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# Implications of response to intervention for English language learners by second grade teachers

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IMPLICATIONS OF RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
LEARNERS BY SECOND GRADE TEACHERS

by

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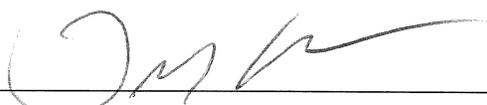
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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of second grade classroom teachers' perceptions regarding the use of Response to Intervention (RTI) with ELL students. The participants interviewed were teachers in three schools from one western Oregon school district that has been using RTI for at least two years and where the population of ELL students is at least 25%. Personal interviews were used to investigate the perceptions of using RTI with ELL students: the challenges, effectiveness and opportunities. Patterns and trends in the interview question responses from the seven classroom teachers were used in order to determine the perceptions they had on the impact of using the RTI process to identify ELL students with a learning disability. The purpose of the study was to explore and conceptualize the components of the factors which affect the efficacy of the special education identification process, which could possibly be a practical contribution to current education practice by making specific recommendations for those who are using RTI with ELL students.

There are many advantages to using RTI for learning identification in ELL students. These include increased collaboration, monitoring progress using both English and native language, on-going targeted professional development and a focus on appropriate and effective instructional methods and strategies. Along with the benefits are challenges in the amount of time it takes for intervention, monitoring, and the other steps that ensure that each student has had the opportunity to learn and show growth and the complexity of providing appropriate interventions and assessment for second language learners.

The cultural and language factors for ELL students need to be addressed in order for any type of accurate and valid learning disability identification to occur. Otherwise, educators are likely to get the same results from RTI that they attained in the past with the discrepancy model.

The attention to both culture and language are important for understanding why these factors make a difference in students' learning and why their role is critical in appropriately identifying students for intervention and for designing the RTI process in a way that is effective.

Overall, using RTI for ELL students is being implemented in a way that is valuable for ELL students and teachers, but it is necessary to have a solid and clear process that combines both Standard and Problem-solving protocols. It is highly recommended that the process be evaluated on a regular basis to ensure continued effectiveness, on-going professional development for teachers receive on-going professional development and that all team members are knowledgeable in the complete progression of steps from initiating a referral to potential identification.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

For the past several years as our district has become increasingly diverse, I have observed a trend emerging with identifying English language learners for special education. In my role as a district administrator and in contact with many school teams, I have informally watched as teams struggle with how to effectively identify English language learner students (ELLs) as learning disabled. I have informally observed either under- or over-identifying ELL students and there are cases of students misidentified because of inadequate assessment tools and practices (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006).

This issue has risen to a level of utmost importance and has also appeared in recent literature. Learning disabled students who are English language learners and have a foundation in another language face unique challenges (Artiles, 2005; Harry, 2002). There are five interrelated elements that appear to be important for avoiding misidentification of students who are English language learners: adequate professional knowledge, effective instructional practices, effective and valid assessments and interventions, team collaboration structures and clear policy guidelines (IES Practice Guide- National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2010). Nationally, ELL students come from more than 400 language backgrounds (Goldenberg, 2008). Eighty percent of ELLs are Spanish speakers and the dropout rate for Hispanic students is 21% compared with 8.7% for all students nationally (National Center on Educational Statistics, 2007). With more than five million ELL students in the United States, up from two million in 1990 (National Center on Educational Statistics, 2011), the challenge of providing effective instruction to these students can no longer be ignored.

From the 1997-98 school year to the 2008-09 school year, the number of English language learners enrolled in public schools increased from 3.5 million to 5.3 million, an increase of 51% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). During the same period, the general population of students grew by 45.9 million to an increase of only 49.5 million. This 51% growth in the ELL population has heightened the need for a concerted focus on using the most effective model for teaching students learning two languages and for understanding the impact of their unique learning needs.

Another more recent change in the education world is the birth of the Response to Intervention (RTI) process, which evolved from the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) special education law (NCRTI, 2010). The initial law outlined an involved, time-consuming process for identifying students with learning disabilities. Classifying a student with a learning disability involved proving that there was a discrepancy between the student's cognitive ability and performance on a series of nationally normed tests. There was a high number of children who were truly learning disabled and did not meet this criterion. With this RTI process, the goal is to intervene early so that students are given the opportunity to learn through the core program and/or targeted interventions. The goal of the RTI process is to make adjustments along the way so that there is evidence in place that the student has been able to respond and learn. It means that data are reviewed and used for adjusting instruction before the student lags too far behind. Another advantage is that general and special education teachers collaborate around the data and instruction along the way, instead of waiting until the student is potentially referred for services (Echevarria & Vogt, 2011).

The National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) is founded on the belief that the RTI process will enhance the proper identification of learning and other disabilities, improve

instructional quality, and provide all students with the best opportunities to succeed in school (NCRTI, 2010). In order for this to occur, a rigorous implementation of the process is necessary. The essential components of RTI are: 1) a school-wide, multi-level instructional and behavioral system for preventing school failure; 2) universal screening of all students, 3) monitoring progress of targeted students, and 4) data-based decision making for instruction, movement within the multi-level system, and potential learning disability identification in accordance with state law (NCRTI, 2010).

