Barriers and Benefits to Response to Intervention: Perceptions of Special Education Teachers

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Barriers and Benefits to Response to Intervention: Perceptions of Special Education Teachers

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Abstract

We conducted a survey of special education teachers to determine their perceptions of the barriers and benefits to the process of Response to Intervention (RTI). This process is used for identification of students with disabilities and for early intervening for students who may or may not qualify for special education services. A total of 211 teachers wrote comments about barriers to successful implementation of RTI and benefits to RTI. The respondents listed several barriers concerning the process, gaps in knowledge, faculty attitudes, and lack of resources. They listed benefits to students in the areas of improved instruction through increased use of assessment and data, early intervening, and use of differentiated instruction. Although teachers listed multiple barriers, they also indicated perceived benefits to themselves and to students from the RTI procedures.

Keywords: Response to Intervention, RTI, collaboration, barriers and benefits

Following decades of dissatisfaction with procedures and practices of determining eligibility for students with specific learning disabilities (Aaron, 1997; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Epps, 1983), a multi-tiered system of instruction called Response to Intervention (RTI) emerged as an alternative approach. The re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) allowed schools or districts to use a process based on a student's response to scientific, research-based intervention to assist educators in differentiating between students struggling because of inadequate instruction and those struggling because of a disability (Ardoin, 2006; D. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; D. Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; L. S. Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2006).

Specifically, students are exposed to high quality, evidenced-based instruction, while educators monitor progress through instructional objectives (D. Fuchs et al., 2003). If they progress at a satisfactory rate and to level of mastery, the students are responding to the instruction or intervention. If they have difficulty with either rate or level of progress, they may be considered to be non-responders. Non-responsive students would then receive more intense instruction in the form of more time, smaller groupings, or additional methods of teaching while teachers use the data gathered to make instructional decisions (Ardoin, Witt, Connell, & Koenig, 2005; Collins, 2007; Deno, Fuchs, Marston, & Jongho, 2001; Deno, et al., 2009; L. Fuchs, Fuchs, & Speece, 2002; Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006; Jimenez, Mims, & Browder, 2012; Stecker, Lembke, & Foegen, 2008; Wolery, Ault, & Doyle, 1992).

Data for progress monitoring of students come from sources (e.g., curriculum-based assessments) that inform the evaluation process that may result (Deno et al., 2009). Students who do not respond to more intense instruction may need special education services. Educators are using RTI to identify students in several disability categories. Along with identification, RTI practices may provide early intervention services for students at-risk for school failure (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005; D. Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; D. Fuchs et al., 2003; Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006; Mellard, Stern, & Woods, 2011; Shinn, 2007; Wiener & Soodak, 2008).

As with any change or initiative, problems occur in many areas including, but not limited to, fidelity of implementation, acceptance of the policy or legislation, and teacher buy in. Change initiatives, such as the development of identification and early intervention techniques, require the understanding of the perceived needs of educators who must implement the process (Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013; Kenney, Banerjee, & Newcombe, 2010; Sarason, 1995; Thousand & Burchard, 1990). Failure to address teacher concerns may result in problems related to implementation, including resistance to the initiative (Werts, Wolery, Snyder, & Caldwell, 1996). Teacher opinions and perceptions are a source of data that facilitate successful implementation of initiatives (Bartell, 2001; Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1997; D. Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012; Jenkins, Schiller, Blackorby, Thayer & Tilly, 2013; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009).

Pavri (2010) investigated teacher perceptions of RTI (i.e., early identification, service delivery) with students with social, emotional, and behavior disabilities using a focus group. Teachers noted their concerns about consistency of RTI
implementation across different sites. In other studies, teachers and administrators indicated a need for improved resources, increased opportunities for professional development, collaboration/collegiality, leadership, and a clear direction including steps and strategies for success (Pyle, Wade-Woolley, & Hutchinson, 2011; Sansosti, Goss, & Noltemeyer, 2011; Wiener & Soodak, 2008).

Currently, implementation varies by states and districts with no single paradigm accepted as the right way to implement RTI (Berkeley et al., 2009; Zirkel & Krohn, 2009). A wide array of research demonstrates the confusion and frustration in schools because of a lack of a consistent policy, a comprehensive framework, and a consensus of procedural steps for RTI (D. Fuchs et al., 2012; Kozleski & Huber, 2010; Pyle, 2011; Sansosti et al., 2011; Werts et al., 2009). This confusion can lead to perceived barriers to the successful implementation of the instruction.

