We want to do something to help kids, but we can't figure out how to make that happen. In an ideal world, you would have an intervention period per day and you would have these intervention programs. We didn't have any funds set aside for it. The schedule stands in the way, and with less flexibility in the schedule you start bogging down a little bit at the middle school, and then the bog is pretty thick at the high school, although I think it's better than it was.*

Donna: [I agree.] *If there were more teachers—certified teachers—available to implement interventions—true interventions—that would certainly be of benefit. I think that issue is also combined with the issue of scheduling, particularly at the middle and high school where you're trying to get in credits and there is not time and there's not personnel to fill those spots. They need funded spots for students to receive skills-based intervention.*

Daniel: *I'm thinking we do what we can. I think if we had more space, we could do more with credit recovery*[27]*. Just based on my limited knowledge of the students, when they are doing it on their own*—[completing their credit recovery program at home, outside of school hours]—*the success is not quite there. When they've got a time slot during the day, they get it done. But we don't have the facilities or the manpower to do it.*

Lois: [It's not just that. It's the scheduling, but it's also] *time. Time is a really big barrier. When you're moving kids in and out of classes every 52 minutes, trying to give them that extra support, that extra time is difficult. We try to implement it somewhere into the enrichment period,*[28] *but then having kids show up and be responsible . . .*

Dennis: [I agree that the *biggest* barrier] *is time—on everything. When you're given 182 days of lessons that we've had to shove into 170, then you're going to have to pace a child slower than that, but you're supposed to get them to the same end? What do you leave out?*

Sarah: *I think the framework is okay. I believe in the framework. I believe in the way it was set out. I don't think as far as the framework of RTI that essential changes need to be made. The changes need to be made in funding at the school and system level. I think the process works, and I think the process can work very effectively. I think it can also work very ineffectively because you just can't maintain or manage. We need help.*

As the participants' comments demonstrate, several barriers affected RTI implementation in the beginning, and as it has been sustained in Cannon County. At all levels, a lack of funding and personnel dedicated to the process were mentioned. At the elementary level, Sarah points out that schools that have found a way to fund a dedicated "interventionist" are able to implement the RTI process to a greater degree. Carol highlights the need for the personnel who are available to have the knowledge needed to implement interventions with fidelity. At the secondary level, Rachel and Rebecca see a need for an administrative position dedicated to RTI. At the middle and high school, the responsibility for RTI rests with counselors, and the process does not run as smoothly. The perception is that it is an "add-on" duty and does not get the

[27]Credit recovery is a program in which students who failed a class with an average between 60 and 69 can work to review content via computer modules and can earn credit for the course. This credit recovery program was an idea that the high school got from a visit to another high school in the state, and it is an intervention that has helped to improve the on-time graduation rate at the high school.

[28] The high school has tried to build in some time slots during the week for intervention. Wednesday mornings are late arrival days, and students can still come in early (the buses run at the regularly scheduled time) for tutoring. There is also an enrichment period built into the school day on Thursday.

attention that it deserves. Additional funding for personnel was highlighted as a need, as well as additional knowledge and training for those who are responsible for interventions.

In addition to personnel, several participants spoke of a need for additional intervention resources and materials. Chloe claims that the problem in the beginning was, and continues to be, finding and purchasing enough research-based interventions to meet the needs of students. Marie and Chloe point out that "math" is a particular area of need. Nearly all of the secondary participants speak of a need for additional intervention resources. What is interesting is that they do not necessarily talk about a "program" or "curriculum" that they needed—which is good because there are not many available to purchase. They do talk of the need to figure out how to provide interventions outside of scheduling a child for classes. Robert, who has experience at both the elementary and secondary levels, highlights the need for the secondary level to have more options like those available at the elementary level. However, others, such as Rebecca, Daniel, and Lois, speak of the lack of time and flexibility, as the schedule at the secondary level is driven by the need for students to earn credits toward graduation. The secondary level experiences an additional "schedule" barrier that elementary has been able to overcome.

In addition to these barriers—personnel, knowledge, intervention resources, money, and time—that have affected RTI implementation at all levels in Cannon County, the secondary participants spoke of one additional barrier to effective intervention. Robert and Lois both commented on the "deep" nature of student needs by the time they reach middle and high school. Robert points out that "at elementary, a lot of times, they just haven't gotten the reading or the math skills yet . . . But, at middle school? It's harder to tell what's going on." Lois concurs by asserting that the reasons behind a lack of achievement at the high school level are "larger" because the problem is "deeper" and "hard to correct." Not only may a student be struggling

with a skill deficit, but by the time that student reaches middle or high school, there is a lack of "motivation" and "self-esteem." Both talked of factors at home that might be affecting the student, and the need to "dig" for "patterns" and reasons why a child may struggle to achieve in school. This additional barrier of attempting to pinpoint the problem affects what educators do to intervene at the secondary level.

Summary

The thematic thick description and findings outlined in this chapter serve to answer the following research question: How does the reconstruction of one school system's implementation of the theoretical RTI framework help us to understand the conditions for its adaptation? In order to answer this question, I gathered data related to the processes put into place in Cannon County, how the idea of "intervention" is construed in the system, and what factors seemed to help or hinder implementation. The data collected—via qualitative interviews, document analysis, and a reflective, researcher journal—reveal that Cannon County was able to successfully implement and sustain an RTI framework, adapted to the local needs of the system, for several reasons. Foremost, the system had a vision for an RTI framework that was connected to the core of instruction, rather than to identifying students for eligibility under IDEA. The system did not merely implement the requirements of RTI in order to comply with the law; rather, RTI implementation was for all students, and one school psychologist in particular had a vision of RTI as a moral imperative. While the place of special education and how RTI connects to the identification of students for additional services complicates the vision, Cannon County has continuously worked to maintain focus on RTI as a curriculum policy. The framework was strengthened and sustained by the movement of the RTI coordinator from the Student Services department to the Curriculum and Instruction Office.

Further, the RTI framework was implemented in a way that broke from the previous intervention process. Instead of attempting to mesh RTI with the existing practices under SST, early implementation focused on how it was different. Teachers now had to support recommendations to the SST with data, and they were required to use research-based interventions for set periods of time before a student could be tested for eligibility under IDEA. In addition, all teachers were required to use a set reading curriculum, and implement it as outlined by the publisher, in order to ensure that all students in Cannon County were given access to a research-based curriculum in reading. While I had anticipated that educators would view this fidelity-driven implementation negatively, many participants spoke of it is a necessary part of the "journey." At a time when educators lacked the knowledge and capacity to effectively teach reading to struggling students, a fidelity-driven RTI process gave them the tools they needed. Secondary participants still desire a more defined process for intervention, and would like more direction and guidance on what to do for struggling students. The idea of "intervention" was very narrowly defined for a time, and participants continue to see that as a necessary step in the implementation of RTI.

Yet, at the same time, Cannon County has continuously reviewed the RTI framework and attempted to address barriers and needs as implementation has moved forward. It is this attitude of continuous improvement that has led to a relaxing of the initial rigidity with which the framework was implemented. As educators increased their knowledge and capacity—especially at the elementary level—they were able to deviate from complete fidelity to curriculum materials and become more responsive to the needs of students. Most recently, the first and second grade teachers have begun to enact a "core and more" program without a set textbook or curriculum, working with their grade level data teams to design instruction based on student assessment data.

The vision of connecting RTI to the core curriculum and the continual reflection on how to improve the process have helped the system continue to adapt the framework to meet the needs of the system. This adaptation seems to be possible—and desirable—only after teachers develop knowledge and capacity to feel confident to act.

Implementation of RTI in Cannon County was helped by leadership—both informal and formal leaders. Particularly, one school psychologist championed the framework, and she worked to build an alliance with a literacy coach in order to increase her chances of being heard. In addition, the support and buy-in of the assistant superintendent, now superintendent, and several building-level principals and assistant principals was key. When leadership was not supportive—at the middle and high school levels—implementation lagged more than it should have. When changes in leadership were made at the secondary level, the RTI framework began to take hold, but implementation is still problematic.

Cannon County has experienced, and continues to experience, many barriers to implementing RTI with fidelity. Participants point to the need for additional resources in the form of personnel, intervention materials, and funding. Further, the secondary level, in particular, highlights the constraints of the schedule on their attempts to provide additional support for struggling students. In spite of these barriers, Cannon County has continued to improve RTI implementation, working to build reading and math support classes at the middle and high school levels, and finding creative ways to build intervention times into the school day. The support—both political and fiscal—of the current superintendent for these intervention efforts has been crucial.

The purpose of an educational case study is not to study the case for its own sake. Rather, the idea is that we can learn something from the close study of a case—or one school

district like Cannon County. The educational case study is "concerned neither with social theory nor evaluative judgment, but rather with the understanding of educational action . . . to enrich the thinking and discourse of education" (Bassey, 1999, p. 28). From a philosophical hermeneutic perspective, I have engaged in a dialogue around RTI in Cannon County in order to add to the larger conversation. My hope was that RTI would say "something new" (Freeman, 2011, p. 547) as I attempted to understand how the framework has been adapted to the needs of educators in Cannon County. My reflections on how the findings from my dialogue in Cannon County can "enrich the thinking and discourse of education" (Bassey, 1999, p. 28), particularly education policy implementation, are presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATIONS

The purpose of this case study was to engage with stakeholders in a dialogue around RTI implementation in Cannon County in an effort to understand how the system has worked to implement an RTI framework and how the idea of "intervention" is adapted to and practiced in a local context. The study was guided by one main research question and three related subquestions:

How does the reconstruction of one school system's implementation of the theoretical RTI framework help us to understand the conditions for its adaptation?

The following subquestions contribute to an understanding of the overarching question:

1. What processes were implemented at the building and system levels?
2. How is the framework of "intervention" constructed at the building and system levels—what does it mean to "intervene"?
3. What conditions in the local context influenced the implementation of the RTI framework?

The hope was that engaging in this dialogue would help to inform my own understanding of RTI and how it is implemented in a way that impacts student achievement. In addition, I hoped that the results of this case study would allow others to expand their understandings, as the experience of implementing an education policy that touches the core of teaching and learning in Cannon County collides with the experiences of others who have worked to implement education

policy. This study adds to the dialogue around education policy implementation, and how policies are adapted to the local context to best meet the needs of teachers and students.

