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PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF K-4 SPECIALIZED LITERACY PROFESSIONALS' EXPERIENCES AND SELF-EFFICACY IMPLEMENTING RTI WITHIN AN MTSS FRAMEWORK FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

Megan Vitale

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ABSTRACT

PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF K-4 SPECIALIZED LITERACY PROFESSIONALS' EXPERIENCES AND SELF-EFFICACY IMPLEMENTING RTI WITHIN AN MTSS FRAMEWORK FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

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This transcendental phenomenological study, grounded in Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1997), investigates K-4 specialized literacy professionals' (SLPs) experiences and perceptions of implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. Data collected from interviews and self-reported journal entries of nine "academic instructional specialists" provide a comprehensive understanding of their roles, responsibilities, experiences, and the factors that shape their self-efficacy in elementary education. The findings highlight the critical role that specialized literacy professionals fulfill in meeting the diverse needs of students through evidence-based, systematic interventions. Their responsibilities extend beyond direct instruction to encompass continuous assessment, progress monitoring, and adapting instructional strategies grounded in empirical evidence. Such an approach highlights the importance of collaborative efforts for successfully implementing RTI within a continuously changing educational environment. The study also reveals challenges specialized literacy professionals face, such as increased workload, the necessity for role adaptation, and a lack of sufficient support, all of which affect their self-efficacy. Despite these obstacles, specialized literacy professionals exhibit resilience attributed to

collaborative networks, professional development opportunities, and the positive outcomes of their intervention efforts. The research emphasizes the significance of adaptability and continuous learning in improving specialized literacy professionals' effectiveness within the RTI-MTSS framework. It shows how these attributes significantly enhance SLPs' ability to implement effective interventions, adjust to the evolving educational landscape, and meet the varied needs of students. The study presents implications for practice and policy and recommendations for future research.

Keywords: specialized literacy professionals, response to intervention, multitiered system of supports, reading/literacy specialist, self-efficacy

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Nate, and our two boys, Landon and Nolan.

You are my why.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Background

The capacity to read is a crucial ability for children that provides a foundation for academic success and continuous learning. While some children appear to acquire reading skills easily, others may encounter difficulties during the learning process (Snow et al., 1998). Large-scale assessments of student skills indicate significant proportions of learners in the United States who cannot read at a basic level of proficiency. According to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; U.S. Department of Education, 2022), fourth-grade students have shown a decline in average reading scores. The results show that 33% of fourth graders performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level, and 63% achieved at or above the Basic level. The current benchmark in a targeted Northeastern state indicates that 30% of fourth-grade students performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level, and 58% scored at the NAEP Basic level (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Notably, the reading proficiency scores of fourth graders have remained relatively the same since the first reading assessment in 1992.

The lack of significant improvement in reading proficiency scores is a concern, as evidence suggests that students struggling with reading after third grade face unique challenges in accessing the general education curriculum. These challenges are not limited to reading but extend to content areas, including social studies and science, where reading is critical for learning new information and building background knowledge (Wanzek & Roberts, 2012). Most students who struggle with reading below their grade level after early elementary school require remediation with decoding at the word level to improve their reading fluency (Scammacca et al., 2013; Vaughn et al., 2010a).

Furthermore, these difficulties persist over time, and students who struggle with reading in upper grades are more likely to continue to struggle academically. This may lead to increased risk factors for adverse outcomes, including retention, dropping out of school, or entering the juvenile justice system (Petrone, 2014). Consequently, promoting early reading success in a child's school career can have long-term benefits. Furthermore, not all students who struggle with reading will qualify for special education services.

According to Adams (1990), the early years of school are critical for developing strong reading skills and are essential for academic success. The responsibility to foster diverse literacy needs is placed on classroom teachers, special education teachers, and reading specialists. Several reports have highlighted effective early reading instruction that works best for students who may face reading difficulties, including those with learning disabilities (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). In the elementary grades, foundational skills like phonological awareness, phonics, word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension emphasize helping all students learn how to read (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Throughout the years, federal mandates like the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) have been introduced to improve reading achievement for both general education and special education students. These mandates allocate funding, establish evidence-based instruction and curriculum standards, and place accountability on schools to ensure that every student achieves proficiency in reading. Educators are taking a leading role in meeting the rising literacy

demands within our society. Initiatives such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and other tiered intervention models like the Multitiered System of Support (MTSS) are being utilized to support students in reaching literacy benchmarks.

School-wide multi-tiered support frameworks are becoming increasingly popular as effective methods for delivering instructional programs (Berkeley et al., 2020). These models are widely used in schools and are designed to intensify services based on a child's increasing academic and behavioral needs (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs et al., 2014; Jimerson et al., 2016; Sugai & Horner, 2006; Sugai & Horner, 2009; Vaughn et al., 2008). The goal for instruction and intervention is for students to respond to less intensive interventions before more extensive interventions are applied. Although these intensive interventions can cover various academic domains and aspects of behavior and social-emotional learning (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016), reading is a primary target for instruction and interventions in the primary grades. This study focuses on enhancing reading instruction and intervention in the early academic years. It is essential to highlight that the term RTI encompasses a comprehensive multi-tiered intervention framework within the academic context.

RTI for literacy instruction and intervention aims to target the substantial population of students who face challenges with components of reading in school settings. These models aim to ensure robust, evidence-based general education instruction, prompt identification of struggling students, high-quality intervention, and ongoing progress monitoring to facilitate informed decision-making (Jimerson et al., 2016). A large body of research shows that small group reading interventions of varying intensity levels can benefit elementary school students with reading difficulties (e.g.,

Gersten et al., 2008, 2020; Hall & Burns, 2018; Wanzek et al., 2016). The primary elementary years are particularly significant as early reading intervention during this time can prevent numerous reading difficulties in students. Extensive research over several decades has provided a wealth of knowledge on early intervention strategies for young readers facing reading difficulties (Blachman, 2013; Fletcher et al., 2018; Jimerson et al., 2016; Petrone, 2014).

A recent review revealed that over forty-five nationwide state education agencies (SEAs) recommended using a tiered support system, such as RTI or MTSS, in schools and districts (Berkeley et al., 2020). However, significant variation exists in the guidance provided by SEAs regarding the logistics of implementing interventions within this framework. This includes the amount of instructional time devoted to interventions, the size of the group receiving instruction, types of intervention used, personnel responsible for delivering instruction, available professional development opportunities, the setting of intervention instruction, and methods for ensuring treatment fidelity (Denton, 2012; Savitz et al., 2018; Truckenmiller & Brehmer, 2021).

Although RTI implementation involves entire school systems, educators play a critical role in making intervention and assessment decisions and ultimately determining the utility and sustainability of the RTI model within the school (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2003). Researchers suggest that these decisions can influence identifying students needing appropriate instruction or more intensive interventions (e.g., Denton, 2012; Truckenmiller & Brehmer, 2021). As such, general education teachers, special education teachers, and reading specialists play a crucial role in the RTI process. Learning from those actively involved in implementing RTI for reading within an MTSS

framework is essential for gaining insights into its effectiveness. These experiences provide an understanding of how intervention service delivery operates within the broader support system. This knowledge enables educators and stakeholders to make informed decisions, modify intervention strategies, and support the overall system for students, which in turn, will contribute to improved reading outcomes in the early academic years.

Purpose of the Study

Reading specialists have been an essential part of schools for many decades and are considered instrumental to reform efforts that focus on data-driven instruction and improvement at all levels (Bean & Kern, 2018; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Dole, 2004). However, these specialists' instructional duties and responsibilities have evolved over time (Bean & Eichelberger, 1985; Bean et al, 2015a; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014; ILA, 2015; Ippolito et al., 2019; Kern, 2011; Quanroche et al., 2001), resulting in various job titles such as interventionalist, literacy specialist, coach, and coordinator. To encompass this diversity in titles and roles, these professionals are collectively referred to as *Specialized Literacy Professionals* (SLPs; Bean & Kern, 2018; ILA, 2017). This comprehensive term describes the shared efforts of all school professionals dedicated to supporting literacy instruction within schools.

This phenomenological study focused on specialized literacy professionals recognized within their schools as "academic instructional specialists" whose primary role is to provide targeted support and strategies to enhance students' academic skills. A key aspect identified within the responsibilities of these professionals is providing increased supplemental instructional support to students at risk for or with reading

difficulties. This support includes providing small-group instruction tailored to individual student needs while incorporating evidence-based instructional components to promote overall literacy development (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). These specialists select, adapt, teach, and assess educational approaches and interventions. Additionally, specialized literacy professionals collaborate with other educators to address curriculum needs, serving as an integral component of an RTI model.

The research on specialized literacy professionals and their roles and responsibilities is extensive and growing (e.g., Bean, 1979; Bean & Eichelberger, 1985; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bean et al., 2002, 2003, 2015a, 2018; Dole, 2004; Dole et al., 2006; Ippolito et al., 2019, Galloway & Lesaux, 2014; ILA, 2015a, 2015b, 2018; IRA, 2000, 2010; Kern, 2011; Kern et al., 2018; Quatroche et al., 2001; Robinson, 1958,1967). For instance, Bean and Lillenstein (2012) conducted a study across various elementary schools identified as successful implementers of RTI to understand how literacy educators functioned in their roles. Their findings revealed that these professionals play a pivotal role in overseeing the RTI initiative, collaborating as a team to analyze student data, make decisions regarding student groupings and instruction, and communicate information about assessment and education to their colleagues.

The present study looked to fill an existing gap in research by exploring the perspectives and professional experiences of specialized literacy professionals implementing RTI for academics within an MTSS framework. The specialists identified as “academic instructional specialists” in this study work directly with students and collaborate closely with other teachers. This requires them to have a comprehensive

understanding of the systems in which they operate. To date, studies that focus on the perspectives of these specialists within this context are lacking.

The research focused on specialized literacy professionals providing reading support to kindergarten through fourth-grade students within an American Northeastern public school district. By exploring these specialists' professional experiences, this study brings insights into their experiences of RTI implementation and how these experiences shaped their perceived sense of self-efficacy. Understanding teachers' views within the current system can aid schools in identifying potential avenues for enhancing existing models (Meyer & Behar Horenstein, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study highlights the critical role of self-efficacy beliefs among K-4 specialized literacy professionals as they navigate the complexities of implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework. It offers a structured approach to answering how these professionals perceive their abilities and the impact of these perceptions on components of RTI implementation practices. Drawing on the insights of Peoples (2021), the use of a theoretical framework enriches the study by situating it within a broader discourse as researchers take other's thoughts into consideration to increase objectivity.

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory

The study is grounded in Albert Bandura's (1977, 1997) self-efficacy theory, which refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to achieve desired outcomes. The concept of self-efficacy was first developed by Albert Bandura within his social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which suggests that human achievement depends on

interactions between an individual's behavior, personal factors, and environmental conditions (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). According to Bandura (1997), these beliefs can significantly influence an individual's behavior, motivation, and eventual success or failure. Self-efficacy beliefs impact an individual's thought patterns and emotions, affecting their willingness to engage in tasks, the level of effort they invest, and their perseverance when faced with adversity (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1997) noted that individuals with a higher perceived self-efficacy are likelier to attempt more, achieve more significant successes, and persist longer than those with lower self-efficacy beliefs.

Self-efficacy is widely recognized as a future-oriented assessment of an individual's perceived capability in specific situations rather than a direct measure of their actual level of competence (Hoy & Spero, 2005; Tracey & Morrow, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Therefore, it represents a subjective assessment of capabilities rather than an objective gauge of skills. This distinction is significant because individuals often either overestimate or underestimate their abilities. Bandura (1997) suggests it is beneficial when teachers have a slightly elevated perception of their teaching abilities. This concept is supported by the idea that a stronger belief in one's teaching capabilities can significantly enhance a teacher's willingness to put forth effort and persevere when faced with challenges. An optimistic self-view encourages teachers to make the most use of the skills and resources they do have.

Teacher Self -Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy is a specific aspect focused on a person's belief in their ability to perform effectively in their role as a teacher and produce positive outcomes for

their students, even those who may be unmotivated or challenged (Guskey, 1988; Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Earlier research by Gibson and Dembo (1984) revealed that teachers with high self-efficacy were more likely to engage in meaningful interactions with students, with a greater emphasis on positive reinforcement of student learning. Subsequent researchers have suggested that a teacher's sense of self-efficacy is strongly associated with positive student outcomes (e.g., Hoy & Spero, 2005; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Zee & Koomen, 2016).

Efficacy beliefs are not just general feelings of competence but are closely related to the tasks and situations teachers encounter daily (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). According to Ross (1992, 1994), teachers with higher levels of efficacy are more likely to (1) adopt new approaches and strategies, (2) use management techniques that promote student autonomy, (3) support low-achieving students, (4) enhance students' self-perceptions of academic skills, (5) set attainable goals, and (6) persist in the face of student failure.

Research has demonstrated that teachers' belief in their efficacy is deeply impacted by how they perceive their successes and failures in teaching. For example, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) found that these self-efficacy beliefs closely relate to teachers' experiences and perceptions of their effectiveness in the classroom. Specifically, when teachers perceive their teaching as successful, their self-efficacy beliefs are enhanced, fostering an expectation that future teaching efforts will also be proficient and effective. Conversely, when teachers perceive their performance as unsuccessful, their self-efficacy beliefs diminish. This perception of

failure continues to lower expectations for future performance, leading to a cycle where the anticipation of future failures impacts teachers' willingness to try new approaches.

Self-efficacy is a motivational construct that influences teachers' efforts and persistence and affects their performance. Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) suggest that this performance becomes a new source of efficacy information, creating a feedback loop where increased self-efficacy leads to more significant effort and resilience. Research indicates that teachers who perceive themselves with high efficacy are more likely to invest effort, establish ambitious goals, persist through challenges, and overcome obstacles (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Further, these teachers show greater organizational and planning skills, are open to new ideas, and are willing to adapt innovative methods to meet students' needs (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

According to Bandura's (1997) theory, teachers form their self-efficacy judgments based on four primary factors. First, verbal encouragement from significant individuals in a teacher's life, such as colleagues and administrators, plays a role. Second, vicarious experiences, derived from observing the successes or failures of other teachers, serve as influential models. Third, mastery experiences are based on the teacher's past teaching history, significantly impacting self-efficacy. Finally, the emotional and physiological arousal experienced by a teacher while anticipating and engaging in teaching also influences their sense of self-efficacy.

Verbal Persuasion. Verbal persuasion involves receiving feedback from others and contributes to reinforcing a person's belief in their ability to achieve their desired level of performance (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-

Moran & Johnson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Bandura (1997) highlights that maintaining a sense of efficacy, mainly during challenging times, is supported when influential individuals express confidence in their capabilities. Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) suggest that verbal persuasion alone might not significantly enhance a teacher's self-efficacy. However, combining it with other sources of efficacy information can boost its effectiveness. By integrating verbal persuasion, teachers can set more realistic goals and work effectively towards improving their teaching skills.

In schools, teachers often receive verbal persuasion through professional development workshops that provide new knowledge on strategies. An administrator or colleague can provide verbal persuasion through specific feedback or encouragement about implementing a new teaching strategy. Hoy and Spero (2005) suggest that while verbal persuasion might have a limited impact, it can boost an individual's efficacy to counter occasional setbacks that may cause self-doubt and interrupt persistence.

Vicarious Experiences. Vicarious experiences refer to situations where an individual observes someone else demonstrate a specific skill (Bandura, 1997; Hoy & Spero, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran and McMaster, 2009). Observing others provides a reference for setting personal teaching goals by allowing observers to compare their capabilities with those of the models. According to Bandura (1977), the impact of these experiences on one's self-efficacy depends on how much the observer identifies with the model.

Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) note that individuals actively search for skilled models who demonstrate the competencies that they aspire to have. These

competent models show their knowledge through their behavior and teach practical skills and strategies for managing demands through sharing. Because teaching lacks clear measures of competence, teachers may choose to evaluate their abilities by comparing themselves to the performances of their peers (Bandura, 1997). By observing the performance of others, teachers can assess their skills and set their own goals. The model's standard is a reference point for the observer to evaluate their ability to achieve similar proficiency levels. However, when a credible model performs poorly, the efficacy expectations of the observer decrease (Hoy & Spero, 2005)

An example of vicarious experiences for a teacher may involve observing a more experienced colleague implementing a new reading strategy in the classroom. By witnessing the strategy's effectiveness firsthand, the observing teacher can gain confidence in their ability to apply the same teaching method successfully. This process allows teachers to learn and internalize new skills through observation without directly engaging in the task.

Mastery Experiences. Mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy-related information (Bandura, 1997; Hoy & Spero, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). When educators perceive teaching success, their efficacy expectations for future teaching proficiency tend to increase unless the success requires too much effort. Conversely, if an educator perceives teaching failure, their efficacy beliefs are generally lowered. An example of mastery experiences for teachers includes successfully implementing a new teaching strategy that leads to observable improvements in student learning.

According to Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009), early successes build strong self-efficacy beliefs even with a few setbacks. However, self-efficacy might weaken if success is achieved with extensive external assistance or tasks perceived as unimportant (Hoy & Spero, 2005). Consequently, teacher self-efficacy can be considered a dynamic and cyclical construct in which performance proficiency generates a new mastery experience (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Bandura (1997) asserts that this process eventually stabilizes and forms a relatively enduring set of efficacy beliefs that tends to resist change.

Physiological and Emotional States. Bandura (1997) highlights that physiological and emotional states also influence individuals' self-assessment of their capabilities. These states can include levels of arousal that can either boost a sense of competence through feelings of anticipation or negatively in the form of anxiety (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran and McMaster, 2009). Emotional responses like these play a critical role in shaping a teacher's self-efficacy belief, affecting their perception of their ability to perform tasks or handle situations effectively (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Moderate arousal levels can enhance performance by focusing attention and energy on challenging tasks. In contrast, high arousal levels, perceived as a threat, might impede the ability to use skills and capabilities. The joy a teacher experiences from teaching a successful lesson may increase the sense of self-efficacy, while high stress or anxiety levels could lower it (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007).

Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Response to Intervention

Implementing instructional change within a complex model like RTI can be difficult and impact teachers' self-efficacy (Isabell & Szabo, 2015). Teachers need to acquire and apply new skills to support students within this framework. However, the success of implementing RTI can be influenced by teachers' levels of effectiveness in assisting struggling students. Moreover, these factors can influence teachers' perceptions of the implementation process (Isabell & Szabo, 2015).

Research on teacher attitudes toward integrating new instructional methods has identified teachers' self-efficacy as a powerful influence on their willingness to embrace new methods (Guskey, 1988; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). In a situation where a teacher is attempting to teach an instructional strategy to a group of struggling readers, a teacher with a strong sense of efficacy would be more likely to try various instructional approaches or strategies until the students are successful (Guskey, 1988). Conversely, a teacher with low self-efficacy is more likely to blame or criticize the students for their lack of success, persist with ineffective instruction, give up on students, or refer them to special education (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). Understanding this impact sheds light on the factors that can either facilitate or hinder the successful implementation of education changes.

Separate studies by Nunn and colleagues (2009) show that implementation of RTI has a significant impact on the development of teacher efficacy and found that increased teacher efficacy is associated with positive RTI outcomes. In one study, Nunn and Jantz (2009) surveyed nearly 500 K-12 teachers, administrators, and support professionals who received a yearlong RTI training. Teacher efficacy was quantitatively measured using

various survey scales. The study showed that implementing RTI had a significant positive impact on the development of teacher efficacy. Findings suggest that RTI implementation processes support educators in improving the development of competencies and perceptions of self-efficacy, ultimately leading to positive learning outcomes for students.

Another study by Nunn et al. (2009) examined the associations connected with RTI implementation, such as beliefs and perceptions of teachers, administration, and support professionals trained in RTI implementation over four years. The study employed two survey scale measures to examine the relationship between teacher efficacy and RTI outcomes. The results indicated increased teacher efficacy aligned with positive outcomes, including collaborative team processes, improved intervention outcomes, and greater satisfaction with achieved results. Together, these studies highlight the potential for structured, evidence-based frameworks like RTI to serve as a catalyst for enhancing teacher efficacy and supporting student learning.

Summary

This study employed Bandura's self-efficacy theory to explore the perspectives of specialized literacy professionals regarding their beliefs and abilities in implementing RTI for academics within an MTSS framework. Previous research indicates that highly effective teachers feel empowered to impact student success positively and are more receptive to adopting new instructional practices. Conversely, those with lower self-efficacy have limited confidence in promoting student learning (Guskey, 1988; Tschannen-Moran & Houy, 2001).

Therefore, this study examined how specialized literacy professionals perceive their efficacy beliefs and various factors influencing them. By utilizing Bandura's self-efficacy theory as a guiding framework, this research provides valuable insight into the perceptions and professional experiences of specialized literacy professionals. It contributes to an area that has not been extensively explored. Insights gained from this study contribute to a better understanding of the unique experiences and challenges of specialists, supporting improving the academic system for students.

Teacher Perspectives of RTI: Benefits and Challenges

As RTI outcomes are increasingly documented, researchers are also exploring the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of educators and administrators who assume various roles within RTI models. These studies have focused on the perceptions and experiences of both general education educators (e.g., Bineham et al., 2014; Braun et al., 2020; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Cowan et al., 2015; Greenfield et al., 2010; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Regan et al., 2015; Rinaldi et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2013) and special education educators (Bineham et al., 2014; Swanson et al., 2012; Werts, 2014) involved in implementing RTI models as a means of supporting struggling readers within elementary schools. Previous investigations on this topic have offered valuable insights into positive outcomes and perceived barriers on several aspects of RTI components in practice.

Several benefits associated with RTI implementation are frequently highlighted in the reviewed literature. These benefits include early identification of students' reading needs, the use of data to guide instruction and planning, and the use of progress monitoring data to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction and student progress (Cowan

et al., 2015; Greenfield et al., 2010; Regan et al., 2015; Rinaldi et al., 2011; Swanson et al., 2012; Werts et al., 2014; Wilcox et al., 2013). Teachers also acknowledged additional advantages, such as increased opportunities to work with colleagues during problem-solving and data meetings, implementing higher-quality instruction, and providing more comprehensive and differentiated instruction based on individual student needs (Greenfield et al., 2010; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Rinaldi et al., 2011; Werts et al., 2014; Wilcox et al., 2013).

Greenfield et al. (2010) emphasize that for multitiered frameworks to succeed, everyone involved must understand their schools' systems, structures, and roles. However, despite educators acknowledging the significance of RTI, a prevalent challenge is their need for sufficient knowledge about how and when to make changes to intervention programs and tiers. Implementation remains a persistent issue, further complicated by the continuous evolution of ideas on the subject (Burns et al., 2005; Fuchs et al., 2010; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012; Gersten & Dimino, 2006). For example, Braun et al. (2020) and Greenfield et al. (2010) conducted interviews with elementary teachers to explore their perspectives on the implementation of academic multitiered systems of support. The findings revealed that educators expressed confusion about the process due to frequent changes in the school-wide implementation protocols. Some teachers found it challenging to understand the model when applied across the school. While teachers recognized the effectiveness of Tier 2 and 3 interventions, they needed help distinguishing between the two support service levels (Greenfield et al., 2010).

Although many studies have found that teachers reported having a general understanding of RTI and its key components, such as administering assessments and

locating data (Greenfield et al., 2010; Regan et al., 2015; Wilcox et al., 2013), there are still significant challenges to the successful implementation of RTI in schools. Teachers have identified several perceived barriers to implementing RTI that can impact its effectiveness. For example, in several studies, elementary teachers reported that they can effectively carry out screening and progress monitoring to identify students with reading difficulties. However, educators feel unprepared or lack sufficient knowledge of how to use data obtained from these assessments to make instructional decisions related to instruction or determining student movement between tiers within the RTI model (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bruan et al., 2020; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Greenfield et al., 2010; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Regan et al., 2015; Wilcox et al., 2013). Concerns have been raised by Braun et al. (2020) and Meyer and Behar-Horenstein (2015) over the need for a more straightforward process for transitioning students from supplemental interventions to more intensive ones in Tier 3. Despite the effectiveness of interventions, teachers often struggle with the decision-making process regarding transition between tiers.

Another significant barrier to RTI implementation, according to multiple studies, is that elementary educators reported a lack of sufficient time as an obstacle in schools (e.g., Bruan et al., 2020; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Greenfield et al., 2010; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Regan et al., 2015; Werts et al., 2014; Wilcox et al., 2013). Specifically, teachers highlight a need for more time for planning, executing intervention practices, and managing data. They express limited time for completing other tasks related to RTI, including professional development and collaboration. While some educators note that allocated structured time is provided in the schedule for students to

have individualized and small group instruction, others described struggling with lost instructional time due to RTI intervention implementation or data collection.

Teachers also highlight frustration due to the limited access to resources and support for RTI, including professional development. Multiple studies have identified a lack of resources and appropriate materials to meet student's needs as a prevalent issue reported by elementary educators (Braun et al., 2020; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015). In addition, teachers report a lack of clarity about their school's system for intensifying interventions and insufficient resources and preparation in providing students with interventions when they are not responding in Tier 2 (Braun et al., 2020; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). Some teachers emphasize the need for more tangible and functional educational resources such as flowcharts, decision-making guides, and lists of research-based interventions (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015). Castro-Villarreal et al. (2014) highlight the lack of staff support available in providing interventions for school students as a significant barrier.

Bean and Lillenstein (2012) note the significance teachers place on the importance of shared expertise among educational personnel to benefit their students. Collaborating with individuals who possess diverse and specialized perspectives can provide valuable insights, suggestions, group support, and problem-solving opportunities. Similarly, Rinaldi et al. (2010) found that a collaborative RTI model gave participants greater autonomy, enhanced their efficacy as educators, and fostered a clear understanding of shared leadership. The study revealed that collaborative, data-informed practice is crucial to the successful and sustainable implementation of an RTI model. Such practices have the potential for a transformative shift in school culture and enhance

teachers' feelings of efficacy. Educators' perceptions of the RTI model emphasized the need for professional development focused on the core curriculum, data collection and analysis, collaborative problem-solving and teaching, teaching methodologies, and shared leadership.

Wilcox et al. (2013) similarly found the effectiveness of collaborative approaches within RTI, yet highlighted concerns about educators' readiness to engage in collaborative practices to increase student literacy achievement effectively. In a study by Braun and colleagues (2020), educators reported significant discrepancies over their roles within RTI and expressed a need for more clarity regarding how collaborations between educators should look. For example, the accountability of teachers has increased, but they may lack the knowledge and proficiencies to implement RTI components effectively (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Regan et al., 2015). Moreover, prior relationships may be altered due to educators' new roles and responsibilities.

Across studies, elementary educators indicated a significant need for professional development training in various RTI components (e.g., Bineham et al., 2014; Braun et al., 2020; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Cowan et al., 2015; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Regan et al., 2015; Werts et al., 2014). Teachers typically perceived professional development opportunities as instrumental, positive, and informative at school and individual grade levels (Greenfield et al., 2010). However, frustration is felt from inconsistent and complicated processes, along with inadequate training (Braun et al., 2020; Werts et al., 2014).

To date, some research has primarily investigated the researcher-driven implementation of RTI with substantial support provided through university-school

partnerships (Greenfield et al., 2010; Rinaldi et al., 2017). For these studies and others, this type of partnership plays a crucial role in facilitating and monitoring the adoption of RTI by involving elementary school educators in the planning and implementation of RTI while also providing the necessary professional development in quality core instruction, supplemental interventions, and peer coaching. Additionally, in many efficacy studies of supplementation interventions for at-risk readers, the treatment is often implemented by the researchers themselves, graduate students, or a few teachers or paraprofessionals trained by researchers. However, for many schools, extensive external support is not available.

Findings from these evaluations of RTI in practice suggest significant variance in implementing the framework, leading to inconsistencies in its effectiveness. In a 2015 evaluation of RTI, Balu and colleagues' assessment of RTI demonstrated a wide range of effectiveness among different schools. The authors found a lack of positive effects on student achievement for those receiving Tier 2 interventions. Additionally, the authors reported several issues surrounding how schools interpret and implement RTI. They identified factors such as misidentifying students needing intervention, a mismatch between intervention and student need, and a lack of alignment between core instruction and intervention as potential reasons for adverse outcomes. For example, 67% of schools reported that students were removed from core instruction to access Tier 2 intervention rather than receive it as a supplemental service (Balu et al., 2015). The challenges suggest that teachers are not entirely content with their experiences with RTI, which is likely to impact the effectiveness and sustainability of its implementation.

Significance of the Study

Many schools implement RTI to adequately support students' needs and determine appropriate special education placement. However, there is a lack of consistency in the implementation process across schools, which can result in varied levels of instruction and intervention. Although teachers' perceptions are valuable for effective implementation, they have yet to be extensively studied in RTI research (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015; Greenfield et al., 2010). Therefore, ongoing research should prioritize understanding specialized teacher's needs and perspectives to improve student outcomes and ensure the successful implementation of RTI practices.

Beyond perceptions of the framework itself, teacher self-efficacy significantly influences the successful implementation of the components of RTI (Thomas et al., 2020). Guskey's (1988) foundational study highlights that self-efficacy plays a vital role in shaping teachers' willingness to embrace and sustain educational innovations. Bandura (1977, 1997) defines self-efficacy as teachers' belief in their abilities to affect student learning outcomes. Isabell and Szabo (2015) emphasize how teachers' efficacy levels, particularly in working with at-risk students and adapting new skills, impact their efficacy in implementing RTI and their perceptions of its implementation. Furthermore, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) stress that teachers with high self-efficacy feel empowered to influence student success, while those with low self-efficacy lack confidence in promoting student learning. Consequently, teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to take risks and positively impact student outcomes. In contrast, those with low self-efficacy may adopt less impactful teaching practices, leading to lower student achievement.

Research Questions

Specialized literacy professionals (SLPs) in this research serve as instrumental in providing academic support for elementary students within a Northeastern public school district. This study aimed to explore the perspectives and professional experiences of SLPs in implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework. The investigation focused on understanding the roles, experiences, and perceptions of these professionals as they support students within the RTI-MTSS framework.

The study centered on the overarching question, "What are the experiences and self-perceptions of K-4 specialized literacy professionals implementing RTI within an MTSS framework?" The following constructs and sub-questions guided this study:

1. Defining Roles and Responsibilities within the RTI-MTSS Framework:

"How do K-4 specialized literacy professionals define their roles and responsibilities in implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework?"