The purpose of the current study is to investigate what special education teachers perceive as the barriers and benefits to RTI. Any change initiative, including that of early intervention and identification of students at risk, requires that attention be given to the perceived state of the practice and the needs of the educators involved (Bartell, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fixsen et al., 2013; Sarason, 1995; Thousand & Burchard, 1990; Werts et al., 1996). To gather opinions, we surveyed special education teachers in North Carolina to determine their perceptions of the process. We asked special education teachers to describe barriers and benefits of RTI.

Method
Participants

A total of 98 of the 101 counties in North Carolina meet the population density requirements for designation as rural counties (Womach, 2005). We conducted a web search of all public school districts (N = 117) in North Carolina, regardless of population status, searching for names and e-mail addresses of special education teachers. Almost half of the respondents reported their districts served less than 5,000 students, falling well below the designation of rural districts. From an initial list of 4,521 possible e-mail addresses, 3,570 were deliverable (i.e., not returned as undeliverable), and these were used in the initial distribution. Of these, 1,754 teachers answered the questionnaire, and 280 responded but opted not to participate, resulting in a 57.0% overall response rate; however, when we calculate the rate using only those that responded to the questionnaire, the return rate is 49.1%. The first questions asked respondents to identify if RTI was used in their schools and if they were involved in RTI. A total of 44.2% (n = 775) of the teachers reported RTI was used in their schools. Of these, 470 were involved in the process and were invited to list barriers and benefits and 211 respondents listed comments.

Instrument

We developed a three-section questionnaire in Survey Monkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com) to fit three screens with two additional screens for a cover letter and a thank you. In Section One, participants responded to two questions to determine their involvement (if any) with RTI. Section Two (RTI questions) contained multiple-choice questions, with an opportunity for open-ended comments on referral processes, key personnel, and ratings of perceptions of success (Werts & Carpenter, 2013) and participants’ perceived barriers and benefits to RTI. The final section contained demographic items related to their current position, number of years as an educator, highest degree earned, size of the student body in their districts, and training in RTI.

Questionnaire Development

We developed the questionnaire through a systematic process of reviews. Based on the existing literature on RTI, and responses and questions to an earlier survey, we wrote a draft and sent it to 10 university faculty members in special education who verified content validity, suggested additional items, recommended deletion of items, and made revisions in the wording of items. From their comments, we revised the document and distributed it to a five-member panel, consisting of a principal, a special education teacher, and three university faculty members from the original panel. We used additional comments and suggestions to write the final questionnaire.

Survey Implementation

Following the procedures outlined by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009), we sent a pre-notice e-mail to alert the potential respondent to a forthcoming request for information about RTI and to validate email addresses. Two days later, we sent the questionnaire link to 3,570 validated addresses with a cover letter stressing the importance of individual participation in the process. We sent three follow-up mailings, with another link to the questionnaire, to non-respondents at 2-week intervals after the initial mailing. We sent a final reminder 3 weeks later.

Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded in several steps. For all questions, the computer survey program automatically entered data from the questionnaires into a database. We each reviewed the first 30 statements independently and derived common themes. We compared, discussed, and revised these themes and wrote definitions for each. Then, we reviewed the data separately and sorted the statements into thematic areas. The first and second author coded the statements of barriers, and the first and third author coded the statements on benefits. Using a constant comparison method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we compared the statements against one another and categorized together if they were similar or formed a new category if the piece of data was unique. Next, we met and reviewed the assigned codes and noted agreements and disagreements. Finally, we discussed the codes and discussed any discrepancies, redefining the codes as needed, until we reached a consensus on all responses.

Results

Participants

On the electronic questionnaire, we provided three areas for responses for barriers and three for benefits. Participants listed one or more comments to each prompt. Demographics

Participants
for the respondents who listed barriers (n = 207 persons) or benefits (n = 208 persons) are listed in Table 1. A total of 211 persons listed either at least one barrier or one benefit. This represents 27.22% of the 775 persons who were directed to this set of questions and 12.0% of the teachers in the total sample (N = 3,570). Slightly more than half (51.5%) of the respondents had a degree beyond the bachelor’s level. A majority (76.7%) worked in inclusive classrooms and resource room settings, and over 70% had worked in the schools more than 8 years. A majority (83.9%) also reported having training in RTI.

**Perceived Barriers**

A total of 207 respondents listed 573 (M = 3.61) statements of barriers to the successful implementation of RTI. In addition, 14 teachers stated there were no barriers to the implementation of RTI, resulting in 587 statements to be coded. The categories are listed in Table 2 and discussed below.