Districts set up the service delivery model in various ways. The common three choices are using a Standard Protocol, Problem-Solving, or a combination of both approaches. The Standard Protocol is sometimes referred to as a “quality control” method of intervening (Tileston, 2004). The team follows a prescribed process for all students with similar deficiencies or gaps. The Problem-Solving model takes a different view. By focusing on the individual needs of each student, and utilizing intervention strategies that meet these specific needs, it is more open-ended.

As these three models emerge in more schools, the necessity for purposefully blending the components for ELL and the special education identification process is becoming more apparent (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2010). Some of the issues that have surfaced are insuring there is an entry point for ELL students that is equitable to the English-only students, creating interventions that are appropriate for the language needs, and assuring that culturally relevant factors are addressed throughout the process.

As the use of the Response to Intervention (RTI) model continues to grow in districts across the state as the number of ELL students also increases, it is an advantageous opportunity to probe into how this new process is working. There are significant differences between the

discrepancy model used in the past and the newly adopted RTI process. As educators grapple with accurately identifying ELL students for a learning disability, I was interested in their perceptions of how effective the RTI process is for this subgroup of students. I was also interested in whether elementary ELL students are being over- or under-identified and correctly placed in special education through this new identification process or the use of the patterns of strength and weakness approach (Esparza-Brown & Doolittle, 2008). I was also curious about whether the RTI process utilized a Standard Protocol, Problem-Solving, or a combination of the two in their model and if this related to the number of ELL students identified for special education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this research was to explore classroom teachers' perceptions of effectiveness, challenges, and opportunities of the Response to Intervention (RTI) process when used with English language learners. One of the challenges with the current process used for referring and identifying emerging ELL students for a learning disability is that the elevated potential for either under- or over-identifying students. There are circumstances where ELL students are over-identified when the study team does not review the data through the bilingual lens (Elizalde-Utnick, 2008). Often teams omit bringing the home history or native language skills into the conversation. One question that arises is whether native language instruction is a necessary component of the identification process for ELL students (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2010).

In other situations, groups of ELL students are under-identified because many teachers are cautious about referring them or have the perception that special education identification will be a long and messy process (Orosco & Klinger, 2010). As the number of ELL students

increases, so does the need for teachers to be trained in English Language Development (ELD), academic vocabulary building, and sheltered language strategies (Collier & Thomas, 2009).

I conducted a qualitative research study with input from a sample size of seven second grade teachers from three different schools in one district and used information gathered from classroom teachers to analyze patterns and trends about using RTI for learning disability identification with ELL students. The interview questions were specifically targeted to capture the perceived effectiveness, challenges, and opportunities that are apparent to the teachers when the RTI process is used for ELL students.

### **Research Questions**

This research design endeavored to answer the overarching question: What are teacher perceptions regarding the RTI model and its use with English Language Learners (ELL) students? Within this question, there were several embedded research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of using the RTI process with ELL students?
2. How do the teachers perceive the challenges of using the RTI process with ELL students?
3. How do teachers perceive the opportunities of using the RTI process with ELL students?

### **Working Hypothesis**

My initial hypothesis was that the second grade teachers who were interviewed perceived that identifying ELL students with learning disabilities through the RTI process had challenges that were different than non-ELL students, but the RTI process did allow for flexibility that was not available in the discrepancy model. I believed that they would perceive that using the

Problem Solving model for ELL students was an opportunity for alternative pathways for the complexities of an ELL student. Overall, I predicted that the perceptions of using RTI for identification of ELL students would be positive, but that navigating the process had been a challenge.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Effective Behavioral and Instructional Support Systems (EBISS):** The goal of EBISS is to increase student outcomes by implementing a continuum of effective and sustainable school-wide academic and behavioral support systems. Through the application of a blended model of response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavioral interventions and supports, school teams will be able to meet the academic and behavioral needs of every student in their schools and programs.

**English Language Learners (ELL):** English language learners are students who have a native language that is not English and who are in the process of learning English as their second (or other additional) language.

**Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW):** This replaced the former discrepancy model for Learning Disabilities (LD) in 2008. A school team may determine that a child has LD if a comprehensive analysis is completed to include the student's strengths and weaknesses; classroom performance, relative to age, appropriate assessments and observation. If this analysis indicates a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in academic performance, achievement (or both), or intellectual development (OAR 581-015-2170), a student could be identified as having a learning disability.

**Problem-Solving Model:** This is a specific process followed in the Response to Intervention

model, which is more open-ended, specific to the individualized needs of each student, and uses a variety of intervention strategies in the process (Shapiro, 2009).

**Response to Intervention (RTI):** Schools identify students at-risk for poor learning outcomes (due to a variety of reasons including learning disabilities or disabilities in behavioral or emotional areas), monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions, and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness (NCRTI, 2010).

**Specific Learning Disability (SLD):** Based on the Oregon Department of Education Administrative Regulation (OAR), Specific Language Disability means,

a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. Specific learning disability includes conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, dyslexia, minimal brain dysfunction, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (OAR 581-015-2000(4)(i)).

At the school level, the term has been shortened to learning disability (LD), so this term was used in the remainder of the document.

**Standard Treatment Protocol Model:** This is a specific process followed in the Response to Intervention model, which is more structured and explicit, with interventions defined and used for a majority of the students who are referred for learning disability identification (Shapiro, 2009).