Five thematic findings emerged from the case study, and were presented via a thematic thick description—making use of a constructed, creative nonfiction dialogue—in Chapter 4. RTI implementation in Cannon County focused on the link between the RTI framework and the core of teaching and learning, which aided implementation, but also made the role of special education problematic. Further, implementation was aided by a conscious effort to make a clean break with the previous SST intervention process and to establish new processes and procedures that included data-based decision-making and research-based components. Leadership in the system, formal and informal, was crucial in this process of setting parameters during early implementation, but also recognized the need to continuously improve, revise, and relax processes over time. Factors that hindered the implementation of an RTI framework in Cannon County included lack of personnel, lack of resources, lack of funding, time and scheduling constraints, and at times, a lack of knowledge on the part of personnel. However, the system's continuous improvement mindset continues to allow for those barriers to be addressed. Finally, an overarching theme emerged related to the difference in RTI implementation at the elementary versus secondary level. The secondary schools—Cannon County Middle School and Cannon County High School—experienced increased barriers to implementation due to a greater scarcity of resources, less support from building-level leadership, and the need for additional processes and procedures to guide the work. It is the significance of these thematic findings, and the implications for policy and future research, that are discussed in this chapter.

I have deliberately titled this chapter "Interpretations," rather than "Conclusions" or "Implications." As previously stated, research conducted from a philosophical hermeneutic

perspective seeks to create a dialogue, as the "horizon" of the researcher is "fused" (Linge, 1976, p. xxviii) with the data, the context, and the understandings of others. This fusion does not lead to complete understanding or "conclusions" in the traditional, scientific sense. Rather, the "interpretations" in which I engage as my horizon encounters this data are merely part of the "ongoing dialogue" (Freeman, 2011, p. 545) related to RTI and to education policy implementation.

In the same manner, research suggests that those who implement education policies engage in a process of interpretation, or meaning-making (Spillane et al., 2006). The "definitions" and rules inherent in policy are interpreted by local educators; thus the act of policy implementation is interpretation, which allows us to "venture into the contingent understandings that are situated in lives, relationships, contexts, and histories" (Moules, 2002, p. 4). In this chapter, I offer no set truths about RTI or about how to best implement education policy. I only offer my interpretations—my contingent understandings—of the data collected in Cannon County, in the hopes that I can add to the dialogue around education policy implementation.

I encourage readers to continue the dialogue via their own conversations related to RTI and policy implementation, via their own implementation efforts, or via their own research. This chapter offers only "a possible configuration of how things could be, or of how this understanding could change the world" (Freeman, 2014, p. 831). I underscore "a possible configuration," as my "configuration" is one interpretation of this data and why it is meaningful. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that "predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge is, therefore, more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals" (p. 224). The interpretations and understandings presented here are context-dependent—I interpret factors that affected the

implementation and adaptation of the RTI framework in Cannon County. What is hoped is that the experiences in Cannon County can "dialogue" with the experiences elsewhere as the conversation around how best to implement an RTI framework, and how to facilitate education reform, continues.

The chapter is organized into three main parts. First, I discuss the significance of the findings of the study, as outlined in Chapter 4, in relation to Response to Intervention specifically. In the second section of the chapter, I broaden the conversation to the significance of the findings of the study to education policy implementation, particularly curriculum policy implementation. In both of these sections, I refer back to the literature related to RTI implementation and to education policy implementation that was discussed in Chapter 2. The final section of the chapter, and of the study, is an effort to "hold open the door" and continue the conversation (Freeman, 2011, p. 549) by discussing implications for policymakers and the adoption and implementation of education policy, as well as implications for further research.

A SSTAGE Star Award: How was the RTI Framework Adapted in Cannon County?

As I highlighted in the beginning, RTI implementation has been problematic in Georgia, and the framework has not been implemented systematically in very many districts (L. Pennington, Executive Director of SSTAGE, personal communication, July 19, 2013). Yet, Cannon County implemented an RTI framework that has withstood the test of time and has been linked to increased student achievement.[29] The main question for this research study was "how"? How did Cannon County implement and adapt the theoretical RTI framework to the local context? The findings suggest that the factors that influenced implementation of the RTI

[29]To win a SSTAGE Star Award, the system has to demonstrate that RTI implementation has impacted student achievement. Cannon County demonstrated an increase in reading and math scores on standardized assessments over time, as well as an increase in the graduation rate. They further demonstrated an increase in student performance on curriculum-based measures of reading ability, and a decrease in the number of students who are referred or found eligible for services under IDEA each year.

framework in Cannon County were not radically different from those highlighted by the existing literature on RTI implementation. Thus, this case study of implementation further serves to close the "research to practice gap" (Ruby, Crosby-Cooper, and Vanderwood, 2011, p. 234), as it examines "contextual influences" (White et al., 2012, p. 76) related to implementation.

Purpose Linked to the Core of Teaching and Learning

The extant literature points to the need to emphasize "RTI as a general education initiative linked to an overarching vision of school improvement" (Shepherd and Salembier, 2011, p. 13). The connection of RTI to the core of instruction and to improving achievement for all students was emphasized in Cannon County. Participants, as well as organizational documents, spoke of the link between the RTI framework and the regular classroom at tier I. From the outset, those responsible for implementing the framework in Cannon County worked to ensure a "research-based" reading curriculum for all students. In addition, changes in scheduling occurred to ensure that students who needed additional supports were not "pulled out" during "core" instruction, but were given a separate block of time for the "more" of their intervention. Educators in Cannon County talk of the purpose of RTI in terms of "closing gaps" via a strong instructional program.

In addition, the responsibility for RTI implementation was moved from the Student Services Department to the Office of Curriculum and Instruction. This was a strategic move that strengthened the implementation of RTI in Cannon County. As participants describe, it allowed for the connection of the RTI framework to other initiatives, such as data teams and the strategic plan for the system. While there was resistance in the beginning from a curriculum director, key leaders in the system, the superintendent and assistant superintendent, recognized the RTI framework as connected to school improvement and to the core of teaching and learning.

Because Cannon County focused on the "little rti" (Shinn, 2007), the system was able to implement the framework in a comprehensive manner.

While the vision and purpose for RTI in Cannon County is linked to improving instruction and student achievement, the place of special education continues to be problematic. This is one instance where listening for the "unsaid" (Davey, 2012, p. 24) allowed me to hone in on the tension around special education in the district. Practitioners worry about the students who do not qualify for special education, as well as whether or not those who do qualify are getting access to the services they truly need. While this issue may be due to state and federal accountability systems that reward schools for serving special education students in the general education classroom, this problematic place of special education in relation to RTI is not surprising. As outlined in the literature, there is a conflict between the theoretical RTI framework as one for all students—Shinn's (2007) "little rti"—and the connection of the framework to determining eligibility under IDEA—Shinn's (2007) "big RTI." The comments of practitioners in Cannon County regarding special education demonstrate that the debate in the literature can also be seen at the level of practice. Marie and Sarah spoke of children who struggled and needed the intensive support that the RTI framework could provide, but those children were not eligible for the "umbrella" of "true support" under IDEA.

Bolt (2005) also found the implementation of a problem-solving model via the RTI framework problematic when teachers saw special education as a cure-all for a student's academic struggles. When teachers think that "academic and social-behavioral problems can be *entirely* solved" (Bolt, 2005, p. 76, emphasis in the original), RTI loses momentum. However, Bolt (2005) points out that the outcomes in special education do not demonstrate that those services are highly effective in relation to increasing student achievement. She suggests that the

"efforts" of "general education teachers . . . may result in more effective programming for struggling students" (p. 76). Dennis, a participant in the current study, realizes the same thing—that RTI gives students access to something they did not have before, regardless of whether or not they eventually qualify for special education services. Therefore, the role of special education is problematic, and because of the link between RTI and IDEA in policy, will remain so. However, Cannon County has worked to focus on how RTI supports all students, which allowed for a more systematic, less superficial, implementation of the framework. Perhaps, Donna is the participant who best summarized the tension and where the focus should lie. While there are "legal requirements" that teachers need to understand about IDEA and finding a child eligible, at the end of the day, what matters is that a student gets an "intervention" and that teachers can "show" the data related to that intervention. What matters is teaching and learning for all students. This focus on the link between the framework and core instruction cemented the role of RTI in Cannon County as more than just an add-on policy related to the identification of students as learning disabled.

An Improved Instructional Program: Core and More

Instead of an implementation focused on compliance with IDEA, in Cannon County, the RTI framework has been implemented as a curriculum policy, aimed at the core instructional program, with a goal of high-quality, research-based instruction for all students (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011; National High School Center, 2010; Painter & Alvarado, 2008). As research related to successful implementation in other schools has found, the implementation of the RTI framework in Cannon County required teachers to use formative assessment data to measure the "response" of their students to the core instructional program. In addition, they use data to identify students who need additional support and work to differentiate instruction for students. RTI

implementation has increased the use of formative assessment and the data-driven instructional planning in Cannon County, which aligns with findings from other implementation studies (Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; White et al., 2012; Greenfield et al., 2010; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Murray et al., 2010; VanDerHeyden et al., 2012).

The use of formative assessment data to plan instruction is highly correlated to increases in student achievement (Hattie, 2005), and the improvements in student achievement over time in Cannon County would support the idea that when teachers, as Lois states, know the "strengths and weaknesses" of their students, they can better meet the students' academic needs. In addition, as the newly drafted RTI manual underscores, RTI has led to increased differentiation in the classroom as teachers have had to "modify classroom space and schedules to accommodate differentiated instruction" (White et al., 2012, p. 84). Most recently, the first and second grade teachers have begun to use data to drive their instructional planning for small, guided reading groups, tailoring the guided reading experience to the needs of the students in the group based on biweekly rubric-based assessment of student progress in reading.

Dougherty et al. (2012) found that even if students receive targeted, intense interventions, those interventions are less effective if students are not given the opportunity to connect their learning back to the core classroom. The educators in Cannon County have also found this to be the case. When students were pulled away from "core" instruction, in order to get "more" via an intervention program, they were not able to maintain progress on grade-level standards. Dennis spoke of math students who were pulled out of his classroom for intervention, and they were not able to access the content and had no chance of success on standardized accountability tests. Carol spoke with hope regarding the new reading program, which has a goal of ensuring that

what students learn in "core" instruction is connected to the instructional level curriculum that they access in their "more" time.

RTI implementation in Cannon County did not just ensure that students could access "interventions." Cannon County worked to find a way to give students access to "interventions" in addition to strong core curriculum and instruction in the classroom. The focus on a research-based curriculum, and using data to inform instructional decisions in the "core" and "more," ensured that the RTI framework did change the structure of teaching and learning in classrooms in Cannon County.