2. Experiences within the RTI-MTSS Framework:

"What specific experiences do K-4 specialized literacy professionals encounter when carrying out their roles and responsibilities within the RTI-MTSS framework?"

3. Self-Efficacy in the Implementation of RTI Components:

"How do K-4 specialized literacy professionals perceive their self-efficacy in implementing RTI practices for students who are at risk of or experiencing reading difficulties?"

4. Factors Influencing Self-Efficacy in RTI-MTSS Implementation:

"What factors contribute to the perceived self-efficacy level of K-4 specialized literacy professionals in implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework?"

Definition of Terms

Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs): EBPs are instructional practices and programs proven effective through rigorous research and scientific evidence to affect student outcomes positively (Cook & Odom, 2013).

International Literacy Association (ILA) Standards: The knowledge, responsibilities, and roles necessary for a reading specialist to complete their job (IRA, 2010; ILA, 2018).

Literacy Coach: A teacher primarily focuses on improving classroom instruction by supporting teacher learning and facilitating school literacy program efforts (Bean & Kern, 2018).

Literacy Coordinator/Supervisor: A teacher primarily focuses on developing, leading, coordinating, and evaluating the school or district literacy program (Bean & Kern, 2018).

Reading/Literacy Specialist: A teacher primarily focuses on planning, teaching, and evaluating instruction for students experiencing difficulties with reading and writing (Bean & Kern, 2018).

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS): An educational framework that encompasses the academic and behavioral supports a child may need to succeed in school (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

Response to Intervention (RTI): RTI is a federal initiative that emerged from the reauthorization of IDEA and has implications for how schools identify and instruct students experiencing learning difficulties (Bean & Goatley, 2021).

Self- Efficacy: Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their ability to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1977).

Specialized Literacy Professionals (SLPs): SLP is an overarching or umbrella term to describe three significant roles in schools today including reading/literacy specialist, literacy coach, and school literacy coordinator/supervisor (Bean & Kern, 2018).

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United States, schools are increasingly adopting multi-tiered interventions in the primary grades as a part of Response to Intervention (RTI) initiatives (Berkeley et al., 2009). These frameworks provide targeted and individualized support to students facing academic or behavioral challenges. One aspect of these frameworks is the involvement of literacy professionals, who are essential in implementing student support systems. This literature review aims to synthesize relevant literature on the historical contexts of RTI, the models and components of RTI, including the tiered structure of instructional support, and meta-analysis research on reading interventions for elementary school students. Furthermore, this review will examine the roles and responsibilities of specialized literary professionals in the evolution of RTI. To present a comprehensive understanding of the topic, this review will draw upon diverse scholarly articles and research studies exploring the implementation of RTI in elementary education settings. Although this review will touch on RTI for behavior, its primary focus will be on RTI for reading support among elementary school schools.

Historical Context of Response to Intervention

The early 2000s marked a period of changes in US federal law, notably with the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 and the 2004 reauthorization of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004 PL 108-446). These legislative acts served as catalysts for education reform aimed at enhancing the academic performance of all students nationwide. The NCLB legislation amplified the federal government's responsibility to ensure students' academic progress and gained attention by establishing a rigorous accountability system for states and public

schools. This system involved rewards and sanctions based on student performance (Yell et al., 2006).

The primary focus on accountability set a goal for all students, including those identified as having special education needs and English language learners, to meet state-identified academic achievement standards by the conclusion of the 2013-2014 school year. Additionally, NCLB promoted evidence-based educational practices and mandated that all students be taught by highly qualified teachers and paraeducators (Simpson et al., 2004).

While NCLB saw accountability measures designed to target the needs of economically disadvantaged children, the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA aimed to enhance how public schools refer, identify, and serve students with disabilities. To achieve this goal, the IDEA emphasizes the procedural requirements of the special education process, aligning with NCLB's provisions, and revises special education eligibility criteria (Yell et al., 2006). Expanding the eligibility requirements, IDEA adopts a more comprehensive approach to identifying students with learning disabilities (LD). This increased flexibility allows for the use of multiple assessment measures instead of relying solely on a significant discrepancy formula between academic potential and academic achievement, as previously mandated in school districts (IDEA Regulations, 34 CFR § 300.307(a)(l)).

In place of evaluating a student's achievement and ability discrepancy, the proposal suggests using research-based interventions as part of the evaluation procedures. This approach aims to determine a student's response to instruction and to inform

decisions about special education eligibility (IDEA Regulations, 34 CFR § 300.307(a)(2)).

Researchers (e.g., Reschly, 1988; Reynolds et al., 1987) have identified several drawbacks of the traditional method of identifying LD, including methodological, theoretical, and practical challenges. The most problematic issue identified is the practice of waiting until a significant discrepancy emerges before a student becomes eligible for services, often referred to as a "wait to fail" approach (Bradley et al., 2007; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). This approach was viewed as harmful because it prevented students from receiving timely and necessary services that could have prevented academic or behavioral challenges.

Systems of Academic and Behavioral Response to Intervention

Several terms, including Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI; Bradley et al., 2007; Fuchs et al., 2003; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005), Response to Instruction (RTI; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003), Response to Intervention (RTI; Bradley et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2006) have been used to describe a prevention-oriented approach focusing on either academic or behavioral outcomes in students. In academic and behavioral contexts, RTI systems are defined as frameworks that provide a systematic approach to identify and address student needs across various levels of intensity within a multi-tiered service delivery system (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs et al., 2014; Sugai & Horner, 2006).

There are various approaches to implementing RTI models, which are best understood as a set of processes with differences in their implementation, including the

problem-solving approach and standard-protocol model (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Bineham et al., 2014). According to Vaughn and Fuchs (2003), effective intervention frameworks should encompass several key features, including screening all students for academic and behavioral concerns, monitoring the progress of at-risk students in identified areas, and providing increasingly intensive interventions based on progress monitoring assessments.

Models of Response to Intervention

While the term RTI gained prominence in the early 2000s, the use of response to instruction for eligibility determination has a longer history. Research by Bergan (1977) and Deno & Mirkin (1977) demonstrated the use of data-driven decision-making to establish measurable goals based on student functioning levels and to evaluate intervention effectiveness using student benchmarks (Bender & Shores, 2007). However, the processes involved in developing and assessing the impact of educational interventions are significantly different, particularly in how determinations are made about interventions, service delivery, and progress monitoring (Shores, 2009). These studies laid the groundwork for early research supporting RTI, specifically the emergence of two distinct RTI models: the problem-solving approach and the standard protocol model.

The Problem-Solving Approach to Response to Intervention

Bergan (1977) implemented a problem-solving model within RTI to address behavioral challenges among students in special education. Initially, the team defined and managed student concerns, establishing a baseline for their functioning and performance compared to their peers. Using a problem-solving process, the team analyzed data and

established student goals based on peer performance. Subsequently, they designed and implemented interventions utilizing evidence-based practices for behavioral change. These interventions were tailored to the specific needs of the students and monitored frequently for progress. Ultimately, the team made data-driven decisions for students based on the progress observed through the interventions. This team-based problem-solving approach evolved from this foundational design (Bender & Shores, 2007).

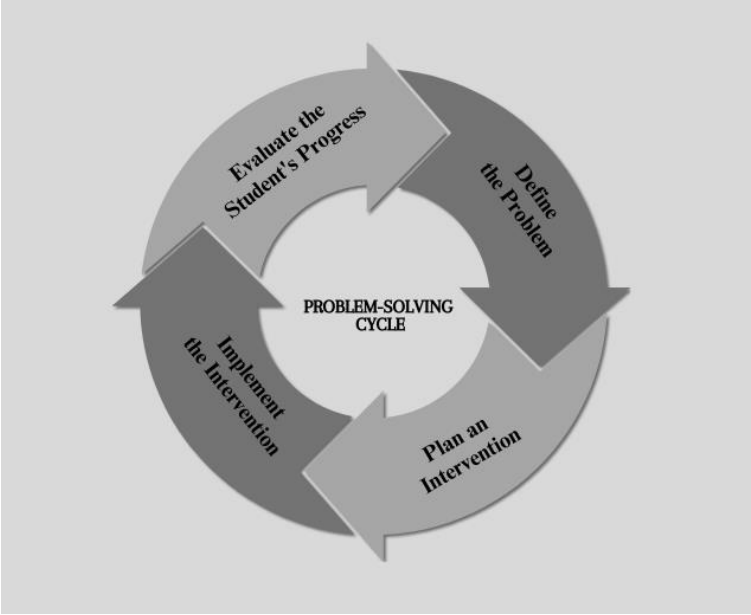
The problem-solving model has been widely replicated and refined and is commonly used in current academic and behavioral school approaches (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Shores et al., 2009). It emphasizes the importance of individualized decision-making and intervention implementation for each student while acknowledging that no specific student characteristic should determine the effectiveness of an intervention (Fuchs et al., 2003). This means that interventions are sensitive to the individualized needs of the targeted learner in terms of background knowledge, access to quality instruction, learning styles, and modalities.

The problem-solving approach within an RTI framework typically involves a multistage process, including problem identification, problem analysis, a targeted implementation plan, and plan evaluation (Erchul & Ward, 2016). This approach emphasizes early intervention services while attempting to integrate general and special education (Preston et al., 2016). Figure 1 illustrates the cyclical problem-solving process outlined by Bender and Shore (2007), involving four steps to determine the best course of action for the student. Foundationally, the problem-solving approach operates according to the idea that students may not require special education services if the most optimal general education is provided (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs et al., 2010). According to

Fuchs & Fuchs (2006), this approach requires a direct comparison between a student's performance level and learning rate with the expected performance of other students in the same classroom. The students' relative classroom performances, not merely test performance scores, determine responsiveness and, subsequently, the need for special education services.

Figure 1

The Problem-Solving Cycle



Note. The Response to Intervention problem-solving cycle. Adapted from Bender and Shores (2007).

The Standard Protocol Approach to RTI

In contrast, Deno and Mirkin (1977) took an alternative approach in their research and explored the impact of standard protocol interventions on students at risk for reading difficulties. Researchers in this study employed curriculum-based measurements to assess the growth of students' progress over time and evaluated the effectiveness of the

interventions. They developed an intervention plan targeting specific reading difficulties among students with reading disabilities. Termed as the *standard protocol treatment*, this method emphasizes the continuous comparison of students' past performance, allowing for frequent adjustments in instruction based on their responses (Bender & Shores, 2007).

As the name suggests, a standard protocol approach is an alternative to problem-solving methods and uses a predetermined set of interventions for all students with similar academic challenges (Erchul & Ward, 2016; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Preston et al., 2016). This approach tends to be more prescriptive and does not allow for individualizing interventions. Implementation of interventions in a standard protocol model usually involves a fixed duration (e.g., 10–15 weeks) delivered in small groups or individually (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). It often utilizes explicit instruction in a scripted or semi-scripted research-based program (Preston et al., 2016).

A Comparison of Models

The Problem Solving and Standardized Protocol models share similarities, such as using scientifically based interventions that target students' academic and behavioral needs with increasing intensity, all while monitoring progress to ensure student improvements and adjust instruction (Bender & Shores, 2007). However, they differ in several aspects, including the number of levels, who delivers the interventions, and whether the process serves as an evaluation for eligibility or the eligibility evaluation itself (Fuchs et al., 2003). Both models commonly refer to the increasing intensity of instructional interventions as *tiers* (Berkeley et al., 2009).

Both approaches are used in RTI models. Some districts employ problem-solving approaches tailored to individual student needs. In contrast, others use standardized

methods, selecting packaged interventions based on their efficacy in improving high-priority skills at various grade levels. Depending on the school district's philosophy of RTI, some may choose one model over the other, while others blend the aspects of both models (Preston et al., 2015). Fuchs et al. (2003) argue that the standardized protocol approach may be more advantageous than a problem-solving model due to more explicit implementation steps that promote clarity and consistency in the intervention, more accessible training for educators to conduct the intervention correctly, and accurate assessment.

Conversely, Shores (2009) suggests educators prefer the problem-solving model in schools because it allows more flexibility in interventions and focuses more on the student's needs. Ultimately, the choice of approach depends on the specific needs and resources within the schools or district. Fletcher & Vaughn (2009) suggest that implementing either model requires significant effort, including professional development, screening, and progress monitoring of students.

Response to Intervention for Academic Support

The RTI framework was initially conceptualized as an academic model that aimed to provide early intervention to address children's educational needs and, secondarily, serve as a tool to identify students with learning disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005, 2006; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). The 2004 IDEA promotes RTI implementation by allowing school districts to allocate up to 15% of their special education funding for early intervention support to students at risk for academic difficulties, even before they are identified as requiring special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). This

acknowledgment recognizes the importance of early identification, and support can prevent students from falling behind and needing more intensive interventions later.

RTI is widely perceived as a multi-tiered prevention model that includes at least three levels, or tiers, of increasing instructional support tailored to student needs (Bradley et al., 2005, 2007; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2013; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Extensive research supports RTI, showing substantial improvements in reading in both short- and long-term studies have shown dramatic increases in reading (e.g., Gersten et al., 2020; Scammacca et al., 2007, 2015; Slavin et al., 2011; Vaughn et al., 2006, 2009, 2010; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007; Wanzek et al., 2010, 2013, 2016, 2018) when interventions are delivered within an RTI model. Similar positive findings have demonstrated the effectiveness of the models for specific learning groups, including English language learners (Vaughn et al., 2006).

Components of Response to Intervention

While there are several models of RTI for academic development (Berkley et al., 2020), they share similar components. These include evidence-based practices, screening, progress monitoring procedures, and interventions with increasing intensity (Bradley et al., 2005; Mellard, 2017; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012; Shores, 2009).

Evidence-Based Practices

RTI highlights the use of Evidence-based practices (EBP) in education. EBPs are instructional practices and programs proven effective through rigorous research and scientific evidence to positively impact student outcomes (Cook & Odom, 2013). This approach is mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; P.L. 114-95), and educators agree that implementing practices shown by scientific research to cause

increased student performance reliably leads to better outcomes (Slavin, 2020). ESSA defines levels of evidence as *strong*, *moderate*, and *promising* for education programs (USDOE, 2015), emphasizing evidence-based interventions meeting *strong* and *moderate* levels of evidence based on the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards (U.S. ED, IED & What Works Clearinghouse, 2013).

Differentiating from previous approaches like best practices, identifying EBPs involves a rigorous and specific set of standards. According to Hosp et al. (2015), these standards require that an instructional practice or program meets specific requirements across several areas, including research design, student impact, and sources of evidence. The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), established by the United States Department of Education, offers a comprehension source for EBPs in education, promoting summaries of research on commercial programs. The WWC helps districts assess the level to which a program is supported by evidence as defined in ESSA. To address the need for standards tailored to special education, Gersten et al. (2005) and Horner et al. (2005) established criteria for identifying EBPs within special education. These standards play a role in identifying students who require special education services (Cook & Odom, 2013; Hosp et al., 2015).

EBPs are foundational within the RTI model, and they rely explicitly on how students respond to these practices. However, it is essential to recognize that only some practices will work for some students (Cook & Odom, 2013; Hosp et al., 2015). While specific instructional methods improve educational outcomes for most students receiving interventions, they might only benefit some students (Fuchs et al., 2012; Torgesen, 2000).

Assessments

Screening. To successfully implement RTI, the first step involves systematically screening all students for academic deficiencies. This is essential for identifying the students needing additional instruction while ensuring that those who do not need such services are not wrongly identified (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). The screening process is a way to target students who struggle to learn despite receiving high-quality education based on scientific evidence (Gersten et al., 2008). When a student's progress is insufficient, they are provided with more intensive instruction, another integral aspect of the RTI framework.

RTI employs an approach involving assessing students multiple times throughout the school year, often across various academic areas. Students identified as being at risk for learning difficulties receive additional evidence-based interventions in those areas. To assess academic functioning, this often takes the form of benchmark testing, which compares a student's performance with that of their peers or an established benchmark. Academic universal screening tools may be norm-referenced or criterion-referenced (Shores, 2009). Norm-referenced tools compare an individual's performance with their peer group, while criteria-referenced assessment tools compare performance with standards or benchmarks.

Numerous norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments are used in US schools. Curriculum-based measurement (CBM; Deno, 2003) is a widely used screening measure for academics that assesses skills and concepts, such as sound-letter fluency, word identification fluency, passage reading fluency (for grades 2-4), and maze fluency (for grades 5-7). More focused measures may target skills such as phonemic

segmentation and nonsense word fluency to identify students at risk of inadequate learning outcomes (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012; Fuchs et al., 2012).

Schools often utilize various published assessments, such as Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), AIMSweb, and FASTbridge. However, other measures, such as computer-adaptive assessments and existing data, such as state tests, are also used. Educators analyze this data to identify students needing more intensive intervention, followed by frequent progress monitoring and ongoing intervention decisions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). By using this approach, educators can ensure that students receive the appropriate support for academic success.

Progress Monitoring. Research on progress monitoring has primarily focused on reading in elementary grades (Hosp et al., 2015). Stecker and colleagues (2008) suggest that progress monitoring involves using a series of brief, repeated assessments to determine which students are meeting the expected curriculum standards. These assessments must be reliable, valid, brief, and sensitive to growth (Stecker et al., 2008). Combining progress monitoring procedures with universal screening data improves accuracy in identifying which students require additional intervention (Compton et al., 2010).

Progress monitoring data provides information on a student's current level of performance and their progress over time. Many of the measures used for universal screening can also be used for progress monitoring, but the frequency of assessments varies depending on the student's skill level. Generally, when the intensity of an intervention increases, the frequency of monitoring a student's process also increases. Progress monitoring assists teachers and other educators make decisions regarding

students' responses to evidence-based interventions across all tiers of the RTI framework (Stecker et al., 2008).

When setting yearly goals, a student's initial performance can be used to determine the expected rate of improvement needed to meet long-term outcomes. A teacher can compare a student's actual progress rate to their projected improvement rate to evaluate if the student is responding appropriately to the instructional program or intervention and is on track to meet long-term expectations. The resulting data is graphed, and a line of best fit is used to show the student's rate of improvement over time.

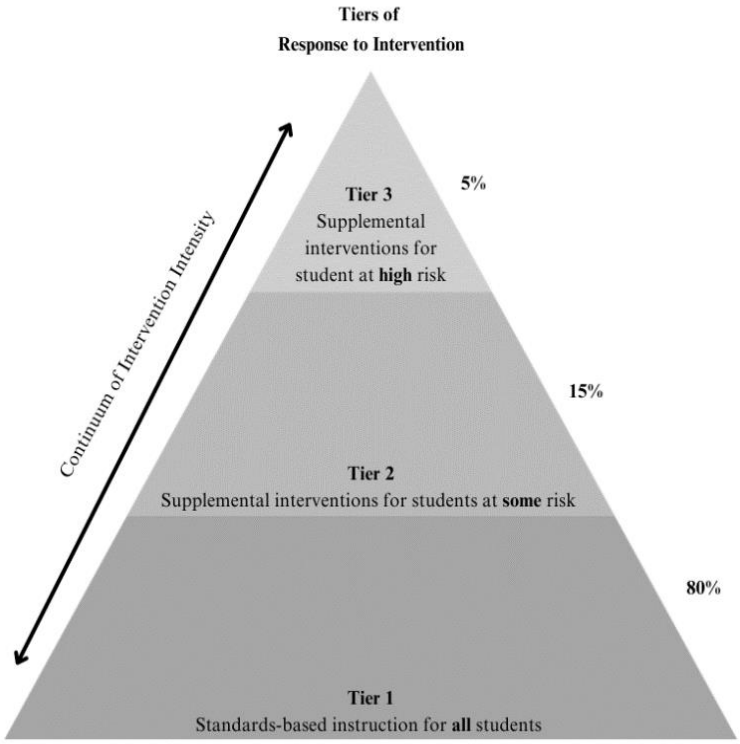
Tiers of Support with Increasing Intensity

One of the unique features of the RTI model is its ability to provide increasingly intensive support to students based on the severity of their needs. A tiered intervention system escalates in intensity according to student needs. Factors such as the type of instruction, size of the instructional group, and the intervention dosage are considered when considering intervention intensity (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2010b).

Multi-tiered systems are often illustrated using a pyramid (see Figure 2). While there are several variations of the triangle, the most common one uses three colors (e.g., green, yellow, and red) to indicate the level of prevention (e.g., primary, secondary, or tertiary). These colors also refer to types of support for groups of students (e.g., universal, targeted, or intensive) or tiers of instruction (e.g., Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3). Additionally, the labels for the levels are generally interchangeable since they all describe the function of multiple tiers. Numbered tiers are used here as label indicators for each level of the RTI model in this review.

Figure 2

Tiers of Response to Intervention



Note. The three tiers of Response to Intervention. Adapted from Bender and Shores (2007).

Tier 1. Educators and researchers commonly refer to classroom instruction as Tier 1 within the academic RTI model. In Tier 1, all students should have access to a high-quality curriculum. State standards should be taught with fidelity through research-based curriculum materials and strategies. Specifically, in the elementary grades, reading instruction should be explicit and emphasize phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2007). Extensive evidence shows that implementing validated practices targeting these skills within Tier 1 improves literacy outcomes (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012).

In Tier 1, most students will learn the necessary skills and thrive academically through the core instruction, with a relatively low percentage requiring more intensive levels of intervention (McMaster & Fuchs, 2016; Runge et al., 2016; Vaughn et al., 2009). Theoretically, all students are provided access to support through high-quality teaching by the general education teacher, using materials and strategies that are grounded in research (Shores, 2009). According to Shores (2009), Tier 1 instruction is typically sufficient to meet the academic needs of at least 80% of students.

However, even with a well-designed core curriculum, teachers may need to make modifications to meet the diverse needs of their students by adjusting or supplementing the curriculum (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Some students may find Tier 1 instruction too fast-paced, with insufficient practice or opportunities to respond, or do not focus enough on skills for each duration. To address these issues, the direct, explicit instructional model offers a framework for differentiation. This model involves teachers offering support for content, process, and production based on students' needs and setting aside time to work with small groups to bridge learning gaps (Buffum et al., 2010).

Tier 2. Tier 2 support is intended for students who have not responded to evidence-based benchmark goals or shown unsatisfactory growth rates in Tier 1 based on one or more data indicators. Beyond the universal level, instructional interventions should not replace the core curriculum but aim to enhance and supplement student learning (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Tier 2 typically involves approximately 15% of the student population and is meant for learners struggling with foundational skills who would benefit from targeted, small-group interventions.

Research has shown that small-group instruction can be highly effective in helping students master essential learnings (D'Agostino & Murphy, 2004; Vaughn, Gersten et al., 2000). The instruction should be systematic and interactive, focusing on the five areas of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, as outlined by the National Reading Panel (2000). According to Vaughn and colleagues (2010b), effective Tier 2 interventions must be intensive enough to allow students with reading difficulties to progress at an accelerated pace as compared to peers. At the same time, these interventions must be practical for teachers to implement and maintain over time.

Students at academic risk receive more intensive, research-based interventions with periodic progress monitoring checks. After providing Tier 2 instruction, educators evaluate student responsiveness. More specifically, performance must be identified as responsive or nonresponsive (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). To design an effective Tier 2 intervention, Wanzek and colleagues (2016) suggest teachers need to analyze reading and progress monitoring data to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and then make informed decisions about the content to target in an intervention. In addition, they must decide on the delivery of the intervention, such as the amount of time students will receive the intervention, the frequency of the intervention, and the size of the instruction group needed to provide explicit, targeted instruction, practice, and feedback to address the student's specific needs. Typically, this can occur three to five times per week, for 20-40 minutes per session, and incorporate frequent opportunities for practice with teacher feedback (Gersten et al., 2008).

Denton (2012) suggests various methods in which Tier 2 interventions are typically delivered, including by general education teachers, a reading specialist, or a paraprofessional providing small group instruction within or outside the regular classroom setting. If students meet the benchmark and growth rate goals, these services are removed, and student progress continues to be monitored in Tier 1.

Tier 3. Tier 3 represents the most intensive general education support available. Despite having access to evidence-based universal and supplemental academic instruction, struggling students may need to receive individualized instruction. Typically, this level of support encompasses approximately 5% of the student population. Like Tier 2, Tier 3 academic support is intended to supplement Tier 1 core instruction and provide increased frequency and instruction using evidence-based interventions that target specific skills to deficits. Educators implementing Tier 3 use ongoing progress-monitoring data to determine student responsiveness to increase or decrease intervention intensity (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017).

According to Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), intervention intensity can be increased in various ways, such as utilizing more teacher-centered, systematic, and explicit instruction, increasing its frequency or duration, reducing student group size, or enhancing educator expertise. A referral for special education services may be deemed appropriate if a student continues to demonstrate a lack of academic progress. Further, states can determine if a student qualifies for an individualized education program (IEP) for LD due to a lack of academic progress despite exposure to high-quality instruction under the IDEA.

Meta-Analysis Research on Reading Interventions in RTI

Schoolwide RTI models for literacy instruction are designed to address the large numbers of students struggling with reading in our schools by ensuring effective, evidence-based general education instruction, early identification of students struggling with reading, high-quality intervention, and progress monitoring for informed decision-making (Jimerson et al., 2016). As highlighted in this review, a key component of RTI models is interventions of increasing intensity for students who demonstrate an insufficient response to instruction (Bradley et al., 2005). There is a large and growing body of research supporting RTI for increasing academic achievement (Edmonds et al., 2009; Gersten et al., 2017b, 2020; Scammacca et al., 2007, 2015; Wanzek et al., 2010, 2013, 2016, 2018; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007). Both short- and long-term studies have shown increases in reading achievement when interventions are delivered through an RTI framework.

Several syntheses of research studies examining Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions and programs for students with reading difficulties have been completed in recent years. These syntheses have analyzed various interventions and programs designed to improve reading outcomes for students with reading difficulties or disabilities, including those targeting phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Additionally, as indicated by Burns et al. (2005), RTI implementation can effectively prevent academic failure and reduce the number of students identified with LD, ultimately improving student achievement and systemic outcomes. In a meta-analysis of RTI research, Burns and colleagues (2005) found that schools implementing RTI improved in unbiased estimates of the effect of student achievement and systemic

outcomes. The meta-analysis also found that less than 2% of students qualified for LD through RTI, a decrease from previous estimates of 6% of students who qualified for LD services.

Programs

Slavin and colleagues (2011) conducted a review to identify successful reading programs for students who struggle with reading. The researchers examined 70 studies on elementary school programs designed to help struggling readers in grades K-5. Studies that lasted at least 12 weeks were considered in the analysis. Based on the findings, the researchers identified several programs that effectively improved reading outcomes for learners. These programs included small group interventions (20 studies), one-on-one interventions typical for Tier 2 (20 studies), computer-based instruction (14 studies), and the effects of Tier 1 approaches such as whole-class teaching (16 studies).

The authors found that programs that concentrated on phonics, phonemic awareness, and reading comprehension strategies proved to be effective. Additionally, it was determined that one-on-one and small-group instruction and tutoring by teaching assistants and certified teachers produced positive results. The effects of these interventions varied from 0.09 for computer-based interventions to 0.56 for whole-class interventions. However, one-on-one and small-group interventions demonstrated effects of 0.39 and 0.31, respectively.

Interventions in the Primary Grades

Wanzek and Vaughn (2007) examined how extensive reading interventions (e.g., Tier 3) can help young students with reading difficulties or disabilities. The authors conducted a review that emphasized the need for RTI models in early elementary grades

to support struggling readers. The study focused on interventions that provided 100 or more sessions and identified the features associated with high effect sizes, such as group size, duration, and whether the intervention was standardized or individualized to meet student goals. Results from the review showed that students who participated in extensive early reading interventions demonstrated positive outcomes in reading achievement measures. The interventions were implemented mainly by trained school personnel who provided feedback on implementation.

Wanzek and colleagues conducted two meta-analyses of studies focusing on reading interventions for kindergarten through third-grade students. The first study, by Wanzek et al. (2016), looked at interventions that lasted less than 100 sessions (Tier 2). The authors reviewed 72 studies published between 1995 and 2013 that focused on Tier 2 type interventions, aiming to identify the overall effects of these interventions on students' foundational skills, language, and comprehension, as well as the intervention structures that may be associated with improved outcomes.

These interventions were found to have moderately positive effects on standardized and non-standardized measures of foundational reading skills, with a minor impact on standardized language and comprehension measures. The effectiveness of these interventions did not vary significantly based on the type of intervention, group size, grade level, implementer, or total hours of intervention provided. However, for students in the early stages of reading, the studies reviewed suggest that foundational reading skills instruction was found to be as effective as multi-component interventions that included both foundational reading skills and comprehension and language instruction. This review also found researchers, general education teachers, special

education teachers, reading specialists, and paraprofessionals responsible for implementing the interventions.

The second study by Wanzek and colleagues (2018) was a review built upon previous work by Wanzek and Vaughn (2007). This review focused on intensive early reading interventions, specifically those provided at Tier 3 with students in grades K-3 who experienced persistent reading difficulties. Like previous research in 2007, the interventions reviewed were delivered for at least 100 sessions. The researchers looked at 25 studies published from 1995 to 2015 and the effects of the interventions on various reading outcomes, including word reading, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and spelling. Findings using robust variance estimation (Hedges et al., 2010) showed effect sizes ranging from moderate to large, with certain features of interventions, such as individualized instruction, explicit and systematic instruction, and the use of multiple modalities to be associated with larger effect sizes. The authors concluded the review with a recommendation for more research on these intensive interventions' most effective components and features.

Balu and colleagues (2015) conducted a national study to examine the impact of multi-tiered support systems on reading. The researchers identified 146 RTI schools in 13 states implementing RTI for at least three years and used reading instructional practices recommended by the Institute of Education Sciences. The study aimed to document the variation in RTI implementation across the schools and to explore how they allocated resources.

The national evaluation sought to answer whether using class-wide screening with a benchmark for designating students for Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention increases students'

performance on a comprehensive reading measure at the end of the year. Surprisingly, the findings showed no statistically significant benefits for second or third-grade students on a comprehensive reading measure. There were adverse effects for students assigned to Tier 2 or 3 in first grade. These results raised concerns about the study's design among the research community (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Gersten et al., 2017a, 2020).