**Burdensome processes—Time, heavy workload, paperwork.** “Time” was a problem or barrier listed in almost one quarter of the statements. The issues listed varied from listing the word, “Time!!!” and statements of added burden “Not enough time in the day to get it all done.” Several respondents mentioned a problem of delay of services. One respondent wrote, “Many teachers avoid initiating the process due to the time required.” Another stated, “Takes so long to identify the students who do need special education services.” Others mentioned the difficulty of having time to teach: “Time-consuming, especially with high teacher-to-student ratios” and “Time for interventions.” This category of responses is similar to teachers who mentioned that the extra workload was problematic. We coded about 7% of the

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**Table 1.**

**Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size of school district</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1,000 students</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,001-2,500</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,501-5,0002</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,001-10,000</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10,000</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA/BS</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA/MS/MEd</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EdS</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD/EdD</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job title</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education: Self Contained</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education: Resource and inclusion</td>
<td>76.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 7 years</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-15 years</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 25 years</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 25 years</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you received training?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>84.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 2.

Statements in Categories of Perceived Barriers to the Effective Implementation of RTI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents' Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burdensome processes</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paperwork</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delay of services</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra or heavy workload</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge gaps</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of information on RTI</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of training</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty attitudes</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials needed</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People needed</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent issues</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of collaboration</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varied</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statements such as extra or heavy workload. Teachers reported: “All day meetings every week . . .” and “Additional assessments.” Others mentioned the burden of extra work for the general education teachers (e.g., “Teachers finding it is too much data collection” and “[It is] too hard for regular classroom teachers to manage if they have several students.” One teacher commented, “There is so much more the teachers have to do with the progress monitoring and graphing data.” Others said they were expected to do more work, more assessments, manage a caseload that was too large, and manage a large class size.

Respondents listed other concerns, such as paperwork, that may be related to a lack of time. About 9% of the statements were concerned with paperwork. There was little specificity about the problems encountered. The written statements listed “Paperwork” and “Too much paperwork.” A few respondents said the forms were redundant and difficult to understand.

Knowledge Gaps—Training and knowledge. Lack of training (5.2%) and lack of knowledge of RTI processes (10.6%) were listed as a problem with knowing what to do and how to conduct the process. Teachers stated several barriers related to training including specific needs such as “Lack of training for RE [regular education] teachers in the use of interventions” and “Administration must provide training for all aspects of RTI.” Participants wrote general statements indicating a knowledge gap: (a) lack of training in the use of proper interventions, (b) progress monitoring methods, and (c) use of assessment instruments. Persons mentioned as candidates in need of training were most often general education teachers. Lack of knowledge was listed in many statements. One respondent stated, “At this time, our school still has many questions about RTI.” Others listed specific knowledge deficits in the steps of the process, progress monitoring, how to use the collected data, and knowing the persons to contact for help.

Attitudes. Another category of barriers listed by special education teachers was attitudes of school faculty members. Lack of teacher buy-in appeared to inhibit successful implementation of RTI. Over 15% of the statements dealt with the issue, with comments such as “Teachers are not willing,” “Teachers are resistant to change,” “Teachers are not on board,” and one respondent typed in capital letters: “TEACHERS ARE AFRAID.” One respondent wrote, “Teachers not referring . . . because they know it will mean more work for them.” This comment may refer to a perception of a burdensome workload and to the attitudes of practitioners who are involved in the process.

Resources and personnel. A lack of resources (7.3%) and a lack of personnel (6.3%) to implement and support
the program were listed as barriers. Teachers recounted they
needed additional resources: (a) more money, (b) more as­
essment instruments, (c) more instructional programs, and
(d) more software to assist in tracking data. One teacher
wrote, “Teachers need more resources in the regular class­
rooms.” Others wrote, “Lack of instructional materials”
and “Lack of money for resources.” Having enough person­
nel with the appropriate training and expertise was men­
tioned frequently. The extra teaching time and persons to
implement and monitor the instruction was paramount.
One teacher said, “[There are] not enough qualified staff
members to work with all the groups.” Others mentioned
a lack of persons to do the paperwork and to staff the
meetings.

Other concerns. Parental issues (3.1% of statements)
and collaboration issues (2.6% of statements) were listed in­
frequently but by multiple people. Parenting issues were mul­
tifaceted. Some teachers stated that parents did not under­
stand the process, and the school personnel needed to edu­
cate them in how the process was to work. Others stated that
parents were circumventing the system, “Parents just ask for
testing” and “Parents will not show up for meetings.” Several
respondents stated lack of collaboration among educators as
another barrier, listing lack of communication and lack of
prompt feedback as issues. Few specified instructional guide­
lines, scheduling problems, transient students and attend­
dance problems; these were listed, albeit infrequently.