This is also an area where teachers continue to struggle. When RTI was first implemented, Chloe says the system leaders could not be sure that all teachers could deliver research-based reading instruction. Therefore, all teachers were mandated to use a specific curriculum program—with fidelity. Over time, as teacher capacity has increased, the rules about implementing that curriculum with fidelity have relaxed, and Marie talks about the ability now to make decisions as a teacher about what to include and what to leave out. Yet, several participants spoke of the continued need for help with research-based instruction. Marie and Sarah, while excited about the ability to move beyond strict adherence to a "basal" reading program at the elementary level, both said that teachers still like to have access to a resource—even if it is just a resource. Further, Rachel, a secondary teacher, said emphatically that she just wants someone to tell her what to do when a student is struggling. She is keenly aware of the "time" that passes for that student while she tries to figure out what works and what does not—so she wants something concrete, something that is not "nebulous."

The current literature suggests that this provision of research-based instruction is a component with which many implementing schools struggle (Dougherty et al., 2012; Greenfield

et al., 2010; Wilcox et al., 2013). Teachers reported to Greenfield et al. (2010) that they struggled with selecting "appropriate best practices or identifying what was working or not" (p. 5). So, Cannon County's educators are not alone in their struggles to identify and provide appropriate research-based instruction. What is interesting, however, is that the early implementation in Cannon County recognized that this would be an area of struggle, so the appropriate "research-based" curriculum was mandated for a time until teacher capacity increased. Yet, even now, teachers still want guidance and information about exactly how to go about meeting the needs of their students.

Collaboration for Instruction

Because collaborative work helps teachers develop this capacity and knowledge to better meet the needs of their students, the implementation of an RTI framework in Cannon County has also been strengthened by a culture of collaboration and the work of "data teams" at each grade level or in subject areas at the secondary level. It is interesting that while I view this is a crucial factor related to the strength of the RTI framework in Cannon County, many of the participants did not recognize collaboration and "data teams" as part of RTI. Data teams in Cannon County were fully implemented in the 2011-2012 school year, several years after RTI was first mentioned. However, the implementation of data teams coincided with the RTI coordinator's move from Student Services to Curriculum and Instruction, and data teams were implemented, really, as "problem-solving" teams at tier I.

In essence, the grade level team of teachers works collaboratively to look at formative assessment data to plan instruction and then respond to student needs—through enrichment, reteaching, and remediation. This is the essence of RTI. Several extant studies of RTI implementation speak of the culture of collaboration that is necessary for successful

implementation of the RTI framework (Dougherty et al., 2013; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Sanger et al., 2012; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011). Shepherd and Salembier (2011) assert that "strong teams are a necessary condition for the implementation of an RtI approach" (p. 13). Only a couple of the participants, Rebecca and Donna, spoke of the link between data teams and RTI in Cannon County. The link can also be found in the new RTI manual, but most participants—even when questions probed for this connection—did not link data teams with RTI.

The lack of connection in the participants' minds between RTI and data teams in Cannon County was surprising to me. In my work with the system over the past two years, this connection has been obvious in my mind. So, the lack of connection in the minds of many of the participants troubles my thinking and calls for reflection. I surmise that the disconnect comes from the shift of responsibilities for RTI from Student Services to Curriculum and Instruction that occurred nearly simultaneously with the creation of data teams.

When many participants talk of RTI in Cannon County, they talk of the early days of implementation—the fidelity with which research-based curriculum was implemented, the shift from the previous intervention process. This implementation focused on "fidelity" occurred when the RTI coordinator was housed in Student Services. While most participants recognize that the procedures and processes are more flexible now, they do not necessarily connect that flexibility, or their capacity for it, to data teams. The shift of RTI to Curriculum and Instruction allowed for RTI's connection to data teams. The two initiatives were able to "dialogue." Participants do not seem to recognize this "dialogue," perhaps because in their minds, the shift of RTI to Curriculum and Instruction and the connections that entailed did not occur as quickly as the physical shift of a person and her office down the hall.

Regardless of whether the participants see the link between a strong RTI framework and the increased collaboration and focus on data-informed instructional decisions via data teams, data teams strengthened RTI in Cannon County. As Rebecca states, the implementation of teacher-led data teams is likely the "best thing" that Cannon County could have done to improve supports for struggling students and to increase student achievement. Data teams, because they created a "professional learning community" (Johnson & Smith, 2008, p. 51) and established a culture of collaboration in which the team structure supported review of data to guide instructional decisions (Shepherd & Salembier, 2011), built capacity in teachers to meet the needs of students. It is this increased "capacity" for implementation (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 36) that allowed for a relaxing of the rigid, "heavy-handed" processes established during early implementation. Only when teachers had developed the capacity to effectively plan reading instruction based on student data could Carol's vision of a "core and more" designed at the school level—designed by the team of teachers—be realized. Increasing the collaboration between teachers, and providing the time for them to work together to review assessment data and plan instruction, built capacity within Cannon County to move RTI beyond a rigid implementation of research-based curriculum materials and toward a problem-solving culture.

Leadership

The importance of leadership, to any change initiative, has been well-established. Leadership for RTI implementation was critical in Cannon County. The role of the principal as "instructional leader" (Shepherd & Salembier, 2011) and as someone who is "on board" (Sanger et al., 2012, p. 104) was underscored by participant comments. Marie talked of the role her assistant principal played in a smooth implementation process. Daniel spoke of the lack of support for RTI at the high school level, and change there did not begin to occur until the

leadership changed. Donna shared that the secondary principals, at the high school and middle school, were not supportive during the early days, and some of the lag in implementation in those two buildings can be attributed to the lack of supportive leadership. Chloe further underscores the importance of "top-down" leadership. She remembers the role of Dr. George—now superintendent, then assistant superintendent—as someone who served as the voice of the RTI committee, sharing information with principals who would then share with teachers. Without the support of the formal leaders in Cannon County, RTI implementation would not have progressed.

What is more, it was not only the leadership of formal, administrative personnel that was important. The informal leadership of a very determined school psychologist and her alliance with a literacy coach made the difference in Cannon County. Many participants remember the role of the lead school psychologist. She is described as "determined" and as someone with a "moral imperative." While formal leadership was critical, it was the "capacity and will" (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 36) of this one person that moved RTI forward. She was the person in the system who had the most training on using brief assessments to screen students and to progress monitor. She worked to train teachers. She sought out research-based curriculum materials. She monitored fidelity of implementation. When she left, the sustainment of RTI rested on the newly appointed assistant superintendent, Dr. Grant, who had the vision to further connect RTI to curriculum and instruction. In addition, it was Dr. Grant who ensured that the person holding the RTI coordinator position gradually morphed to fit the system's needs—moving from a school psychologist, to a school psychologist with a leadership degree, to a former administrator with experience in RTI implementation. As the policy implementation literature suggests, the implementation of reform policy rests on the local capacity and will of the organization and its

people. The implementation of the RTI framework in Cannon County was aided by the support of leadership, and the existence in the system of personnel with the capacity to move implementation forward.

Practical Barriers to the RTI Framework

The barriers to the RTI framework that were outlined by participants, like some of the other themes, were not surprising. Cannon County has experienced some of the same pitfalls that are outlined in the existing literature related to RTI implementation. Most participants recognized that the implementation of RTI would be easier with additional personnel, additional funding, and additional intervention resources. The extant literature demonstrates that RTI, when implemented well, requires systems change. Dulaney (2013) points to the need for schools to map their resources, "both human and capital, to build and sustain the RTI infrastructure" (p. 62).

What is interesting about implementation in Cannon County is that the system has continually worked to address barriers and discuss resource allocation. Carol spoke of her "negativity" in the beginning because she could not see how they would find the time to implement intensive intervention programs at the elementary level. However, gradually, she came around and they found ways to reallocate time during the day. This was not a casual mind-shift, however. Donna points to the "hours" of meetings that were held with elementary administrators to develop consistency of implementation.

Barriers have been more difficult to address at the secondary level. While changes in leadership were made, and RTI implementation moved forward when leaders were more receptive, implementation continues to flounder due to lack of knowledge about and resources for implementing an intervention framework at the secondary level. Sansosti et al. (2011) point

out that practitioners at the secondary level have recognized "the importance of systems structures in RTI implementation," but also note that most of the current systems in place at the secondary level are "barriers" (p. 13). Rebecca's comments related to scheduling barriers support this finding in previous research. As someone who could influence scheduling at the high school level, she wanted to make RTI work. She wanted to support students. Yet, she could not determine how to add interventions in a high school schedule that is driven by earning units for credit toward graduation. Cannon County High School has tried to overcome that time barrier by adding in scheduled intervention times during the week. Yet, lack of knowledge about effective interventions at the secondary level, which is not uncommon (Sansosti et al., 2010), prevents educators from making meaningful use of that time.

RTI is "unique" as a curriculum reform policy in that the framework allows for flexibility and adaptation at the local level (Greenfield et al., 2010). RTI does "not require specific materials or programs," but "lends itself to local adaptation" (Stepanek & Peixotto, 2009, p. ii). Cannon County was able to implement and sustain an RTI framework adapted to local goals—a focus on improved core curriculum for all and additional academic supports for some—partly due to this flexibility. However, other key factors that helped were the formal and informal leadership and a mindset of continuous improvement, as barriers were raised and addressed as well as they could be. Further work to address barriers at the secondary level is needed, but this is work that is needed on a global scale, and will be discussed with the recommendations for future research.

Getting Past the Classroom Door: Factors that Aided Implementation

The explicit research question for this case study was related to how an RTI framework was adapted for implementation in a local school system. In the preceding section, I attempt to

focus on a discussion of findings that relate specifically to how the RTI framework was adapted for implementation. The system worked specifically to make a connection between the purpose for RTI and instruction. In addition, the system worked to address barriers that arose—barriers that the literature related to RTI implementation already highlights as common. Further, the attitude of leaders and the work of informal leaders in the district who had the knowledge necessary to implement RTI were critical.

An underlying assumption for the research question related to RTI implementation, however, is that if we can identify factors that allowed for the successful implementation of an RTI framework—a framework that does, indeed, affect the core of teaching and learning—we can better understand how to implement reform policies that stand a chance of "getting past the classroom door" (Cuban, 1991, p. 242). In Georgia, many systems have not implemented an RTI framework to the same degree that Cannon County has done. While "big RTI" (Shinn, 2007) is required by law, many systems have struggled with "little rti" (Shin, 2007). So, an underlying question is what did Cannon County do to aid implementation of this type of policy, and what can we learn from their efforts about how to implement curriculum reform policies? This section discusses two thematic findings—the strong break from the previous SST intervention process and the move from implementation focused on fidelity to adaptation to, perhaps, enactment—that, I think, can tell us quite a bit about why this implementation effort has been sustained when so many are not.