Collaborators on the outcome study (Gersten et al., 2017a) offered some explanations from observations of implementation that likely influenced the findings from Balu and colleagues (2015). For example, 60% of classrooms reported that students missed some reading instruction, Tier 2 reading interventions replaced rather than supplemented Tier 1 instruction for over half of the students, and too many first-grade students received the intervention (41% compared with 20% recommendation by experts).

Following findings from the national evaluation using intensive reading intervention in an RTI model failed to show positive impacts (Balu et al., 2015), a review was conducted by Gersten and colleagues (2017b) aimed at evaluating the research literature from 2002 to 2014 on evidence supporting reading intervention from students in grades one through three who are at risk for struggling with typically classroom reading instruction. This review focused on Tier 2 interventions that provided preventive services to students for reading difficulties with typical classroom reading instruction (e.g., Tier 1). The team identified and analyzed 20 interventions that met the evidence standards of the What Works Clearinghouse.

Results revealed that all but one of the 20 interventions demonstrated positive or potentially positive effects in at least one area of reading performance, with the strongest

effects seen in word and pseudo-word reading. Several interventions positively affected reading comprehension and reading passage fluency, but no effects were found for vocabulary. The authors noted that most interventions included a component not typical of current school practices, such as ongoing support for the individual delivering the intervention, including the teacher, paraeducator, or research member (Gersten et al., 2017b).

In 2020, Gersten and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis to review the most recent literature on the effectiveness of reading interventions for students at risk of reading difficulties in grades one through three. The goal of the review was to determine how intervention and study variables impact the effectiveness of these interventions on measures of word and pseudoword reading, reading comprehension, and reading passage fluency. Like Wanzek and colleagues (2018), this review used RVE to analyze a set of studies that had not been previously examined this way. Results from 33 studies conducted between 2002 and 2017 that met WWC evidence standards revealed a mean effect size of 0.39, indicating that students from Grades 1, 2, and 3 who score in the at-risk category on a screening test do, on average, benefit from the set of reading interventions studied (Gersten et al., 2020).

A researcher, certified teacher, or paraprofessional delivered the reviewed interventions in one-on-one or small-group settings. Additional support was given to the interventionalist in 21 out of 33 studies, and almost half of the studies utilized scripted interventions. All interventions addressed aspects of foundational reading, including phonological awareness, decoding, and passage reading fluency, with a majority using systematic, explicit instruction. The average effect size was 0.46 for one-on-one

instruction and 0.31 for small groups (Gersten et al., 2020). Grouping facilitated effects for Grade 1 but not for Grades 2 and 3. Therefore, it may be more beneficial for beginning readers to receive one-on-one instruction or for small groups to be more homogeneous in their knowledge and skills (Al Otaiba et al., 2014). One interesting finding is the potential impact of the interventionalist on student reading achievement. Unlike previous studies (e.g., Slavin et al., 2011), interventions delivered by certified teachers or paraprofessionals did not produce significantly different effect sizes.

Interventions in the Upper Elementary and Beyond

Recent research has explored the effectiveness of Tier 2 and Tier 3 reading interventions for struggling readers beyond third grade, including middle and high school students. This research (e.g., Edmonds et al., 2009; Scammacca et al., 2007, 2015; Wanzek et al., 2010, 2013). The findings indicate that these interventions can significantly impact reading outcomes for struggling readers, even in upper elementary grades and beyond.

It is essential to provide targeted and effective interventions for struggling readers throughout their academic careers beyond early elementary grades. Beginning in upper elementary grades, where the focus for learners shifts from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," struggling readers who have not yet mastered decoding or have fluent reading may find comprehension skills challenging. Therefore, teachers in upper elementary grades and beyond must intervene for students identified for or at risk for reading difficulties. To support educators in this task, guidance documents (e.g., Torgesen et al., 2007; Kamil et al., 2008) are available for interventions with students who read below grade level).

Response to Intervention for Behavior

The reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004 also highlighted the importance of evidence-based behavioral interventions that utilize multiple levels of support and response to prevent problem behaviors and address the educational requirements of students with serious behavioral challenges (Sugai & Horner, 2009). This has led to schools increasingly adopting schoolwide prevention models to promote a positive school environment and reduce discipline issues (Bradshaw et al., 2010). One such model is the school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2006, 2009), which aims to improve a school's ability to prevent and provide support for students' social-emotional needs and prevent challenging behaviors from persisting.

PBIS is a framework that utilizes evidence-based practices within a tiered continuum of support for students. It relies on systems of support staff in the implementation and uses data to inform decisions (McIntosh & Goodman, 2018). PBIS is considered an RTI approach to social and emotional behavior rather than a specific program or curriculum. The goal is to improve learning environments by increasing the time students are in school, the proportion of time students are engaged in instruction, and the level of academic engagement during instruction (Sugai & Horner, 2009). PBIS is associated with an increased positive school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2009), with a growing body of research that supports the efficacy of PBIS in reducing suspensions and office discipline referrals, promoting school safety and health, and supporting increases in academic achievement (Bradshaw et al., 2009, 2010).

Ongoing research supports the idea that the most effective strategy for promoting positive behavior in schools is to focus on expectations and consequences. This concept

forms the basis of positive behavioral approaches through RTI. Multi-tiered models for developing social-emotional and behavioral competence incorporate a continuum of behavior support to prevent, respond to, and reduce challenging behaviors (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). This effective method of intervention support is not concerned with just the short-term goal of stopping inappropriate behaviors but, instead, has a long-term goal of positively impacting the student's life and behavior (Applebaum, 2009). This is accomplished through increasingly intensive support, or tiers, and data-based decision-making (Shores, 2009).

Tiers of Behavioral Interventions in RTI

The first tier of the PBIS continuum supports students and staff in all areas of the school. This involves establishing a foundation of rules, routines, and consistent physical arrangements throughout the school. For example, a few positively stated behavioral expectations of being respectful, safe, and responsible are explicitly taught to all students using systematic procedures (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). These expectations are reinforced by school staff, and students are frequently recognized and rewarded for meeting them. A continuum of consequences is also implemented for unacceptable behavior. However, some students may require additional support, leading to Tier 2 PBIS interventions, which provide structured behavior interventions, frequent feedback, and adult monitoring. These students may also receive systematic teaching of socio-emotional skills, such as appropriate peer engagement or skillful strategies to resist impulsive reactions.

The focus of Tier 3 in the PBIS model is on students who demonstrate ongoing patterns of problem behavior. Interventions are individualized and highly intensive,

aimed at meeting the specific needs of each student (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). The most common form of assessment used in Tier 3 behavioral planning is a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA; Shores, 2009), a process of gathering data to determine why a behavior occurs within a setting. An FBA also examines events and consequences that predict and sustain inappropriate behavior (Runge et al., 2016).

Shared Connections between Academic RTI and PBIS

Although RTI has traditionally been used to describe an academic model and PBIS a behavioral model, they share common characteristics, including a tiered system of support, evidence-based practices, and data-based and team-driven decision-making structures (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Both approaches prioritize prevention over treatment and emphasize the importance of effective instruction. McIntosh and Goodman (2016) suggest that the fundamental philosophy of both models is that preventing problems is more effective for students than reacting to them. The instructional focus for these models is founded on principles of effective instruction, with an emphasis on differentiated instruction necessary to provide a continuum of support. Researchers have emphasized integrating academic and behavioral models in RTI programs (Horner et al. (2005). It is challenging to separate academic and behavioral difficulties; therefore, support should be integrated to enable students to reach their full learning potential (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

In a meta-analysis by Stewart and colleagues (2007), researchers compared the effectiveness of reading-only, behavior-only, and comprehensive, integrated models. They found that students made more significant gains in reading and behavior when exposed to the comprehensive model. Combining these two approaches into a single

comprehensive RTI model can provide appropriate support to students who exhibit deficits in either or both areas. This approach ensures that students receive the necessary interventions to address their academic or behavioral needs.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports

In recent years, legislation has brought more variability to the education system, with the introduction of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2016. ESSA replaced the NCLB, marking another significant shift in education policy. One of the significant changes the ESSA implemented was a renewed importance on using schoolwide support to improve student outcomes, including academics and behavior. These support systems, knowns as *multi-tiered system of support* (MTSS), are a comprehensive range of evidence-based practices that allow educators to respond to the unique needs of students while incorporating frequent observation and data analysis to inform instructional decisions (ESSA, SEC. 8101. [20 U.S.C. 7801]). Although the new, yet familiar term "multi-tiered system of support" was introduced in the legislation through ESSA, its implementation is not federally mandated and, therefore, left open for states and districts to develop. Including MTSS in ESSA also means that districts can receive funding for its implementation.

Several researchers (Burns et al., 2015; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016) define MTSS by its integration of two or more intervention service delivery models, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RTI), along with other social and emotional learning initiatives into a single, tiered prevention and intervention framework and embraces the whole child approach to teaching and learning (see Figure 3). At the core of MTSS is a data-informed decision-

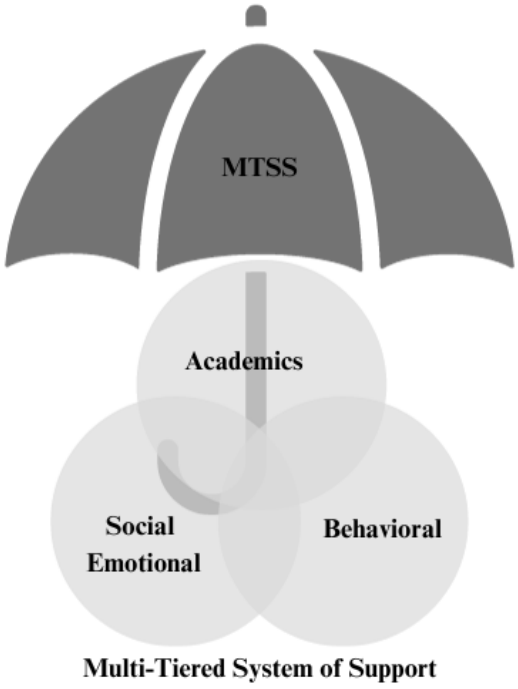
making process that guides differentiated instructional supports based on students' specific needs (Gartland & Strosnider, 2020; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016).

The primary aim of MTSS is to effectively organize resources available in a system or program to meet the diverse needs of all students and promote academic achievement and prosocial behavior (Bahr et al., 2021). Researchers contend that these intervention service delivery models help to promote uniformity across schools, provide early intervention to students, abide by state guidelines, and recognize that academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional difficulties tend to be interconnected and often do not function independently of one another (Harn et al., 2015; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

According to a systematic review by Berkeley et al. (2020), multi-tiered frameworks have become essential in organizing instruction, especially in elementary schools. A review of 50-state education agency websites found that all states supported at least one initiative or provided guidance on implementing tiered support systems in some capacity. MTSS models were more prevalent than RTI models, with five additional states using the terms RTI and MTSS interchangeably, and four states had developed their unique tiered model. However, the study also revealed that the different names given to states' models do not always accurately reflect their similarities and differences (Berkeley et al., 2020).

Figure 3

Multi-Tiered System of Support Model



Note: The integrative model of Multi-Tiered System of Support. Adapted from McIntosh and Goodman (2016).

RTI and Specialized Literacy Professionals (SLPs)

In 1998, the National Research Council released a report titled Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow et al., 1998), emphasizing the importance of improving the quality and effectiveness of reading programs and instruction for young children. This highlighted the significance of investing in knowledgeable teachers with experience and expertise in teaching reading effectively. The report also suggested the need for in-school specialists with specialized training related to addressing reading difficulties to support students and teachers. Although working with students has been the primary role of the reading specialist, their roles and responsibilities have evolved over

time (Bean et al., 2003; Dole, 2004; Kern, 2011). While often perceived differently by different professionals, the research on the roles and responsibilities of reading specialists suggests that they have traditionally assumed many essential responsibilities (Quatroche et al., 2001).

As emphasized in this review, RTI provides a consistent and flexible model for identifying students struggling with reading early and appropriately. It requires collaboration between experts, such as literary specialists and classroom teachers, to implement components of the framework. By utilizing RTI, literacy professionals and classroom teachers can provide a series of increasingly targeted interventions to assess literacy strengths and challenges exhibited by students in hopes of providing instruction that meets their needs outside of a special education setting (IRA, 2010). This framework may require school districts to rethink the reading specialist's role based on the school's unique needs and contexts.

The Evolution of Specialized Literacy Professionals

The Remedial Reading Teacher. The beginning efforts to define the role of the reading specialist can be traced back to an article written by E.W. Dolch, who emphasized the need for a remedial reading specialist to work with students experiencing difficulties with reading (Dolch, 1940). Later, Robinson (1958) conducted a study that investigated the titles used to identify the remedial reading teacher and discovered a range of labels being used, including *reading specialist*, *reading supervisor*, *reading consultant*, *reading coordinator*, and *director of reading*. Interestingly, the study revealed that the different titles did not necessarily indicate differences in duties.

The 1960s introduced a new title for the reading teacher as legislation increased the accountability placed on school academic instruction. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; Public Law No. 89-10) was enacted and provided significant funding for additional support to economically deprived students. In the initial conceptualization of this program, eligible students were to be taught by a reading specialist using materials and resources purchased with Title I funds. The program evolved from a specific specialized program for at-risk students into a pull-out program for struggling readers (Dole, 2004).

Under this model, the Title I teacher would take struggling readers out of their regular education classroom and provide small group reading instruction in an alternative location. However, research has shown limited success in these pull-out programs due to inconsistencies between classroom instruction and pull-out programs, resulting in fragmented teaching, classroom instruction loss, and reduced reading and writing time. (Allington, 1994). This prompted a shift for reading specialists to work alongside classroom teachers to connect the learning students were receiving in pull-out to what they learn in their classroom. Collaboration emphasizes sharing approaches, materials, and resources between the literacy specialist and the classroom teacher (Dagen & Bean, 2020).

Around the same time as the implementation of ESEA, the International Reading Association (IRA, now known as the International Literacy Association, ILA) established the first set of minimum standards for the professional training of reading specialists. These standards were developed by the Professional Standards and Ethics Committee and approved by the Board of Directors of the International Reading Association (Dietrich,

1967). At the time, five clarification categories of roles for reading specialists were decided, and duties were detailed, including the *reading teacher*, *reading consultant*, *reading coordinator*, *reading clinician*, and *college instructor*. States used these standards to establish guidelines for certification for reading specialists, by colleges developing training programs, and by teachers and administrators preparing for positions within schools (Kern, 2011).

In 1984, the introduction of Reading Recovery, a one-to-one intervention for the lowest achieving first graders, began in the United States and significantly influenced the role of reading specialists. The implementation of Reading Recovery required many school districts to invest Title I money into professional development for teachers. As a result, many reading specialists were trained to be Reading Recovery teachers working primarily at the elementary grade levels. However, this precipitated a shift of teachers into elementary schools and left districts with limited funds to provide reading support instruction to students in upper elementary through high school grades (Kern, 2011).

The Diverse Roles of the Reading Specialist. Several significant studies have highlighted that reading specialists assume multiple roles and responsibilities in schools, which often depend on the needs of the student population and teachers in the district (IRA, 2000). These roles can be both informal and formalized leadership positions. Bean's (1979) seminal study highlighted the variability of the role, from those who only work with children and those who function primarily as a resource to teachers or administrators without working with children. However, years later, Bean et al. (2002) found that over 90% of U.S. reading specialists reported being involved with instructing students daily. The same percentage indicated they spent some time of the day serving as

a resource to teachers. Almost all were engaged to some degree in curriculum development and worked alongside other in-school professionals (Bean et al., 2002).

Bean and Lillenstein (2012) conducted a study in five schools using an RTI framework to learn about how various specialized literacy professionals functioned. They found that specialized provided focused, frequent interventions for selected students and informal support to teachers, working collaboratively with them. Results also showed they functioned as a team with coaches and other educational professionals in the schools to make decisions about how to support instruction at all levels (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

The Dual Role. In the 1980s and 1990s, the role of the reading specialist underwent a significant change as they began to work more closely with teachers in the classroom to develop effective instructional strategies for struggling readers (Dole, 2004; Dole et al., 2006; Quatroche et al., 2001). A study conducted by Bean and colleagues (1995) indicated that while reading specialists performed various tasks, they generally had a positive outlook on their role but expressed frustration and confusion about the duties they were asked to perform. In addition to their instructional role, participants indicated that they had more responsibilities as a resource or leader to others and felt unprepared to take on more responsibilities (Bean et al., 1995).

Given these changes and ongoing concern for how reading specialists were functioning in schools, the ILA appointed a commission to obtain empirical evidence that would support the development of a position statement on the role of the reading specialist in school settings (IRA, 2000). The research resulted in the following findings: (a) reading specialists assume multiple responsibilities; (b) many reading specialists work

collaboratively with classroom teachers as a resource and for the school in performing administrative tasks; and (c) reading specialists are viewed as having an essential impact on the success of the literacy program (Bean et al., 2002, 2003; Quatroche et al., 2001).

These findings supported the IRA Position Statement *Teaching All Children to Read: The Roles of the Reading Specialist* (2000), identifying the primary responsibilities of the reading specialist. The specified duties included instruction, diagnosis, assessment, and leadership (IRA, 2000). The IRA also recommended that every school in the United States, including middle and high schools, have at least one qualified reading specialist as a core member of its educational team (Kern, 2011).

The *Standards for Reading Professionals-Revised (*2003) acknowledged the findings of Quatroche et al. (2001). They supported the stance of reading specialists as a teacher leader through the new title of reading/literacy coach. Also labeled as a dual role, the reading specialist/literacy coach role subsumes the numerous roles held by the reading specialist (Kern, 2011). Reading specialists can use their knowledge of literacy learning to inform their role as collaborative consultants. Jaeger (1996) posits that reading specialists need certain qualities to function effectively as collaborative consultants, including having a wealth of knowledge and experience that can be shared with students and teachers and a commitment to the instructional change process.

The Coaching Role. Although many reading specialists routinely held responsibilities for working collaboratively with classroom teachers, the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and its Reading First Initiative highlighted the need for continuous, job-embedded, professional learning for teachers. At this time, schools began to employ reading/literacy coaches responsible for working with teachers to assist

in implementing the reading program as indicated by legislation. Those who had served as reading specialists were frequently assigned to this new position and asked to assume a more active teacher-oriented role. Studies around this time found that reading specialists took responsibility for schoolwide literacy improvement for all students (Allington & Walmsley, 1995; Bean et al., 2002; Quatroche et al., 2001).

Often, teachers were not prepared to handle these coaching responsibilities and were assigned to perform in this role, leading to significant variation in how these newly appointed coaches functioned in schools (Ippolito et al., 2019). According to Frost and Bean (2006), the "gold standard" for a literacy coach is obtaining a reading specialist certificate and experience as a classroom teacher with coaching and leadership skills. However, Bright and Hensley (2010) found that the percentage of individuals possessing an advanced degree or credential as a reading specialist or endorsement certification showed results as low as 16% to as high as 80% in various states.

Given the newness of this role, schools struggled to define clearly what these professionals should do and how coaches should best allocate their time (e.g., the amount of time working with teachers and classroom-related activities). Deussen et al. (2007) found that, on average, literacy coaches spent only 28% of their time working with teachers, not 60-80% as envisioned. In perhaps the most comprehensive study of the roles and responsibilities of the literacy coach, the *Reading First Implementation Evaluation Final Reports* (Moss, 2008) revealed several critical duties of the literacy coach's role, including interpreting assessment results, designing, and monitoring the effectiveness of strategies for struggling readers, and observing and providing feedback to teachers. Deussen and colleagues (2007) reported five categories to place coaches based on their

roles and functions: data-oriented, student-oriented, managerial, individual teacher-oriented, or teacher-group-oriented. Most significant of these findings related to the correlation between the state where the coach worked and the most common categories. This suggests that a state's guidance on the coach's role influences the literary coach's work.

Later, as states and school districts adopted the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Associations and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), emphasis was placed on literacy as an essential element of instruction in academic disciplines in K-12 schools. Coaches were needed to work with teachers to support them in implementing literacy across the curriculum.

In synthesizing the literature on literacy coaches, L'Allier et al. (2010) also exemplified the complexity and variability involved with being a literacy coach. Researchers attempted to guide a historically varied role in content by identifying seven guiding principles for literacy coaches. The following guidelines were developed to suggest what literacy coaches need in terms of qualifications and how they should spend their time. They include: (1) coaching requires specialized knowledge, (2) time spent working directly with teachers as a focus, (3) collaborative relationships are essential, (4) coaching needs to support student reading achievement, (5) coaches need to be intentional and flexible, (6) coaches must be literacy leaders in the school, and (7) coaching evolves (L'Allier et al., 2010). Bean et al. (2015b) studied the sustainability of Reading First in elementary schools in two different states. Results identified coaching as a positive approach to providing job-embedded professional learning experiences for teachers.

The Influence of IRA/ILA on the Role of SLPs

Since 2000, there have been many questions related to the reading specialist and the literacy coach's roles: Are they distinct? What are the overlaps? How should these professionals be prepared? Due to the increasing complexities of these specialized positions, the writers of the Standards for Reading Professionals-Revised 2010 (IRA, 2010) recognize that a reading specialist/literacy coach might serve as a teacher for students experiencing reading difficulties, reading or literacy coach, coordinator of reading and writing programs, or a combination of both roles.

Similarly, Galloway and Lesaux (2014) synthesized research on the roles of reading specialists. They found that these professionals did much more than instruct struggling readers; they held multiple roles that required them to assume leadership positions in the school. These included analyzing data to guide instruction, address the needs of students at all levels, and serve as a resource for teachers (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014).

Likewise, Bean and colleagues (2015a) conducted a second national study investigating the responsibilities, leadership views, and teacher preparedness for these roles. Survey results from more than 2,500 respondents representing every U.S. state indicated the presence of district role groups, identified as those who worked primarily with students (interventionalists and specialists), with teachers (coaches), and those who ran or developed literacy programs (coordinators/supervisors).

The findings of this national study served as the foundation for a position statement by the International Literacy Association (ILA) about the distinctions among three specific roles: reading/literacy specialist, literacy coach, and literacy

coordinator/supervisor (ILA, 2015a). This position statement and its accompanying research brief (ILA, 2015b) were used to guide the development of the *Standards for the Preparations of Literacy Professionals* 2017 (ILA, 2018).

Given significant research evidence that indicates distinctions among these roles (Bean et al., 2015a; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014), a goal of the 2017 Standards was to identify more clearly the responsibilities of these professionals and the necessary skills, and knowledge for them to be successful (Bean & Kern, 2018). Another goal of the 2017 Standards was to reflect current research and literature about literacy, professional development, and the critical role of the many professionals involved with literacy instruction (Bean & Kern, 2018). The term *specialized literacy professional* was also coined as a new, overarching term to describe the work of all school professionals who specifically support the literary instructional work done in schools.

Since the publication of the International Literacy Association (ILA) foundational findings and position statement distinguishing the roles of reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators/supervisors in 2015, there has been an effort to further investigate and understand the evolving role of specialized literacy professionals. Bean et al. (2018) explored how school principals view the contributions, roles, and challenges of SLPs within schools. Findings indicated that principals viewed reading/literacy specialists as working primarily with students and coaches as working primarily with teachers, which is consistent with the results of the national study (Bean et al., 2015). Additionally, principals viewed both specialists and coaches as integral to supporting teachers and students in literacy teaching and learning.

Summary

This literature review aims to comprehensively evaluate relevant literature on Response to Intervention in elementary education, primarily focusing on RTI for reading support. The review covers the historical contexts of RTI, various models and components of RTI, and research on reading interventions for elementary school students. The review also synthesizes literary professionals' historically evolving roles and responsibilities. This is important to understand because literacy professionals play a critical role in supporting students' literacy development. Specialized literacy professionals have a unique skill set and knowledge base that allows them to provide targeted instruction and support to students who need support with reading. Additionally, their responsibilities are expanding beyond providing direct instruction to students to collaborate with other teachers and provide professional development opportunities for others.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to explore the perspectives and professional experiences of specialized literacy professionals (SLPs) implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) components within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. Conducted within an American Northeastern school district, this research focused on their self-efficacy in implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) components with students at risk of or experiencing reading difficulties. The study explored the roles and responsibilities, experiences, self-perceptions, and influencing factors for these professionals in the RTI-MTSS framework. Notably, all participants held the position of specialized literacy specialists under the title of "academic instructional specialist" in this study.

The study centered on the overarching question, "What are the experiences and self-perceptions of K-4 specialized literacy professionals implementing RTI within an MTSS framework?" This study was approached by the following constructs and sub-questions:

1. Defining Roles and Responsibilities within the RTI-MTSS Framework:
   "How do K-4 specialized literacy professionals define their roles and responsibilities in implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework?"
2. Experiences within the RTI-MTSS Framework:
   "What specific experiences do K-4 specialized literacy professionals encounter when carrying out their roles and responsibilities within the RTI-MTSS framework?"
3. Self-Efficacy in Implementation of RTI Components:

"How do K-4 specialized literacy professionals perceive their self-efficacy in implementing RTI practices for students who are at risk of or experiencing reading difficulties?"

4. Factors Influencing Self-Efficacy in RTI-MTSS Implementation:
   "What factors contribute to the perceived self-efficacy level of K-4 specialized literacy professionals in implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework?"

Methodology

The qualitative research study utilized the transcendental phenomenology methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological research methodology aligns well with this study, as it allows for an investigation of the individuals' lived experiences on a particular phenomenon of interest (Daly, 2007). This methodological approach seeks to understand how individuals perceive and interpret the world around them and offers a means to explore subjective beliefs, such as self-efficacy, in greater depth.

Transcendental phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994), aims to describe the essence of a phenomenon or experience as individuals carry it out. This involves bracketing or setting aside preconceptions and focusing solely on individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Peoples (2021) stresses the significance of meaning-making in phenomenological inquiry, emphasizing that it is confined to the construct of experience. Therefore, researchers aim not to uncover universal meaning but to grasp the meaning individuals derive from their experiences.

A qualitative transcendental phenomenological design allows for analyzing multiple experiences within a similar context, enabling certain generalizations about a

specific experience. In this study, the researcher gathered data from specifically chosen participants with hands-on experiences implementing RTI as specialized literacy professionals. The analysis process entailed identifying significant statements and categorizing them into themes. By employing both textual and structural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), a comprehensive understanding of the participant's experiences was achieved.

Moreover, adopting a transcendental phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to identify personal biases and consciously set them aside during the study, a process known as bracketing or epoche, meaning to refrain from judgment (Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2021). This way, researcher bias is not eliminated but is suspended to focus on experience analysis.

Role of the Researcher

In my current role as a specialized literacy professional and as an active researcher, my involvement in this study is shaped significantly by these two roles. With sixteen years of teaching experience, I have gained invaluable insights and experiences in elementary education. At the same time, my research interests have provided me with a different perspective through which to view educational practices and challenges. This dual perspective forms the foundation of my approach throughout this study.

Notably, rapport with the participants had been established previously through my role as a teacher. These connections were crucial for fostering open and authentic engagement during this study. I acknowledge the biases and perspectives derived from my professional background and approach this research with a commitment to maintaining reflexivity.

As the primary source of data collection, I actively engaged in bracketing through journaling and memoing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to deliberately set aside my personal beliefs, biases, and preconceptions regarding implementing components of RTI within an MTSS framework. This step allowed me to approach data collection and analysis with an open and unbiased perspective. Maintaining this ongoing self-awareness was essential for recognizing and addressing potential personal influences and refraining from adding my interpretation to the data.

Reflexivity, as emphasized by Litchman (2012), serves as an essential self-examination process enabling researchers to dive deeper into their own assumptions, beliefs, and interactions within the research context. This approach is critical for identifying and addressing the subjective elements that the researcher brings into the research study, thereby enhancing the integrity and depth of the research findings.

Sample Characteristics

In its broadest conceptualization, the study aimed to address the target population of K-12 in-service specialized literary professionals in the United States. However, due to the significant challenges of the size of the population of interest, the researcher selected a specific sample of participants to narrow the research scope and increase the study's feasibility. The investigation centered on specialized literacy professionals working in elementary schools within a specific school district in the American Northeast.

The literature review identifies three major roles within schools today that are categorized as specialized literacy professionals, with the reading/literacy specialist being one of them (Bean et al., 2015a; Bean & Kern, 2018; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). In this study, this role is identified in the target schools as "academic instruction specialist."

These individuals have firsthand experience relevant to the phenomenon being studied and can provide insightful perspectives on their relevant and lived experiences.

The study focused on elementary-level literacy specialists because of the historical shifts in their roles and responsibilities over time (Bean et al., 2003; Dole, 2004; Kern, 2011). The roles and responsibilities of elementary-level literacy specialists have significantly evolved from focusing primarily on remediation through pull-out programs to providing comprehensive literacy support. Specialists have transitioned from working in isolation to collaborative leaders alongside classroom teachers, special education teachers, and other professionals to design and implement academic support tailored to individual student needs. (Bean et al., 2015a; Ippolito et al., 2019).

The researcher purposefully selected a school district in the American Northeast due to its smaller size and its history of implementing RTI practices across elementary schools. The expectation that a smaller district would show less variability in RTI practices than larger, more diverse districts motivated this strategic choice (Regan et al., 2015). Additionally, the selection of this district was facilitated by its accessibility to the researcher, who is also employed in the district as an academic instructional specialist. The district's accessibility to the researcher simplified the logistical aspects of conducting the study by providing easier access to participants integral to understanding the RTI-MTSS framework in practice.

The identified school district is in a suburb of a major northeastern city. The district has a population of approximately 4, 400 pre-kindergartens through 12th grade students and a total teaching and support staff of around 700. The participants for this study represent the four elementary schools within the district.

The primary approach used to select participants for this study was purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher intentionally employed this sampling method to select individuals with relevant knowledge and experiences in implementing RTI within an MTSS framework at specific K-4 elementary school buildings. These participants served as specialized literacy professionals within public elementary schools. Additionally, the researcher utilized convenience sampling to include participants who were easily accessible. Specifically, the participants were fellow colleagues working in the same school district as the researcher.

A total of nine teachers from four elementary schools within one school district in the American Northeast participated in this study (see Table 1). Of the available fifteen instructional specialists spanning the four elementary schools, nine agreed to participate in this study.