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

The criterion-based, purposeful selection included interviews with a projected sample size of seven second grade teachers from three similar schools in one district. I chose purposive sampling as the method because this strategy allowed for specifically choosing a group of people to interview in order to obtain information that might not be available when using other types of methods (Maxwell, 2005).

Limitations of this study were based on the fact that I chose to interview only primary grade level teachers because a majority of learning disability referrals come from these younger grades. Due to the fact that this was a qualitative study and only three schools were used to gather research data, it limited the amount of information gathered and generalizations could not be made. The potential weakness was that there would not be a perspective from the intermediate level, which could have similar or different issues. There may have been other teachers at different grade levels with stronger implementation and/or an overall larger percentage of ELL students in these programs. These factors could potentially skew the data. It was also likely that the schools varied in the amount of time that they have been using the RTI model, as well as whether the process is exclusively Standard Protocol, Problem-Solving, or a combination of both. Because Oregon has been at the forefront of the RTI movement, the schools that were chosen for the study had received basic training, but there could be differences in the understanding and consequent implementation of the core tenets of RTI. Also, the education department in Oregon has just started to address the implications of RTI for ELL students.

The delimitations of this qualitative study using in-depth interviews to gather information on the learning disability process used for ELL students were the boundaries of the selection

process of those involved in the study. The participants were chosen from only three elementary schools in one school district in western Oregon. As a component of the sampling procedure, the criterion for choosing the schools was a demographic of at least 25% English language learner students, schools currently using the RTI process, and classrooms that were not designated as bilingual classrooms.

### **Summary**

Since both the topics of English language learners and RTI are current, there is a wealth of research information on the benefits, disadvantages, and recommendations to consider during implementation. The research on actual implementation using the RTI process for ELL students is more limited. The next chapter grounds the reader in the foundational empirical research that has been conducted within the past ten years and provides a deeper understanding of this researcher's study that focused on the potential benefits of using RTI for ELL students, in order to obtain appropriate special education identification.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Introduction**

There are three current topics in discussion among American educators that relate to this study. The first topic is education of ELL students, the second is Response to Intervention (RTI), and the third is an intersection of specific models of RTI used for ELL students. All are relatively new, but have a growing research base (Echevarria & Vogt, 2011). The following literature review focuses on each of these areas, and provides a more in-depth description of key research on some of the implications of using RTI with ELL students.

### **Educating ELL Primary Students**

As the schools in Oregon become more diverse, the need for specific best practice training in teaching ELL students has become more of a priority. Three reoccurring themes were evident in the research on the potential reasons educating ELL students are challenging and why it has risen to a high level of concern. The first theme focused on ineffective or poorly trained teachers. ELLs are more likely than other groups to be taught by a teacher who lacks appropriate teaching credentials (Maxwell-Jolly, Gándara, & Driscolli, 2006). Fifty-six percent of public school teachers in the United States have at least one ELL student in their class, but less than 20% of these teachers are certified to teach ELLs (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). The second theme is lack of access to appropriate instructional and assessment materials. Most states use curricula and assessments that are developed specifically for English speakers and make no accommodation for ELLs who, by definition, are not proficient in English. Therefore, instructional and assessment materials may not be valid or reliable as indicators of what ELLs know and can do academically (Maxwell-Jolly, Gándara & Driscolli, 2006). The last theme is failure by schools to incorporate students' language and culture into instruction. Recent reviews

of research on language instruction indicate that teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English and using reading passages with themes from students' cultures improves comprehension (Goldenberg, 2008). Nevertheless, approximately 60% of ELLs are in essentially all-English instructional settings with little differentiation for language proficiency and cultural backgrounds (Zehler, Hopstock, & Fleischman, 2003).

One of the most debated subjects in the arena of teaching ELL students is whether to teach English only, teach initially in students' native language with a transition to English, or use a simultaneous dual language approach. A synthesis of key research suggests a focus on quality instruction in both languages concurrently. If this is not feasible, then learning to read in a native language when combined with oral proficiency in English is one of the best predictors of success in English literacy for English language learners (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008).

Sheltering Instruction Observation Model (SIOP) is a popular framework for instruction that provides classroom teachers the skills to teach academic content and language systematically and consistently to ELL students. The components include content and language objectives, building background, scaffolding, higher-order thinking, review and assessment. Lyster and Ballinger (2011) stated that "English language learners benefit from English Language Development instruction, but they also need instruction in the use of English in the content areas. Teaching both content and language is a challenge for teachers" (p. 4). In a SIOP- based classroom, students are orally interacting with each other in cooperative learning groups and provided background knowledge to connect their learning (Echevarria & Vogt, 2011). A similar model that has been used successfully with ELL students is Guided Language Acquisition

Design (GLAD). Teachers are trained on how to scaffold and shelter language and concepts through the use of visuals, graphic organizers, models, and other sensory-oriented techniques.

For the past decade the issue of whether to remove (or “pull out”) ELL students from the classroom in order to receive services or integrate them into the classroom with additional support has been discussed, debated and tested. Recent research studies indicate that serving students collaboratively within the classroom setting is the more effective and equitable approach. Theoharis (2011) conducted instrumental case studies of two urban elementary schools and with the principals involved in school reform, which resulted in inclusive ELL settings. One school combined all of their resources to eliminate pullout services for ELL students, reduce class size, and adopt a model of school community collaboration among all the staff. The other school initiated a co-teaching approach, using the classroom and ELL teacher to team-teach the students. They eliminated pullout ELL services and focused on community building, professional development, and collaboration. Student achievement at both schools and in particular the achievement of ELL students, and the connection with ELL families greatly improved. This new approach promotes social justice by allowing ELL students access to all content areas and the opportunity to interact with English-only speaking students.