The Before and After: Implementation of a Reform Defined as Different

All of the participants in this case study of RTI implementation in Cannon County spoke of the change that RTI brought—it was vastly different from SST. In Cannon County, the RTI framework was not implemented with an attitude that it could be incorporated into existing

practices. It was not seen as something that practitioners were really already doing. It was different, and everyone knew it. The literature related to education policy implementation suggests that RTI, as a policy that attempts to "mandate what matters" (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 39) because it affects the core of teaching and learning, runs the risk of being "absorb[ed]" and "convert[ed]" into a "routine add-on compatible with existing practices" (Cuban, 1991, p. 217). Rather than actually change, practitioners often just "dot the i's," as Rebecca stated with the initial RTI paperwork, rather than truly modifying current instructional practices.

However, RTI implementation in Cannon County was different. Prior to RTI, the SST process allowed for "teacher professional judgment" to determine whether or not a student was evaluated for eligibility under IDEA. Prior to RTI, the "data" that teachers brought to intervention team meetings was in the form of grades and classroom test scores, and the process moved forward with superficial, "silly" interventions. RTI mandated that teachers do something different. In Cannon County, Sarah states, teachers had to "show, not tell." Teachers had to bring data related to a student's struggles—a specific skill deficit—and then the team suggested, not a silly intervention, but a research-based intervention to be implemented for a period of time, while data continued to be collected.

The systematic implementation of the theoretical RTI framework, and the sustaining of the framework over time, hinged upon this establishment of a before and after—that RTI was different and required something different from teachers. I speculate that a strong sense of before and after was established through the determination of the lead school psychologist. Where the curriculum director at the time resisted the change and might have couched the RTI mandate as something to add on and that really should not change what teachers were doing, the lead school psychologist had a "moral imperative" to establish something different. Donna

describes it as "heavy-handed," but several participants describe it as a necessary part of the journey. When the system could not be sure that all teachers had the capacity to deliver research-based instruction, they had to do something different. The manner in which RTI was implemented in Cannon County required that teachers think about instruction, intervention, and serving struggling students in a different way. This "difference" led to a stronger implementation over time.

RTI Implementation as a Journey from Fidelity to Adaptation to Enactment

As they spoke about the before and after of RTI implementation, and how the framework was different from what was required under SST, participants also talked of the early days of implementation as a time focused on fidelity. While I already knew from district documents, and from my work with the district, that RTI implementation was very top-down and fidelity-driven, I was not prepared for the attitude of acceptance that participants had toward that "fidelity." Because of the research related to curriculum policy and the situated nature of implementation (Honig, 2006), I believed going into this case study that a fidelity perspective is not truly feasible. I also assumed that educators would feel boxed in by the fidelity with which Cannon County attempted to implement the theoretical components of the RTI framework, and that they would talk of how adherence to a research-based curriculum constrained their work as a teacher. This did not occur, as several participants spoke of the necessary "journey" from a place of fidelity to a place of adaptation, and most recently enactment. Further, some participants even spoke of a continued need for someone to tell them what to do.

Cannon County, undoubtedly, began with a fidelity perspective toward RTI implementation. According to Snyder et al. (1992), fidelity refers to the "degree to which a particular innovation is implemented as planned" and "the factors which facilitate or hinder

implementation as planned" (p. 67). Sarah talked of "The Bible" of processes and procedures created by the district RTI committee in the beginning. Several participants remembered the focus on "research-based" materials that had been vetted by outside organizations. The system worked early on to address things that are commonly seen as barriers to a fidelity perspective, such as "teachers' lack of skills" and "incompatibility of organizational arrangements with the innovation" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 69). Because teachers were perceived as lacking skill as reading teachers, the system bought a research-based reading program, and many research-based intervention programs, and instructed teachers to implement them exactly as required by the publishers. The system worked to address organizational barriers by establishing the "core and more" program for reading and math at the elementary level, and by modifying the high school bell schedule so that intervention periods are built into the day twice a week. Teachers were not allowed to "adapt programs to their own needs" or "leave out key components" (Hall & Loucks, 1981 cited in Snyder et al., 1992). RTI implementation required that everyone use the materials provided with fidelity.

Yet, participants remember this focus on implementing the reading curriculum "with fidelity" as necessary. They speak of this time as a time when they needed processes and procedures in order to make the shift from the SST intervention process to the RTI process. They talk about the research-based materials as giving them something to use—something that had been proven. Sarah saw it as taking a burden off of teachers' over-filled plates and handing them something they could walk away from the intervention team meeting and begin to use. Even today, when teachers are encouraged to engage in the problem-solving process and use data to make instructional decisions, they still struggle with "acceptable" levels of "variation" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 71) and often ask for permission to try innovative practices. At the

secondary level, where fidelity of implementation was not as possible because there was not a research-base at the high school level, teachers still have a need for a well-defined process.

Perhaps this fidelity of implementation in the early days was made possible in Cannon County because the system did have the motivation to change. Top-level leadership was supportive of the implementation of the theoretical RTI framework. Further, while the mutual adaptation perspective highlights the fact that school systems vary in the "capacity to deal with innovations" (McLaughlin, 1975, p. xi), Cannon County did have someone who had the capacity and the motivation to implement RTI with fidelity—the lead school psychologist. The "constellation of factors" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 412) that was necessary for implementation fidelity was present in Cannon County. Honig (2006) stresses that "implementability and success are the product of interactions between policies and . . . participants in implementation and their starting beliefs . . .and the place or contexts that help shape what people can and will do" (p. 2). Conditions were ripe in Cannon County, due to leadership support and the capacity and will of a lead school psychologist, for the implementation of the RTI framework with fidelity.

Over time, however, the system has moved past a fidelity orientation to RTI implementation and toward adaptation of the framework, if not enactment, which would entail the development of curriculum as the teacher "together with his or her students . . . constructs positive educational experiences" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 81). Snyder et al. (1992) discuss "mutual adaptation" during curriculum implementation as a continuum between complete fidelity and enactment. Along this continuum between implementing the curriculum innovation exactly as planned and constructing the educational program organically in the classroom,

mutual adaptation would entail teachers adapt the planned implementation to fit the local context and their own needs.

Marie pointed out that in Cannon County, as teachers became more comfortable with the research-based curriculum and using research-based strategies, they were able to make decisions about what to "leave out" of the curriculum. Further, Rebecca underscores—even if others do not recognize the significance—the role of the data teams as a means for teachers to build collective capacity to meet the needs of students through the use of formative assessment data to guide instruction. Tier II interventions, which used to be exclusively provided by canned programs in an interventionist's classroom or in a computer lab, have moved closer to the classroom, as teachers are able to do the "core and more" via whole class and small, skill-based group instruction. Even high school teachers, according to Lois, are more willing to seek help and look for ways to support their students, as they have learned to identify the "strengths and weaknesses" of their classes.

One of the most striking examples of how the system has moved from fidelity to adaptation is found in the change over time of the Elementary Intervention List (Appendix D, Document 5). Originally, the interventions listed were mapped to a tier—tier II interventions versus tier III interventions. Now, those interventions can be adapted to either level of intensity, and teachers can use any intervention that matches the needs of the student. In the beginning, fidelity was seen as necessary because teachers could make those types of decisions on their own. As teachers built the capacity to problem-solve around student data, rules relaxed, and the framework was further adapted to the needs of the context and students.

Finally, the recent creation of a different type of reading program in first and second grades is a move toward enactment, as teachers are now using "externally created curricular

materials and programmed instructional strategies" as "tools" to "construct the enacted experience of the classroom" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 81). Carol spoke of the new approach to reading instruction, which no longer relies on the "research-based" basal reader exclusively. Rather, teachers gather formative assessment data on their students' reading levels biweekly and work as a grade level team to design instruction on grade level standards and on the instructional level skills of their students. Rather than sending students out of the room for interventions in a separate location, the interventionists and special education teachers are "pushing in" to the classroom to provide instruction to small groups of students. This new approach sounds exactly like curriculum enactment as described by Snyder et al. (1992):

> The role of the teacher, then, is as a curriculum developer who, together with his or her students, grows ever more competent in constructing positive educational experiences . . . [C]urriculum knowledge includes situated knowledge, created in practice when teachers engage in the ongoing processes of teaching and learning in classrooms . . . [This is a] process of individual growth and change in thinking and practice rather than an organizational procedure of design and implementation. (pp. 81, 425)

While some elementary participants expressed excitement about this new freedom, others worried about losing the framework of RTI—morphing back into the old ways of thinking and doing things. However, I am not concerned. As the participants see this as a "journey," so do I. At this time, the educators in Cannon County have a greater capacity to support struggling learners than they did when the RTI framework was first implemented eight years ago. Providing flexibility, as Rebecca says, allows them to better serve the students who do not fit into the "box." I surmise that even if the framework was dismantled tomorrow, and someone said that Cannon County no longer "does RTI," that teachers would still "do RTI."

If RTI is about providing high-quality, research-based instruction and supporting students who struggle by providing additional help in small groups (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011), then the educators in Cannon County, at least at the elementary level, have built the capacity to do that

regardless of whether anyone measures the "fidelity" of their RTI implementation. The system has journeyed from a place where fidelity was needed, due to lack of capacity, to a place where teachers have the knowledge and skills to enact a curriculum that supports all students, at least at the elementary level. Secondary teachers have not journeyed quite as far, and it is perceived to be because they could not start in a place where implementation was done with "fidelity." The secondary educators, as Rachel states, still need some parameters, and someone to "tell [them] what to do" before they can feel comfortable in a "nebulous" world where they are responsible for making decisions about what students need.

Before beginning the case study, I believed that participants would report that the "fidelity perspective" was a hindrance to RTI implementation—that they would view it negatively and would be more appreciative of the relaxing of the rules and additional freedom over time. This was not the case, and it has caused me to pause and think more deeply about the implementation of curriculum policy. Research says that fidelity of implementation is not possible, as there is a "disconnect" between the policy and "on-the-ground" implementation (Short, 2008, p. 421). Most of the literature related to curriculum implementation advocates for an approach that is bottom-up (Elmore, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Fullan, 1993; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977; McLaughlin, 1995; Honig, 2006), and Cho (1998) says we should "relinquish the notion of the fidelity perspective" (p. 1). Yet, if Cannon County had relinquished the "fidelity perspective" related to RTI implementation, the "journey" toward enactment might not have begun. This disconnect, between the reported need for fidelity of implementation in Cannon County and the literature which suggests that fidelity is not possible or desirable, calls for a continued "dialogue" around implementation of curriculum reforms and how systems can best

facilitate changes that can improve the core of teaching and learning and, ultimately, better serve students.