Table 1

Participant Identifier and Engagement Summary

Participant	Identifier	School Identifier	Length of Interview (in minutes and seconds)	Number of Journal Entries
SLP 1	(S1)	A	29.45	5
SLP 2	(S2)	A	27.10	4
SLP 3	(S3)	B	57.53	5
SLP 4	(S4)	C	30.29	6
SLP 5	(S5)	B	36.35	5
SLP 6	(S6)	D	42.32	4
SLP 7	(S7)	C	51.26	8
SLP 8	(S8)	B	27.03	7

Participant	Identifier	School Identifier	Length of Interview (in minutes and seconds)	Number of Journal Entries
SLP 9	(S9)	D	43.29	3

Procedures

Before data collection, the researcher secured appropriate permission from the associated university's Institutional Review Board (IRB, see Appendix A). This step was necessary to ensure the study adhered to ethical guidelines set by the review board. Next, the researcher met in person with the assistant superintendent of the target school district site to obtain permission to conduct research involving district employees (see Appendix B). The process for the IRB and selected district site consisted of providing detailed information outlined in the research proposal. The information included procedures for participant selection, acquiring necessary permissions, and implementing data collection strategies. Additionally, the information incorporated details on the recording, storage, and utilization of gathered information throughout the study.

Data Collection

The researcher acted as the primary data collection instrument. Creswell and Poth (2018) outline steps typically involved in collecting data for qualitative research. These steps include locating a research site, gaining access, purposefully selecting participants, developing a rapport with participants, collecting data, recording information, minimizing field issues, securely storing data, and attending to ethical considerations at each phase of

the process. The goal of this study was to address each of these steps with careful consideration.

Academic instructional specialists were contacted for this research study through an email sent to school district-provided addresses. The researcher drafted an email message requesting their participation, detailing the purpose of the research and provided an informed consent form for participants to sign and return. The consent form included in the email outlined the study's objective and ensured participants were fully informed about their involvement, requiring their signature for formal consent to participate (see Appendix C). The researcher's email assured participants that identities would remain anonymous and that participation in the study was completely voluntary. All participants were given an opportunity to review the consent form and discuss any questions or concerns. One week after the initial recruitment email, the researcher followed up with a second email requesting participation. After receiving signed consent forms through email and mail, the researcher contacted each participant individually to schedule one-on-one interviews, discuss journaling details, and answer any additional questions.

Individual Interviews

Interviews served as this study's primary data because they are versatile and can be utilized to address multiple research questions. McGrath and colleagues (2019) suggest that qualitative research interviews are preferable when the researcher aims to gain insights into an individual's perspectives on a phenomenon rather than making generalizable understandings that apply to larger populations. The one-on-one interviews with participants lasted for approximately 30-60 minutes using Zoom, an online web conferencing platform. Conducting interviews virtually provided scheduling flexibility,

convenience for wider participation, ensured privacy and confidentiality through security measures, and allowed for recording the sessions. The researcher obtained written consent prior to, and then again, verbal consent from participants during the interview for their participation in the study and allowing the researcher to collect video and audio recordings of the interview.

The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview format to gather critical aspects of the study, allowing for flexibility and the exploration of emergent themes (Peoples, 2021). Additionally, the researcher employed a protocol to guide the interview process (see Appendix D). The questioning aimed to understand background information, experiences, challenges, successes, and self-perceptions in the context of implementing RTI components as an academic instructional specialist. The researcher created a comprehensive outline to align the interview questions with objectives to support each question (see Table 2).

Table 2

Interview Questions and Objectives Summary

Question Number	Topic of Question	Objective of Question
1	Background and motivation	Understanding the teacher's journey, experience, and motivation for transition to an instructional specialist role.
2	Role clarity and responsibilities	Evaluating the teacher's understanding of their role and the specific duties as an instructional specialist.
3	Confidence and implementation of RTI practices	Assessing teachers' confidence level in executing RTI practices and

Question Number	Topic of Question	Objective of Question
		identifying factors influencing their confidence in this area.
4	Evaluation and data-driven approach	Exploring the teacher's methods for assessing the effectiveness of RTI interventions, including the data points that guide their instructional decision.
5	Success stories	Collecting examples of successful RTI implementation and understanding how these achievements have increased the teacher's confidence.
6	Challenges and problem-solving strategies	Identifying challenges encountered in RTI implementation and exploring possible solutions to address these issues.
6	Addressing unmet expectations	Exploring how the teacher addresses situations where a student's progress does not meet experiences despite RTI interventions.
7	Resource availability and the impact on efficacy	Understanding the impact of available resources and support on the teacher's abilities in RTI implementation.
8	Collaboration and conflict resolution	Examining collaborative practices with colleagues and strategies to navigate resistance or different opinions regarding components of RTI.
9	Professional development and staying informed	Looking at how the teachers stay updated with current research and best practices in RTI implementation.
9	Enhancement through professional development	Identifying professional development opportunities that may contribute to

Question Number	Topic of Question	Objective of Question
		the teacher's knowledge and skills in RTI implementation.
10	Opinion on the future of instructional specialists in RTI	Gaining insights into the teacher's perspective on the potential future of the instructional specialists' role in RTI.

Additionally, as outlined by Litchman (2012), questioning strategies were employed to encourage participants to respond more entirely to the interview questions (see Table 3). The data collected through the interviews was securely stored on a passcode-locked computer and used for analysis to answer the research questions.

Table 3

Strategies for Interview Questioning

Elaboration	Probing	Neutral	Single Question	Wait Time	Special Areas
Expand ideas.	Elicit more information	Maintain nondirectionally	Ask only one.	Allow silence and pauses	Listen and do not assume

Journals

The secondary data collection method involved gathering documents through participants self-reported reflective journaling. In this study, personal journaling involved the written responses of blending personal reflections, accounts of events, and descriptions of experiences (Chabon & Lee-Wilkerson, 2006). According to Creswell (2012), private documents like personal journals allow researchers to represent the participants' thoughts in their own words, as individuals usually give thoughtful attention

to their entries. Moreover, utilizing personal journals minimized intrusion by ensuring that the data remained uninfluenced by the researcher.

This study's research design for journaling followed a solicited, event-contingent, and unstructured format (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022), allowing participants to freely document their experiences and reflections. During initial communication with participants, participants were asked to write reflective journal entries spanning four to five school days. The researcher strategically chose this duration of time to allow for a comprehensive collection of experiences and insights within a typical school week. This approach aimed to gather in-depth insights into daily experiences of challenges and successes to offer a deeper understanding of instructional specialists' roles and practices within the RTI-MTSS framework. Participants were informed that their journal entries would be utilized and reported on by the researcher. According to Arndt and Rose (2023), event-contingent writing focuses on collecting data relevant to the specific events or experiences investigated shortly after it has occurred. In this study, participants were encouraged to reflect on and record their daily experiences with implementing RTI components within an MTSS framework.

The researcher offered participants a set of suggested prompts and open-ended questions to guide them as they documented their experiences and perceptions in free text (see Appendix E). These optional prompts aimed to encourage thoughtful reflection on daily experiences, successes, challenges, collaborations, and areas of improvement within the context of RTI implementation. The decision to provide prompts to participants, as informed by Unterhitzenberger and Lawrence (2022), was based on the understanding that even unstructured journal entries tend to organically develop a structure. This insight

supports the use of prompts to gently guide participants' reflections, ensuring that the entries, while varied in length, will remain focused and rich in details. Upon finishing, all participants submitted the digital journals to the researcher, who then security stored them in a passcode-locked location.

Data Analysis

Organizing and preparing the data is a necessary preliminary step in data analysis. This process involved arranging the video files into separate computer folders labeled corresponding to each participant in the order of their scheduled interview. Next, the researcher transcribed (Creswell, 2012) the audio recordings from the interviews into separate Microsoft Word document files with the assistance of Zoom's audio transcription tool. The researcher reviewed the audio recordings again to ensure accurate transcription and cross-referenced them with the transcribed text files. The process involved making edits to ensure a verbatim transcription was achieved, aiming for word-for-word reproduction of verbal accounts into the written form. The researcher saved the journal entries and individual participant interview files within the matching participant folder. Next, the researcher prepared each interview transcription and journal entry for manual coding and analysis by organizing each page with a double-spaced format on the left two-thirds of the page and a wide right-hand margin for writing codes and notes.

In phenomenological studies, data analysis involves an approach aimed at understanding the experiences of individuals and interpreting the essence of lived experience. Peoples (2021) asserts that this method involves going beyond each description's surface to uncover its fundamental nature. Creswell (2012) suggests that qualitative data analysis is an iterative process that is comprised of critical steps. In this

study, the steps taken to analyze transcription and journal entries were based on Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology model. This process included phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis.

Phenomenological Reduction

The first step Moustakas (1994) recommends in the phenomenological reduction process is to engage in the process of epoche. This is the deliberate approach the researcher took to set aside personal prejudgments, biases, and preconceptions about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological epoche does not eliminate everything; instead, it serves as a way to derive new knowledge. The researcher engaged in the process of epoche through reflective journaling and memoing (Creswell & Poth. 2018). Pre-data collection reflective journaling allowed the researcher to examine personal beliefs and experiences related to implementing RTI within an MTSS framework and better acknowledge and understand the subjective lens of the researcher. Memoing during data collection and analysis further reinforced the practice of epoche. This involved writing down immediate thoughts and reflections as the researcher interacted with the data. The self-reflective writing step was foundational to acknowledging the challenge of approaching the data with an open mind to really understand the participants experiences from their perspective.

Horizontalization. The next step in the phenomenological reduction process involved horizontalization. During this phrase, the researcher adopted a participant focused approach to engage with the data. Working sequentially with one participant at a time, the researcher reread the interview transcripts and journal entries to identify significant statements or phrases that captured the essence of diverse participant

experiences and perspectives. According to Moustakas (1994), each statement in the horizontalization process represents a segment of meaning.

As part of this process, the researcher used the highlighting feature in Microsoft Word to visually distinguish these significant segments within the text. Each participant was assigned a unique color for highlighting, which allowed the key phrases and sentences to stand out from the surrounding text and, later, served to differentiate the contributions of individual participants. Next, the researcher removed all repeated statements and those that did not relate to the research topic to leave only the textual representation, or horizons, of the phenomenon being explored (Moustakas, 1994). An example of a horizontalization process is highlighted in Table 4.

Table 4

Examples of Horizontalization Process from Participant Data

Verbatim Participant Data	Horizontalization
S2: "Oh, I've always wanted to teach small group. And even actually, when I had to teach kindergarten during the 2020-2021 school year when kids were coming back into the classroom, I was excited to come back to the small group instructional role because I knew the classroom wasn't quite where I wanted to be."	"*I've always wanted to teach small group*." "*I was excited to come back to the small group instructional role because I knew the classroom wasn't quite where I wanted to be.*"
S4: "I, I think that, I enjoy my job. I like, I do. I say these negative things. But if I put myself but I if my yeah, my Utopia would be leadership for me. It really, and you've heard me say it a lot. But it really does come down to good leadership."	"*I enjoy my job*." "*My utopia would be leadership*." "*It really does come down to good leadership*"

Verbatim Participant Data	Horizontalization
S7: "You know. So, our responsibilities are changing, and that's kind of, I'll be honest. I'm struggling with that, you know. We've gone from one model to another, but in terms of our responsibility at this point.	"*Our responsibilities are changing.*" "*I'll be honest. I am struggling with that*." "*We have gone from one model to another*."
S9: "I would say, an 8. Yup, just because I have done this for so long, and we have had a lot of the same, you know, point parts of it. It's not, you know. We went from AIMs Web to Fast, you know, but we still do universal screening. So, all like the major part parts are have been the same. So, I feel pretty comfortable with that. We were in charge of a lot of the data 5-7 years ago, but not so much anymore."	"*I would say, an 8*." "*I have done this for so long*." "*We still do universal screening."* "*I feel pretty comfortable.*" "*We were in charge of the data 5-7 years ago, but not so much anymore."*

Coding. The researcher employed a variety of coding methods to explore the experiences and perceptions of participants. The coding approach was informed by the guidance of Creswell and Poth (2018) and Saldaña (2021). Saldaña (2021) particularly emphasizes the value of using flexibility in coding techniques to capture distinct aspects of the data. In the initial phase of coding, the researcher employed structural, In Vivo, and descriptive methods (Saldaña, 2021). In the second round of coding, the researcher utilized focused and pattern coding methods (Saldaña, 2021). By integrating different coding methods, the researcher embraced a flexible coding approach, allowing for a rich exploration of the experiences and perspectives of specialized literacy professionals navigating RTI within an MTSS framework.

After multiple readings of the transcript and journal entries, and through applying the process of horizontalization, the researcher created four structural codes directly related to one of each research question. Structural coding provided a foundation to organize and interpret the textual data for further coding methods (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher developed descriptions of each structure code to ensure the analysis remained closely connected and focused on the research questions (see Table 5). The structural codes include, (1) roles and responsibilities definition, (2) RTI-MTSS experiences, (3) self-efficacy in RTI implementation, and (4) factors influencing self-efficacy.

Table 5

Analysis: Initial Structural Codes, Description, and Data Examples

Structural Code	Description	Data Example
Roles and Responsibilities Definition	Participants describe how they view their roles and responsibilities in the context of implementing RTI within MTSS framework. Statements may include descriptions, definitions, and understanding of their professional roles and responsibilities.	S1 "*I primarily see groups throughout the day that focus on reading anywhere from a one-on-one intervention to group sizes as large as 8 or 9."* *S9 "This year our IS team was instructed to teach only Tier 3 interventions. We always have taught TEAM time (Tier 2) and Tier 3."*
RTI-MTSS Experiences	Participants describe their specific experiences of instructional specialists as they navigate their roles and responsibilities within the	S2 *"I was excited to come back to the small group instructional role because I knew the classroom wasn't quite where I wanted to be*."

Structural Code	Description	Data Example
	RTI-MTSS framework. Statements may include daily practices, challenges, and successes.	S7 "*This year, we're going through a transition at the elementary level, where the three smaller buildings have one less IS provider and our roles have shifted*."
Self- Efficacy in RTI Implementation	Participants describe their perceptions of their own effectiveness and confidence in implementing RTI practices, especially with students at risk for or experiencing reading difficulties. Statements may include personal ratings, strengths, and areas of improvement.	S8 "*I would rate myself a 7*." "*I feel confident that I can be an effective internationalist…and carry out my other roles*." S6 *"I'm on a journey to make it better."* *"I would rate myself a high 8."* *"I love my job and I love this position."*
Factors Influencing Self-Efficacy	Participants describe or imply what influences their perceived self-efficacy in the RTI-MTSS framework. Statements may include areas of professional growth, support from colleagues, and resources.	S7 "*We are so fortunate to have a literacy coach who is so knowledgeable and provides us with meaningful PD and strategies that can be implemented immediately to help struggling students*." *S4 "My biggest challenge, this year in particular. But it's probably it's been seeping up over the past couple of years is just a lack of clear leadership."*

The researcher utilized Microsoft Excel as a tool to support organizing and analyzing the qualitative data collected through the transcripts and journal entries. The organization involved creating separate tabs within the spreadsheet, each dedicated to one of the structural codes previously identified. By separating a distinct tab for each structural code, the researcher was able to systematically examine and then categorize the significant statements, or horizons. Again, the researcher engaged in a participant-focus approach, working through analyzing and organizing horizons, one at a time, moving from Microsoft Word to Excel while cross-referencing the descriptive outline created. In addition to utilizing Microsoft Word and Excel for data organization and coding, the researcher used a journaling notebook as a complementary tool to document the coding process and provide a reflective space for deeper analysis. Memoing allowed the researcher to capture emerging thematic ideas when working with the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After organizing the textual horizons from each participant within structural codes in Excel, the researcher engaged in the process of In Vivo and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2021). In Vivo codes focused on prioritizing participants' specific words and phrases as verbatim quotes, allowing the researcher to capture each participant's direct meanings and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). In Vivo coding allowed the researcher to ensure the process remained authentically grounded in participant experiences and perspectives. Descriptive coding served in facilitating the systematic labeling and organization of topics within the dataset (Saldaña, 2021).

Imaginative Variation

After phenomenological reduction, where significant statements were identified and organized under structural codes, the researcher moved into a phase of imaginative variation. The process is crucial for exploring the essence of the phenomenon from diverse perspectives and understanding deeper meanings beyond the initial textual descriptions derived from first-cycle coding (e.g., In Vivo and descriptive coding; Moustakas, 1994). During this phase, the researcher paid attention to the detailed examples within the data that illustrated the themes shaping the phenomenon.

To operationalize imaginative variation within the coding process, the researcher engaged in the process of second-cycle coding. Second-cycle coding methods involve more advanced approaches to organizing and analyzing textual data to develop a thematic, conceptual, or theoretical organization from the initial array of first-cycle codes (Saldaña, 2021). During this phase, the researcher utilized focused coding (Saldaña, 2021) to group together similar In Vivo and descriptive codes that captured the same ideas or insights within each structural code. The gathering of codes included a careful review of each list of codes to identify overlaps, similarities, and emerging patterns across participants' experiences. Subsequently, the researcher created focused categorical codes within each structural code and sorted the In Vivo and descriptive codes systematically and analytically. The researcher examined the focused codes for their contribution to understanding the essence of the phenomenon, considering how aspects of time, space, and intrapersonal relationships influenced the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Following focused coding, the researcher applied pattern coding (Saldaña, 2021) to further refine the focused codes into broader categories and to identify which focused categories may relate more closely under another structural code. The iterative process of coding, recoding, and categorization (Saldaña, 2021) ensured the researcher thoroughly and reflectively engaged with the textual data to allow for the evolution of codes into meaningful categories. The researcher reviewed the focused categorical codes within each structural code and created themes. The method of developing themes within the confines of each structural code allowed for a focused exploration of the data closely related to the research questions. Figures 4-7 showcase the researchers' systematic coding and analysis process, progressing from structural codes, focused codes, categorical themes, and overall themes.

Figure 4

From Structural Code "Roles and Responsibilities" to Themes

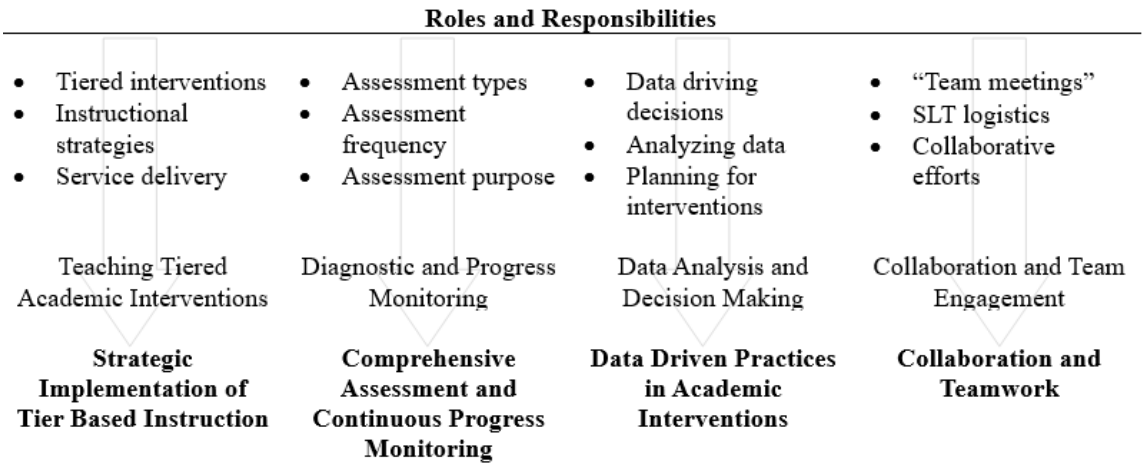


Figure 5

From Structural Code "RTI-MTSS Experiences" to Themes

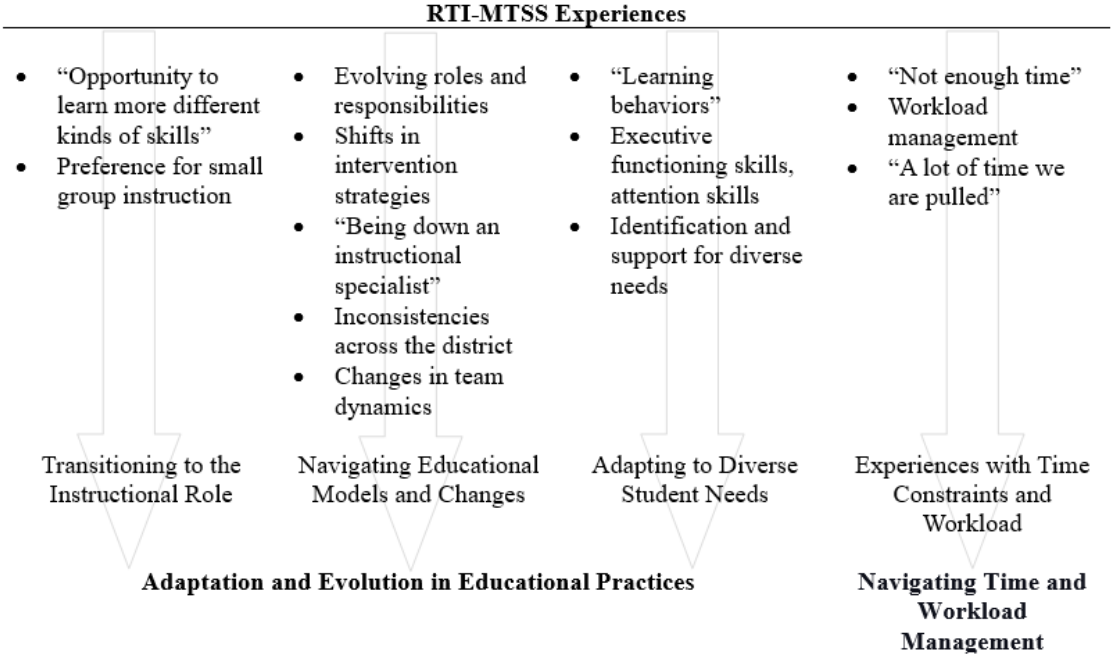


Figure 6

From Structural Code "Self-Efficacy" to Themes

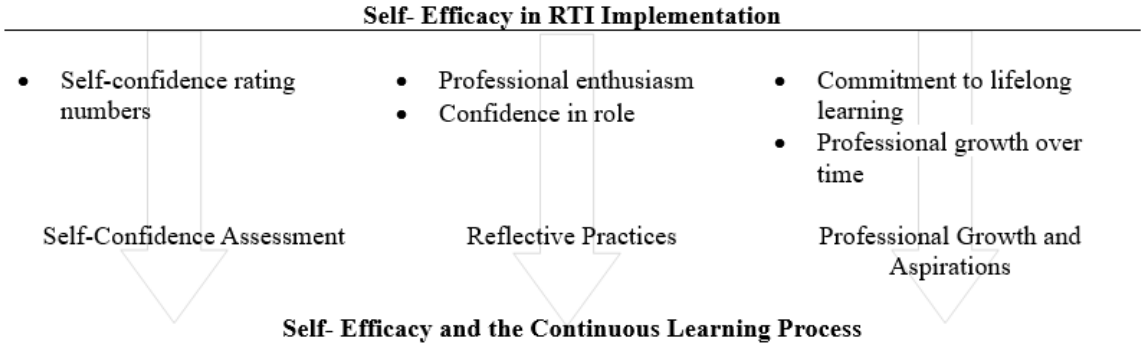
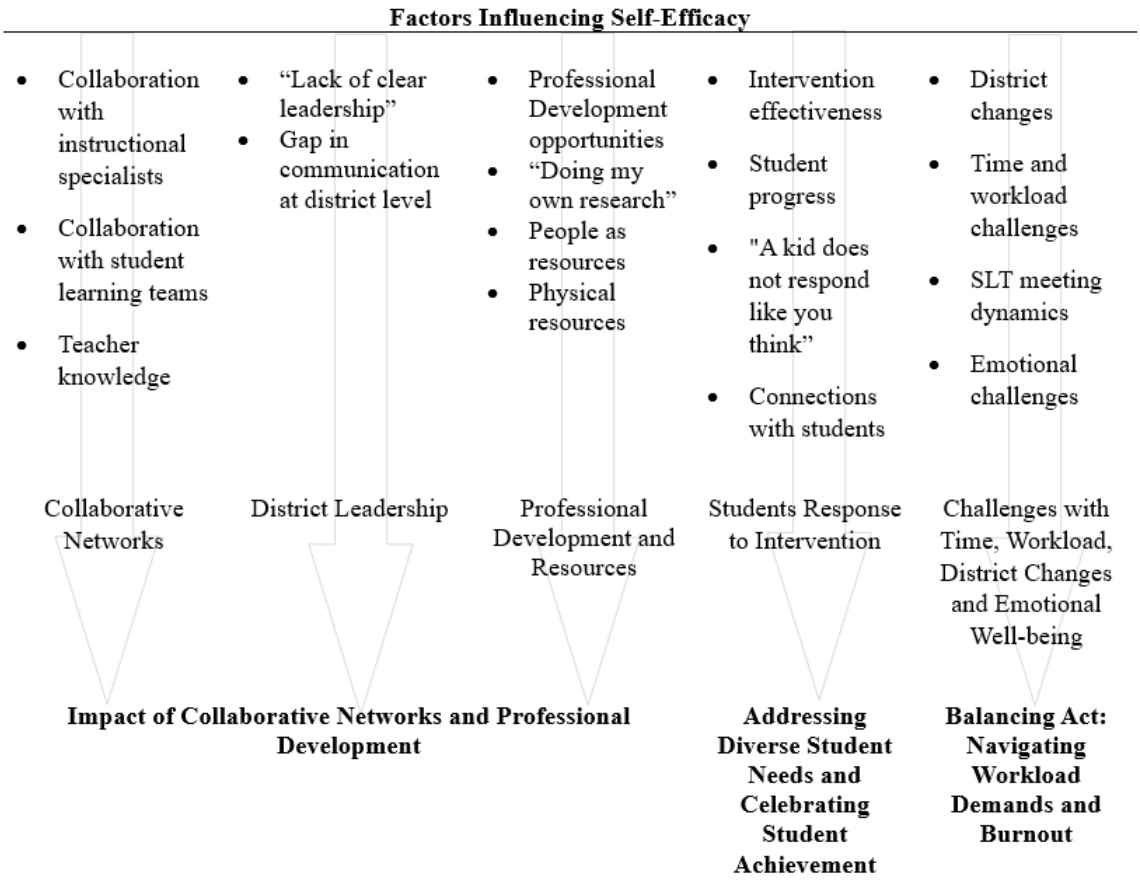


Figure 7

From Structural Code "Factors Influencing Self-Efficacy" to Themes



Synthesis

In the final phase of phenomenological research, the researcher utilized thematic analysis and synthesis to integrate the textual and structural descriptions, aiming to fully capture the essence of the investigated phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Saldaña (2021) suggests that thematic analysis in phenomenology seeks to understand experiences, making a clear distinction between what is explicitly presented (the observable) and the deeper, more abstract layers beneath the surface (the conceptual). By focusing on significant experiences and perspectives shared across participants, the researcher

developed a written description that encompasses the themes related to each structural code in response to the research questions. The description provided a clear link between the research questions, structural codes, and themes while providing a rich and detailed exploration of the significance and meaning of each theme, supported by direct quotes from participants.

Ethical Considerations

Aligned with the ethical guidelines outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), this research followed a rigorous framework to ensure ethical considerations at each stage of the study. The researcher obtained approval from the Institute Review Board at the associated university before collecting data. This was necessary to adhere to the ethical factors of the research design and protect participants' rights. Additionally, authorization was acquired from a representative of the selected school district site. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, and assurance was given that their participation was voluntary. The researcher collected signed, informed consent prior to data collection and verbal consent during individual interviews. During interviews, the researcher avoided asking leading questions, sharing personal opinions, and disclosing sensitive information. Electronic data collected was safeguarded as password-protected files, and signed consent forms were securely stored in a password-protected location. During data analysis and reporting, pseudonyms were used for participants and research sites to maintain confidentiality and protect their identities.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the value of a research study is strengthened by its trustworthiness. According to Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2019),

phenomenology allows for a detailed analysis of individual conscious experiences while meeting the criteria for trustworthiness. In this study, credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were established in order to establish the credibility and validity of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility and Dependability

Credibility within research refers to the authenticity of data and how it is interpreted and presented by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), there can be no credibility without dependability. One effective method employed by the researcher to promote credibility and dependability was through triangulation (Crewell & Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the researcher triangulated the data using multiple data sources and methods collected from interviews and participants' reflective journals.

To ensure strength in interpretations and conclusions, the critical practice of peer review was done (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process involved active discussions concerning the researcher's conclusions with another researcher not directly involved with this study. Additionally, the researcher engaged in member-checking with participants to ensure the findings were accurate. A detailed description of the participant's statements was provided as a necessary step toward developing meaningful connections between their experiences and the evolution of themes within the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transferability and Confirmability

Another aspect of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is transferability. Transferability involves the potential for findings to be applicable in

different settings and among various groups. However, by its nature, qualitative research does not primarily aim for reproducibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized that researchers can provide detailed descriptions that allow for conditions of transferring findings. In this study, rich textual and thematic structural descriptions were provided, allowing for the exploration of how these findings might be relevant and transferable to different contexts.

Confirmability is the last perspective on trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the findings are shaped by the participants' responses and the researchers' interpretations rather than the researcher's biases or viewpoints. The researcher ensured reflexivity (Lichtman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was woven into all aspects of the study processes. This practice encouraged critical self-reflection and self-awareness by the researcher to consciously set aside potential bias and predisposition. This helped the study maintain an objectivity level essential for credible research (Lichtman, 2012).

Summary

This chapter outlines the qualitative transcendental phenomenological design used to investigate the experiences and perspectives of K-4 Specialized literacy professionals implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), exploring their roles, responsibilities, professional experiences, and self-efficacy in supporting students facing reading challenges. Transcendental phenomenology was utilized because it enables an investigation of the individuals' lived experiences on a particular phenomenon of interest (Daly, 2007). This methodological approach seeks to understand how individuals perceive and interpret the world around them and offers a

means to explore subjective beliefs, such as self-efficacy, in greater depth. Moreover, this design allowed for analyzing multiple experiences within a similar context, enabling generalizations about experiences.