A study conducted in 2009 with data from selected schools in several cities, provided a few key recommendations for effectively improving the academic achievement of ELL students (Horowitz, 2009). The contextual proposals included developing a clear instructional vision and high expectations for ELLs, view meeting the academic needs of these learners as a priority and an asset, and building a culture of collaboration from all stakeholders in the process of the critical work of insuring that the appropriate and best instructional practices are in place.

## **Models of Learning Disabilities Identification**

In the realm of special education identification, several models for identifying learning disabilities have been utilized. Since this is a critical decision in the life of a student, it has been important to analyze the results and the process on a regular basis. This allows for the validity of the identification to be assessed using sampling from across the United States. Over the past thirty years, educators have proposed and experimented with numerous alternative approaches to strengthening the academic achievement of low-performing students, as well as correctly identifying students with a learning disability (Lindholm-Leary, 2010).

**RTI model for learning disability identification.** RTI has emerged as the most recent model for capturing struggling students, intervening early, and closing the achievement gap or moving forward with potential learning disability identification. A strong research base showing the benefits of RTI was in place before the actual implementation in schools across the United States (Echevarria & Vogt, 2011). Consequently, using the RTI model for identification of students with learning disabilities is growing (National Center for Response to Intervention, 2010). There are districts across the United States that train their staff in this process, which replaces the former model of proving that there is a discrepancy between a student's achievement and academic abilities in order to qualify for LD special education identification. The basic tenets of RTI include: high quality classroom instruction, research based instruction, universal screening of all students, tiered instruction, using scientifically research based interventions and ongoing progress monitoring (National Center for Response to Intervention, 2010).

Perhaps one of the most reasonable explanations for the popularity of RTI is the opportunity for immediate interventions for children who struggle academically (Gresham, VanDerHeyden & Witt, 2005). In addition, the cornerstone belief that all children can learn

popularizes the RTI model. Essentially, the underlying foundation of RTI is that research-based interventions are offered to students before they fail academically. Through school screening and early interventions, deficits are caught in the beginning stage and corrected before they have a chance to advance (Gresham, VanDerHeyden & Witt, 2005).

Vaughn and Chard (2006) assert that the RTI approach unites general education and special education by providing opportunities for collaboration and teaming through planning and implementing interventions. Only when students have gone through a series of interventional steps are they assessed as children who may truly be at-risk and in need of more specifically designed instruction. The guiding principle in referring a child for services is his/her response (or lack of response) to interventions and the gap between his/her academic performance and the performance of peers (Gresham et al., 2005). Thus, the fundamental premise behind RTI is that, by early intervention, students will be monitored frequently with scientifically proven assessment measures, which potentially reduces the wait time for a student to get the additional help he/she needs. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Zumeta (2008) reported that by applying frequent measures of evaluation, those who are eligible for special education with a specific learning disability will be identified early in their academic careers and not confused with those who have not been the recipients of sound scientifically-based teaching.

In the RTI model, team decisions about intensity and duration of interventions are based on individual student responses to various interventions. The regular classroom teacher takes an active role in assessing each student and monitoring the results. There are several advantages to having the classroom teacher involved with the intervention process from the beginning. The teacher generally knows each student better than a specialist or substitute. He or she is also able to teach to the strengths of the student, determining which intervention might be the most

effective. However, not all teachers are willing or equipped to meet the demands of the RTI process. Thus, the eagerness of the teacher to implement RTI is essential. He or she must be willing to develop and monitor interventions as well as document the results. Additionally, some educators may be faced with time constraints, lack the knowledge of scientifically proven interventions, or lack skill in data collection. These constraints may result in RTI concepts that look better on paper than in reality (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009).

In a study that examined how teachers view the implementation process of RTI, Greenfield and Rinaldi (2009) posed the following question: After the first year of implementation, how do educators view the RTI change process? Data were analyzed using a consensual qualitative methodology. Results indicated that teachers viewed the reform effort as positive overall. However, many teachers expressed concerns about the implementation of RTI. The majority of teachers associated the following positive outcomes with the first year of reform: data informed instructional planning, progress monitoring to measure the effectiveness of the instruction, and better knowing when to refer English language learners for special education services. Teachers identified the culture of the school as "positively mixed," meaning positive shifts were taking place and teachers were working along a continuum of understanding and adoption practices. Key concerns of implementation were also raised as implications for effective adoption of the model at the elementary school level.

#### **Standard treatment protocol and problem solving.**

Within the RTI model, there are two specific processes available for school teams. The more standardized and rule-based decision-making process is the Standard Treatment Protocol. In contrast, Problem-Solving is a more open-ended approach (Butterfield & Read, 2011). Some districts have opted for a process that combines the best of both models. In those instances, the type used is chosen to meet the specific needs of the student.

In Standard Treatment Protocol, all students with similar learning problems and achievement receive the same assessments and interventions. The results are measured against a standard benchmark (NASDSE, 2006). Proponents argue that it is more research-based than the Problem-Solving approach and leaves less room for error. Additionally, the Standard Treatment approach is not as time-consuming and complex (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Another advantage is that school teams identify and use a set of effective interventions that can be applied broadly to many students who have the same skill needs (Shapiro, 2009).