Adapting my Understanding of the Curriculum Implementation Process

Earlier, I argued that the policy implementation process must be adapted to fit curriculum policy, because a rational, linear model with distinct phases (Anderson, 2011) does not fit education policy. I agreed, and continue to agree, with McLaughlin (1990) about the importance of the role of the local context in implementation: "[L]ocal choices about how (or whether) to put a policy into practice have more significance for policy outcomes than do such policy features as technology, program design, funding levels or governance requirements" (p. 36). I also argued earlier that the fidelity perspective is not feasible; however, after engaging in this dialogue around RTI implementation in Cannon County I find myself standing at a "horizon" where "fusion" is necessary (Linge, 1976, p. xxviii).

Implementation of an RTI framework "with fidelity" is, in many ways, different from implementation of other policies related to curriculum. While Snyder et al. (1992) discuss fidelity of implementation in relation to curriculum materials that are designed to be nearly teacher-proof, the RTI framework does not mandate any specific resources or programs. Rather, when we talk of implementing the RTI framework "with fidelity," it means that we have implemented the research-based components as outlined in Chapter 2. In addition, when practitioners in Cannon County talk of implementation "with fidelity," they are talking about a locally prescribed reading curriculum and locally prescribed intervention programs. Thus, this is not exactly "fidelity" in the same way that Snyder et al. (1992) talk about fidelity of curriculum policy implementation. However, the "fidelity" with which the educators in Cannon County

worked to implement those locally prescribed, research-based curriculum materials brought me to a "horizon."

I continue to believe that fidelity of implementation cannot be mandated by policymakers. Further, even local leaders cannot mandate fidelity without the alignment of other factors in the local context. There was a "constellation of factors" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 412) in Cannon County that influenced implementation and made implementation of RTI with fidelity possible—support of leadership and a determined school psychologist are just two of those factors. In a different location with different actors, that fidelity, even to a locally prescribed curriculum, would not have occurred. My "enhanced" policy process for curriculum policy would maintain that the context of implementation (McLaughlin, 2006) and the capacity of the implementers—their "prior knowledge and experience to notice, make sense of, interpret, and react" to the policy (Spillane et al., 2006)—continue to be important. However, based on the reactions of the participants in Cannon County, it seems that a *lack* of capacity to act can also affect how a policy should be implemented.

In Cannon County, "fidelity" to a theoretical RTI model and to locally prescribed curricula was needed in the beginning due to a lack of capacity on the part of teachers. The system could not be sure that all of the teachers had the prior knowledge and capacity to implement research-based instruction. So, a strong framework—with rigid rules and procedures—was put into place to ensure access to a research-based curriculum for all students. Over time, as teachers built the capacity to provide more effective reading instruction, they were able to deviate from the rules and procedures, and at the elementary level, today, they are closer to a place of curriculum enactment on the continuum described by Snyder et al. (1992). So, instead of a model of education policy implementation that dismisses the fidelity perspective, it

seems that we must consider the conditions under which an implementation plan that is closer to a fidelity perspective on the continuum between fidelity and enactment might be chosen by local leaders.

Snyder et al. (1992) speak of mutual adaptation in the implementation of curriculum policy as occurring along a "continuum" between "complete fidelity" and complete "enactment" (p. 73). I would argue, based on this case study of RTI implementation in Cannon County, that all three curriculum policy implementation perspectives discussed by Snyder et al. (1992)—fidelity, mutual adaptation, and enactment—occur along a continuum, and that in reality, implementation of policy in local systems is an ongoing process in which leaders and teachers constantly move along the continuum between fidelity and enactment. This shifting of perspectives is due to the fact that policy implementation is a meaning-making process (Spillane et al., 2006) that involves learning on the part of teachers (Coburn & Stein, 2006). I reiterate McLaughlin's (2006) idea that during this learning process, implementation is anything but linear:

> On the ground, implementation involves interplay of change and continuity, getting started and going deeper, learning and relearning as midcourse corrections are made. Despite this understanding, though, too many implementation research designs continue to adopt a "pathway" model, rather than deal directly with the actual simultaneity of different implementation tasks. (p. 217)

This was the nature of RTI implementation in Cannon County. When the system was "getting started" with RTI implementation, fidelity to a theoretical framework and the research-based curriculum options available was seen as necessary. Yet, as educators engaged in a process of "learning and relearning," new understanding led to a shift on the continuum toward further adaptation and enactment. At the secondary level, there is, perhaps, a current need to shift back

toward fidelity, as educators seek more guidance and more clearly defined processes for supporting students.

The participants in Cannon County stated that implementation with "fidelity" was important in the beginning due to a lack of capacity on the part of teachers to implement reading instruction that was research-based. As time went on, and teachers at the elementary level became more adept at understanding what effective strategies and methods looked like in their classrooms, they were able to begin adapting the curriculum, and now they are in the early stages of true enactment of a teacher-created reading curriculum in first and second grades. At the secondary level, teachers have not made the same strides, and the majority still lacks the capacity to effectively support struggling students. Snyder et al. (1992) point out that it is often "teachers' lack of clarity" or "teachers' lack of skill" that can interfere with successful policy implementation (p. 69). In Cannon County, the recognition of a lack of clarity and skill on the part of teachers in regards to the delivery of reading instruction led to a tight focus on fidelity of curriculum implementation.

Flyvbjerg (2006) discusses how people learn and acquire new skills. He outlines five stages of human learning, based on the Dreyfus model: novice, advanced beginner, competent performer, proficient performer, expert" (p. 10). At the novice level, there are rules for action that are "context-independent," and the learner determines "skills by evaluating how well they follow the rules they have learned" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 11). Flyvbjerg (2006) uses the example of a nursing student. Students are taught protocols for working with patients. They are often given a preset sequence to follow—take temperature, take blood pressure, etc. However, as the nurse moves from student to "competent performer," the preset rules for action become less important, as the "behavior 'flows' and becomes better adapted to the concrete situation" (p. 13).

Instead of following a list of protocols and moving from patient to patient in a preset order, the competent nurse is able to react to the context of the situation, prioritizing care for patients as necessary. Finally, an "expert" is someone who is able to "make the leap" from "rational decision making" to "intuitive decision-making" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 17). The expert in any field—medicine, education, chess—is someone who does not engage in "calculated problem solving," but just does "what 'works'" based on the countless experience he or she has had (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 17). Novices need rules and guidelines to follow, but as they experience and react to real-life contexts, novices become more adept at responding to the context and intuitively knowing what to do in a given situation.

While Flyvbjerg (2006) engages in this discussion in order to make the point that the "intuitive" knowledge learned from the experience of the "case" is not given enough attention in social science research, I find another use for his discussion of the progression from novice to expert. When the educators in Cannon County were at a "novice" level for what it meant to engage in research-based instruction and data-driven decision making, they needed rules for action. Thus, the system needed to engage in a fidelity-driven RTI implementation.

As the educators built capacity and skill over time—as they encountered situations in which intervention was needed in context—they were able to move to a level of competence, and some have moved to an expert level. Yet, that might not have been possible without the rules for action that were established to begin with. I could be given the freedom to "enact" the job of nursing or to "enact" a chess game, and both acts would fail miserably. I do not even know where to begin. I would need some ground rules to guide my efforts. Educators in Cannon County seem to have felt the same way about RTI implementation in the early days. They needed the ground rules. They needed an established set of procedures—as Sarah terms it, "the

Bible"—in order to know how to act. As they learned via experience over the next eight years, they were able to move from a place of "rules" closer to a place of intuitive decision-making.

Thus, a fidelity perspective seems useful when the educators are at the novice level. This does not necessarily mean that they are novice teachers in the sense that they are new to the profession. Based on Flyvbjerg's (2006) discussion of the move from novice to expert, we are all novices or experts in a variety of things, and even a veteran teacher may be a novice at a new strategy or when attempting to implement a specific innovation or program. When teachers in a local context lack the capacity to implement a reform—regardless of their years of experience in the classroom—no amount of adaptation or freedom to "enact" the reform is going to help. I continue to assert that education policy implementation, however, is context-dependent. In Cannon County, the decision to implement RTI "with fidelity" occurred, again, in a setting where a "constellation of factors" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 412)—supportive leadership, the capacity and will of the lead psychologist, the accountability requirements for schools—came together to support a fidelity-driven implementation plan. The decision regarding whether to implement from a fidelity perspective or along a continuum closer to enactment is one that should rest with school and district leaders, who understand the capacity of the implementers and the local context better than policymakers who are "far from the seat of curriculum practice" (Short, 2008, p. 421 & 423). Only those at the local level will understand their teachers—collectively and individually—and whether or not they have the capacity to implement a policy. The perspective taken in regards to policy implementation in any local district, whether it be closer to fidelity or closer to enactment, must be suitable to the local circumstances—the context and the capacity and will of the implementers—or implementation is doomed to failure.

Recommendations

As I conclude, I make recommendations for future "dialogue" and action in three areas: research, policy, and practice. In making these recommendations, I seek to "hold open the door" (Freeman, 2011, p. 549) and keep the conversation around RTI implementation and curriculum policy implementation going. The findings in this study, and the interpretation of their significance, are context-dependent. They are significant in what they can reveal to us about our own experiences, and in how they help us to learn vicariously and apply that learning to new situations (Bassey, 1999).

Recommendations for Research

The findings in Cannon County support the need for additional research related to RTI implementation at the secondary level. While the elementary schools in Cannon County were able to build a strong framework for intervention, using research-based intervention materials and curriculum materials, the secondary schools struggled more in this area. In addition, further research is needed on how to best implement an RTI framework at the secondary level when students must also earn credits toward graduation. Case studies of RTI implementation in secondary schools are warranted.

In addition, future research should continue to focus on the connection between RTI and the core of teaching and learning. Hill et al. (2012) note the fact that research to date has failed to give enough attention to tier I. This case study of implementation in Cannon County reveals that a focus on tier I and how RTI changes what teachers are doing every day in classrooms was important to the implementation. Additional research should be done in this area. Is an RTI framework focused on tier I more palatable to schools and district leaders? If implementation

focuses on building the base of the pyramid of interventions first, can systems more easily see the connection between RTI and school improvement efforts?

Finally, additional research is needed in the area of curriculum policy implementation. The findings from Cannon County point to the need for perspectives on curriculum policy implementation that range from fidelity to enactment, and that are contingent on the local context. Additional research is needed to discover if a fidelity perspective has been useful in other contexts where teacher capacity for implementation was low, and if implementation is helped by a continuous improvement mindset that allows for a move from fidelity toward enactment as capacity builds. Future research must also explore the complexity of "novice" and "expert" in relation to educators. We often think of this dichotomy in terms of years of experience, but our knowledge and capacity is more complex than that and not always contingent upon the years that have been spent in the classroom.