The researcher thoroughly explored and addressed personal biases and preconceptions crucial for conducting this study, drawing from the dual perspectives of being a specialized literacy professional with extensive teaching experience and an active role as a researcher. This was necessary to ensure that a reflexive approach to collecting and interpreting data occurred throughout the study. The study occurred with participants chosen through purposeful and convenient sampling methods. In total, nine teachers from four elementary schools within one school district in the American Northeast participated in this study. Data collection methods encompassed semi-structured individual interviews, and participants submitted reflective journal entries. Data was analyzed using the Transcendent Phenomenological model outlined by Moustakas (1994). This included phenomenological reduction (epoche, horizontalization, and textual descriptions), imaginative variation (structure descriptions), and syntheses of meaning. Credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were employed in this study to ensure trustworthiness. Ethical considerations were carefully considered to protect the rights of participants.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to address the gap in knowledge regarding specialized literary professionals (SLPs) in Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), specifically focusing on their self-efficacy in implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) components with students at risk of or experiencing reading difficulties. The research explored the roles and responsibilities, experiences, self-perceptions, and influencing factors for these professionals in the RTI-MTSS framework.

Participants

Nine participants volunteered for one-on-one interviews and provided self-reported journal entries. All participants served as SLPs under the "academic instructional specialist" title within the same school district. The following section briefly describes each participant, who varied in experience within this role, ranging from limited to extensive. For confidentiality, pseudonyms (S1-S9) were assigned to identify the participants in this study.

SLP 1 (S1)

Over eleven years, S1 has been deeply engaged in education, primarily as a classroom teacher. With six years dedicated to teaching fifth grade and two years to third grade, S1 shifted into the role of an instructional specialist three years ago. During her time as a classroom teacher, she became immersed in curriculum and instruction, focusing mainly on implementing cohesive tier-one instruction and understanding the principles of evidence-based reading instruction. Transitioning from fifth to third grade allowed her to broaden her teaching skill set. When the opportunity came to transition into the instructional specialist role, S1 was eager to embrace it. Her time in this role has

been transformative, expanding her knowledge base compared to previous teaching experiences. Reflecting on this transition, she noted, “I can tell you. I have learned exponentially more than I ever knew in the nine or eight years prior.” This progression emphasizes her commitment to continuous growth in teaching.

SLP 2 (S2)

This educator’s journey began in the classroom, initially teaching a multi-age group of fifth and sixth-grade students and then as a fifth-grade classroom teacher for four years. Around 2010, S2 transitioned into the instructional specialist position, primarily focusing on providing reading and math interventions for kindergarten through fifth-grade students. This shift aligned with a long-term goal she called a “five-year plan” to become a small group instructional support teacher. With the guidance of her principal’s mentorship, she actively pursued this role.

Her dedication and passion for small-group instruction became more evident as she eagerly returned to this position after temporarily taking on a kindergarten classroom teacher role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflecting on this transition, she said, “I was excited to return to the small group instructional role because I knew the classroom wasn’t quite where I wanted to be.” Her dedication to small-group instruction reflects her ongoing commitment to fostering student success through tailored learning experiences.

SLP 3 (S3)

Specialist S3 brings a diverse and extensive background in education. She graduated from college with a major in elementary education in 1990 and later pursued a master’s degree. Her teaching experience includes four years in fourth grade and seven years in third grade before taking a break to raise children. During this time, S3 stayed

connected to education by actively participating in school activities and volunteering. Returning to teaching was challenging for her due to certification differences between states, despite her prior teaching experience and advanced degree.

After becoming recertified, S3 started with substitute teaching before securing long-term positions and eventually settling into a permanent role focused on providing instructional academic support for students. Reflecting on her experience, she mentioned, "When I was doing the long terms, I loved getting my eyes on some of these kids that really needed the extra support, and I love the small group interaction." Over the past eight years as an instructional specialist, S3 has navigated through different grade levels and various subject focuses, displaying adaptability and versatility in her teaching experiences.

SLP 4 (S4)

This educator began their teaching journey in 2001 and spans varied roles from classroom instruction to specialized support. Initially, S4 started as a fourth-grade classroom teacher and later, a first-grade classroom teacher. In between, she spent six years working part-time as an instructional and learning specialist, aiding a school district in implementing and integrating learning systems until the company closed operations. Driven by a desire to work more closely with educators, S4 transitioned into the role of an instructional specialist. For about seven years now, she has enjoyed this role, especially in supporting students who struggle academically and watching their progress through interventions. Transitioning from the general education classroom to the instructional role has provided her with a greater sense of balance and the motivation to continue making a difference in her educational journey. When reflecting on this role, she

emphasized, “I would much rather see the difference I can make with the interventions we are providing; that provides me with the excitement to keep moving forward.”

SLP 5 (S5)

S5 brings with her approximately 26 years of teaching experience. She began her career focusing on special education in preschool and then later transitioned to a program for students with autism-related disorders. For the past nine years, she thrived in a special education teaching setting, a role that she found intense yet deeply rewarding. Seeking a change, S5 shifted roles into an instructional specialist. She was particularly drawn to collaborating and applying her specialized expertise in a different educational setting. Reflecting on this transition, S5 expressed excitement, “I was eager and excited… I had already developed so many relationships because we collaborated in the classroom so much with students pushing in and out.”

This shift allowed her to explore areas of education involving engagement with different grade levels and active participation in Student Learning Team (SLT) meetings, which was a new experience for her. Her considerable prior experiences have focused her skillset on modifying and adapting lessons to align with the unique requirements of students while in the inclusive setting. She enthusiastically embraces her first year in this new role, aiming to infuse a fresh perspective and ideas from her rich experiences as a special education teacher into this instructional specialist position.

SLP 6 (S6)

The teaching journey of S6 began over twenty years ago as a classroom teacher. Her deep-rooted love for the classroom environment grew as she transitioned between being the classroom teacher for third and first-grade students. Initially hesitant, S6

eventually accepted a pivotal change and transitioned from the role of a classroom teacher into that of an instructional specialist. Reflecting on this transition, she expressed, "I thought long and hard about it, and I thought some things happen for a reason. Maybe I am meant to have a different role…I could really learn a lot." After seven years in this position, S6 reflected on this transition by acknowledging the differences between the instructional specialist role and a classroom teacher role, stating, "It really, truly is a completely different role, being an instructional specialist. And what we do is nothing like being a classroom teacher." Despite initial hesitation to leave the classroom teacher role, she found herself firmly committed to the instructional specialist role, affirming, "I reflect on that thinking how I never wanted to leave the classroom… year after year, it just builds on and on., and I love it so much. I can't imagine going back to the classroom."

SLP 7 (S7)

Specialist S7 has over two decades of teaching experience in various educational settings. Her professional journey began as a full-time special education substitute teacher on assignment. During this initial year, a supportive colleague profoundly helped shape her understanding of inclusive teaching practices, setting the foundation for her career. She carried this insight forward into a dual role as a part-time instructional specialist and part-time special education teacher. As a special education teacher, S7 navigated across multiple grade levels, teaching students in third to fifth grade and later kindergarten through second grade. As the districts' needs evolved, S7 transitioned into a full-time instructional specialist role, initially met with some reluctance.

Reflecting on this change, she expressed an emotional attachment to special education, stating, “I cried because I wanted to be a special education teacher. That’s what made me want to be a teacher.” However, despite these initial hesitations, S7 has embraced her instructional specialist role for the past twelve years, proudly stating, “I just absolutely love it.” Drawing from her extensive expertise, she recognized the similarities between the methodologies of special education and instructional support, noting, “I think the tools are very similar.” This understanding and appreciation for the shared practices between the two roles is foundational to her commitment and passion for her current instructional specialist position.

SLP 8 (S8)

S8 began her educational journey by graduating with a master’s degree in literacy in 2020. Her teaching path began during the challenging times of the pandemic while taking on remote teaching due to COVID-19, and then she transitioned from remote to in-person teaching. Initially, S8 held long-term substitute positions for first- and second-grade teachers and then assumed the building’s daily substitute role. S8 was able to step into a full-time teaching position as an instructional specialist.

This role offered her a new experience that had not been a part of her teaching journey during the pandemic period due to the modified methods of delivering instruction. Though initially unfamiliar, S8 quickly grew fond of the role, seeking colleague guidance while discovering her passion for analyzing data. Currently in her third year, S8 reflected on this experience, stating, “This was like my first real long-term job. So, it’s been nice, and I want to keep with it.”

SLP 9 (S9)

The educational journey of this participant began over twenty years ago as a classroom teacher, teaching various grade levels, including third and fourth grade. After a short break from teaching, S9 took on the role of instructional specialist. Initially, she focused on teaching math interventions to students for a few years before transitioning to a focus on teaching reading and math interventions. After the Covid-19 pandemic, S9 experienced a shift towards primarily providing reading interventions.

When reflecting on her motivation to stay in the instructional specialist position, S9 contemplates the yearly decision between remaining in her current role or returning to the classroom at the start of each year. While the initial adjustment period may be challenging, she noted that she eventually settles back into the instructional rhythm each school year. Her journey highlights the continual adaptations and challenges she has faced during yearly educational changes and has shaped her teaching experience over time.

Research Questions and Key Findings

This study is grounded in Albert Bandura's (1977, 1997) self-efficacy theory, emphasizing an individual's confidence in achieving desired outcomes and how these beliefs influence behavior and success. In the investigation of K-4 specialized literacy professionals implementing RTI within an MTSS framework, this theory was foundational in exploring their professional experiences and perceptions. The study centered on the central question, "What are the experiences and self-perceptions of K-4 specialized literacy professionals implementing RTI within an MTSS framework?" The researcher designed the study to explore this question through four detailed sub-

questions. The sub-research questions define roles and responsibilities, uncover specific experiences, assess self-efficacy in implementing RTI components, and identify factors that influence their perceived self-efficacy. Following a comprehensive analysis of the collected data, the researcher identified several themes associated with each sub-question. These themes are thoroughly examined in the sections below and supported by evidence highlighting the detailed observations and perspectives of K-4 specialized literacy professionals on implementing RTI within an MTSS framework.

Defining Roles and Responsibilities within the RTI-MTSS Framework

Sub-research question 1 asked, "How do K-4 specialized literacy professionals define their roles and responsibilities in implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework?" After the exploration of participant interviews and journal entries, four key themes emerged (see Table 6), including (1) strategic implementation of tier-based instruction, (2) comprehensive assessment and continuous progress monitoring, (3) data-driven practices in academic interventions, and (4) collaboration and teamwork. The thematic analysis is supported by previous researchers, which identify the primary duties of specialized literacy professionals to include instructional delivery, diagnostic evaluation, and serving as a resource to teachers, highlighting these as critical responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals within their educational settings (e.g., Bean et al., 2003, 2015a).

Table 6

Themes Related to the Roles and Responsibilities of Specialists

Roles and Responsibilities	Sub-Components of Roles and Responsibilities
1. Strategic implementation of tier-based instruction	• Systematic research-based interventions • Adaptability and Resourcefulness • Tier 2 and tier 3 intervention delivery • Variability in roles and implementation
2. Comprehensive assessment and continuous progress monitoring	• Conduct diagnostic assessments • Monitor academic progress through assessments
3. Data-driven practices in academic interventions	• Data-driven approach to identify students' academic needs, provide supplemental support, and make ongoing decisions.
4. Collaboration and teamwork	• Shared culture of teamwork with instructional specialist's teams • Collaborative efforts with grade level teacher teams

The study identified participants as "academic instructional specialists," which closely aligns with the International Literacy Association *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals* position of reading/literacy specialist (ILA, 2017). These standards advocate for a standard approach to the role of literacy specialist that prioritizes a student-centered approach. The standards also emphasize the critical importance of this

role in collaborating with teachers and understanding the broader educational framework in which they operate to support literacy development effectively (Bean & Kern, 2018; ILA, 2017).

Strategic Implementation of Tier-Based Instruction. A consistent finding among all nine participants highlighted the specialists' role in implementing systematic reading interventions for students who are at risk of or experiencing academic difficulties within the RTI-MTSS framework. This is consistent with previous studies highlighting that reading specialists primarily work directly with students to provide instructional services (Bean et al., 2002, 2015, 2018; Bean & Kern, 2018; Bean & Goatley, 2020). Findings in the current study indicated specialists tailor interventions to target foundational areas of reading development, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, encoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. S9 explained it as: "We teach [students] based on their levels and try to expand on what they don't know or fill the gaps they don't have... I find out where they are and what they need, then go from there." Kern et al. (2018) emphasize that reading/literacy specialists must be able to target instruction to meet the needs of students they support.

The implementation of systematic reading interventions by specialists highlights a responsive approach within the RTI-MTSS framework. A key responsibility within their role is to understand the components of reading acquisition and be able to utilize research-based interventions targeting foundational areas of reading development, mirroring previous research signifying the importance of understanding the components of reading acquisition and being able to deliver instruction that is evidence based and focusing on improving literacy learning for all students (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). The

highlighted emphasis on foundational reading areas also aligns with the National Reading Panel's (2000) recommendations on teaching these essential skills.

These specialists' instructional roles are characterized by their adaptability and resourcefulness. The data revealed that instructional specialists employ responsive methods, utilizing well-researched programs and resources to meet students' needs effectively. Participants described the school district as providing well-researched intervention programs and emphasized that designing intervention plans is a continuously evolving practice. S1 elaborated, "If one structured program isn't quite right…we are able to take bits and pieces and then adapt it with another program." The ability to modify and tailor intervention plans indicates that specialists provide targeted support and effective interventions to diverse student populations.

All nine participants identified a significant part of their responsibilities as providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions beyond Tier 1 instruction during "Team Time," a dedicated period of the school day for delivering academic interventions provided by collaborative teams of teachers. S2 reflected on the diversity in this role, stating, "I primarily see groups throughout the day that focus on reading anywhere from a one-on-one intervention to group sizes as large as 8 or 9." Literature supports the "team time" structured approach to intervention service delivery, suggesting supplemental interventions should move beyond the universal curricular level and not replace the core curriculum but enhance and supplement student learning (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016).

The dedicated block of supplemental instructional time is also an "all hands-on deck" approach that utilizes all available teachers, including classroom teachers, special education teachers, instructional specialists, and teaching assistants, to deliver academics.

In line with previous studies, researchers indicate that various providers can deliver interventions within the general education setting or in a separate space, highlighting the flexibility and collaborative nature of intervention service delivery methods (e.g., Denton, 2012; Wanzek, 2016). The involvement of various educational providers facilitates an inclusive model of the intervention system. It aligns with research advocating for the effectiveness of small-group instruction as researchers have shown that small-group instruction can be highly effective in helping students master essential learnings (D'Agostino & Murphy, 2004; Gersten et al., 2000).

Patterns in the data revealed instructional specialists' pivotal role as key drivers in delivering comprehensive academic intervention services. Through integrating RTI within the broader framework of MTSS, the target district has established a systematic approach to support students' academic needs. The effectiveness of this model is enhanced by considering factors such as the type of instruction, size of the instructional group, and intervention dosage, playing an essential role in determining the intensity of support provided to each student (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2010b).

Further, the model utilizes the collective expertise and resources of a diverse team of educational professionals, maximizing the impact of interventions through strategic and coordinated efforts. The service delivery method aligns with the primary goals of MTSS, which aims to organize resources available within a system effectively to meet the diverse needs of all students and promote academic achievement and prosocial behavior (Bahr et al., 2021). The inclusion of math interventions along with literacy interventions highlights the district's commitment to addressing academic challenges comprehensively. The instrumental role of specialists in this framework highlights their

contribution to the district's overarching goal of providing a comprehensive and adaptable support system for all students.

The findings from the study offer a contrasting perspective to those reported by Braun et al. (2020) and Castro-Villarreal et al. (2014), who noted that educators experienced a lack of clarity in their school' systems for RTI process, as well as insufficient resources and preparation for delivering interventions, and lack of staff support. In contrast, the investigation into the insights of specialists revealed a different environment. Instructional specialists in the current study are instrumental in providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, effectively utilizing various resources and collaborative strategies to meet the diverse needs of students. The support system in the target district is characterized by strategic planning, comprehensive resource allocation, and a strong emphasis on collaboration among educator teams.

However, exploring the specialists' roles and responsibilities within the same school district revealed significant variability. These variations included the grade levels they supported, their focus on specific subjects, and the distribution of Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention groups they managed. For example, while some specialists provide interventions across all kindergarten and fourth-grade levels in reading and math, others concentrate on fewer grades and more on reading. In addition, there were noticeable inconsistencies in the implementation of tiered interventions across the district, with differences in the duration of interventions and the emphasis on either Tier 2 or Tier 3 groups. Despite these discrepancies, specialists strive to maintain a balanced approach in managing intervention groups, often collaborating within their teams. S5 noted, "We

really try to look at groups and make sure we support each other and share all those [Tier 3] students… It is a more intense planning and intervention type that we are doing."

The data analysis suggests the pivotal role of specialized literacy professionals in implementing effective, student-centered academic interventions within the RTI-MTSS framework. The findings show the adaptability, resourcefulness, and strategic planning these specialists use to meet the diverse needs of students at-risk of and experiencing reading difficulties. Through continuous and tailored interventions, the study highlights how specialists navigate and respond to the unique educational school environment and ensures interventions for students are relevant to the needs of their students within each building. Evidence from Galloway and Lesaux (2014) and Bean et al. (2015, 2018) supports the idea that specialized literacy professionals have versatility in their roles and responsibilities within and across schools. Various factors influence how specialists' function and require adaptations in their roles and responsibilities (Bean et al., 2015a).

Comprehensive Assessment and Continuous Progress Monitoring. A unanimous finding from the instructional specialists highlights the critical role of continuous assessment and progress monitoring in their practice. These assessment procedures serve multiple purposes for these specialists, including identifying students at risk for or experiencing academic difficulties, ensuring effective interventions, and adjusting teaching strategies for students as needed. This finding aligns with previous researchers indicating that specialists are involved in assessment activities to a great extent (e.g., Bean et al., 2002, 2003; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bean & Kern, 2018; Kern et al., 2018).

Each specialist emphasized a comprehensive array of assessment tools to diagnose, track, and support student learning effectively. This "comprehensive assessment toolkit" includes nationally normed reading and math screening assessments alongside additional phonological awareness, decoding, and fluency assessment tools. Specialists also utilized teacher-created formative assessments targeted at specific academic skills. In a reflective journal entry, S1 noted, "We have multiple assessments that show different skills in the progression of learning…Through these assessments, we can better pinpoint exactly what students need and, more importantly, why."

Consistent with the principles of effective RTI implementation, instructional specialists systematically screen all students for academic difficulties. Diagnostic assessments ensure a targeted approach is taken for those students needing additional instruction while preventing the misidentification of those who do not require such services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). Monitoring student progress with data allows for a precise understanding of students' current performance, tracking progress over time, and making informed decisions about their responses to evidence-based interventions across all tiers of the RTI framework (Stecker et al., 2008). Moreover, Bean and Kern (2018) assert that specialized literary professionals should deeply understand the purpose, attributes, strengths, and limitations of various assessment tools and the specific insights they offer about students' literacy strengths and needs.

All nine instructional specialists reported on continuous assessment and progress monitoring, reflecting a shared commitment to data-driven instruction. The approach specialists take ensures targeted and responsive interventions tailored to meet the diverse needs of students at risk of or experiencing academic challenges, as previously identified.

S2's insight into using individualized assessments to "dig deeper" into students' learning needs exemplifies this strategic practice. Two specialists emphasized the weekly process of monitoring students' academic progress, which serves as the foundation for planning effective, focused, and timely interventions. Patterns of continuous assessment and monitoring student progress responsibilities reflect the specialist's integral role within the RTI model and align with established research findings emphasizing the importance of identifying at-risk students early, guiding interventions, supporting data-driven decisions, and enhancing student academic outcomes (Bradley et al., 2005; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012; Mellard, 2017; Shores, 2009).

The findings from this study highlight the integral role of continuous assessment and progress monitoring practices among K-4 specialized literary professionals, mirroring observations by Greenfield et al. (2010) and Wilcox et al. (2013) that educators utilize data to document and enhance students' academic progress through strategic monitoring. However, these findings contrast with those reported by researchers previously, which highlighted significant gaps in teachers' knowledge, training, and time allocation for implementing effective data collection, progress monitoring, and data-informed instruction within RTI frameworks (e.g., Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Regan et al., 2015).

Data-Driven Practices in Academic Interventions. All nine instructional specialists provided insights on their critical role in utilizing student data to make well-informed decisions about student needs and organize targeted instructional interventions within the RTI-MTSS framework. A key aspect of their role involves analyzing data to identify students at risk for or currently facing academic challenges.

S9 provided insights into their data-driven approach for identifying students needing additional support, explaining, “We start by looking at the percentiles on norm-referenced assessments… Typically, we look at students in the 20% and below, sometimes moving it to the 25% or 15% and below.” Findings indicated that specialists are responsible for making decisions on the intervention delivery. Decisions include determining the duration students will receive the intervention, the frequency of the intervention, and the optimal size of the instruction group needed. These decisions aim to provide explicit, targeted instruction, practice, and feedback to address the student’s specific needs. This practice aligns with established research on practices associated with intensifying instruction (Fuchs et al., 2014).

Through diligent data collection and analysis, specialists identify specific learning areas where students may require further support or opportunities for acceleration. Findings suggest that specialists rely on data to continually assess the effectiveness of their interventions and make necessary adjustments. For example, S2 highlighted the importance of these assessments to “check what is working, what is not, and then adjust [interventions] based on the needs of students.” Complementing this, S1 shared a reflective observation on the importance of ongoing assessment, stating, “My immediate reaction always asks, are the kids responding? Are they showing growth?” This approach to continual evaluative practices aligns with the guidance that educators should identify student performance as responsive or nonresponsive (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007).

The emphasis on data-driven decision-making among these specialists aligns with findings from Bean and colleagues (2003; 2015), who noted that specialized literacy professionals prioritize assessment and classroom-level data as essential for making

instructional decisions and ensuring accountability. Participants in the current study indicated that decisions about interventions and instructional strategies are made based on evidence rather than intuition or assumptions. S7 emphasized the nature of their approach, stating, “Students begin with a diagnostic assessment to identify skill gaps…Once the gap is closed, we strategically move on to the next area, ensuring a personalized and effective intervention process.” This approach aligns with Wanzek and colleagues’ (2016) recommendations for teachers to analyze reading and progress monitoring data when designing effective interventions.

The findings from the specialists in this study provide a notable contrast to the perceptions of teachers reported in previous studies. In this study, the instructional specialists demonstrated a remarkable capacity for leveraging student data to make informed choices concerning interventions and instructional approaches. This contrasts with teachers in earlier studies, who expressed feelings of unpreparedness and confusion about applying data to instructional decisions and managing student transitions between RTI tiers (Castro- Villarreal et al., 2014; Regan et al., 2015). Additionally, teachers have acknowledged encountering challenges in analyzing data and in making instructional choices regarding Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, particularly when students fail to make anticipated progress (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015).

The divergence in studies between the instructional specialist of this study and the teachers described in previous studies highlights the instrumental role of specialized literacy professionals in navigating the RTI framework, includes a process for identifying at-risk students, making evidence-based decisions on intervention strategies, and

adjusting instructional approaches based on continuous progress monitoring, including student tier transitions.

Collaboration and Teamwork. All nine instructional specialists in this study emphasize the collaborative nature of their role in implementing RTI within an MTSS framework. These practices highlight their integration into a broader support network across their school and district. Participant responses highlighted that the structure of these networks varies, ranging from engagement involving a few fellow instructional support providers to more extensive collaboration within Student Learning Teams (SLT) that include classroom teachers, special education teachers, and teaching assistants. These established collaboration practices align with previous research, indicating that they are essential to the role of the specialized literacy professional (Bean et al., 2002, 2003, 2015, 2018; Bean & Goatley, 2020; Bean & Kern, 2018; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014; ILA, 2017).

Nine instructional specialists emphasized that implementing RTI within an MTSS framework is a collaborative effort, not done in isolation. They described being deeply linked to a network of other support providers across their school and district. Analysis of participant insight highlighted a shared culture of teamwork and mutual support among the instructional specialist teams. Insights from participants like S3, who emphasized her team's dedication to supporting each other, and S1, who expressed the value of ongoing communication and collective problem solving within their team, noting that "The way we problem solve together has given me so much knowledge that I didn't have before."

All instructional specialists highlighted their commitment to collaborative efforts with diverse teachers during weekly SLT meetings. Specialists described these meetings

as identifying and addressing student needs, analyzing data for informed decision-making, addressing academic and behavioral concerns, and exchanging best practices or "benevolent borrowing." S3 highlighted the unique dynamics of SLTs across different grade levels, stating, "Our meetings…are very open conversations about kids. Everyone is sharing ideas and giving feedback." Similarly, S8 reflected on an SLT meeting with a fourth-grade team of teachers tasked with analyzing and sorting data. The collaborative effort within the team allowed them to engage in the process of efficiently identifying students who needed additional support, placing them with teachers to intervene, and having a discussion on instructional strategies. She emphasized, "If it weren't for collaboration with my colleagues, we would not be able to make these informed decisions to help our students. It allows us to target each student's individual needs and ensure best practices are being used." The processes of Student Learning Teams (SLTs), as described by participants, align with guidelines from Bean and Goatley (2020) that suggest these meetings provide the opportunity for in-depth conversations about specific students, allow teachers to collaborate to meet students' needs, and provide powerful professional learning opportunities as specialists, classroom, and special education teachers share ideas about resources, materials, and various approaches for differentiating instruction.

Findings indicate that specialists actively follow established norms and a structured agenda during SLTs, take meeting notes, and make decisions regarding student intervention groups. Their participation in discussion highlights their integral role in the educational team, even in academic areas outside their primary teaching responsibilities. This aligns with findings from Bean et al. (2015a), suggesting specialized literacy professionals are not the sole literary instructors for students but work collaboratively

with other teachers, including other specialists, and provide informal support to others (e.g., providing teachers with ideas and materials, assigning them with interpreting data, or making instructional decisions).

Analysis of findings highlights instructional specialists' integral role and responsibilities in fostering collaboration and teamwork within educational settings. Their active engagement in building and managing supportive networks with other professionals emphasizes their informal leadership role within their building and district. In the structure of SLTs, instructional specialists, alongside classroom and special education teachers, collectively assume academic responsibility for all students in the school, not just those within their classroom. In this capacity, specialists assume the role of collaborative consultant (Jaegar, 1996). The collaborative role corresponds closely with the findings of (Bean et al., 2003, 2015; Bean & Goatley, 2020; Bean & Kern, 2018; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012) that suggest specialists commonly engage in shared leadership roles. These roles encompass collaboration with other teachers for planning and resource material selection, working with other school professionals for program coordination, and active participation in curriculum development and school-based teams (Bean et al, 2003, 2015; Bean & Goatley, 2020).

Contrary to the findings of Braun et al. (2020), where teachers reported a need for more clarity regarding the collaborative process among educators for the delivery of various tiers of instruction, the current study illustrates a distinct approach. The collaborative approach highlighted in the current study aligns with the transformative shift described by Galloway and Lesaux (2014), where collaboration between classroom teachers and reading specialists involves collaborative negotiation that emphasizes a

shared relationship to enhance reading instruction for all students. The findings also mirror those researchers reinforcing the idea that a collaborative RTI model provides participants with greater autonomy, enhancing their effectiveness as educators and cultivating an understanding of shared leadership (Bean et al., 2015a; Bean & Goatley, 2020; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Rinaldi et al., 2010).

Experiences within the RTI-MTSS Framework

Sub-research question 2 asked, "What specific experiences do K-4 specialized literacy professionals encounter when carrying out their roles and responsibilities within the RTI-MTSS framework?" In the discussions and journal entry reflections, two themes emerged: adaptation and evolution in educational practices and navigating time and workload management (see Table 7). In exploring the themes of adaptation and evolutions in educational practices and navigating time and workload management, each theme was examined through participant data and in relation to previous data to provide a comprehensive view of the experiences K-4 specialized literary professionals encounter within the RTI-MTSS framework.

Table 7

Themes Related to Experiences within the RTI-MTSS Framework

Experiences	Sub-Components of Experiences
1. Adaptation and evolution in educational practices	• Transition to the instructional specialist role • Navigating educational model and practice changes • Increases collaborative efforts with a shift towards shared leadership

	within Student Learning Teams (SLT). • Adapting to diverse student needs
2. Navigating time and workload management	• Redefined division of responsibilities

Adaptation and Evolution in Educational Practices. In the dynamic landscape of education, instructional specialists navigate the complexities of the RTI-MTSS framework, taking on evolving roles and responsibilities. The study's analysis of experiences from nine specialists suggests a historical and continuous journey through the complexities of educational models and collaborative practices. Insights from all specialists indicate they are significant participants in shaping the practice of service delivery and collaboration within the RTI-MTSS framework.

Transitioning to the Instructional Specialist Role. Insights from the instructional specialist experiences describe transformative professional journeys, with each specialist sharing a unique path that led to a specialized role. Seven out of nine participants transitioned from roles as elementary classroom teachers, and two from positions as elementary special education teachers. S1 reflected on the profound impact of her role transition, explaining, "I have learned exponentially more than I ever knew in the 8 or 9 years prior." Likewise, S6 expressed, "I thought about just going into this role for maybe a year or two, take what I learned about interventions, and bring it back into the classroom. Here I am seven years later." Patterns in the data suggest that the diverse backgrounds of the specialists have provided a solid foundation in curriculum and

instructional strategies that enriched their expertise and provided a comprehensive understanding of the elementary academic environment. S5 confirmed, noting:

> I was excited to be able to participate in this new role with many more teachers new to me and to bring that different kind of idea and perspective to what I was doing as a special education teacher into this kind of position.

The analysis of participant responses revealed a collective desire to embrace new challenges, a commitment to ongoing professional growth, and a shared enthusiasm for expanding their existing skills to impact student learning. Unanimously, participants are passionate about providing targeted support to students, expressed joy in working with students who need additional help, and find fulfillment in being a part of student's academic progress.

The participants in this study show traits, characteristics, and professional backgrounds that mirror those of reading/literacy specialists highlighted in prior research by Bean and colleagues (2002, 2003). These previous studies found that many reading/literacy specialists had extensive professional experiences as classroom teachers and demonstrated enthusiasm for their roles and dedication to the significance of effective literacy instruction for students. Like prior study participants, these specialists held prior roles as classroom or special education teachers, which have equipped them with a better understanding of the challenges and complexities encountered in the classroom. Analysis suggests this background is an advantage in their current role.