Perceived Benefits

We asked respondents to list benefits of RTI. A total of
208 people listed 572 statements. Of these, 27 could not be
coded. These included comments that were not benefits
such as “Not a quick fix” and those that were ambiguous
such as “Focus.” Seven respondents made a statement indi­
cating there were no benefits, yielding 538 (M = 3.86) state­
ments detailing benefits to the students and benefits to the
schools and teachers. The categories and subcategories are
listed in Table 3.

Benefit to the students. The largest number of state­
ments (72.76%) clustered in areas that noted students were
receiving a higher level of instruction because of the imple­
mentation of RTI. Many respondents mentioned early inter­
vening. Representative comments included “Allows students
to not fall through the cracks,” “Kids get help sooner,” “Prob­
lems are caught early,” and “Kids don’t have to wait to get
the help they need.” Similarly, special education teachers dis­
cussed the improved quality of special education referrals (e.g.,
“It decreases the number of referrals for special education.

Table 3.

Statements in Categories of Perceived Benefits of RTI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents' Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefits to students</td>
<td>72.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased use of assessments and data</td>
<td>15.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening earlier</td>
<td>13.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using differentiated instruction</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better or fewer referrals</td>
<td>12.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying needs of students</td>
<td>9.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are more successful</td>
<td>7.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits to teachers</td>
<td>15.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased level of professional development</td>
<td>4.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased collaboration</td>
<td>7.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing perceptions of Special Education</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased parent involvement</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varied</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rural Special Education Quarterly 2014 Volume 33, Number 2
Just because a child is below grade level—it does not mean they’re special ed,” and “Prevents mislabeling.”

Many statements focused on the instruction that students were receiving. It appears that special education teachers who responded to the survey perceive general education teachers to be providing more and better-differentiated instruction based on individual needs. This may be in response to the increased use of assessment data. There were many comments, such as, “Teachers are providing directed interventions to address specific [student] needs,” and “Students are being taught in targeted skill deficit areas and making progress.” Comments further included reference to teachers using high quality instruction and providing modifications to students who may be struggling. One respondent made the statement, “Forces teachers to teach outside the box.” Overall, many stated that students were more successful under this process, writing short statements such as “Student success” and “Increased achievement.” Teachers described the benefit as extending to all students in the classrooms. “It offers intervention strategies for students who may not qualify for special education, but [they are] still getting that one-on-one intervention and strategies they need.”

Benefits to schools and teachers. Another cluster of comments dealt with teachers making better professional decisions as a result of RTI. The largest category of comments was in the area of assessing and using the assessment data to make instructional decisions. Teachers noted better data collection, use of the data to track instruction and student growth, and data to ensure that interventions were delivered with fidelity. Most comments were short and general.

Teachers talked about general educators and teams making better decisions about the nature of the difficulty students may experience. "Problem solving for individual students makes us look at individual skill areas, including behavior, tailored to individual students." One person listed a specific example: “. . . to more precisely describe a student’s difficulties (phonemic awareness) rather than just reading.” One respondent summed the situation, “We are becoming more proficient with targeting underlying academic issues.”

Special educators listed personnel development as a benefit. General statements of “Teachers are learning,” and “Teaching has improved,” were noted. Additional comments included, “It makes regular educators really look at their teaching and assessment,” and “Providing teachers with strategies to use with their whole class.”

The use of research-based interventions was perceived as a benefit to the use of RTI. Representative comments included, “Interventions from research are better quality than others,” and “Forces all teachers to become more proactive and problem solvers in the search for research-based methods.” One teacher wrote, “Students are being exposed to new, wonderful, research-based strategies.”

Several respondents just typed “accountability” as a benefit that contributed to better professional decision-making. One stated, “Regular education teachers are held more accountable for implementing intervention strategies and modifying instruction.”

Several respondents just typed “accountability” as a benefit that contributed to better professional decision-making. One stated, “Regular education teachers are held more accountable for implementing intervention strategies and modifying instruction.”

Another area of benefit to schools was better collaboration among teachers and parents. A small number of respondents mentioned that parents were more aware of the processes and felt more comfortable with special education referrals after the tiered process. One said that RTI was “a way to be sure that parents are aware of their child’s problems and that they are an integral part of [sic] educational process.”