Recommendations for Policy

Policymakers must come to understand the context-dependent nature of education policy implementation (Honig, 2006). Education reform policies should be designed in the same manner as the theoretical RTI framework, which provides a list of components and a framework on which local systems can build a problem-solving intervention process matched to their needs. The RTI framework is a "hypothesis . . . stated as principles [and] general aims" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 83). Policymakers should focus on the aims of policies, while ensuring that there is enough flexibility in the policy to allow local systems to implement the policy in a manner that makes sense.

In addition, policymakers must understand that reform efforts should come with the appropriate amount of funding for personnel and professional development. The educators in

Cannon County, where implementation was a priority, still lament the lack of personnel to aid the process. Further, the lack of knowledge of some personnel to implement the research-based interventions was a barrier. Prior to enacting policies, policymakers should think through what supports local systems might need to implement a policy and ensure that those are provided as well.

Recommendations for Practice

While researchers and policymakers can learn from this qualitative case study of RTI implementation in Cannon County, my hope is that educational leaders and teachers will learn the most. Based on findings from Cannon County, I would recommend that any school system looking at RTI implementation, or trying to improve RTI implementation, focus on why RTI is different from what has been done before. Cannon County made a clean break with the SST process, and realized that RTI meant a change in how teachers used data and how they intervened for struggling students. Further, I would recommend that systems focus on the purpose of RTI, not as a means to find students eligible for special education services, but as a school improvement framework to increase achievement for all students. I also recommend that school systems put processes and procedures in place so that teachers understand what is expected of them and how to help students. Over time, these processes can be relaxed as teachers build capacity—through professional development and through embedded learning via professional learning communities. Finally, I recommend that systems identify leaders who can champion the process, including informal leaders with the capacity and will to move implementation forward.

It is important, also, for local leaders to understand the connection between the capacity and understanding of educators and their ability to implement policy. Educators in Cannon

County needed and wanted more processes and procedures—more "fidelity"—when they were "novices" in their understanding of RTI. As they progressed in their understanding, and they became "competent performers" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 10), they did not need to rely on process and procedure to the same extent. Further, the capacity of the teachers did not necessarily relate to their years of experience. This has important implications for the practical planning of program implementation in school districts. Leaders often think that "veteran" teachers already have expertise, and they may not provide as much support via process, procedure, or professional development. However, capacity of teachers is just as context-dependent as policy implementation. Teachers may be "competent performers" in one area and "novices" in another (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 10). Educational leaders need to recognize and consider the varying capacities of teachers in relation to new policies and programs.

Final Thoughts

This study began with a purpose of opening a space for "dialogue" around RTI implementation in a case study district—what could we learn about RTI implementation and education policy implementation by looking closely at one district's implementation efforts. The study did open a space for "dialogue" in Cannon County, and the words of participants, as well as organizational documents, increased my understanding of RTI implementation in the system and served to "fuse" my "horizon" of understanding about RTI and its implementation with the understandings of others.

What I hope my final reflections—my interpretations and recommendations—have done is to "hold open the door" (Freeman, 2011, p. 549) as I have "trouble[d] [my] own understanding . . . and [kept] searching for ways to invite the topic to say what it has not yet said about itself" (Freeman, 2011, p. 550). From a philosophical hermeneutic perspective, my understanding will

never be complete. I will never arrive at a perfect understanding of RTI or of what it takes to successfully implement education policy. However, engaging in this "dialogue" in Cannon County has allowed me to add to my knowledge by giving me a "vicarious" learning experience (Bassey, 1999) of the implementation of RTI there. The hope is that it has done the same for the reader.

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Appendix A: RTI Provision in IDEA 2004

(6) SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—Notwithstanding section 607(b), when determining whether a child has a specific learning disability as defined in section 602, a local educational agency shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skill, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation, or mathematical reasoning.

(B) ADDITIONAL AUTHORITY.—In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the evaluation procedures described in paragraphs (2) and (3). Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 20 U.S.C. §1400 (2004).

Appendix B: Researcher Subjectivity Statement

I have a preexisting relationship with the case study district and participants in the study. The implementation of RTI in Cannon County, however, preceded my relationship with the district. Thus, in this research, I situate myself as a fellow learner and participant in the dialogue surrounding RTI. Just as the research is interested in how RTI has been implemented and adapted by other stakeholders, I also seek to continue the "fusion of horizons" (Linge, 1976, p. xxviii) as my own understanding of RTI collides with the understandings of others. My hope is to engage these stakeholders in an open, honest dialogue about RTI implementation as we work together to add to the dialogue and, hopefully, have RTI say "something new" about itself.

Based on personal experience, I view RTI frameworks as "colliding with" the lived world of the school. RTI policies have often failed to take into account the context of schools, as well as the values and beliefs of educators, and have met resistance from day one. Because RTI policies are linked to special education eligibility, many who are responsible for implementation and supervision of RTI frameworks come from a different background than I do—those to whom responsibility for RTI implementation has fallen in Georgia are largely school psychologists and special educators. My background includes time as a general education teacher at the high school level, and as an assistant principal at the high school level. Yet, I have been responsible for RTI implementation since its inception, and I now coordinate RTI implementation at the district level. I have found that I, more than my colleagues who fill this role, tend to privilege what I call "teacher ways of knowing". While RTI frameworks talk about the idea of scientific, research-based interventions, I have very decided views about privileging lived experiences of

teachers and their "data" based on observation and interaction with students over scientific, research-based methodologies. RTI, and *No Child Left Behind 2002* (NCLB), privilege curriculum and instructional methods that have been validated through a positivist research base, but I maintain that teachers have other ways of knowing when a strategy or instructional program is working for students. Teachers validate their instruction through lived experiences with students. Philosophical hermeneutics is my theoretical frame because I value ontological ways of knowing. This makes me a very different "breed" of RTI coordinator.

Saying all of that, I believe in the power of intervention and the RTI framework in theory. I think, though, that the framework has been implemented from a scientific, measurement-driven perspective, and the rigidity of understanding about what makes something "valid" or what makes something "research-based" collides with the way that teachers think about their practice. This epistemological understanding of the framework and the ontological ways of knowing of traditional classroom teachers must engage in a "dialogue" and horizons must be fused for RTI to truly realize its potential in the lived experiences of teachers and students in schools.

Appendix C: List of Studies Included in Literature Review

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Focus	Methods	Level of Focus	Subject/ Skill Focus
Ardoin, S. P., Witt, J. C, Connell, J. E., Koenig, J. L.	2005	Application of a three-tiered response to intervention model for instructional planning, decision making, and the identification of children in need of services	*Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*	Implementa-tion	Quantitative	Elementa ry--4th grade	Math
Bolt, S. E.	2005	Reflections on practice within the heartland problem-solving model: the perceived value of direct assessment of student needs	*The California School Psychologist*	Implementa-tion	Case Study—1 Student	Elementa ry	Multiple--behavior and academic struggles
Carney, K. J., Stiefel, G. S.	2008	Long-term results of a problem-solving approach to response to intervention: discussion and implications	*Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*	Achievement	Quantitative	Elementa ry	Multiple
Chapman, L., Greenfield, R., Rinaldi, C.	2010	"Drawing is a frame of mind": an evaluation of students' perceptions about reading instruction within a response to intervention model	*Psychology in the Schools*	Implementa-tion	Qualitative—arts-based	Elementa ry	Reading

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Focus	Methods	Level of Focus	Subject/ Skill Focus
Denton, C. A., Nimon, K. Mathes, P. G. Swanson, E. A., Kethley, C. Kurz, T. B. Shih, M.	2010	Effectiveness of a supplemental early reading intervention scaled up in multiple schools	*Exceptional Children*	Achievement	Quantitative, quasi-experimental study.	Elementary	Reading
Detgen, A., Yamashita, M., Davis, B.	2011	State policies and procedures on response to intervention in the midwest region: Issues and answers	*Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest*	Implementation	Qualitative	Multiple	Multiple
Dougherty, K.A., Stahl, K., Keane, A.E., Simic, O.	2013	Translating policy to practice: Initiating RTI in urban schools	*Urban Education*	Implementation	Mixed Methods	Elementary	Reading
Duhon, G. J., Mesmer, E. M, Gregerson, L., Witt, J.C.	2009	Effects of public feedback during RTI team meetings on teacher implementation integrity and student academic performance	*Journal of School Psychology*	Implementation	Quantitative	Elementary	Multiple
Dulaney, Shannon	2013	A middle school's response to intervention journey: Building systematic processes of facilitation, collaboration and implementation	*NASSP Bulletin*	Implementation	Case Study	Secondary-Middle	Reading (administered the QRI-III as a screener)

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Focus	Methods	Level of Focus	Subject/ Skill Focus
Dykes, F.	2009	RTI implementation challenges for rural elementary principals	*Southeastern Teacher Education Journal*	Implementa-tion	Quantitative survey study	Elementary	Multiple
Easton, J. E., Erchul, W. P.	2011	An exploration of teacher acceptability of treatment plan implementation: Monitoring and feedback methods	*Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*	Implementa-tion	Quantitative survey study--likert scale.	Elementary	Multiple
Graves, A. W., Brandon, R., Duesbery, L, McIntosh, A., Pyle, N. B.	2011	The effects of tier 2 literacy instruction in sixth grade: Toward the development of a response-to-intervention model in middle school	*Learning Disability Quarterly*	Achievement	Quantitative	Secondary--Middle	Reading
Greenfield, R., Rinaldi, C., Proctor, C., P., Cardarelli, A.	2010	Teachers' perceptions of a response to intervention reform effort in an urban elementary school: a consensual qualitative analysis	*Journal of Disability Policy Studies*	Implementa-tion	Qualitative	Elementary	Reading
Hernandez Finch, M. E.	2012	Special considerations with response to intervention and instruction for students with diverse backgrounds	*Psychology in the Schools*	Implementa-tion	Literature Review	Literature Review	Literature Review