Navigating Educational Model and Practice Changes. The analysis of experiences of instructional specialists in this study highlights an evolving role and shifting responsibilities, particularly in how they allocate resources and collectively focus

their efforts. The evolution reflects the adaptative and dynamic nature of their roles within changing educational models and practices. Most participants, six out of nine, emphasized the continuous transformations in their responsibilities, influencing their day-to-day practices. S9 reported that "almost every single year, something changes."

Insights gathered from participants indicated that the change in the target district from Academic Intervention Services (AIS) to embracing a holistic approach within an RTI model integrated into the broader MTSS framework reflected a shift to a more comprehensive approach. Five out of nine participants took on the task of providing support in specific subject areas, primarily to students selected based on teacher discretion and assessments, including teacher-created and provided by the state. The model primarily focused on targeted interventions for students below specific academic benchmarks. Evidence from the study suggests that as the district's educational model transitioned to a tiered RTI framework within an MTSS system, so did the roles and responsibilities of instructional specialists. S7 emphasized this shift, expressing, "We have gone from one model to another, and our responsibilities are changing."

Data indicates that instructional specialists currently navigate a complex system that emphasizes early identification of students at risk for academic difficulties, provides interventions based on the level of needs, and monitors student progress to inform instructional decisions. This transition to an RTI-MTSS framework required a shift of responsibilities that extends into a broader spectrum of interventions across Tiers 2 and 3 in reading and math. It also required a deeper understanding of a broader range of students' needs and the ability to collaborate effectively with various teams of educators to implement responsive and timely interventions. Analysis suggests that these specialists

possess qualities such as adaptability, flexibility, and a readiness to evolve within the educational landscape.

Findings from interviews and journal entries show that eight out of nine participants have experienced significant role variability within and across schools and overtime periods. The variability shows differences between schools and evolvement throughout a school year. Specialists report being tasked with providing interventions tailored to a specific grade level or focusing on a particular subject area, such as reading or math. S3 reflected on her experience with continual changes in practice, explaining:

> At first, I taught kindergarten through grade four, reading and math. Then, in the next couple of years, we shifted a little bit to try and have more focus…There were a couple of years I only taught grades kindergarten through second with another instructional specialist, and another provider taught third through fifth-grade interventions.

Most participants expressed that they have been able to tailor their roles to the needs of each grade level within their buildings. Analysis of the findings suggests that specialists need to be adaptive to this variability. This flexibility allows for a responsive approach to the needs of each school and student population, demonstrating the specialist's ability to adjust and provide for the evolving needs of the school.

Insights from S6 indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic led to significant changes in the focus of instructional specialties, shifting towards prioritizing Tier 3 interventions in reading and, more recently, math. She reflected, "Our [district] philosophy behind that decision was that if you cannot read, you cannot solve the math word problems. Plus, math is not mandated." Most participants reported on the more

recent directed by district leadership for instructional specialists to primarily focus on providing Tier 3 reading and math interventions for grades kindergarten through fourth. Again, evidence from the data suggests that despite the district's direction, specialists continued to experience variability in intervention focus and workload across schools in the district.

The findings in this study resonate with longstanding observations about the dynamic nature of reading/literacy specialists' roles and responsibilities. Historically, these roles have gone through significant transformations, impacting educational practices (Bean et al., 2002, 2003, 2015; Bean & Kern, 2018; Dole, 2004, 2006; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014; Ippolito et al., 2019; Kern, 2011; Kern et al., 2018; Quatroche et al., 2001). The evolution identified reading specialists within roles of literacy specialists, coaches, coordinators, and, more recently, specialized literary professionals (ILA, 2018), reflecting the diverse and changing needs of the education landscape of education. Bean and Goatley (2021) suggest that there is no single model of the instructional role for literacy specialists to follow. Instead, they suggest that literacy specialists should understand the critical elements necessary to promote literacy success for students experiencing reading difficulties.

Bean et al. (2015a) highlight that educational institutions must evolve in response to internal and external pressures. This change requires flexibility and the ability to adapt to new challenges. Adaptation demands organizations to proactively adjust strategies necessary to meet changing needs. Thomas et al. (2020) suggests that adopting RTI practices within districts can vary, influenced by the diverse needs and structures across different grade levels. Therefore, specialized literacy specialists adapt their roles and

responsibilities based on the instructional context, the individuals they support, and the unique setting in which they work (Bean et al., 2001; Galloway & Lesaux. 2014). Ippolito et al. (2019) argue that constant change is inevitable due to the new demands and societal educational shifts. This continuous change implies that specialists often take on various roles and responsibilities tailored to their context. Patterns in the data reveal that this is evident in the educational model changes and practices for the specialists in the present study.

Participant data further highlighted another shift for specialists, transitioning from working in isolation to playing a significant role within a collaborative educational framework. A key aspect of this transformation is the implementation of Student Learning Team (SLT) meetings within the RTI-MTSS framework. RTI is grounded in the practice of collective responsibility and a significant change from how most schools have functioned in the past (Buffum et al., 2009). Insights from all specialists describe these meetings as a platform for problem-solving and decision-making among teams of teachers. S5 emphasized, “Each grade level has different needs, such as strategic monitoring, curriculum development ideas and strategies, best practices, student-specific updates, and how to use best resources that we have.” This finding aligns with previous research indicating that reading specialists are performing tasks that include collaborating more with other educators and serving as a resource in the school (Bean et al., 2002, 2003, 2015; Bean & Kern, 2018; Galloway & Lesaux, 2015; Ippolito et al., 2019).

The findings reveal that eight out of nine participants experienced changes in SLT meetings, highlighting a historical shift towards a shared leadership model where classroom teachers are increasingly taking on more roles. Evidence from participant data

showed that initially, instructional specialists were the primary leaders of these meetings, coordinating discussions and managing information. Classroom teachers and special education teachers contributed insights on student performance and classroom observations. S3 reported that classroom teachers often relied on instructional specialists for guidance to help run these meetings. Alongside this shift, participants expressed the logistical evolution of SLT meetings, including various scheduling options, such as organizing meetings before the school day begins, biweekly meetings throughout the school day, or daily meetings.

Findings suggest these adjustments reflect a commitment to enhancing stakeholder collaboration and efficacy. Moreover, the experience of specialists in this study presents a contrast to previous research by Castro- Villerreal et al. (2014), which explored RTI practices from the perspectives of various educators, including general and special education teachers, administrators, and special support personnel. Unlike participants in that study, specialists in the current study did not identify time constraints for planning, execution, and data gathering as a significant barrier to implementing effective RTI practices.

Despite five of the nine participants reporting experiences of challenges and tension in SLTs, most participants have observed considerable improvements in how SLTs function. S3 described it as a "more hands-on-deck approach I have seen since we started." Data from participants indicated that instructional teams have learned from past experiences and have implemented adjustments such as starting meetings earlier, dedicating separate days to focus on math and reading data, and planning agendas in advance. Improvements in SLT meetings echo previous studies suggesting that overtime,

stakeholders implementing RTI respond significantly more positively about collaborative practices (Regan et al., 2015; Rinaldi et al., 2011).

Most participants described a shift towards more effective and collaborative SLT meetings, with more recent attempts to balance leadership and responsibilities among all team members. Eight of the nine specialists highlighted positive changes in the collective mindset of team members and the quality of discussion within team meetings. S5 noted that they operate more with "open conversations for all members of the team to have an opportunity to discuss ideas, celebrations, concerns and ask for ideas or help with a certain situation." Further illustrating the power of collaborative effort, S8 shared insights from a specific fourth-grade SLT meeting where the team analyzed a recent math assessment to strategically group students for Team Time based on their performance. She noted, "Without the collaboration with my colleagues, we would not have been able to make these informed decisions to help our students." This collaborative strategy allowed the team to target interventions to meet the individual needs of each student and ensure that best practices are implemented. Meyer and Behar-Horenstein (2015) note that good communication and collaboration are essential for effective RTI implementation. The findings in the current study mirror those of previous studies, emphasizing the need for participants implementing RTI practices to define a clear process for multidisciplinary collaborative teams to work together on instruction across all tiers (e.g., Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Regan et al., 2015).

Adapting to Diverse Student Needs. Findings from the exploration of K-4 academic instructional specialists uncover their experiences in meeting students' diverse and evolving needs, particularly those presenting challenging learning behaviors and

coming from diverse backgrounds. Six out of nine participants emphasized the need for ongoing adaptation of their intervention methods to support the changing requirements of students. Various diverse groups of students, including English Language Learners (ELL), students identified with special education services, and those exhibiting challenging behaviors within the Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, complicate these experiences. Insights from participants indicated that addressing the needs of such diverse groups of students requires continuous adjustments and customization of intervention strategies to ensure that every student receives the appropriate and targeted support they require within the RTI framework.

In an interview, S1 shared her experiences managing students' executive function, attention, and social-emotional skills within academic interventions. She expressed her observations over the limited academic growth observed in some of these students, often leading to their placement into Tier 2 or Tier 3 academic interventions with an instructional specialist. She also shared observations on the significant role that emotional readiness and attention play as barriers to students' abilities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Similarly, S9 shared her experiences supporting students identified with special education needs within intervention groups, highlighting the obstacles that come from a lack of familiarity with learning and management strategies due to her background not specializing in special education.

Participants S2 and S3 discussed their experiences with the increasing diversity in their student populations, highlighting the increase of non-English speaking students entering the school district. Specialists noted that the recent arrival of more ELL students has created new situations for teachers and specialists alike, including navigating the

complexities of supporting their English language learning needs, language service requirements, and access to the core curriculum. S3 discussed her adjustments in providing effective reading support to ELL students and questioned the ability to monitor their progress, especially when significant language barriers exist. The data indicates that specialists proactively include ELL students in their intervention groups and seek innovative solutions to accommodate these needs. These strategies include identifying 'pockets of time' throughout the day that can be dedicated to targeted interventions and utilizing teaching assistants to provide these interventions more effectively. The need for more explicit tools and strategies to effectively support reading interventions for ELL students was common among participants.

The analysis of insights from instructional specialists indicates a process of adaptation and critical evaluation that instructional specialists experience in addressing the diverse learning needs of students. The adaptation process is not only in response to the evolving nature of educational practices but also due to navigating the complexities of meeting a wide range of students' needs within the RTI-MTSS framework. Insights indicate that specialists are continuously reassessing and refining their approach and materials to meet diverse learning needs. This adaptation has been a learning experience that often pushes them beyond their comfort zones.

Adapting and evaluating foundational strategies addresses the needs of diverse learners, including those with reading difficulties and ELLs. Kern et al. (2018) suggest that students with reading difficulties have diverse characteristics and patterns of reading ability and they acknowledge that this diversity requires a tailored approach to instruction and intervention. This diversity requires specialists to identify readers' profiles and

deeply understand the various intervention strategies available to support all learners. Moreover, Foorman and Torgeson (2001) identify three critical components of instruction for students needing supplemental instruction, including explicit and comprehensive, more intensive, and more supportive instruction required by most students. The researchers also suggest that these students need instruction that provides more scaffolding to help them complete tasks successfully and greater feedback and encouragement (Foorman & Torgeson, 2001). The findings from Bean and Lillenstein (2012) resonate with the instructional specialist's efforts, emphasizing the collective responsibility in education to ensure inclusivity and targeted academic support for all students.

Previous research indicates that ELLs can achieve word reading proficiencies comparable to their monolingual peers if educators provide students with evidence-based instruction that is responsive to their linguistic strengths and needs, suggesting that these strategies can significantly improve word reading skills (Vargas et al., 2021). Similarly, Richards-Tutor et al. (2016) found that explicit and system interventions focused on phonological awareness and word reading instruction benefit ELL students, especially in the early stages of education.

Navigating Time and Workload Management. The experiences of eight out of nine participants, as shared through in-depth discussions and reflective journal entries, highlight the continuous nature of managing time and workload within their roles. Findings suggest that these instructional specialists navigate the evolving educational landscape as a response to internal and external influences (Bean et al., 2015a). Insights from participant data reveal several key areas related to time and workload management

for these specialists, including adaptions in service delivery logistics, adjustments to operating with fewer specialists in most buildings, and duties that extend beyond the primary intervention roles.

Analysis of insights highlights the impact of two recent district initiatives on the experiences of time and workload management for instructional specialists. These directives include focusing on intensive Tier 3 academic intervention implementation and reducing instructional support personnel. Five of the nine participants provided perspectives into the shift towards delivering exclusively intensive interventions in reading and math for kindergarten through fourth-grade students. S6 expressed the redefined division of responsibilities, explaining, “We are now only servicing Tier 3 interventions in math and reading, which means the classroom teachers are responsible for providing a Tier 2 level of service within their classrooms.” Echoing this, S3 shared the logistical constraints, noting that intervention support is “locked into the 50-minute Team Time block. We have no more minutes in our day to even attempt to work with kids outside of that block now.” Specialist S7 voiced a concern shared by others, “There is no differentiation between Tier 2 and Tier 3 support at this time…While I can close many gaps, I do not feel that twenty-five minutes is enough to change the trajectory of a student’s progress.” In response, S7 and her instructional specialist team have implemented an additional SLT meeting each week dedicated to the team of specialists to assess the effectiveness of the Tier 3 interventions for students. The approach includes proactively using a data-driven decision-making process that involves adjusting providers or targeted interventions.

Moreover, the reduction in instructional specialists' positions, as highlighted by three out of nine participants, influences the capacity of specialists to provide comprehensive support. Analysis of participant perspectives suggests that they encounter experiences related to balancing the demands of their primary intervention roles with the academic needs of their students. As specialists are operating within a fixed schedule, primarily due to the "Team Time' block dedicated to Tier 3 math and reading interventions, their ability to adapt and respond to the various academic needs of students within the school day is significantly limited. The reduction in staff also contributes to this issue by narrowing the collective capacity of the specialist team to support intervention needs. Consequently, instructional specialists have had to prioritize interventions and neglect others, such as providing only reading and not math support. The findings in the current study are consistent with Regan et al. (2015) in highlighting that educators positively recognize a structured time during the school day for individual and small-group instruction for students. Similarly, both sets of participants describe this dedicated time during the day as insufficient to meet the needs of students, particularly if a student needs interventions in more than one instructional area.

Findings from the current study previously indicated that participants engage in a broad spectrum of roles and responsibilities associated with RTI implementation, including their involvement in five weekly Student Learning Team (SLT) meetings. While collaboration is essential to RTI-MTSS implementation in the target district, three of the nine specialists suggested that their participation could be redirected more effectively on days when math is the focus of the meeting. They advocated for prioritizing their time to support students, emphasizing their focus on reading

intervention rather than math. These insights suggest a potential misalignment between the specialists' primary objectives and responsibilities or an opportunity to optimize resource allocation based on specialized focus.

Similarly, S3 highlighted another layer of responsibilities that falls onto the instructional specialists, including stepping in as a substitute teacher due to staffing shortages. This disruption from their scheduled intervention blocks and SLT meetings interrupts their planned interventions and affects the student's ability to receive targeted support. The insights gathered from participants' experiences align closely with the specialized literacy professionals in the Ippolito et al. (2019) study, indicating that in addition to the expected responsibility, participants engaged in responsibilities not typical of their position type. In their study, researchers observed that educators who serve as SLPs frequently take on multiple roles shaped by the context in which they work and require adaptation to changing times (Ippolito et al., 2019).

Self-Efficacy in Implementation of RTI Practices

Sub-research question 3 asked, "How do K-4 specialized literacy professionals perceive their own self-efficacy in implementing RTI practices for students who are at risk of or experiencing reading difficulties?" To gain deeper insight into the self-perceived efficacy of instructional specialists in implementing RTI practices for students encountering reading challenges, participants were asked to evaluate their own capabilities using a defined scale during one-on-one interviews.

This scale was structured to range from 1 to 10, where a rating of 1 signifies the lowest level of perceived efficacy, indicating a specialist's beliefs in their minimal effectiveness in implementing RTI components. Conversely, a rating of 10 represents the

highest level of perceived efficacy, reflecting a strong confidence in their abilities to effectively apply RTI components. Through this self-assessment process, participants quantitatively expressed their confidence levels (see Table 8) Analysis of insights from all nine instruction specialists reveals a theme centered on the relationship between instructional specialists' self-efficacy and a dedication to lifelong learning.

Table 8

Participant Efficacy Self-Assessment Scores

Participant	Self-Assessment Score
S1	7
S2	7
S3	8.5-9
S4	9-10
S5	7-8
S6	High 8
S7	9
S8	7
S9	8

Self-Efficacy and the Continuous Learning Process. The self-assessment scores, ranging from 1 to 10, revealed diverse confidence levels and professional development among instructional specialists. Mostly, they assigned themselves towards the higher ends of this scale, reflecting a positive perspective of their ability to implement RTI practices within an MTSS framework. The analysis of participant data suggests a significant alignment between the attribute of lifelong learning and the elevated levels of

self-efficacy reported among these specialists. T1 notably highlighted this connection, stating, “I will continue to build my confidence with each new set of students and a new set of experiences I encounter. That’s the world of education. We are all lifelong learners.” Similarly, T8 reflected, “I have learned a lot in the past two years that have helped me to get to that confidence level.” These behaviors are particularly relevant when viewed through the lens of Bandura’s (1997) self-efficacy which suggests that individuals with higher perceived self-efficacy tend to attempt more, achieve more significant successes, and persist longer than those with lower self-efficacy beliefs.

Six of the nine participants highlighted the nature of learning within educational roles, acknowledging the impossibility of achieving complete mastery due to the “ever-evolving” nature of education. S1 emphasized this continuous learning process, noting, “Children are so individually different that when you get down to the individual student level, there is always going to be something new to learn…There will always be a student who does not respond the way you anticipate. These individual moments keep me from rating myself a ten.” She added that she aspires to maintain a level 8 rating while adapting to the evolving nature of education. Similarly, S2 expressed that teaching is never fully mastered, “I feel as though being at a ten would mean having all the answers.” Wheatley (2002) highlights the positive and critical role of doubt in the professional development of educators, emphasizing its importance in the reflective process leading to new insights and learning. By integrating doubt into the reflective process, educators are motivated to seek new learning opportunities, embrace adaptivity, and foster a more responsive and innovative approach to teaching (Wheatley, 2002).

The insights shared by participants highlight intrinsic motivation and a proactive approach toward personal and professional development. T4's journal entry suggests the motivational power of learning opportunities, noting, "It is fascinating to me and excites me more to do my job." T5 provided a forward-looking perspective, explaining, "There is always more to learn…I really want to make sure I'm helping kids achieve their maximum learning potential." This drive for lifelong learning among the specialists signifies more than a commitment to professional development; it reflects a growth mindset characterized by resilience and adaptability. S3 stressed the need to be "open-minded to learning more about what we do and how to get better…or how to help the kids." She added, "We are trying to think outside of the box to help the students." S1 and S6 share a similar perspective of ongoing growth, with S1 stating," You're always growing and learning in this profession," and S6 explained, "I am on a journey to make it better." This perspective aligns with Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) and Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009), who discuss how self-efficacy influences educators' ability to adapt to new challenges. This adaptability is essential for lifelong learning, as it ensures that specialists remain responsive to the evolving needs of their students and continually seek out and incorporate new knowledge and practices into their teaching.

In synthesizing, perceptions indicate a shared understanding among instructional specialists who view their professional journey as a continuous path of learning, growth, and adaptation. The collective desire to enhance efficacy through a commitment to supporting student outcomes and professional development is also evident. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) highlight that self-efficacy is a future-oriented assessment of an individual's perceived capability in specific situations rather than a direct measure of

their competence. This perspective is essential for understanding lifelong learning among these specialists. High self-efficacy fuels a forward-thinking approach where specialists continually assess their readiness to meet challenges and opportunities for growth, thereby perpetuating a continuous journey of learning and development. This mirrors Galloway and Lesaux (2015), who contend that navigating the demands of specialized literacy professionals relies on a sustained commitment to enhancing instructional practices and a persistent pursuit of professional expertise.

Factors Influencing Self-Efficacy in RTI-MTSS Implementation

Sub-research question 4 asked, "What factors contribute to the perceived self-efficacy level of K-4 specialized literacy professionals in implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework?" Several significant themes emerged from the study, including the impact of collaborative networks and professional development, addressing diverse student needs, celebrating their academic achievements, and navigating workload demands and burnout (see Table 9).

Table 9

Themes Related to Factors Influencing Self-Efficacy

Factors for Self-Efficacy	Sub-Components of Factors
1. Impact of collaborative networks, professional development, and resources	• Instructional specialist team • Grade level teams • District leadership and support • Professional development and resources
2. Addressing diverse student needs and celebrating achievements	• Students' response to intervention challenges and successes • Fostering meaningful connections with students
3. A balancing act: navigating workload demands and burnout	• District directed changes impacts practices

Impact of Collaborative Networks, Professional Development, and Resources. Exploring the factors contributing to the perceived self-efficacy levels of K-4 academic instructional specialists in implementing RTI practices within the MTSS framework revealed an impact of collaborative networks and professional development. These collaborative networks include instructional specialist teammates, grade-level teams of classroom teachers, special education teachers, teaching assistants, district leaders, the literacy coach, and building administration. Professional development opportunities and resources for effective intervention instruction emerged as significant components for implementation.

Instructional Specialist Team. Through interviews and journal entries, the insights from all nine instructional specialists highlighted the crucial role of collaborative

practices within their teams, contributing significantly to boosting their self-efficacy and confidence in implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework. The participants emphasized the importance of ongoing discussion and reflection as everyday practices, with team support as a critical factor in "confidence building." In a reflective journal entry, S1 shared a time of feeling self-doubt and a lack of confidence when instructing a challenging second-grade group requiring a Tier 3 level of reading intervention. To build confidence, she explained that the first step for her is to meet with her teammates to share the successful parts of the intervention and problem solve areas where students were not responding. She noted:

> Through this discussion, new ideas and ways to approach the instruction came to light. Each teacher on my team shared what they were doing, why they were doing it, and how they were doing it. And although not every idea would match my needs, it started to spark new ideas to build on …Talking it through with my teammates is a huge part of building my confidence as an RTI provider.

Likewise, S3 emphasized the valuable impact of learning with experienced team members on her confidence. In the interview, she reflected on her initial days in the role, stating, "A couple of members of my team taught me a ton when I first started…they were in the role for a while, and it was helpful for them to help me through the different components of the job." This mentorship and shared expertise within her team served as crucial for the development and understanding of the demands within the role. Kern et al. (2018) posit that reading/literacy specialists need to have a deep understanding of supplemental and intervention strategies that can enhance student learning, including the

capability to design and implement instructional approaches tailored to meet the diverse needs of students.

Through collaborative problem-solving, participants emphasized gaining valuable insights into understanding and meeting students' needs and interpreting data more effectively. S4 shared her experience of ongoing teamwork with her team, highlighting, "We collaborate constantly, bouncing ideas off of each other." Similarly, S5 expressed gratitude towards her teammates for their support, noting, "I go to my teammate first. They have been phenomenal and so supportive, especially with sharing resources." Insights suggest that these ongoing interactions contribute to specialists' collective focus on addressing and targeting the diverse academic skill gaps their students need to fill.

Moreover, analysis of responses indicates that most participants view openness and trust as contributors to fostering a collaborative and supportive culture within the instructional support teams and strengthening their self-efficacy. S1 acknowledged, "I have so much trust in my team that I can go to them without fear of judgment and know they will help me think it through." These findings suggest that fostering a team dynamic that includes regular collaboration, reflective practices, and a supportive nature is key to building confidence and improving instructional effectiveness for specialized literacy professionals. These findings reflect the insights from Ryan and Hendry (2023), who identified that teachers believe this supportive exchange of practices among colleagues, such as sharing knowledge, strategies for teaching reading, and resources, played a significant role in enhancing their confidence in their ability to teach reading.

Student Learning Teams (SLTs). Transitioning from the supportive environment of the instruction specialist team, which enhances specialists' self-efficacy, participants'

experiences with Student Learning Teams (SLTs) or grade-level teacher teams reveal that these interactions can either strengthen or challenge their confidence in implementing RTI components. Findings from five of the nine participants support the idea that engagement with grade-level team teachers positively influence instructional specialists' self-efficacy. Participant report that interactions with grade-level classroom teachers and special education teachers offer valuable insights into the curriculum, providing a comprehensive understanding of the needs necessary for delivering targeted interventions to all students.

Data analysis suggests that investments in working closely with grade-level teams have led to successful and positive student transformations. These collective findings align with previous studies investigating various teachers' perceptions of implementing RTI, where teachers highlighted several benefits. These advantages included opportunities for collaboration with colleagues during problem-solving sessions and data meetings, the implementation of higher-quality instruction, and the availability of more comprehensive and differentiated instruction tailored to the individual needs of students (Greenfield et al., 2010; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Rinaldi et al., 2011; Werts et al., 2014; Wilcox et al., 2013).

Participants' experiences highlighted an increased emphasis on shifting from "my" to "our" students when discussing students and showcasing the power of collaboration among teachers with a shared interest in student success. S2 expressed the crucial role of teamwork in supporting a second-grade student's success, crediting the collaborative efforts of her colleagues and the grade-level team. She stated, "Whether it was taking other students so that I could minimize his group size or giving me ideas and

communicating what types of interventions would be appropriate for him." S2 added, "I could not have done that on my own because I knew I was not on my own, and I knew that I could check back with the whole team I have been working with to ensure I was on the right path." Similarly, S6 shared her enthusiasm for the collaborative nature of her role, especially in working across K-4 grades and engaging in discussions about students' strengths and weaknesses. She highlighted the value of teamwork when describing an example where collaborating with a third-grade teacher provided crucial insights into a student's trauma and home life, enhancing her support through more frequent check-ins with the student.

The insights on collaboration between instructional specialists and classroom teachers resonate with Bean and Lilienstein's (2012) research, highlighting the significance of shared learning in educational settings. Their study advocates for RTI and collaborative dialogue as valuable sources of professional development for all involved, highlighting the role of structured meetings in facilitating meaningful team interactions. Similarly, Bean et al. (2015a) found that specialized literacy professionals perceived a shared vision in their school, focusing on student learning among teachers. This vision aligns with the current study's findings, which suggest the value of combining the expertise of instructional specialists and teachers during grade-level meetings to provide meaningful strategies and insights shared among educators to improve outcomes for students.

Evidence from the study also suggests that collective teacher knowledge is a very influencing element impacting instructional specialist self-efficacy as it relates to cooperative elements of RTI implementation. The perspectives from eight of the nine

participants revealed the profound influence of mutual understanding and expertise among grade-level classroom teachers and instructional specialists on the dynamics of SLT meetings and overall collaborative efforts. This collective knowledge base and shared expertise are foundational in implementing effective intervention strategies and supporting a cohesive educational approach within an MTSS framework (Greenfield et al. 2010)

Results show that shared collective knowledge and insights deeply influence the effectiveness of interactions within grade level team meetings. Most participants expressed the challenge of aligning the understanding of instructional strategies, intervention instruction, and intricacies of RTI processes between instructional specialists and classroom teachers, indicating an impact on discussions during meetings. In a reflective journal entry, S1 shared her experiences of challenges involving extending collective knowledge beyond the Tier 1 curriculum towards more targeted Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. She emphasized, “There are misunderstandings about group size, duration of interventions, and specific actions taken by specific teachers” that hinder the effectiveness of SLT meetings. Additionally, S1 highlighted instances of resistance from some classroom teachers, stressing the importance of mutual trust, respect, and effective communication, as previously characterized by the instructional specialist team dynamics, which are necessary to overcome these barriers. Similarly, S5 expressed concerns about the challenges of collaborative decision-making, particularly when discussions become overly focused on classroom-specific issues.

Five out of nine participants shared insights into the historical tension between instructional specialists and classroom teachers, noting that guidance from specialists

often can be perceived as directive rather than collaborative. S3 pointed out the perception issue, noting that it has often placed specialists in opposition to classroom teachers, leading to division instead of collaboration. She also expressed the difficulty of navigating grade-level team meetings, especially when teachers express dissatisfaction or resist suggestions made by instructional specialists. Participants also reported a shared confusion held by classroom teachers surrounding the roles and responsibilities of instructional specialists. Insights indicated that this sometimes leads to challenging conversations in which specialists explain and defend their positions, particularly about district and building level administrative expectations relating to components of the RTI-MTSS framework. The concerns expressed by these specialist's mirror those raised by Braun et al. (2020), who noted significant discrepancies in educators' perceptions of their roles within RTI and a need for more clarity regarding the nature of collaboration among educators. This lack of clarity extends to the increased accountability placed on teachers, who may need more knowledge and skills to implement RTI components effectively (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Regan et al., 2015).

S7 advocated for a more tailored approach to developing SLT meetings across different grade levels within the district, emphasizing the importance of adapting to the unique needs of each team. She stressed that a "one-size-fits-all" approach is ineffective and expressed a desire for a clearer understanding of RTI implementation processes and role clarification for all stakeholders within the educational framework. The emphasis on the need for professional development, as indicated by participant findings, aligns with prior research studies advocating for training in the core curriculum, data collection and analysis, collaborative problem-solving and teaching, teaching methodologies, and shared

leadership (e.g., Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bineham et al., 2014; Rinaldi et al., 2010). Additionally, findings from Bineham et al. (2014) indicate that all levels of personnel need training related to RTI implementation.

Findings from participants in the current study resonate with broader understandings that highlight the complexities of implementing RTI practices within schools. Like the challenges expressed by the instructional specialist in this study, existing findings indicate persistent hurdles in RTI implementation, even as teachers understand its foundational aspects (Greenfield et al., 2010; Regan et al., 2015; Wilcox et al., 2013). The difficulties observed in effective collaboration and shared understanding within grade-level team meetings mirror the barriers identified by teachers in previous studies, particularly around using assessment data for instructional decisions and navigating transitions between RTI tiers (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bruan et al., 2020; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Greenfield et al., 2010; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Regan et al., 2015; Wilcox et al., 2013). Bean and Goatley (2021) assert that for a group to function effectively, with a clear purpose and a commitment to meeting their goals, it requires time. This perspective highlights the importance of sustained effort in team development, noting that successful collaboration and shared learning are processes that can evolve.