The Problem-Solving Model takes a more personalized approach and allows for a higher level of flexibility and professional expertise. Flexible interventions and/or strategies are planned and implemented over a period of time. There are usually four stages: identifying the problem, analysis of the problem, implementation and evaluation. One of the major differences between this and the more standardized approach is the belief that a specific intervention is not necessarily appropriate for all students struggling with similar deficits. A shortcoming is the possibility of integrity of implementation, which could potentially question the validity of the identification (Echevarria & Vogt, 2011).

Fuchs and Deshler (2007) suggest using a dual response where a combination of both approaches is used. The Standard Protocol would be used for basic academic difficulties and the Problem-Solving approach for more complex academic challenges. The Problem-Solving model makes use of systematic and methodical plans to solve problems. Examples of the strategies which may be used are: modification of the environment to assist students, focus on what the child can do rather than on weaknesses, use of functional assessments that can be performed by teachers, use of interventions that have a high probability for success, use of strategies to ensure that the interventions are implemented consistently and accurately and use of a systematic way of

collecting data and monitoring to see if the students are responding to the interventions (Schwanz & Barbour, 2004).

**Patterns of strengths and weaknesses model for learning disability identification.**

Because of changes in federal law, school teams can identify and serve children with learning disabilities (LD) earlier and more effectively. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004) provides a definition of LD and general conceptual frameworks for identifying and intervening with children. These include RTI and Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW). Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses model allows alternative research-based methods to identify and intervene with students with a LD in lieu of using RTI for identification. It replaced the former testing for a severe discrepancy between the cognitive and achievement levels of the student being referred for special education identification. In the Oregon Administrative Rules (OAR 581-015-2170), this method is described as:

An added option of RTI based on district model: requires progress monitoring; observation by qualified personnel; must include assessment of a student's strengths and weaknesses, based on classroom performance and academic achievement or both, relative to age, Oregon grade-level standards or intellectual development; and requires the use of a variety of technically sound assessment tools and strategies. (Oregon Department of Education, 2008)

Districts/teams may choose among three major research-based PSW models. Each of these three PSW models follows four general principles. The first principle is that the Full Scale IQ is irrelevant except for Mental Retardation (MR) diagnoses. Secondly, children classified as LD have a pattern in which most academic skills and cognitive abilities are within the average range. However, they have isolated weaknesses in academic and cognitive functioning. This conforms

to Shaywitz's (2003) declaration that dyslexia is "an isolated weakness in a sea of strengths." The third principle is that each model demands that we "match" deficits in specific cognitive processes to the specific area of academic concern without testing children with numerous measures in an attempt to find a deficit. Lastly, most cognitive abilities that do not relate to the area of academic concern are average or above.

The specific process of using the patterns and strengths methodology involves reviewing existing information and achievement data, observing the student during regular instruction, collecting progress monitoring data, collecting data and administering assessments to evaluate the student's strengths and weaknesses in academic performance and intellectual development (this piece requires three points of evidence to equal a pattern of strength or weakness), an analysis of cognitive or language processing with a minimum of one index score to identify a weakness with supporting observations, and reviewing development history (Butterfield & Read, 2011). Since using this methodology in conjunction with the broad intervention model is relatively new, there is limited research on how this affects the validity of learning disability identification.

### **Identifying Learning Disabilities for English Language Learners**

District and school leadership teams that are prepared to effectively address the needs of ELLs are an important ingredient in a successful RTI framework because although many ELLs currently participate in bilingual education programs, achievement outcomes for ELLs as a group are bleak. On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the average reading score for fourth grade ELLs was 188 points out of a possible 500 (compared with 224 for non-ELL fourth graders). This 36-point discrepancy in achievement is larger than the 26-point gap in reading achievement between Hispanic students and white students, the 28-point gap

between African American students and white students, the 27-point gap between students from low-income families and students from high-income families, and the 33-point gap between disabled students and nondisabled students (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Statistics show that a higher proportion of ELL students is identified with specific learning disabilities. There is limited research on this topic, but raw data indicate that this population of students is generally over-identified in many schools (Butterfield & Read, 2011).

Lindholm-Leary (2010) outlines effective features of assessment and accountability for ELL students. The key factors to consider are that the assessments be conducted in both of the languages used for instruction. It is important that there is alignment with the vision and goals of the program. Interpretation and analysis should be accurate and the implementation consistent and systematic. English language learners with disabilities face many challenges in their academic career. Learning a new language and coping with their disabilities create obstacles in their academic progress. For this reason, it is critical that the most appropriate assessment and interventions be used in order not to hinder the potential identification, to ensure that the linguistic and cultural factors have been taken into account, and to plan the best instruction and/or accommodations. With these complexities, it is imperative that the team implements a process that always begins with considerations that are different than for English-only students. Quantitative case studies on the classification, assessment, and accommodation for ELL with disabilities students do not provide encouraging results (Abedi, 2009). These indicate that in many situations students are not assessed in their dominant language, or a test is used that is language rich, which in both scenarios may skew the data.