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Focus	Methods	Level of Focus	Subject/ Skill Focus
Hill, D.R., King, S. A., Lemons, C. J., Partanen, J. N.	2012	Fidelity of implementation and instructional alignment in response to intervention research.	*Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*	Implementa-tion	Literature review of experimental studies	Elementary	Reading
Johnson, E. S., Smith, L.	2008	Implementation of response to intervention at middle school	*Teaching Exceptional Children*	Implementa-tion	Case Study	Secondary--Middle	Multiple
Kerins, M. R., Trotter, D., Schoenbrodt. L.	2010	Effects of a tier 2 intervention on literacy measures: Lessons learned	*Child Language Teaching and Therapy*	Achievement	Quantitative	Elementary	Reading
Marston, D.	2005	Tiers of intervention in responsiveness to intervention: Prevention outcomes and learning disabilities identification patterns.	*Journal of Learning Disabilities*	Achievement	Literature Review	Elementary--2 and 1 study on Heartland	Reading
Martinez, R., Young, A	2011	Response to intervention: How is it practiced and perceived	*International Journal of Special Education*	Implementa-tion	Survey--Likert-scale. "Descriptive" Study.	Multiple	Multiple
Mellard, D. F., Frey, B. B., Woods, K. L.	2012	School-wide student outcomes of response to intervention frameworks	*Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*	Achievement	Quantitative	Elementary	Reading

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Focus	Methods	Level of Focus	Subject/ Skill Focus
Mitchell, B. B., Deshler, D. D., Lenz, B. K.	2012	Examining the role of the special educator in a response to intervention model.	*Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*	Implementa-tion	Qualitative—observation	Elementary	Multiple
Murray, C. S., Woodruff, A.L., Vaughn, S.	2010	First-grade student retention within a 3-tier reading framework	*Reading and Writing Quarterly*	Achievement	Quantitative	Elementary	Reading
Murakami-Ramalho, E., Wilcox, K. A.	2012	Response to intervention implementation: A successful principal's approach	*Journal of Educational Administration*	Implementa-tion	Case Study	Elementary	Reading
Nunn, G. D., Jantz, P., B	2009	Factors within response to intervention implementation training associated with teacher efficacy beliefs	*Education*	Implementa-tion	Quantitative—survey.	Multiple	Multiple
Pyle, N., Vaughn, S.	2012	Remediating reading difficulties in a response to intervention model with secondary students	*Psychology in the Schools*	Achievement	Quantitative	Secondary--Middle	Reading
Ruby, S. F., Crosby-Cooper, T., Vanderwood, M. L.	2011	Fidelity of problem solving in everyday practice: Typical training may miss the mark	*Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*	Implementa-tion	Mixed Methods	Elementary	Problem-Solving Teams

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Focus	Methods	Level of Focus	Subject/ Skill Focus
Sanger, D., Friedli, C., Brunken, C.	2012	Educators' year-long reactions to the implementation of a response to intervention model	*Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative research*	Implementa-tion	Qualitative	Secondary--Middle AND High	Reading/Literacy
Sansosti, F. J., Goss, S., Noltemeyer, A.,	2011	Perspectives of special education directors on response to intervention in secondary schools	*Contemporary School Psychology*	Implementa-tion	Qualitative	Secondary--Middle AND High	Multiple
Sansosti, F. J., Noltemeyer, A., and Goss, S.	2010	Principals' perceptions of the importance and availability of response to intervention practices within high school settings	*School Psychology Review*	Implementa-tion	Quantitative--survey	Secondary--High School	Multiple
Shepherd, K, Salembier, G.	2011	Improving schools through a response to intervention approach: A cross-case analysis of three rural schools	Rural Special Education Quarterly	Implementa-tion	Case Study	Elementary	Reading
Simmons, D., Coyne, M. Kwok, O, McDonagh, S., Harn, B., Kame'enui, E. J.	2008	Indexing response to intervention: A longitudinal study of reading risk from kindergarten through third grade	*Journal of Learning Disabilities*	Achievement	Quantitative — Longitudinal	Elementary	Reading

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Focus	Methods	Level of Focus	Subject/ Skill Focus
Stepanek, J, Peixotto, K.	2009	Models of response to intervention in the northwest region states: Issues and answers	*Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest*	Implementa-tion	Qualitative	Multiple	Multiple
Sullivan, A. L., Long, L.	2010	Examining the changing landscape of school psychology practice: A survey of school-based practitioners regarding response to intervention	*Psychology in the Schools*	Implementa-tion	Mixed Methods	Multiple	Multiple
Swanson, E., Solis, M., Ciullo, S. McKenna, J.W.	2012	Special education teachers' perceptions and instructional practices in response to intervention implementation	*Learning Disability Quarterly*	Implementa-tion	Mixed Methods	Elementa ry--3-5	Math and Reading (teachers chosen taught one or the other)
Tran, L., Sanchez, T., Arellano, B., Swanson, H. L.	2011	A meta-analysis of the RTI literature for children at risk for reading disabilities	*Journal of Learning Disabilities*	Achievement	Meta-Analysis	Meta-Analysis	Reading
VanDerHey den, A. M., Witt, J. C., Barnett, D. W.	2005	The emergence and possible futures of response to intervention	*Journal of Psychoeducation-al Assessment*	Implementa-tion	Case Study	Elementa ry	Reading and Math

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Focus	Methods	Level of Focus	Subject/ Skill Focus
VanDerHeyden, A. M., Witt, J. C., Gilbertson, D.	2007	A multi-year evaluation of the effects of a response to intervention model on identification of children for special education	*Journal of School Psychology*	Achievement	Quantitative	Elementary--district	Reading and Math
VanDerHeyden, A., McLaughlin, T., Algina, J., Snyder, P.	2012	Randomized evaluation of a supplemental grade-wide mathematics intervention	*American Educational Research Journal*	Achievement	Quantitative	Elementary--Upper	Math
Vaughn, S., et al	2010	Response to intervention for middle school students with reading difficulties: Effects of primary and secondary intervention	*School Psychology Review*	Achievement	Quantitative	Secondary--Middle	Reading
Wanzek, J., Cavanaugh, C.	2012	Characteristics of general education reading interventions implemented in elementary schools for students with reading difficulties	*Remedial and Special Education*	Implementa-tion	Quantitative--survey	Elementary	Reading
Werts, M. G., Lambert, M., Carpenter, E.	2009	What special education directors say about RTI	*Learning Disability Quarterly*	Implementa-tion	Mixed Methods	Multiple	Multiple

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Focus	Methods	Level of Focus	Subject/ Skill Focus
White, R., B., Polly, D., Audette, R. H.	2012	A case analysis of an elementary school's implementation of response to intervention	*Journal of Research in Childhood Education*	Implementa-tion	Case Study	Elementary	Reading (started small but will implement others)
Wilcox, K, Murakami-Ramalho, E, Urick, A	2013	Just in time pedagogy: Teachers' perspectives on the response to intervention framework	*Journal of Research in Reading*	Implementa-tion	Mixed methods--questionnaire, focus groups, interviews. Phenomenological--looks at "RTI" as a phenomenon.	Multiple	Reading

Appendix D: List of Documents Included in Document Analysis

1. **Response to Intervention: Georgia's Student Achievement Pyramid of Interventions.** Revised 2011. Complete manual related to RTI in Georgia, including the pyramid and "core implementation features" and "common attributes" as defined by the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities.
   Retrieve From: http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Curriculum-and-Instruction/Documents/RTI%20document%20Full%20Text.pdf
   In-Use Document

2. **Cannon County Elementary School Response to Intervention Plan.** Revised 2011-12. Official overview of RTI in elementary schools in Cannon County.
   In-Use Document—Transitioning to Inclusion in the RTI Manual in summer of 2014

3. **Cannon County Middle School Response to Intervention School Plan.** Revised 2011-12. Official overview of RTI in middle school in Cannon County.
   In-Use Document—Transitioning to Inclusion in the RTI Manual in summer of 2014

4. **Cannon County High School Response to Intervention School Plan.** Revised 2011-12. Official overview of RTI in high school in Cannon County.
   In-Use Document—Transitioning to Inclusion in the RTI Manual in summer of 2014

5. **Cannon County School District Elementary Intervention List.** Revised October 2011. Official list of research-based intervention programs for elementary.
   In-Use Document—Revised in summer of 2014

6. **Elementary School Pyramid of Interventions.** Revised January 2013. Pyramid of interventions specifically for an elementary school.
   In-Use Document

7. **Cannon County High School Pyramid of Interventions.** Revised January 2013. Pyramid of interventions specifically for high school.
   In-Use Document

8. **Self-Assessment and Questionnaire for Student Support Team Coordinators.** Sent to Coordinators 3/16/07. Self-assessment and questionnaire for SST coordinators to complete with a core group of teachers in order for district leadership to plan implementation of RTI.
   Historical Document

9. **Response to Intervention: District Level Self-Assessment.** Date Unknown—School Year 2006-07. Document created by National Association of School Directors of Special Education. Completed by the RTI team in the early implementation stages.
   Historical Document

10. **"Concerns" Document—Notes Presented to District Leadership.** Exact Date Unknown—available in an RTI implementation manual that was kept from 2006-07 to 2011. Seems to date between 2007 and 2010 (prior to the district RTI review in 2010). Outlines concerns related to providing intervention simultaneously with core instruction. Students receiving tiered interventions—including special education students—were not receiving core instruction on grade level standards.
    Historical Document

11. **Minutes: RTI Meeting.** February 9, 2010. Minutes from a meeting held after a district-wide RTI review in 2010. Group that met discussed the commendations and "themes" or findings from the review. Suggestions were made for addressing findings.
    Historical Document

12. **Cannon County High School Response to Intervention Process.** Fall 2012. One-page overview of RTI and tiered intervention , as well as guiding questions for data teams. Given to data team facilitators.
    In-Use Document

13. **Family Guide to RTI**. Exact Date Unknown—available in the RTI implementation manual that was kept from 2006-07 to 2011. Also available on the district's website. A brochure that explains RTI to parents.
    In-Use Document

14. **Self-Assessment on Screening Information**. Exact Date Unknown—available in an RTI implementation manual that was kept from 2006-07 to 2011. Seems to date within the first couple of years of implementation. The document is a self-assessment created by the national Research Center on Learning Disabilities. It appears to have been completed by a collaborative team, perhaps the district's RTI committee, and they rated themselves in several areas: general education practices, student assessment practices, intervention model practices, SLD determination practices, and student outcome data. In addition, there are "brainstorming ideas" attached.
    Historical Document

15. **Cannon County Middle School Concerns About SST.** Exact Date Unknown—available in an RTI implementation manual that was kept from 2006-07 to 2011. Seems to be during the transition from SST to RTI at the middle school. The document summarizes five concerns that staff at the middle school expressed about the SST process. In addition, there are several pages of notes for "strategies" to address the issues.
    Historical Document

16. **District RTI Committee Pyramid of Intervention Questions for Academics and Behavior—Elementary**. Exact Date Unknown—available in an RTI implementation manual that was kept from 2006-07 to 2011. Document serves as a graphic organizer for elementary to answer questions about each tier—when students enter and exit, who monitors, time frames, parent notifications, etc. Completed by stakeholders specifically for elementary.
    Historical Document—but in the process of updates by committee during summer 2014

17. **District RTI Committee Pyramid of Intervention Questions for Academics and Behavior—Middle.** Exact Date Unknown—available in an RTI implementation manual that was kept from 2006-07 to 2011. Document serves as a graphic organizer for middle to answer questions about each tier—when students enter and exit, who monitors, time frames, parent notifications, etc. Completed by stakeholders specifically for middle level.
    Historical Document—but in the process of updates by school-level RTI team in the fall of 2014

18. **District RTI Committee Pyramid of Intervention Questions for Academics and Behavior—High.** Exact Date Unknown—available in an RTI implementation manual that was kept from 2006-07 to 2011. Document serves as a graphic organizer for high to answer questions about each tier—when students enter and exit, who monitors, time frames, parent notifications, etc. Completed by stakeholders specifically for high level.
    Historical Document—but in the process of updates by school-level RTI team in the fall of 201.