District Leadership and Support. Findings from eight participants highlighted the significant role of a district literacy coach in enhancing their self-efficacy for RTI implementation. They shared how the coach's support and guidance have elevated their confidence and improved effectiveness in their teaching practices. S1 recalled, "Knowing

I can go to my team and literacy coach builds my confidence because I feel I learned something every time I go to them."

The specialists collectively acknowledged the valuable role of the literacy coach in their professional growth. S7 affirmed, "We are fortunate to have a literacy coach who is so knowledgeable and provides us with meaningful professional development and strategies that can be implemented immediately to help struggling students." Most participants pointed out that interactions with and modeling by the literacy coach have fostered ongoing learning. S9 reflected on a coaching session involving modeling with the literacy coach, who provided her training on an intervention program, saying, "Now, I have another intervention in my toolbox."

Collective perceptions agreed that the extensive knowledge held by the literacy coach is a valuable resource. S4 shared, "Every intervention I put in front of a student, I have been trained by [the literacy coach] in all of them. She has really been a source of knowledge and trained us well. I am confident in my teaching and effectiveness of these resources." Insights suggest that working closely with the literacy coach has equipped the specialist with meaningful professional development and strategies, directly enhancing their teaching practices.

Previous research defines literacy coaches as a significant source for providing job-embedded professional development for teachers, which includes conducting more extensive group workshops, facilitating small teacher study groups, supporting grade-level meetings, and working with individual teachers (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Calo et al., 2015; Colburn & Woulfin, 2012; Deussen et al., 2007; Hathaway et al., 2016; Ippolito et al., 2019; L'Allier et al., 2010; Pletcher et al., 2019). Bean and Lillenstein (2012)

found that reading specialists and coaches worked as a team to discuss data results and make decisions about grouping and instruction. By engaging in these diverse forms of professional development, literacy coaches provide support that addresses the specific needs of teachers at different stages of their careers with various instructional challenges. As indicative of the specialists in the current study, this approach enhances their instructional practices and contributes to a culture of continuous learning and increased efficacy in their capacities.

While the specialists collectively recognize the significant support from a district literacy coach in enhancing their practices and confidence to implement them, there was also a notable call for stronger leadership in other areas. Five of the nine participants voiced the importance of building-level leadership, with most indicating a desire for more substantial support and leadership presence to support their roles and responsibilities. One participant, S5, highlighted her building administrator's role in boosting her confidence in implementing RTI practices. She shared how the administrator regularly engages with the instructional specialist team, asks about their needs, tracks the progress of RTI components, and actively participates in SLT meetings to offer guidance and support.

In contrast, the findings revealed that four of the nine participants needed greater involvement, support, and leadership from their building administrators to implement RTI practices effectively. These four participants come from half of the target schools involved in the study. During an interview and in her reflective journal, S4 expressed dissatisfaction with her school's leadership, noting, "It has had a grave effect on my attitude and how I feel working for this building and district." She attributed her

frustration to a perceived lack of urgency in driving the building forward in advancing MTSS. S4 also pointed out experiences of challenges from situations where leaders set expectations for implementation and progress by failing to follow through with concrete actions. This lack of follow-through has led to frustration and placed the instructional specialists in challenging and "awkward positions."

Likewise, S7 shared frustration with her experience with a building leader, noting a disconnect between the leader's encouragement for creative thinking. Despite being urged to "think outside the box" to address challenges, she described how instructional specialists encountered resistance. Similarly, insights gathered from S3 and S6 highlight the impact it makes when a building leader attends and contributes to the SLTs. S6 elaborated, "[The building principal] keeps everyone guided and focused, creating a very different meeting."

Insights from these participants reveal a call for more transparent, more actionable leadership to facilitate collaboration with grade-level teams, highlighting experiences with misdirection and vision. Frustration was expressed over the absence of building leaders from the SLT meetings, emphasizing the need for their direct involvement and communication. These experiences suggest a gap between what leadership provides and what the specialists need for effective practices in the RTI-MTSS framework.

Additionally, findings suggest these participants would benefit from leadership that empowers them to enhance their efficacy. S7 reflected on her experiences with the district's initial transition towards implementing collective responsibility to support all students within an MTSS framework, noting frequent meetings, extensive communication, and knowledge-building related to the transition. However, she noted

that the recent district-directed changes impacting their roles and daily responsibilities in RTI practices had left instructional specialists needing a clearer understanding of the reasons behind these changes or what guidelines to follow for implementation. This situation indicates a disconnection in the decision-making process and communication flow.

Evidence from the study suggests a complex system where the support from a district literacy coach significantly boosts instructional specialists' self-efficacy and effectiveness in RTI implementation. At the same time, there is a need for robust and consistent leadership across all levels to support and empower those implementing RTI within an MTSS framework. This alignment is essential for creating an environment where instructional specialists feel fully supported, not just in their daily responsibilities but in the broader goal of enhancing student outcomes through effective RTI implementation.

Research findings resonate with the research, highlighting the critical role of principal leadership in supporting the work of specialized literary professionals. Studies by several researchers have found that principal involvement as instructional leaders are pivotal for the successful implementation of RTI as they are instrumental in creating a culture of collaboration, shared responsibilities, and accountability (Bean & Kern, 2018; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bean et al., 2015a, 2018). Bean and Lillenstein (2012) note that the principal's leadership is crucial in setting norms for collaboration and ensuring a systemic approach to shared responsibility and accountability. Furthermore, Bean and Kern (2018) emphasized that principals have the position to implement change and function as gatekeepers who can influence specific efforts for change, highlighting the

importance of principals allocating time for teacher teams to collaborate. While insights in the current study indicate that they have an allocated time to meet, Bean and Goatley (2021) emphasize the necessity of principals' participation in collaborative meetings involving SLPs and their teacher colleagues. This involvement emphasizes the significance of principals understanding the challenges and issues these professionals face in their instructional roles, thereby fostering a more informed and supportive school environment.

Professional Development and Resources. In addition to valuing personnel resources like literacy coaches and administrators, specialists also emphasized the importance of sources of professional development and physical resources in their work. The findings from all nine participants indicated that the professional development and resources they received have provided them with the tools to enhance their efficacy in successful RTI implementation. They described diverse professional development experiences within and outside the school district, including attending in-school sessions, professional learning conferences, workshops, mentoring programs, collegial circles, and coursework. S2 explained, "I have learned so much not only from the interventions I have been provided or the research I have read, but the people I have worked with that have been powerful."

Six out of nine participants acknowledged the value of intervention resources supplied by the district to support their instruction within RTI. They reported that the district provides a solid research-based reading program for Tier 1 and effective programs for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions to teach foundational skills essential for proficient reading. S6 emphasized, "As an interventionalist, I feel confident that the interventions

we have in place are effective and show results. Likewise, S8 explained, “I feel equipped to provide my students with an effective intervention each day.” S2 expressed appreciation and confidence gained from having scripted programs covering all parts of the science of reading, finding that her familiarity with these programs has allowed her to make teaching more engaging for students without compromising the integrity of the research-based approach.

Five of the nine participants highlighted their participation in diverse professional development sessions offered by the district. Most of these specialists shared their involvement in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) workshop led by a district hired consultant, focusing on SLT meetings and team improvement strategies. Valuing the consultant’s advice on managing team challenges, S3 noted, “Our job is to coach teammates through these times.” The workshop provided these specialists with strategies to help foster a collective and resilient team environment, serving as an example of the support and direction for the collaborative aspects of the MTSS framework specialists have been seeking.

S4 also shared her participation in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training, describing the experience as “clear and concise and assisted with my understanding of biases.” She reflected that this training boosted her confidence in addressing diversity and inclusivity in educational settings. S3 and S5 reported that collaboration with an English as a New Language (ENL) teacher supported fostering their confidence in implementing RTI components with diverse student populations through monthly workshops. Data from these participants highlight that the ENL workshops provided practice tools for supporting diverse learners, such as building vocabulary through visuals, scaffolding

lessons with visuals and sentence starters, and using Google Translate for better communication and instructions.

Specialists S5 and S8 discussed their attendance at an IXL, a digital resource, professional development session, where they learned about organizing Tier 2 academic groups, assigning tasks to students, and analyzing student performance. S8 shared her plans to supply IXL in math and reading intervention groups for progress monitoring, allowing students to work independently while she assigns specific tasks. She observed, "This enhances my knowledge of RTI as it provides me with tools for intervention and data collection on student progress." Together, perceptions suggest these diverse professional development experiences highlight the concrete benefits of such learning on RTI practices. S1 and S6 also emphasized mentoring and observing other teachers as influential for professional growth. They expressed that observing teachers in actions provides valuable insights into teaching strategies and student interactions, specifically the responsibilities of planning targeted lessons, decision-making based on diagnostic data, and organization of materials. S6 emphasized, "Getting the chance to see others in action can be very inspiring."

As previously revealed, analysis of findings from nine participants indicates a proactive approach towards fostering their professional development as lifelong learners by actively seeking opportunities to enhance their understanding of their roles as academic instructional specialists and their responsibilities in RTI practices. Through interviews and journal entries, each participant shared their willingness to invest time and effort in activities provided by the district and beyond, including attending reading

conferences, exploring professional journals and blogs, listening to podcasts, and utilizing social media videos for educational content.

The findings of this study contrast with previous research, presenting a notable distinction from the challenges highlighted in previous research on RTI implementation. These prior studies indicate that various teachers have expressed frustration over limited access to resources and support for RTI, including professional development opportunities and a lack of resources and appropriate materials to meet students' needs (Braun et al., 2020; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015). The findings from the current study indicate that access to professional development and resources allows specialists to focus on developing and refining RTI strategies and interventions targeted to student needs, further contributing to their expertise and effectiveness. The availability of these resources fosters a sense of confidence among specialists, which, in turn, encourages more innovative practices and a greater willingness to implement new learning or address challenging situations in RTI implementation.

Addressing Diverse Student Needs and Celebrating Student Achievements. Understanding and meeting students' diverse needs presents challenges and opportunities for instructional specialists to implement RTI within an MTSS framework. The data from five of the nine specialists suggests their self-efficacy can be adversely affected by challenges related to when students do not respond positively to interventions, when there is a lack of observed growth, and when specialists are unsure about the most effective strategies or interventions for specific students.

The findings highlight that a lack of positive response or progress in students significantly impacts instructional specialists' self-efficacy. This impact is felt deeply by

participants who feel a strong sense of responsibility for their student's academic achievements. S1 shared experiences of pressure to support and advocate for students, noting, "We become so invested in their success that we put pressure on ourselves." Similarly. S5 shared her dedication to maximizing student learning potential, acknowledging the ongoing challenges in tailoring specific support for students, stating, "I am still developing this craft, ensuring that I am helping students achieve maximum learning." She also expressed the challenge of balancing educational and engaging activities across five grade levels, suggesting it can be "frustrating to think of new approaches to reach a student or group."

Insights indicate that this sense of responsibility often leads to disappointment when expectations are unmet. Participants shared that their confidence level wavers significantly with slow student growth or lack of progress in intervention. In a journal entry, S1 reflected on the difficulty of providing targeted instruction within fixed intervention cycles, questioning, "What do we do when we have a child who should be moving to a different intervention group, but the cycle is not through?" Likewise, S3 and S8 provided experiences with students who showed minimal academic progress, with their growth scores remaining "stagnant," expressing frustration after exhausting all available intervention options. S3 highlighted the necessity of seeking solutions proactively, while S8 acknowledged that "Sometimes, you see students struggling, and progress is not being made, and you want to do something about it…but sometimes the student just needs more than what I can give, and that is hard to watch."

Findings previously indicated that instructional specialists continually reassess and adapt their intervention strategies to meet the unique needs of their students, especially

diverse groups of students, including English Language Learners, students identified with special education services, and those with challenging behaviors within Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention groups. S1 discussed the necessity of constant adaptation, questioning what might be done differently to ensure students respond, saying, “You are constantly making a change and thinking, ‘What am I doing wrong? What can I fix it so that the student does respond?” Her experience with a Tier 3 intervention group brought out feelings of self-doubt and a dip in confidence, explaining:

> The self-doubt comes from the fact that I haven’t experienced a group like this. They most likely need more time to respond to the intervention, and I am worried that the time so far has been wasted because I have done something incorrectly, or I could be doing something in a better or different way.

Data also highlights the pressures specialists face to achieve measurable outcomes within set timeframes, significantly impacting instructional strategies. Reflecting on a journal entry, S2 recognized that her instructional pace was too fast and needed to slow down. Admitting to removing effective scaffolds and overlooking errors without corrections, S2 realized she had prioritized completing activities over addressing students’ misunderstandings. She stated, “This has become my challenge, but it is an opportunity to change and shift my instruction forward. Somewhere along the way, my goal shifted from learning to completion.” To address this situation, S2 refocused with a different teaching approach and relied on student data to guide the instructional pace of her lessons.

In addition to challenges, evidence from the study suggests that witnessing student successes influences instructional specialists’ ability to build and sustain self-

efficacy. Most participants shared success stories centered around positive outcomes of students' academic progress because of tailored intervention instruction provided by an instructional specialist, fostering a sense of accomplishment and enhancing their confidence levels. In her reflections, S1 highlighted the impact of active learning strategies in her intervention approach, which facilitated students' progression from reading individual words to full-text comprehension. She shared another success with a reluctant reader who, through targeted support, could "segment the word" and successfully read an entire story. S1 attributed student success in reading achievement to the role of systematic and predictable instruction, parallelling the needs of students and herself and emphasizing the importance of repetition and clear procedures and instruction in building confidence, stating, "If they know what to expect, then they too can problem solve when something presents as a challenge.

Findings from five of nine specialists indicate that long-term growth in student achievement also contributes to enhancing their self-efficacy. These participants acknowledged that observing meaningful growth in student achievement over time serves as an example of the benefits of ongoing intervention efforts and validates the effectiveness of their instructional methods. For example, S4 shared a success story involving two students initially in Tier 3 support. After a year of dedicated effort, explicit instruction, weekly progress monitoring, adapting instruction to address gaps, and exposure to grade-level text, both students no longer required this level of support. She expressed joy in experiencing the transformative growth of students, stating, "That is a huge positive."

Similarly, in a reflective journal entry, S1 shared that one of the positive aspects of this teaching role is the opportunity to be a part of student progress over many years. She explained, “When you zoom out to the higher level of their elementary experience, they are learning, just maybe not at the same rate as their peers.” She expressed the feeling of being fortunate to be able to see this trajectory, however slow as it may be. Analysis suggests that this continuous journey alongside students provides an opportunity to rebuild that confidence in teaching intervention instruction

S5 and S6 offered unique perspectives on establishing meaningful connections with students, contributing to their efficacy. Both specialists emphasized the significance of investing time in building relationships, acknowledging students’ varying needs, and including social and emotional components into their small group instructional elements. S6 discussed implementing deliberate check-ins at the beginning of each Team Time session to better understand a student’s well-being. These check-ins and connections support students in developing a sense of trust and create a foundation for effective learning. S5 echoed this, saying, “I’ve enjoyed that relationship building and success that I think once we have those established, that it helps us help them learn.”

The analysis of findings from the participants emphasized the dual nature of challenges and opportunities faced by instructional specialists implementing RTI within an MTSS framework. More than half of the specialists reported difficulties in understanding and meeting students’ diverse needs, particularly when students did not respond to interventions, showed a lack of growth, or when the most effective strategies were uncertain. This uncertainty often led to less confidence in their abilities to improve student outcomes. However, alongside these challenges, participants also indicated that

witnessing student success with academic progress and making meaningful connections with students play significant roles in enhancing their self-efficacy. Witnessing long-term student growth, adopting a reflective and adaptive teaching approach, and fostering strong relationships with students were key factors in validating the effectiveness of their instructional methods and efforts.

The finding from the current study closely aligns with recent conclusions from Ryan and Hendry (2023), who investigated the views of twelve Australian primary teachers' perceptions, experiences, and self-efficacy in teaching reading. In their study, the researchers highlight that teachers perceive student success, particularly among struggling readers, as a significant boost to their confidence in their instructional abilities. Additionally, the teachers in the study identified experiences that diminished their confidence and led them to doubt their capabilities, mainly when they could not help a child make progress or when the data did not show growth in students' skills. These perceived failures or lack of success in their teaching efforts directly impacted their self-efficacy (Ryan & Hendry, 2023).

A Balancing Act: Navigating Workload Demands and Burnout. When exploring the experiences of K-4 academic instructional specialists within the RTI-MTSS framework, the researcher previously identified participant complex experiences navigating the district's recent initiatives including those related to the educational model and collaborative efforts. Insights gathered from eight of the nine participant interviews and journal entries indicate that these specialists face significant workload demands and burnout associated with managing multiple responsibilities and staying current with elementary educational standards. Data analysis revealed that most participants struggle

with demands associated with balancing Tier 2 and Tier 3 service delivery roles, managing reading and math interventions, and staff reductions. These adjustments have led to challenges with complicated workload, time management, and negative feelings toward implementation. S7 shared, "We have gone from one model to another, but I am struggling in terms of our changing responsibilities at this point."

Participant responses highlight that the demands on instructional specialists have intensified due to a decrease in available support staff to provide interventions across most of the targeted elementary buildings. Insights suggest that this shortage has adversely impacted the effectiveness of interventions and has significantly burdened the remaining specialists with increased workloads, complicating their abilities to provide comprehensive Tier 2 and Tier 3 support for reading and math to kindergarten through fourth-grade students. S3 and S4 shared their feelings of associated pressures with working with one less team member, indicating that previous years were more successful in supporting more students with targeted interventions.

Most participants also indicated concerns about being restricted to teaching interventions for one grade level during the "Team Time" block, preventing them from offering more extended intervention time. S8 mentioned how new scheduling constraints prevent instructional specialists from supporting math interventions for a grade level if they provide students with extended Tier 3 reading support. S2 shared insights into the logistical aspects of integrating reading interventions for ELL students within the existing daily schedule. She noted the practice considerations involved in scheduling these interventions outside of core curriculum, emphasizing these opportunities are "far and few between." Evidence suggests that these restrictions on intervention service delivery

limit the specialists' flexibility to provide the necessary comprehensive support, impacting their sense of control and capacity to affect positive student outcomes.

Findings from participants suggest that a significant concern among them is the workload, with the majority indicating that the requirements of organizing and teaching multiple small groups throughout the day, participating in various grade-level meetings, and maintaining expertise in all elementary reading and math standards continue to a widespread feeling of "mental burnout." S4 affirmed, "There is such variety throughout the day, and every grade level is taught something different. It is a lot." In a reflective journal entry, S3 wrote on the demanding nature of her role and responsibilities, detailing the numerous tasks she performed during the week, which included teaching students, monitoring progress, analyzing data, planning for new groups, grade-level meetings, and attending a workshop. She acknowledged feeling "pulled in many directions."

Likewise, S2 and S8 identified the challenge in managing many groups, estimating around 8 or 9 intervention groups daily, indicating that "sometimes this seems overwhelming." S2 expressed, "That is a lot of preparation and not enough time in the day to feel like you are a master of any curriculum and all the skill levels in every single grade." Similarly, more than half of the participants acknowledged the feelings of pressure and incompetence in being able to be the expert in all grade-level standards. Participant S8 also shared that having many diverse groups to teach makes it challenging to keep track of paperwork, planning, and assessments for each one.

In addition to teaching various grade levels, subjects, and skills, instructional specialists attend each weekly grade-level team meeting. Most participants suggested that the constant demands on them to participate in these meetings negatively impacted their

morale and overall outlook toward their roles. S7 described these required daily meetings as a significant source of stress for her that affects her attitude, emphasizing, “It is like 90% of my mental stress.”

The experiences of instructional specialists, as described, highlight the significant challenges they face in adapting to evolving roles and responsibilities within the RTI-MTSS framework. These challenges, encompassing overextension and struggles to meet the demands of their roles, resonate with the broader literature on teacher self-efficacy, burnout, and stress. The negative correlation between teachers' self-efficacy and burnout, as established in studies by Burić et al. (2020), Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007; 2010), and Zee and Koomen (2016), emphasizes the significant nature of these issues.

Summary

This chapter provides the results of the qualitative transcendental phenomenological analysis of the experiences and perspectives of K-4 specialized literacy professionals implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), exploring their roles, responsibilities, professional experiences, and self-efficacy in supporting students facing reading challenges. Across their experiences and perceptions, ten themes emerged. These themes included: (1) strategic implementation of tier-based instruction, (2) comprehensive assessment and continuous progress monitoring, (3) data-driven practices in academic interventions, (4) collaboration and teamwork, (5) adaptation and evolution in educational practices, (6) navigating time and workload management, (7) self-efficacy and the continuous learning process, (8) impact of collaborative networks, professional development, and resources, (9) addressing diverse students’ needs and celebrating achievement, and (10) navigating

workload demands and burnout. Three subthemes identified within the fifth theme include (1) transitioning to the instructional specialist role, (2) navigating educational model and practice changes, (3) adapting to diverse student needs. Four subthemes identified within the sixth theme include, (1) instructional specialist team, (2) student learning teams (SLTs), (3) district leadership and support, and (4) professional development and resources. The findings from this chapter offer significant insights into the experiences and perceptions of K-4 specialized literacy professionals. In the next chapter, the researcher will examine the limitations of the current study, explore the implications of these findings for educational practice, policy development, and the professional development of specialized literacy professionals, and outline recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The researcher designed this transcendental phenomenological study to fill a knowledge gap regarding the experiences and perceptions of specialized literacy professionals (SLPs) in the Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. Transcendental phenomenology was suitable for examining individuals' lived experiences around a specific phenomenon, facilitating an in-depth analysis of SLPs' subjective beliefs, including their sense of self-efficacy (Daly, 2007). The study was grounded in Albert Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which posits that an individual's belief in their capacity to achieve desired outcomes significantly influences their actions, motivations, and successes or failures. Research also incorporates the concept of teacher self-efficacy, which has been shown to impact instructional methods and student achievement outcomes (Hoy & Spero, 2005; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012; Ross 1992, 1994; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

The study explored the experiences and perceptions of specialized literacy specialists as they implement RTI within the broader MTSS framework, providing insights into their practices within the context of today's schools. The researcher gathered data through one-on-one interventions and self-reported journal entries from nine participants identified as "academic instructional specialists, " to explore the central question, "What are the experiences and self-perceptions of K-4 specialized literacy professionals implementing RTI within an MTSS framework?" The investigation was structured around four research sub-questions. The discussion is structured to address the four sub-questions related to specialized literacy professionals' roles, responsibilities,

experiences, and self-efficacy in RTI-MTSS implementation and factors influencing self-efficacy.

Defining Roles and Responsibilities within the RTI-MTSS Framework

Research Question

"How do K-4 specialized literacy professionals define their roles and responsibilities in implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework?"

K-4 specialized literacy professionals are instrumental in delivering systematic, evidence-based interventions tailored to meet the diverse needs of students. Drawing from diverse teaching backgrounds, these professionals are committed to systematic, evidence-based reading interventions that target the foundational areas of literacy development. Central to their practice is the delivery of Tier 2 and Tier 3 academic interventions, positioning them as key drivers in providing comprehensive academic support beyond the Tier 1 curriculum. Instruction involves tailoring the scope and focus of interventions to accommodate students' varying needs.

Their roles extend beyond direct instruction to include continuous assessment, progress monitoring, and adapting instructional strategies. This approach serves multiple purposes, including identifying students at risk, ensuring the effectiveness of interventions, and adjusting teaching strategies as needed. The commitment to data-driven instruction reflects a shared understanding among specialized literacy professionals of the importance of empirical evidence in guiding instructional decisions and interventions. The dynamic nature of educational practices requires these professionals to exhibit adaptability, strategic planning, and collaborative engagement to implement RTI within an MTSS framework effectively.

Effective early reading instruction, particularly for students at risk of reading difficulties, including those with learning disabilities, emphasizes foundational skills such as phonological awareness, phonics, word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Snow et al., 1998). Research supports the efficacy of small group reading interventions of varying intensity levels for elementary students with reading challenges (Gersten et al., 2008, 2020; Hall & Burns, 2018; Wanzek et al., 2016), highlighting the importance of early intervention in preventing reading difficulties (Blachman, 2013; Fletcher et al., 2018; Jimerson et al., 2016; Petrone, 2014).

This study promotes that specialized literacy professionals play a crucial role in the RTI-MTSS framework, delivering instructional interventions, conducting diagnostic evaluations, and serving as a resource for teachers (Bean et al., 2003, 2015). The work of these SLPs aligns with the International Literacy Association Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals (ILA, 2017), advocating for a student-centered approach to literacy education and emphasizing collaboration within the educational framework. Along with previous studies by Bean and colleagues (e.g., Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bean et al., 2015), the current study has shown that specialized literacy professionals are key in overseeing RTI initiatives, analyzing student data, making instructional decisions, and fostering a collaborative environment among educators. This collaborative approach enhances educators' autonomy, effectiveness, and shared leadership, highlighting the importance of data-driven decision-making and continuous assessment in improving student academic outcomes (Bradley et al., 2005; Mellard, 2017; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012; Shores, 2009).

Experiences within the RTI-MTSS Framework

Research Question

"What specific experiences do K-4 specialized literacy professionals encounter when carrying out their roles and responsibilities within the RTI-MTSS framework?"

K-4 specialized literary professionals' experiences within the evolving elementary settings highlight their continuous engagement and adaptation to shifting educational models, particularly as schools transitioned to a tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) framework within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). Coming from diverse teaching backgrounds, these specialists bring a wealth of knowledge in curriculum and instructional strategies, united by a shared commitment to enhancing student learning, especially for those requiring additional support. The study supports findings from previous studies highlighting that specialized literacy professionals bring a wealth of professional experiences and a profound commitment to literacy education into their roles (Bean et al., 2002, 2003). This background is identified as a pivotal asset in their current capacities, allowing them to offer more effective academic support and collaboration with classroom teachers.

The study's findings highlight specialists' dynamic and evolving roles within the educational framework, revealing their adaptability and strategic allocation of resources in response to changing models and practices. Evidence indicates that as the district's educational model transitioned to a tiered RTI framework within an MTSS system, so did the roles and responsibilities of specialists towards a more inclusive approach across Tier 2 and 3 in reading and math. A model transition included a shift towards shared leadership within Student Learning Teams (SLTs) with changes toward a more

collaborative model where classroom teachers and specialists have balanced roles within the meetings. Despite some experiences with challenges and tensions within these teacher team meetings, improvements are evolving, indicating a commitment to collective efforts towards enhancing the function and impact of meeting outcomes.

Recent district initiatives focusing on intensive Tier 3 academics and reducing instructional support specialists have notably impacted specialists' experiences, particularly concerning time and workload management. The shift towards exclusive delivery of intensive interventions and a decrease in specialists presents experiences with balancing responsibilities, fitting interventions into constrained time blocks, and occasionally taking on roles as substitute teachers. These changes have complicated the ability to provide comprehensive support across tiers, highlighting concerns over the adequacy of intervention time and the blurring lines between Tier 2 and Tier 3 support. Despite these experiences, specialists remain dedicated to adapting their strategies to meet students' diverse and evolving needs, illustrating the critical need for continuous evolution in practice and materials to effectively respond to the unique learning profiles within the RTI-MTSS framework.

Specialists reported experiencing significant variabilities in their roles and responsibilities across different schools and over time, reflecting adaptability to effectively meet the evolving needs of different schools and student populations. This variability spanned across grade levels supported, the focus of specific subjects, and the distribution and implementation of Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. Additionally, specialists experience inconsistencies in the duration of interventions and prioritization between Tier 2 and Tier 3 groups. Such variations highlight the challenges in

standardizing practices and emphasize the complexity of implementing a tiered intervention approach across different schools and student populations.

The findings from this study update existing literature that documents the evolving nature of reading/literacy specialist roles within educational settings. This evolution reflects transformations in response to the dynamic needs of the educational landscape, highlighting the adaptability required in these roles (Bean et al., 2002, 2003; 2015; Bean & Kern, 2018; Dole, 2004, 2006; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014; Ippolito et al., 2019; Kern, 2011; Kern et al., 2018; Quatroche et al., 2001). Bean and Goatley (2021) emphasize that there is not a one-size-fits-all model for the instructional role of literacy specialists. Instead, they advocate for the understanding of the essential elements that promote academic success, particularly for students facing learning difficulties. This perspective is critical at a time when educational institutions must navigate both internal and external pressures, requiring a degree of flexibility and adaptability to effectively respond to new challenges (Bean et al., 2015a).

Adapting to these challenges is not straightforward, as indicative in the current study and others (e.g., Thomas et al., 2020). The implementation of RTI practices within districts is influenced by diverse needs and structural variations across different grade levels. Ippolito et al., (2019) further argue that the inevitability of change, driven by new demands and societal shifts in education necessitates that specialized literacy professionals continuously adapt, adopting various roles and responsibilities according to the specific instructional context of the students they support, and the unique settings in which they operate in (Bean et al., 2001). The current study's data patterns corroborate

this view, showing how changes in educational models and practices have directly influenced the roles and responsibilities of the specialists involved.

Self-Efficacy in Implementation of RTI Practices

Research Question

"How do K-4 specialized literacy professionals perceive their self-efficacy in implementing RTI practices for students who are at risk of or experiencing reading difficulties?"

Specialized literacy professionals report high levels of self-efficacy regarding their ability to implement RTI practices effectively. This positive self-perception is closely tied to their commitment to ongoing professional development and reflective practices that embrace the challenges and uncertainties within educational settings. Continuous learning stands out as a foundational element of their professional identity, fostering resilience and cultivating a growth mindset that prepares them to navigate the changing requirements of their roles effectively.

The synthesis of these findings highlights a clear connection between high efficacy and the commitment to lifelong learning among these specialists. Their shared insights reveal an intrinsic motivation and proactive approach to personal and professional development, traits that are invaluable for navigating the complex and evolving demands of elementary education. This aligns with the perspectives of Bandura (1997) and Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) further highlighting how self-efficacy influences specialists' adaptability to new challenges and their likelihood to engage with new challenges, achieve greater success, and demonstrate persistence in adversity.

Moreover, specialists confident in their abilities are well-positioned to significantly improve academic outcomes for their students (Hoy & Spero, 2005; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). This adaptability is essential for lifelong learning, ensuring that specialists stay responsive to their students changing needs and continuously integrate new knowledge and practices into their teaching

Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) highlight that self-efficacy is a future-oriented assessment of an individual's perceived capability in specific situations, rather than a direct measure of their actual competence. This perspective is essential for understanding lifelong learning among these specialists. High self-efficacy fuels a forward-thinking approach where specialized literacy professionals continually assess their readiness to meet challenges and opportunities for growth, therefore fostering a continuous journey of learning and development.