In a 2009 special issue of the *Journal of Applied Testing Technology*, four studies were shared that represent significant steps forward in the area of evaluating the validity of methods

for assessing the educational achievement of students with disabilities. The studies address some of the most difficult student groups to assess: students with learning disabilities, students with severe cognitive disabilities, deaf/hearing impaired students, students with disabilities who are also English language learners, and students who are likely to be inaccurately measured on statewide reading tests (Sireci, 2009). Abedi (2009) reminds us that disability status and language proficiency are separate characteristics and for ELL students, accommodations in both instruction and assessment are necessary. A variety of research designs and statistical methods should be utilized to provide evidence for evaluating the validity of assessments of these students. Using a pre-assessment to determine specific testing needs is one method for insuring that the correct measure and accommodations are used (Butterfield & Read, 2011).

During the RTI process for an ELL student, the use of the most appropriate intervention is critical. Brown & Doolittle (2008) advocate that there be a wide menu of options, both in English and the student's primary language. They believe that an RTI process for schools with a high number of ELL students should use a combination of both the Standard and Problem-Solving protocols, so that ELL students are not forced into the same identification path that is used for English-only students (Brown & Doolittle, 2008).

There are recommendations from case study research that provide appropriate solutions to the assessment issue. The suggestions include insuring that there is a cultural, linguistic and ecological framework for RTI and the recommendation that the intervention needs to account for each of these factors in assessment and instruction in order to be the most effective. Researchers note the importance of understanding students' language proficiency in their first and second language as well as the context of how they acquired those language skills (Elizalde-Utnick, 2008). In these studies, it is clear that a one style approach method is not adequate for all ELL

students (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). This applies to insuring that a variety of assessments be utilized in both languages so that there is a comprehensive view of a student's strengths and weaknesses in his/her primary and secondary languages. It is critical that the school team views the ELL student's needs through the lens of past history, cultural factors, learning environment, and a more open-ended, problem-solving approach that utilizes a combination of interventions and strategies (Klingner & Edwards, 2006).

In a study conducted by Orosco and Klinger (2010), the purpose was to determine how a RTI model was implemented with a large percentage of Latino English language learners who were having reading difficulties in an urban elementary school at the primary level (K-2). The researchers explored the school personnel's perceptions of RTI, what the model looked like in their school, and the challenges they faced. There was a focus on how teachers' understandings, beliefs, judgments, professional development, and training affected the RTI decision-making process by investigating classroom-based literacy instruction and problem-solving meetings. This study contributes to the literature by presenting a qualitative, in-depth description of how teachers implemented an RTI model for English language learners. The results indicated that the RTI model that was utilized and teacher beliefs in the abilities of English language learners created a deficits-based RTI literacy model (Orosco & Klingner, 2010).

A qualitative study of school districts found that district leaders often think teachers are too quick to refer ELL students for special education, while teachers see administrators as waiting too long to refer (Zehr, 2009). The critical point is the need to examine, monitor and resolve issues related to both the over- and under-identification of ELL students as learning disabled. It is recommended to have a consistent application of the pre-referral process, specific staff training on how to address the cultural and language factors, strong instruction which

engages students, and assistance for teachers to address any misconceptions about the abilities of racial/ethnic students (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Tafoya (2007) suggests that teachers often delay referring students who do not have English as their first language. A responsible teacher might be concerned that the child has not been exposed to a level of English to override the possibility of language as the primary reason for challenges in academic subjects. However, if the student truly has a learning disability a delay will only enhance the problem (Butterfield & Read, 2011).

A case study conducted in a Midwestern elementary school concluded that using the RTI process with ELL students was a hindrance rather than a help to ELL students (Zehr, 2010). The implementation failed in this school because the components of the process focused on the deficits rather than their assets. Teachers in this study were not adequately prepared with effective pedagogy for ELL students and tended to view these students through the same lens as their middle class white students. A missing piece was bridging the gap in the home-school cultural and linguistic differences. The study emphasized the need for teachers to be sufficiently trained and highly qualified to deliver general classroom instruction for ELL students, before entering the RTI process that involves choosing appropriate interventions, based on data from the general instruction.

Proponents for the Standard Protocol approach in RTI argue that this is the most research-based of the RTI approaches and it leaves less room for error in professional judgment (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). However, the Standard Protocol model requires research-based interventions and there are only a few programs that have been researched specifically with ELL students and/or students in low socio-economic communities (McCardle, Keller-Allen, & Shuy, 2008). For example, a program may not provide enough focus on oral communication,

comprehension and vocabulary for English language learners (Klingner, Sorrells, & Barrera, 2007).

For the past year, San Diego schools have been using a clearly articulate process for ELL students in the RTI model. The teams follow a protocol that rules out every possible outside factor, including mental health, nutrition, parental involvement and the quality of instruction the student has received, in order to ensure that the potential identification is as accurate as possible. In this outlined plan, the teachers follow a more prescribed set of interventions that align with these factors, before a student can move forward to evaluation for special education identification. An intense professional development plan supported the process and allowed for teachers to be as highly qualified as possible before the detailed RTI plan for ELL students was put in place. Still in its early stages, the district leaders are confident that following these steps, along with comprehensive training, teams will be kept from over-identifying ELL students (Maxwell, 2012).