19. **Draft RTI Manual.** Summer 2014. District worked in the summer of 2014 to review documents and update to reflect current practices. RTI manual was drafted by a committee of district and elementary administrators, and then reviewed by school psychologists and the entire administrative team (district and school-level). Purpose was to condense some of the documents into one, coherent manual for the district.
    In-Use Document

Appendix E

Recruitment Email to Potential Participants

Potential participants will first be contacted via email, and then Amanda will meet with them in person to review the consent form and answer any questions about the research study and their participation. This document is the initial email to potential participants.

Dear _____,

I would like to ask if you are willing to consider participation in a research study that I am conducting as part of my coursework at the University of Georgia. I am interested in understanding how the Cannon County School System worked to implement RTI policy and how the context, values, and beliefs of the stakeholders affected the policy implementation. As you know, I have only been working in the system for a little over a year. You have been chosen for this study based on your history with the system during RTI implementation, your role (either as a teacher, psychologist, or administrator), and your willingness in past conversations to be open and honest when you engage in a professional dialogue with me about intervention procedures.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview—at a location of your choosing—of approximately 60 minutes. The interview will focus on how RTI was implemented in Cannon County Schools and your perceptions of the factors that helped or hindered that process. You can benefit from participation by engaging in a process of reflection on RTI implementation, and from sharing your thoughts about implementation so that the system can continue to improve processes going forward. After the interview, you will be provided with a transcript of the interview so that you can make any notes and additional comments.

If you are willing to consider participation, I will meet with you to provide more details about the study and how results will be used, as well as have you review and sign a consent form and schedule a date and time for an interview. If you have any questions or concerns about this research after that conversation, you are welcome to contact Dr. Melissa Freeman at freeman9@uga.edu or at 706-542-3613.

Thank you!

Amanda Sailors
RTI-Assessment Coordinator
Cannon County Schools
706-795-2191

Appendix F

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM
Understanding RTI Implementation: A Dialogue

Researcher's Statement
We are asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: *Amanda Sailors (Ph. D. student)/Dr. Melissa Freeman (supervising professor)*
Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy
Contact Information

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of the study is to understand—through document analysis, dialogue with stakeholders, and a researcher journal—how the Cannon County School System, a 2013 SSTAGE STAR award winner for promising practices related to RTI implementation has implemented RTI policy, and how the context, values, and beliefs of the stakeholders affected the policy implementation.
You are being asked to participate in an interview because you are a practitioner in the system with a role in the RTI process.

Study Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to …

- Participate in an interview of approximately 60 minutes.
- The interview will focus on how RTI was implemented in Cannon County Schools, and your perceptions of factors that helped or hindered that process.
- The interview will be structured as a professional conversation—I will have a list of questions to use as a guide, but our conversation will proceed as a conversation.
- The interview will be audio-recorded, to aid in recall and transcription.
- The results of the interviews conducted as part of this study may be used as data for a dissertation study focused on how local contexts, values, and beliefs affect the implementation of RTI policy.

- After the interview, I will provide you with a transcript so that you can review your responses and make additional notes and comments as necessary to clarify.

Risks and discomforts

- There may be minor discomfort associated with speaking openly with the researcher, who is involved with the implementation of RTI at the system-level.
- You have been chosen to participate in this research because of your willingness to be open and frank in previous professional conversations. I will seek to further minimize any discomfort by reassuring participants that data are being gathered in order to better understand RTI implementation and how beliefs of practitioners play a role in policy implementation.

Benefits

- Participating in this research allows the practitioner to reflect and engage in a process of continuous improvement.
- Participating in this research allows practitioners the opportunity to share information—directly with system-level personnel—related to the RTI process and factors that help or hinder their ability to serve students.
- This research will potentially benefit other schools and systems as they work to implement RTI frameworks and/or sustain RTI frameworks. It may also benefit policymakers at the state, local, and national levels, as they seek to better understand how local contexts and the beliefs of policy implementers impact policy decisions related to implementation.

Incentives for participation

Participants will be thanked for their time with a small token of appreciation (e.g., goody bag of snacks, gift certificate to the school store, etc.)

Audio/Video Recording

The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed in order to aid the researcher in recall. The transcripts will be shared with the participants so that they can review them and add any clarifying remarks. Audio files of the interviews will be destroyed upon completion of transcription. Transcripts of interviews will be stored in a secure location indefinitely. Personally identifying information will not be included in the transcripts—participants will be identified by role/position only.

Privacy/Confidentiality

The data collected through the interview process will not identify the participants directly. Instead, participants will be identified indirectly by their position (e.g., school psychologist or administrator). Because the school system is small, there is the potential for those who are familiar with the system and who know the employees to identify the participants. The researcher cannot promise complete anonymity, but can attempt to protect the privacy of participants by using the following process:

1. Interviews will be audio recorded, and when transcribed, no personally identifying information will be used.
2. Participants will be referenced by their role/position only (administrator, psychologist, intervention teacher).

3. Audio recordings will be destroyed once transcripts are finalized.
4. Transcripts will be stored in a secure location indefinitely, and any published work resulting from this research will only reference comments based on the role/position of the practitioner.

The researcher will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than as required by the school district and by the department at the University of Georgia responsible for regulatory and research oversight.

Taking part is voluntary

Taking part in this research is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate before the study begins or discontinue at any time, with no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is *Amanda Sailors*, a *graduate student* at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact *Dr. Melissa Freeman* at *freeman9@uga.edu* or at *706-542-3613.* If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Appendix G

Understanding RTI Implementation
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol
Potential Questions

1. Tell me about your history of working in the school system—positions held, length of employment, etc.?

2. Describe what comes to mind when I say "intervention."

3. Tell me how you understand the term "RTI" or "Response to Intervention."

4. If a teacher has a student who is struggling with meeting standards, what should that teacher do?

5. Do you think that your system's work to implement an RTI framework has affected your answer? Would you have answered differently before RTI—tell me what you think you would have said?

6. Think back to when the system first implemented RTI and tell me about that.

7. Describe how teachers and support staff reacted to RTI implementation in those early days—can you give specific examples?

8. Describe how RTI implementation changed the nature of teaching and learning—can you give specific examples?

9. Tell me about any barriers to implementing RTI successfully—can you give specific examples?

10. How successful do you think the system has been with implementing RTI (probe for details)?

11. Describe how RTI implementation has impacted student achievement in your system—can you give specific examples?

12. If you could change something about how the RTI process works, what would you change and why?

Appendix H: RTI Implementation: Visual of Themes and Categories Generated Through Categorization

Themes and Categories Generated from Interview Data

Theme 1: The RTI framework represented a change from the previous intervention process (SST), and now "intervention" includes data-based decision-making and research-based components..

RTI versus SST
Data-based decision-making process.
Focus on research-based components.

Theme 2: In Cannon County, there is a focus on the link between the RTI framework and the core of teaching and learning, as the goals of RTI are described in terms of closing gaps and improving instruction and student achievement.

Surface goal of RTI to close gaps and support students in Tier I.
Tier I instruction as important to the process.
RTI as improving instruction and student achievement.

Theme 3: Several conditions in the local context-- the role of leadership, resource barriers, concern over the place of special education in this new context—influence(d) the implementation of RTI in Cannon County.

Leadership (formal and informal) at the district and school level critical to the process.
Resource barriers—in the past and present—make implementation difficult, and the barriers encountered by elementary versus secondary staff differ.
The place of special education is an underlying concern at all levels.

Theme 4: Early implementation focused on developing and adhering to processes and procedures, but also by continuing to build understanding, capacity, and buy-in of teachers over time.

Detailed processes and procedures.
Over time, flexibility within fidelity.
Teacher expertise is built over time.
Teachers learn to adapt curriculum rather than follow by rote.

Theme 5: Implementation, while district-wide, has differed at the secondary level, due to a less well-defined process, less clear idea of what it means to "intervene," and additional resource barriers that are not experienced at the elementary level.

Concept of "intervention" is more abstract and less defined at middle and high school levels.
Determining the cause of student failure is more difficult at the secondary level—harder to define the deficit = harder to define "intervene".
Secondary stakeholders do not seem to understand the theoretical process the same as elementary stakeholders.
Secondary educators cite barriers that were more difficult to overcome: scheduling constraints, resources for interventions

Themes and Categories Generated from Document Data

Theme 1: Theoretical components/skeleton of framework present, but early documents lack detail for "what it looks like" or "means" for the classroom.

RTI buzz words used in documents with little to no explanation.
Focus on importance of tier I, but what that means is not well defined.
Line between instruction and intervention is not well-defined—but "instruction" is important.
Processes and procedures are important—documents attempt to establish the process.
Evidence of a focus on defining tiers—what is different about the tiers—even if it is a surface.

Theme 2: Focus on link between RTI framework and instruction.

Tiers of "instruction".
Tier I buzz words—"differentiation." "standards," "high-quality"—but words are not further defined (but a shift over time to recognize need to define).
Importance of tier I—even if what that looks like is not defined.

Theme 3: There has been a shift over time, as the capacity of teachers has increase—shift from programs and relying on the judgments of those outside the classroom to teachers.

Evidence of lack of confidence in teacher ability to judge effective intervention or teacher ability to judge movement within tiers.
Evidence over time of an increase in teacher ability to provide strategies and interventions outside of canned programs.
Realization of the need for training and professional development.

Theme 4: Documents highlight the focus on data-driven decision making, and the link between assessment and instruction.

Data—universal-screening and formative assessment—used to make decisions about instruction.
More emphasis placed here over time—data teams and formative assessment.

Theme 5: Resource barriers and frustration with process and procedures have been ongoing, but continually addressed.

Frustration with process—e.g., paperwork.
Frustration with lack of resources—personnel, intervention tools.