Collaboration among educators was a theme mentioned by a few respondents. Respondents wrote, “If done correctly, the teacher gets team advice on student needs,” and “Collaboration between regular and special education has increased.” Teachers stated they felt supported, and the use of the team as decision makers was beneficial for many educators as well as students.

Other statements. Statements that were not repeated frequently and coded as “other” included several stating that discipline was better in the schools. Other teachers commented that there was a model to be followed to identify and refer students for evaluation. One respondent summed, “There are steps that have to be followed . . . can’t just decide to do something because you want to!” Although only a few persons mentioned that the process might be a change in the manner in which special education was perceived, one respondent stated that a benefit to the multi-tiered process is that “[Special education] teachers become a more validated, respected, and integrated member of the school family.”

Discussion

Over 83% of school districts in North Carolina are considered rural. Many of our respondents face the difficulties of rural and isolated schools. Limited staff and resources, teacher recruitment and retention, and fewer educators with whom to collaborate are problems. Teachers are asked to teach a wide range of abilities and needs (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011). When fewer special education classes are extant, general education teachers must depend on the expertise of only a few special education teachers. The problems of collaboration and professional development to implement an initiative such as RTI is complicated by lack of qualified personnel, a lack of resources, and lack of extensive related service providers limiting the ability to provide complete services (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Steed, Pomerleau, Muscott, & Rohde, 2013).

There are several conclusions we can draw from the lists of barriers and benefits provided by these special education teachers. Although teachers listed multiple barriers, they also indicated perceived benefits to themselves and to students from the RTI procedures. First, many barriers are seen as detrimental to the ideal implementation of a multi-tiered system of instruction. Some of these barriers may be remediable through training and support. State and local leadership teams should specify clear regulations based on available research clarifying procedures, policies, and the vocabulary used for RTI to reduce variations in implementation (Mellard et al., 2011; Zumeta, Zirkel, & Danielsen, 2014). Other problems may need an intentional change in schedules or streamlining procedures, such as establishing a system for the paperwork that is not onerous for the general education teacher. A few respondents mentioned additional personnel were needed to manage the paperwork required for data monitoring, monitor referral processes that were spread over time, and work with small groups and individual
students. An exploration of the cost relative to the benefit of RTI may be necessary to eliminate the time and logistical barriers. By definition, resources in all schools are limited in particular in rural areas. Targeting capital and human resources to specific student needs is logical in promoting student growth (Dulaney, 2012).

In spite of data indicating identification of students with Specific Learning Disabilities has not yet changed significantly with a multi-tiered system of identification (Bickel, Zigmond, & McCall, 1998; Shinn, 2007), teachers report benefits to students. The benefits may be for two groups of students: (a) those who are receiving intervention earlier than would be possible under a traditional referral process and (b) those who would not qualify for special education services. Respondents stated that students are receiving monitored and intense instruction designed to determine a degree of responsibility.

Second, of the benefits listed, the majority of statements (72.78%) related to the increased benefit to students. Special education teachers stated that students are faring better instructionally and showing growth through use of assessment data, early intervention, and sound instructional practices. This finding confirms those of several researchers. White, Polly, and Audette (2012) found teachers describing school and district level improvements. Their teacher participants described the general education teachers’ willingness to engage more fully in the RTI processes and that the instructional plans were perceived as effective for student learning. Multiple researchers described interventions that hold promise for promoting growth in rate and level for students who are struggling (Jenkins, Peyton, Sanders, & Vadasy, 2004; Vaughn, & Fuchs, 2003; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2010). In a cautionary vein, the use of interventions should be technically adequate and presented with procedural fidelity to ensure benefits to individuals (Burns & Symington, 2002; Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999; VanDerHeyden, 2010).

Suggestions by the respondents may be helpful in providing a positive and effective RTI process for the schools. Several persons mentioned good leadership, and researchers have noted that leadership is critical (Hoover & Love, 2011; Thomas & Dykes, 2011; Van Dyke & Whittaker, 2011; White et al., 2012). Having a principal or other leader committed to the process can ease the tasks that are key to an effective RTI team. The team is responsible for both the educational growth of individual students and the school improvement plan (Guskey & Jung, 2011; Kovaleski & Glew, 2006; Nellis, 2012). This was reflected in our respondents’ comments about benefits to the student, benefits to the teachers, and benefits to the schools. Teachers stated they perceived the enhanced knowledge of teaching using RTI, the use of data for guiding instruction, and the discussions about the students that enhanced their teaching and the teaching of others on the faculty.