The Problem-Solving technique appears to be more appropriate for use with ELL students if the focus is on understanding external or environmental factors that affect the child's opportunity to learn. For this model to work, team members must have expertise in cultural and linguistic diversity and be knowledgeable about interventions that have been effective with ELL students with different needs (Butterfield & Read, 2011). There are many reasons a child may not respond to instruction, including that the method is not an effective one with this child and a different approach would yield better results, the level of instruction might not be a good match for the child, or the environment might not be conducive to learning. It is important to look in classrooms and observe instruction, and also to try different approaches, before determining that a child may have a disability. It may be more appropriate to provide ELL students with extra

support at the second tier of an RTI model while they are acquiring English, rather than placing them in special education (Klingner, Sorrells, & Barrera, 2007).

### **Conclusions from the Literature**

In this literature review, several studies on identifying ELL students for LD special education identification using the RTI model were explored. This topic is debated across the country and most strongly in states with large populations of English language learners. The National Center for Response to Intervention (2010) recommends that school teams use what they know about the language proficiency of students to develop an intervention and carefully consider the language of instruction, take into account the student's characteristics or environmental factors, and base recommendations on individual students versus generalizing why the entire subgroup may be struggling. It is also important that faculty and staff understand an intervention, how it differs from core instruction, and how to evaluate it effectively.

With a federal push for more states to use the RTI process for special education identification, it is clear that a discussion on the pitfalls of this process in its purest form is necessary for schools with a high percentage of ELL students. There is a variety of considerations to take into account in order to ensure that students are not inappropriately referred, or if they are in the process that they receive intervention strategies that are matched to their skill set, language needs, or cultural background. When the student is an English language learner, teams should proceed with caution and ensure that they are asking the pertinent questions and choosing appropriate interventions so that the student is not inadvertently identified with a learning disability. The key is to carefully take steps to insure that the process is suitable for this vulnerable subgroup of English language learners.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

#### Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of primary level classroom teachers regarding the use of the RTI process for learning disability identification for ELL students. Specifically, I used a qualitative exploratory approach with responses from in-depth interviews of seven primary classroom teachers from three different schools in one Oregon district to determine patterns and trends of these educators' opinions about using RTI with ELL students. The objective of this investigation was to gain greater insight into whether the new RTI model was the most appropriate for indentifying ELL students with a learning disability. Due to the exploratory nature of this qualitative research study, the research questions were created to encourage a dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee. However, the questions were also designed with a theme towards investigating the strengths and weaknesses associated with the RTI process and the perceptions and attitudes of the staff involved in implementing RTI for ELL students.

This research design endeavored to answer the overarching question: What are teacher perceptions regarding the RTI model and its use with English language learner (ELL) students?

Within this question, there are several embedded research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of using the RTI process with ELL students?
2. How do the teachers perceive the challenges of using the RTI process with ELL students?

3. How do teachers perceive the opportunities of using the RTI process with ELL students?

### **Setting and Participants**

Seven second grade teachers from three different schools in a district in western Oregon were the individuals interviewed and their responses were analyzed for the study. I contacted these individuals for personal interviews as a primary mode of data collection, according to the limitations and delimitations presented earlier in this study. The participants were chosen from three elementary schools within one district in Oregon. Each school had a population of at least 25% ELL students and has been assessing using RTI. The interviews were conducted at individual school sites. The interviews were private between the researcher and the participants and scheduled at a time most convenient for the interviewees. This particular school district was chosen based on the fact that they have implemented the RTI model over the past two years and they have a significant percentage of ELL students.

### **Sampling Strategy and Rationale**

The sampling strategy that was used is purposive sampling or a typical case sampling technique because it is the most appropriate of the four types of techniques for non-probability sampling for this particular exploratory study (Maxwell, 2005). In order to address the research questions in this study it was necessary to select a population that was familiar and knowledgeable about the research subject. This particular qualitative methodology was selected in order to obtain an in-depth view from a small group of educators that have direct experience teaching ELL students and knowledge of the RTI process. Participants were contacted through email, followed by a telephone call. A description of the study was reviewed and the classroom

teacher was invited to participate in the study. If he/she was willing to participate, a date was set for the interview to occur.

The following interview questions were developed with the intent that the questions would yield information based upon the respondents' perception of RTI. The interview questions were a mixture of both formal and informal inquiries.

1. What are the components of using RTI with ELL students that are effective and working well?
2. What challenges are there in using the RTI process with ELL students?
3. Are there opportunities that have been offered when using the RTI process with ELL students?
4. How else would you improve the RTI process with ELL students?
5. What else can you tell about the RTI process with ELL students?

### **Research Ethics**

In order to have a consistent research strategy and method for documenting the data, I followed George Fox University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for research. Verbal consent was obtained from the Assistant Superintendent of the district. A letter of consent was given to each participant describing the nature and purpose of this study (Appendix A). The letter requested signed consent for use of data acquired from the audio recorded interviews and field notes. The interviews, field notes, and other data collected were used for analysis and solely for the purposes of this particular study. Confidentiality of individuals was carefully considered following the recommendations of George Fox University's Institutional Review Board ethical policies and procedures. Each participant was issued a letter designation for the analysis to eliminate the risk of being identified. No research was conducted without the

prior approval of the IRB. In addition, data collected are stored on a secure server or in a locked file cabinet for three years, at which time I will take action to personally destroy the files. All study files, including participant consent forms, field notes and interview recordings, will be destroyed by me after the results have been written, disseminated, and the dissertation has been successfully completed.