Factors Influencing Self-Efficacy in RTI-MTSS Implementation

Research Question

"What factors contribute to the perceived self-efficacy level of K-4 specialized literacy professionals in implementing RTI practices within an MTSS framework?"

The factors contributing to the perceived self-efficacy level of K-4 specialized literacy professionals in implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) practices within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework include positive influences that boost confidence and challenges that test their adaptability and resilience. On the positive side, collaborative networks, team support, professional development, and resources are pivotal in enhancing self-efficacy. Regular discussions, reflections, and collaborative

problem-solving with specialists and student learning teams foster a supportive culture that significantly enhances specialists' confidence in their RTI implementation. Additionally, accessing professional development opportunities and effective intervention resources provides these professionals with the necessary knowledge and tools for successful practices, elevating their sense of efficacy. Importantly, it is the application of this new knowledge, rather than the exposure to it, that has been identified as a key factor in improving teacher self-efficacy (Ross, 1994).

Despite reporting a strong self-efficacy, these professionals face challenges that test their adaptability and resilience, such as workload management and navigating evolving educational demands. Specialists highlight the pressure of balancing Tier 2 and Tier 3 service delivery roles, addressing reading and math interventions for K-4 students, and managing a diverse student population, often with limited control over providing extra time for students needing additional support. This workload, amplified by reduced numbers of specialists, leads to feelings of burnout. Adapting to changes in educational models, policies, and practices without adequate support or clear guidance further impacts confidence in implementing RTI. A lack of sufficient involvement and support from building administrators and district leaders, and unclear communication about roles and expectations can lead to frustration and diminish specialists' belief in their efficacy.

Specialized literacy professionals' beliefs in their ability to succeed are shaped by various factors, including mastering experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and physiological states (Bandura, 1997). These elements significantly influence an individual's behavior, motivation, and eventual success or failure (Bandura, 1997).

For the specialized literacy professionals in this study, experiences with collaborative networks and professional development opportunities and resources serve as sources of motivation and validation, impacting their confidence in implementing RTI components effectively. Verbal persuasion involves receiving feedback from others and contributes to reinforcing a person's belief in their ability to achieve their desired level of performance (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). The collaborative environment, characterized by problem-solving, resource sharing, and mutual support among teachers, empowers specialists to navigate challenges and make instructional decisions alongside their colleagues.

Specialized literacy professionals thrive in a culture that values and practices verbal persuasion, where positive relationships with colleagues and leaders create opportunities to receive affirmative feedback and encouragement. This approach aligns with Bandura's (1997) emphasis on the importance of verbal persuasion in sustaining self-efficacy, particularly during challenging times, by influential individuals who express confidence in one's abilities. Vicarious experiences involve observing someone else demonstrate a specific skill (Hoy & Spero, 2005). Observing effective practices and receiving modeling and guidance from others, especially the literacy coach, offers vicarious experiences. Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) highlight that individuals actively search for skilled models, such as mentors or leaders who demonstrate the competencies that they aim to develop. These competent models show their knowledge through their behavior or by teaching effective skills and strategies through sharing. The effectiveness of these vicarious experiences in enhancing self-efficacy is amplified when

the observer closely identifies with the model (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009).

The roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals are directly involved with the implementation of RTI-MTSS practices, providing them with opportunities for accomplishments and challenges. According to Tschannen- Moran and Hoy (2007), when educators perceive teaching success, their efficacy expectations for future teaching proficiency tend to increase unless success requires too much effort to sustain. The positive experiences for SLPs, such as engaging in collaborative networks, accessing professional development, and utilizing effective intervention resources, provided these specialists with concrete examples of their capabilities, leading to an enhancement in self-efficacy. Moreover, witnessing the positive outcomes of their interventions and students' academic progress are powerful affirmations of their efforts and reinforces their efficacy beliefs. Establishing meaningful connections with students and understanding their diverse needs contributes positively, particularly when these relationships change students' learning trajectories. These elements resonate with Bandura's (1997) concepts of mastery experiences as critical to developing self-efficacy. Mastery experiences are the most powerful source of efficacy information, influencing educators' beliefs about their teaching abilities (Bandura, 1997; Hoy & Spero, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009).

Conversely, encountering challenges, including workload management, evolving educational demand, and testing SLPs resilience and adaptability. Other challenges include meeting students' diverse needs, such as unresponsive intervention outcomes or

stagnated academic progress, which can adversely affect the self-efficacy of specialists. These experiences of perceived failure or minimal progress often lead to self-doubt or disappointment for them. Additionally, when confronted with new challenges of balancing Tier 2 and Tier 3 service delivery roles or dealing with inconsistent directives from district leadership, specialists reported feelings of struggle. Such challenges contribute to a diminished sense of control or efficacy in their roles, highlighting how negative mastery experiences can impact specialists' confidence in their abilities. Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) note that when outcomes for teachers are not favorable and cannot be attributed to a lack of effort, experiences viewed as challenges are likely to have an adverse effect on self-efficacy belief. Moreover, Bandura (1997) contends that self-efficacy is a dynamic construct and new mastery experiences serve as a new source of self-efficacy that either confirms or disrupts existing beliefs. Therefore, if specialized literacy professionals successfully navigate these challenges, they gain new mastery experiences that boost their self-efficacy, creating a positive feedback loop.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory also recognizes psychological and emotional states as significant factors influencing self-efficacy beliefs (1997). According to researchers, how an individual interprets and reacts to their physical and emotional states can affect their confidence in their abilities (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). For the literacy professionals in this study, physiological and emotional responses within the elementary school environment can be impactful on their self-efficacy, including stress from high workloads, anxiety over student outcomes, or excitement from successful interventions can impact their self-

efficacy to perform tasks or handle situations effectively (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009).

Limitations

The phenomenological research study utilized interviews and journal entries as methods to gain valuable insights into the experiences and self-perceptions of K-4 specialized literacy professionals as they implemented RTI practices within an MTSS framework. Despite the rich insights obtained through these methods, it is important to consider several limitations in the study.

Phenomenological studies typically involve a small sample size, limiting the generalizability of the findings to a larger population. The sample size may also fail to adequately represent the diversity and complexity of experiences within the greater population of interest. Additionally, since the data was collected from one public school district in the American Northeast, the data is limited by the demographics of this particular site. Moreover, the study's findings are reflective of the practices, policies, and educational climate at the time of data collection. Changes in educational standards, policies, or practices post-study can also limit the replicability of the study's findings.

The potential for self-reported basis is a notable limitation in this study, as participants' responses during the interview and in their self-reported journal entries might have been shaped by social bias or their desire to present themselves in a favorable light. Such biases may make the participants reluctant to share information or withhold details that could reflect negatively on their professional practices. Moreover, the power dynamics between the administration or other colleagues and specialized literacy professionals could influence the study's findings. These dynamics might affect

participants' willingness to be open and honest with their responses. The concern over possible professional repercussions may influence how comfortable participants feel reporting the challenges they face or, instead, overemphasizing perceived success.

Additionally, the reliance on subjective experiences and interpretations of participants in this study increases the risk of researcher bias influencing the data analysis and interpretation. The personal involvement and background of the researcher as a specialized literacy professional could affect how participants approach their responses and potentially lead them to share experiences or perceptions that they believe would be viewed positively by someone else within the role.

To mitigate the limitations of power dynamics, the research design included the strategic development of interview questions and journaling prompts that encouraged a balanced reflection of both positive and negative experiences and perceptions. This approach aimed to create an environment where participants would feel comfortable sharing a range of experiences, reducing the desire to report experiences based on perceived expectations.

Implications

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study aimed to bridge a gap in the literature by examining the experiences and self-perceptions of K-4 specialized literacy professionals implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) within a broader Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. The study explored how these educators navigate the complexities of implementing RTI practices and the influence of their experiences on their self-efficacy beliefs. By exploring the dynamics of instructional

practices, support systems, and teacher confidence, the study provides valuable insights with significant implications for educational practice, policy, and future research.

Refining and Defining the Roles of Specialized Literacy Professionals (SLPs)

The findings of this study support the call for refining the definitions related to the roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). This clarification is essential for understanding the scope of their work within the RTI-MTSS framework. In this study, the roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals closely align with the *International Literacy Association Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals*, which positions reading/literacy specialists in a primarily instructional role focusing on students struggling with reading and writing (ILA, 2017).

However, the current study also reveals that their responsibilities extend beyond providing support for students facing challenges in math. This broader scope of responsibilities highlights the dynamic nature of this role, indicating that their instructional support is not limited to literacy alone but includes supporting students who encounter difficulties in other academic areas. This dual focus highlights these professionals' versatility and critical importance in addressing a wide range of academic challenges, thereby enhancing the educational outcomes for students across multiple subject areas. Moreover, specialized literacy professionals are increasingly engaging in collaborative planning and problem-solving with teams of classroom teachers, special education teachers, and other school personnel (Bean et al., 2002, 2003, 2015, 2018; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bean & Kern, 2018; Bean & Goatley, 2020; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014; ILA, 2017).

The broadening of roles and responsibilities in this study contributes to an evolving understanding of specialists' instructional duties over time (Bean & Eichelberger, 1985; Bean et al., 2015a; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014; ILA, 2015; Ippolito et al., 2019; Kern, 2011; Quanroche et al., 2001). Therefore, school districts must clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their position within the RTI-MTSS framework. However, it is equally important to emphasize the need to avoid overly standardizing descriptions of these roles. The diverse needs of students and the dynamic nature of educational environments necessitate flexibility and adaptability in these roles (Bean et al., 2015a, 2018; Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). Various factors influence how specialists' function and require adaptations in their roles and responsibilities (Bean et al., 2015a).

In addressing these considerations, school districts need to establish a framework for defining the roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals, emphasizing clarity and flexibility. This framework should include the core responsibilities of teaching tiered academic interventions, conducting diagnostics, progress monitoring, and engaging in data-driven decision-making. Additionally, the framework must allow flexibility within the role definitions to adjust based on student needs, educational research findings, and innovations in teaching practices. This acknowledges the evolving nature of educational challenges and the necessity for these specialists to adapt their practices as needed.

A framework is essential for ensuring that all stakeholders thoroughly understand the specialized literacy professionals' integral role within the educational system, particularly in the context of the Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered

Systems of Support (MTSS) framework. For SLPs, this framework provides a clear understanding of their expected roles and responsibilities, allowing them to focus their efforts and professional development on areas that will most effectively support student learning. For the school district, a clear yet flexible framework supports the strategic planning and allocation of resources, ensuring that specialized literacy professionals are effectively utilized and supported within the RTI-MTSS framework. A framework also ensures that they are equipped with the support needed to effectively carry out their diverse roles and responsibilities.

Support for Specialized Literacy Professionals (SLPs)

To support specialized literacy professionals effectively, especially those working within the K-4 elementary setting, schools and districts must integrate several key strategies for workload management, fostering collaboration, enhancing leadership, and providing comprehensive professional development.

The experiences of specialized literacy professionals in this study highlight the need to alleviate workload pressures and maximize instructional time. Flexible staffing models, additional staff support, and scheduling adjustments for dedicated intervention blocks with flexibility beyond these allocated times are essential. School and district leaders play a significant role in supporting these professionals by recognizing their workload challenges, advocating for resources, and promoting a sustainable balance. Moreover, involving specialized literacy professionals in decision-making processes related to scheduling and resource allocation can ensure that their insights and needs are considered. This approach may lead to more effective and supportive practices that reflect the realities of their roles and responsibilities in today's elementary schools.

The insights from this study reveal a complex dynamic where support from a district literacy coach significantly enhances specialized literacy professionals' self-efficacy and effectiveness in implementing RTI practices. However, there is a notable need for improved leadership at the building level. Principals as instructional leaders are pivotal for successfully implementing RTI (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bean et al., 2015a, 2018). Bean and colleagues (2015a, 2018) posit that principal support is critical if specialized literacy professionals are to be successful in their multiple and evolving roles in schools. Therefore, the contrast between the positive impact of literacy coaching and the obstacles presented by less supportive building-level leadership highlights a key area for development. To bridge this gap, school and district leaders must receive targeted training that emphasizes the importance of instructional leadership in the RTI process, including strategies that foster a culture of collaboration, shared responsibilities, and accountability (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bean et al., 2015a, 2018).

Leaders at both the school and district levels should create supportive environments that prioritize and facilitate collaboration across all levels of the educational system. This approach can include establishing regular meetings between specialized literacy professionals, classroom teachers, special education teachers, and leadership building district-wide to discuss strategies, share insights, and coordinate efforts in RTI implementation. Providing platforms for these discussions fosters a more integrated approach to student support guided by leaders who model practical leadership skills (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Moreover, researchers advocate for opportunities for specialized literacy professionals and principals to collaborate and problem-solve regarding SLPs' professional needs. This opportunity will enable open communication

and access to the necessary resources, including time, materials, and professional development, to effectively carry out their roles and responsibilities (Bean & Kern, 2018).

Galloway and Lesaux (2015) contend that navigating the demands of specialized literacy professionals relies on a sustained commitment to enhancing instructional practices and a persistent pursuit of professional expertise. The finding from this study revealed that SLPs have intrinsic motivation and a proactive approach toward personal and professional development, aligning with previous studies (Bean et al., 2015a; Galloway & Lesaux, 2015). Additionally, the participants expressed confidence in various aspects of RTI implementation but reported encountering challenges when supporting diverse student populations. These challenges include addressing the needs of students with challenging learning behaviors, English Language Learners, and those facing social-emotional and behavioral challenges. To empower specialized literacy professionals to confidently and effectively address all students' academic needs, schools and districts must provide targeted professional development opportunities that equip them with skills in culturally responsive practices and effective behavior management systems.

This necessity aligns with the primary goals of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework, which aims to efficiently allocate resources available within a system or program to meet the diverse needs of all students to promote academic achievement and prosocial behavior (Bahr et al., 2021). Research suggests that intervention service delivery models like MTSS promote consistency across schools, facilitate early intervention for students, comply with state guidelines, and acknowledge

the interconnected nature of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional challenges (Harn et al., 2015; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). At the core of MTSS is a data-informed decision-making process that offers differentiated instructional supports tailored to the specific needs of students (Gartland & Strosnider, 2020; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Incorporating other support staff, such as school psychologists and counselors into the collaborative network will complement the instructional focus of specialized literacy professionals. This collaborative effort will broaden the scope of interventions available. Therefore, schools and districts can support the professional development of specialized literacy professionals and enhance the MTSS framework's capacity to meet students' wide range of needs, integrating academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports into a cohesive response approach.

In addition to providing professional learning opportunities to strengthen the SLP's primary role in instructional practices, schools and districts should offer training related to collaborative teamwork strategies, mentorship, and leadership development. Recognizing the positive impact of literacy coaching, district leadership should ensure that resources are allocated to support this role across buildings. This approach may involve hiring additional literacy coaches or providing those in the literacy specialist's role with the training and time needed to serve their capacity effectively. The findings in the current study highlight the informal leadership role that specialized literacy professionals assume within their schools, particularly in facilitating collaborative decision-making and problem-solving processes. In this capacity, specialists take on the role of collaborative consultant (Jaegar, 1996). The collaborative role corresponds closely with the findings from researchers that suggest specialists commonly engage in shared

leadership roles (Bean et al., 2003, 2015a; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bean & Goatley, 2020; Bean & Kern, 2018). These roles encompass collaboration with other teachers for planning and resource material selection, working with other school professionals for program coordination, and active participation in curriculum development and school-based teams (Bean et al., 2003, 2015a; Bean & Goatley, 2020). Specialized literacy professionals can lead professional learning experiences that provide colleagues with the information they need to confidently deliver effective instruction to all students.

Higher Education Programs

This study, along with the 2017 standards outlined by the International Literacy Association (ILA, 2018), suggests the need for preparation programs to evolve with the changing landscape of literacy education and the expanding roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals working within multi-tiered support systems. In the study's target district, SLPs reported starting their careers as classroom teachers or special education teachers before transitioning into the specialized role. This suggests that for most participants, their preparation programs did not adequately equip them for the diverse roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals, including the tasks of foundational knowledge in evidence-based instructional practices assessment techniques, data analysis methods, and collaborative teamwork strategies essential for effective RTI-MTSS implementation. Therefore, there is a need for educator preparation programs to realign with the evolving demands of schools and ensure that future specialized literacy professionals obtain comprehensive training that includes the skills and knowledge required to support students' literacy development within the RTI-MTSS framework. Additionally, Kern et al. (2018) suggest that programs should make

candidates aware of the leadership possibilities by providing experience that develops their understanding of how to lead and participate in collaborative discussions about instruction, how to facilitate decision-making, and how to support teacher learning in the school.

As highlighted in this study, mastery experiences profoundly impact specialists' confidence and effectiveness in implementing literacy interventions within the RTI-MTSS framework. Preparation programs should provide hands-on experiences and practicums that allow incoming teachers to apply theoretical knowledge in today's classrooms under the guidance of experienced specialized literacy professionals. This includes observation of intervention instruction, assessment and data analysis methods, and collaborative practices. Candidates can be provided with opportunities to develop and lead efforts within the school or larger community during fieldwork, such as organizing and leading family literacy events (Kern et al., 2018).

These experiences allow incoming specialized literacy professionals to experience firsthand the application of theoretical knowledge within schools, fostering a deeper understanding and building confidence in their abilities to implement interventions in various situations. Additionally, preparation programs should emphasize the importance of fostering cultural competence, understanding diverse student populations, and addressing social-emotional and behavioral aspects of learning to meet the needs of all learners inclusively.

Recommendations for Future Research

While prior research has extensively explored aspects of experiences of specialized literacy professionals functioning as literacy coaches (e.g., Bean et al., 2015b,

2018; Calo et al., 2015; Colburn & Woulfin, 2012; Deussen et al., 2007; Frost & Bean, 2006; Hathaway et al., 2016; Ippolito et al., 2019; L'Allier et al., 2010; Pletcher et al., 2019), there exists a notable gap in understanding the roles and experiences of SLPs identified as reading/literacy specialists, particularly within the context of RTI-MTSS implementation. To bridge this gap, future research should include qualitative and quantitative methodologies to explore the unique challenges, roles, responsibilities, and professional development needs of these specialized literacy professionals, specifically those specializing in reading/literacy.

Observational studies that enable direct observations of reading/literacy specialists in action within classrooms and intervention settings can provide valuable insights into their interactions with students, teachers, and administrators. Researchers can observe how specialists collaborate with other stakeholders, adapt their instruction based on student needs, and navigate challenges encountered during implementation. Surveys or focus groups with reading/literacy specialists can be utilized to identify the specific professional development needs within the context of RTI-MTSS implementation that can inform targeted training programs for specialized literacy professionals. Understanding the areas where specialists feel least confident can guide the development of workshops or coaching sessions to enhance their skills and efficacy.

Future research should also focus on longitudinal studies that assess the self-efficacy of specialized literacy professionals functioning as reading/literacy specialists within the RTI-MTSS framework and aim to understand its influence on instructional practices and student outcomes. Researchers can utilize pretest-posttests assessments of self-efficacy and evaluations of instructional practices and student performance.

Specialists can participate in opportunities designed to enhance self-efficacy, including training sessions, coaching, peer collaboration, and recognition of achievements. Quantitative analysis can investigate the relationship between changes in self-efficacy, instructional practices, and student outcomes, and qualitative data can offer further insights into the experiences and perceptions of SLPs.

Additionally, the current study provided insights into the experiences and self-perceptions of nine specialized literacy professionals within a single school district. Future research should include comparative studies across multiple districts or regions. By exploring the experiences of specialized literacy professionals in diverse educational settings, researchers can gain a broader understanding of RTI-MTSS implementation practices, challenges encountered, and the practical strategies utilized to address these challenges across different educational environments. Comparative studies allow researchers to identify variations in policy implementation, resource allocations, and support from district leaders through different contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored the complex roles of specialized literacy professionals (SLPs) within the frameworks of Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), aiming to bridge a gap in understanding their experiences and perceptions. Utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach, this research explored the lived experiences of SLPs, highlighting their self-efficacy beliefs in alignment with Bandura's self-efficacy theory. The findings indicate that specialized literacy professionals are instrumental in delivering targeted, evidence-based literacy

interventions, drawing upon their diverse teaching backgrounds to address students' varied needs across different academic support tiers.

Central to their effectiveness is the ability to define and adapt their roles and responsibilities within the evolving landscape of educational practices, particularly as schools shift towards integrated RTI and MTSS models. This adaptability is characterized by a commitment to data-driven decision-making, continuous professional development, and a collaborative network that enhances instructional strategies and student learning outcomes. This study highlights the critical importance of foundational reading skills and early intervention in preventing reading difficulties, reinforcing the value of specialized literacy professionals in fostering academic achievement through tailored instructional and targeted support. Moreover, the study highlights the significant impact of self-efficacy on SLPs' ability to implement RTI practices effectively. High levels of self-efficacy among specialists are associated with a proactive approach to professional growth and a resilient response to the challenges of educational settings. Factors influencing confidence include collaborative networks, access to resources, and experiences with success. These factors empower specialized literacy professionals to navigate the complexities of their roles.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by comprehensively understanding the roles, responsibilities, experiences, and self-efficacy of specialized literacy professionals within the RTI-MTSS framework. The work of these specialists within RTI-MTSS frameworks is integral to students' success. Their dedication to providing high-quality, evidence-based literacy interventions and a commitment to professional growth and collaborative practices is necessary for shaping positive

educational pathways. As educational models and practices evolve, the findings from this study offer valuable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers aiming to optimize the effectiveness of literacy support services and enhance student learning outcomes. Furthermore, fostering a supporting environment that enhances self-efficacy and promotes continuous learning is essential for enabling specialists to meet the challenges of today's educational landscape.

APPENDIX A

IRB Approval

Date: 12-3-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY2023-327
Title: PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF K-4 ACADEMIC INSTRUCTIONAL SPECIALISTS' EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING RTI WITHIN AN MTSS FRAMEWORK FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS
Creation Date: 4-24-2023
End Date: 7-4-2024
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Megan Vitale
Review Board: St John's University Institutional Review Board
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Review Type	Decision
Initial	Expedited	Approved

Key Study Contacts

Member Olivia Stewart	Role Co-Principal Investigator	Contact stewarto@stjohns.edu
Member Megan Vitale	Role Principal Investigator	Contact megan.vitale20@stjohns.edu
Member Megan Vitale	Role Primary Contact	Contact megan.vitale20@stjohns.edu

APPENDIX B

District Informed Consent Form

Dear [redacted]

Your district has been selected to be used as a site to conduct a research study to learn more about the experiences and perspectives of instructional specialists who provide academic support to kindergarten through fourth grade students**.** The study seeks to understand how specialists experience RTI implementation within an MTSS framework and how these experiences reflect their sense of self-efficacy. One key component to being considered within the perceptions is what each person believes is their role in the process, which can directly impact their opinions about implementation and their willingness to implement high-quality instruction. Understanding teachers' views on the current system can assist schools in identifying ways to improve the current model. This study will be conducted by Megan Vitale, Department of Education Specialties, St. John's University, as part of her doctoral dissertation work. Her faculty sponsor is Dr. Stewart, Department of Education Specialties.

The researcher requests permission to use the district email system and Zoom account to recruit and videotape interviews with district employed academic instructional specialists for this dissertation research study. It is understood the importance of protecting the privacy of employees and ensuring that district resources are used appropriately. Therefore, all necessary measures will be taken by the researcher to protect the confidentiality of participants and to ensure that the use of district resources is in compliance with district policies.

There are no known risks associated with your site participating in this research beyond those of everyday life. Confidentiality of teachers will be strictly maintained by removing teacher and district name and any identifiers will be replaced with a pseudonym. Consent forms of participants will be stored in a separate location from the interview documentation and will be stored in a locked file. Teacher responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others. Participation in this study is voluntary. Teachers may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Federal regulations require that all subjects be informed of the availability of medical treatment or financial compensation in the event of physical injury resulting from participation in the research. St. John's University cannot provide either medical treatment or financial compensation for any physical injury resulting from your participation in this research project. Inquiries regarding this policy may be made to the principal investigator or, alternatively, the Human Subjects Review Board (718-990-1440).

Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator better understand how academic instructional specialists experience their roles and responsibilities in implementing RTI within an MTSS framework in elementary schools and how these specialists perceive their self-efficacy in implementing RTI for students at risk for and with reading difficulties.

If there is anything about the study that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact [redacted] John's University 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens NY, 11439 or the faculty sponsor, [redacted] St. John's University, Sullivan Hall 4th Floor, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens NY, 11439.

For questions about the rights of research participants, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University [redacted]

You have received a copy of this consent document to keep.

Agreement to Participate

Yes, I agree to have district teachers participate in the study as described above.

Signature	Date
Printed Name	Title

Yes, I agree to allow the researcher permission to use district resources to recruit and videotape sessions with district teachers.

Signature	Date
Printed Name	Title

APPENDIX C

Participant Informed Consent Form

INTRODUCTION:

You are invited to participate in a research study aimed at gaining a comprehensive insight into the experiences of academic instructional specialists who implement RTI within an MTSS framework and how these experiences shape their perception of self-efficacy. This investigation is led by doctoral candidate Megan Vitale, specializing in Literacy at St. John's University, as a component of her qualitative research study. Her faculty sponsor is Dr. Olivia Stewart, Department of Education Specialties, St. John's University. Before providing consent, kindly review this form and please ask any questions you may have.

DESCRIPTION:

You have been invited to participate in this research study based on your role as an academic instructional specialist focusing on providing and supporting literacy intervention efforts within schools located in the American Northeast. By agreeing to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in a single video-recorded interview discussing various aspects of your role and experiences within this capacity. This interview is anticipated to last approximately thirty minutes. The resulting video file will be securely stored in a locked location. You will have the option to review the video at your convenience, and it will be permanently deleted after the study concludes. You will also be requested to write a reflective journal entry over the course of five days. Suggested prompts will be provided. The journal's contents will also be securely stored in a locked location and either returned to you or permanently deleted after the study concludes. Your privacy and confidentiality will be rigorously maintained throughout the process.

RISK AND BENEFITS:

No known risks are associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. While you will not receive immediate personal benefits, your involvement will significantly enhance the investigator's understanding of the lived experiences of academic instructional specialists. This may lead to developing more effective support

systems and strategies for professionals in this field in the future. Your participation is invaluable in advancing our collective knowledge and understanding.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. At any point during the interview, you have the right to withdraw your consent or choose to discontinue the session. You also hold the right to decline to respond to any questions posed. Strict confidentiality measures will be in place. All names will be replaced with pseudonyms, ensuring your anonymity. Additionally, consent forms will be securely stored in a separate and locked location from the interview documentation. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential, except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report suspicions of harm to yourself, children, or others to the appropriate authorities.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact [redacted]St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens NY, 11439 or the facult[redacted]. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens NY, 11439. For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair[redacted]

You have received a copy of this consent form to keep.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

- I have read the contents of this consent form.
- I have been encouraged to ask questions.
- I have received the answers to my questions.
- I give my consent to take part in this study.
- I give my consent to be recorded.
- I have received a copy of this form.

Signature/Date

Participant Signature	Date
Printed Name	Date

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

1. Could you please share your background as an instructional specialist? Including the number of years in this role and your previous teaching experience.
    a. What motivated your transition?
2. Can you describe to me your role and the responsibilities you take on as an instructional specialist?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you in implementing RTI practices?
    a. What factors contribute or influence this level of confidence or your self-efficacy?
4. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your RTI interventions?
    a. What specific data points guide your practice in intervention instruction?
    b. How do you ensure Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions are tailored to meet each student's unique needs?
5. Can you share an example of a success or accomplishments that you have had in implementing components of RTI?
    a. How do you think this experience boosted your confidence levels to implement RTI effectively?
6. What challenges have you encountered in implementing components of RTI?
    a. What strategies have you found to be or believe would be effective in addressing these challenges?
7. Could you share a situation where a student's progress did not meet expectations despite RTI interventions. How did you address this, and what adjustments did you make?
8. How do you perceive the level of support and resources available to you for implementing RTI within MTSS?
    a. How do you think this impacts your abilities or level of self-efficacy?
9. Collaboration with other teachers is a crucial aspect of implementing RTI effectively. Could you please describe the specific ways in which you work

together with your colleagues in the school to ensure that RTI strategies are applied successfully?

   a. Please share any examples or practices that have proven particularly effective in this collaborative process.
   b. How do you handle situations where there may be resistance or differing opinions among colleagues regarding RTI implementation?

10. How do you stay updated with current research and best practices in RTI implementation?
11. What professional development opportunities have enhanced your knowledge and skills in RTI implementation?
12. How do you see the role of instructional specialists in RTI evolving in the future?

APPENDIX E

Journaling Directions and Suggested Prompts

Reflective Journal Directions:

- **Purpose**: The purpose of this journal is to capture your thoughts, experiences, and reflections related to your role in implementing RTI within an MTSS framework.
- **Time Frame**: Please record an entry for four to five school days.
- **Format**: You may use a physical notebook or a digital platform, whichever is more convenient for you.
- **Honesty**: Be as candid and honest as possible.

Suggested Prompts: (feel free to use these as a springboard or share more on any of your day-to-day experiences)

1. Describe any specific tasks or activities related to RTI that you participated in today.
    - Reflect on any challenges you encountered and the strategies you used to address them.
    - Reflect on any successes and the strategies you used to achieve them.
2. Share any interactions or collaborations with colleagues in relation to RTI.
    - How did these interactions contribute to or impact your efforts in RTI implementation?
3. Describe any professional development opportunities or training you participated in today or recently.
    - In what ways do you feel these activities enhance your knowledge and skills in RTI?
4. Reflect on the resources and support available to you for RTI implementation.
    - What factors influence your confidence and effectiveness in using these resources?
5. Summarize any recent successes you experienced in RTI implementation.
    - How did these experiences contribute to your confidence in your role?

6. Summarize any recent challenges you experienced in RTI implementation.
    - How did these experiences contribute to your confidence in your role?
7. Are there any specific changes or improvements you would like to see in the way RTI is implemented in your school and/or district?

Thank you for your dedication and contribution to this research. Your insights are greatly appreciated!

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