Good professional development includes respect for the opinions of others and use of the experiences of the participants (King & Lawler, 2003; Wei, Andree, Darlings-Hammond, 2009). In this vein, including the perspectives of those in the schools, in this case special education teachers, may aid in enhancing the perceived benefits. Special education teachers have noted that the persons who are most involved in RTI are the general education teachers (Werts & Carpenter, 2013); therefore, the opinions of the barriers and benefits seen by that group of educators would appear to be salient in furthering the benefit to both teachers and to students. A commonly accepted and clear consensus that professional development in RTI is both necessary and accepted is needed (Jaquith, Mindich, Wei, & Darling-Hammond, 2011). Listening to the voice of the general education teacher is also critical in establishing “buy-in” to the process. This includes the acceptance of the initiative, as well as the motivation to implement the procedures with fidelity. Educational leaders should communicate the rationale for the practices. Several investigators (Dulaney, 2012; George, White, & Schlaffer, 2007; White et al., 2012) have stated that the involvement of faculty in the decision-making was critical to success.

We noted that many of the comments were inclusive of the faculty in the schools. Many of the comments began with “we,” indicating that the teachers perceive the barriers and benefits as inclusive, faculty-based issues. The collaborative nature of the process is inherent because the general education teachers are heavily involved in each tier and special education teachers’ involvement increases across the tiers (Werts & Carpenter, 2013). Because the nature of the initiative is inclusive, the respondents’ comments on training may be interpreted as inclusive as well. All persons in the school need training and professional development in the processes of progress monitoring, instructing with effective and differentiated methods, as well as judicious and professional use of the data collected. Professional development should include an ongoing component adhering to fidelity of implementation of the components. Teachers’ implementation of the instructional components and the progress monitoring procedures should be both self-regulated and supervised. High quality collaboration between teachers, administrators, and school psychologists could minimize drift and ensure appropriate data-driven decision-making to benefit student growth (Werts et al., 2009).

Overall, RTI processes require collaborative and flexible role definitions of school personnel (Fuchs et al., 2012; Kozleski, & Huber 2010; Pyle, 2011; Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007; Sansosti et al., 2011; Werts et al., 2009). Supportive school teams include special education teachers, general education teachers, school psychologists, speech therapists, reading specialists, administrators, and others who will need to work together, plan together, and invest in the process to identify at-risk learners, develop instructional plans, and implement appropriate interventions that will be evaluated with a high degree of attention to the data and the information gathered. Schools will need to determine the specific roles and tasks that will be completed by each team member to prevent overlap and unnecessary redundancy and to ensure successful outcomes for students. In rural schools, educators may serve multiple roles, increasing the need to talk, share, and collaborate. This calls for attention to the needs and opinions of a shared value system, school-wide commitment, and administrative support with appropriate resources.

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The advantage of the in-service opportunities appear to provide personal professional development. Special educators may have been discussing their own professional development or that of all teachers in the school. Here again, there may be limited resources, including time and travel to consult with others, increasing the need to attend to the needs of all teachers.

Limitations

As in any survey study, there are multiple limitations. The responses were varied in length, ranging from one word to several sentences. Because the method of responding (to a box on a screen), the typical respondent did not elaborate, and there was no opportunity for investigators to ask for clarification. Therefore, the analysis is limited to the printed word and the interpretation of the investigators. As in all survey research, the validity of the responses is not calculable. The self-report nature of the survey form limits any checking of validity or the reliability of responses over time.

In this project, the return rate for all respondents was excellent (Werts, Meyer, & Isidori, 2012) at over 50%; however, only respondents who reported experience with RTI were directed to the in-depth questions. This may be defensible because only those who had a basis for judging the barriers and benefits were involved, but the sample size was truncated. Therefore, we have no measure of the extent to which the opinions are representative of special education teachers overall.

Future Research

Additional research approaches are warranted to determine the nature of barriers and benefits to RTI. Future research endeavors should consider the weight of opinions against actual practice. Determining the state of the practice through observation may provide a broader picture of the collective beliefs and possible points of practice that could be changed to yield more benefits. Focus groups and interviews of teachers may yield further and in-depth insights into how to remedy existing barriers. The opinions of general education teachers would appear to be salient in terms of the relative barriers and the benefits they face in implementation. A larger and more diverse sample would be instructive. Overall, the field should focus on the use of perceptions of stakeholders in the adequacy of the implementation, the attitudes of the persons involved in the process, and the use of the process in effecting student growth on meaningful measures.

References


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