### **Research Design**

This qualitative study was exploratory in approach, using in-depth interviews, followed by data analysis seeking patterns and trends. An important dimension of the study was to record and describe the thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes of a key group of educational professionals, concerning RTI with ELL students. The intent was to capture information in a qualitative manner using in-depth interviews. The goal was to investigate and document important patterns and characteristics in an effort to add knowledge to the field of general and special education. Specifically, the targeted key research topic was the implementation of RTI for ELL students in three schools from one district in Oregon.

The research process consisted of three general steps: contracting with the participants, the interview, and interpreting through narration patterns and trends from the responses to the interview questions. This interview and analysis process began in late April 2012 through June 2012, with final dissertation work completed in the fall of 2012.

For the purposes of this study, I created a base interview schedule of five open-ended questions and probes that were used within the format of the personal interview (Appendix B). The varieties of the questions in the interviews were designed to gather perceptions on the RTI process for ELL students in the teacher's school setting. I conducted semi-structured interview sessions informally at a location selected by the participant in order to have the flexibility to lead

to relevant conversations as they arose during the one hour sessions. I recorded written notes in a journal and recorded each interview session electronically using recording software on my computer, after obtaining permission from the participants. Electronic recordings of the interviews were transcribed. The primary sources for this research were the transcriptions of the interviews and any journal notes. Member-checking was used to verify the accuracy of transcripts. This was accomplished by emailing the completed transcripts to each participant for comments and feedback, followed by a form of peer debriefing. All comments and feedback were included in the summary of the findings for each respondent.

An important piece of the methodological approach when using a qualitative study is to make few assumptions about the outcome so that personal biases do not determine possible outcomes (Maxwell, 2005). Additionally, this qualitative study also followed a constructivist model where the research process is open-ended (Berg, 2009). It was assumed that the perceptions of the educational professionals involved in the study are influenced by their environment, past experience, and understanding of the RTI process.

### **Data Collection and Analytical Procedures**

In this qualitative study, I collected data through in-depth interviews, using semi-structured questions with seven general education classrooms teachers. I recorded the interviews, created verbatim transcripts for each interview, then summarized and looked for pattern and trends. I also chose an organizational system in which information is coded. I used a traditional coding procedure of working through the process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This method is commonly used in qualitative research (Berg, 2009). I analyzed data collected from the personal interviews by doing content analysis. The data collected included information about each school's demographics, journal notes, and

transcriptions of recorded interviews. I developed a coding strategy to ascertain dominant themes that were shared by all participants in an attempt to employ the general process of analyzing qualitative data. The organization and interpretations of patterns and trends were based on this strategy.

After the interview text was carefully transcribed, the initial process of open coding was used with all interview transcripts. I initially read the transcripts to identify key ideas or patterns that were sorted and coded into categories of response by hand, using note cards and color highlighting. Next, axial coding was used to separate the responses. I then began to narrow patterns to identify similar experiences in order to create a smaller number of categories and labels for study. In applying open coding, the identified characteristics from various data sources were first listed. As part of the open coding process, important patterns in responses were noted. Next, in the axial coding stage, I categorized data into tentative typologies. Typologies help to establish unique categories using common themes and patterns identified in the teacher interviews (Bailey, 2007). Finally, after further collapsing typologies, the final stage of selective coding assisted me in looking for themes and noticeable patterns that describe the perceptions about RTI for ELL students from of the teachers in these three schools.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Over the course of this study, my primary responsibility was to adhere to all of the protocols and policies of the George Fox University Institutional Review Board in a professional and an honorable manner. As a graduate student attempting to earn a doctoral degree through this research investigation, I have a vested interest in pursuing this study through to a successful completion. I am currently a director in a greater Portland, Oregon, area school district, with key responsibilities in supporting K-12 instruction and assessment. The focus of this work was based

on personal experience with RTI implementation in several schools and the opportunities to help school teams adjust the process to meet the needs of the ELL students. Therefore, it was important to have the ability to produce an objective and scholarly analysis independent of any district RTI data, as clearly demonstrated in the final dissertation. Because the data obtained in this study were derived through interviews, rapport with the respondents was essential. According to Yin (2009), a good researcher must be a good listener and not be trapped by personal ideologies. Yin also argues that the researcher must be flexible and adaptive, so that any unusual responses or situations do not skew the results of the study.

I have been in the field of education for over 25 years. This level of experience, along with knowledge of the RTI process, enhanced my credibility during the interview process. Avoiding bias was also of utmost importance to this research study. I anticipated that I would be able to set aside preconceived opinions and allow the study to evolve according to the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of the respondents. Being open to contrary findings is the test of a nonbiased researcher (Yin, 2009). Allowing biases to lead the results would only negate the study. Every attempt was made to prevent any bias from hindering the research process. However, having stated the above, all researchers bring some bias to the field.

### **Potential Contributions of the Research**

In this qualitative study, I identified patterns and trends in the interview question responses from seven classroom teachers in order to determine the perceptions they have on the impact of using the RTI process to identify ELL students with a learning disability. The data also indicated the specific protocols used in each school. This study adds breadth to the existing research on this topic, since these models are relatively new to the educational world. Specifically, this could potentially lead to the enhancement of the special education identification

process of ELL students through the use of appropriate assessments, review of language history, interventions, primary language instruction, and/or sheltered language settings. My efforts were to explore and conceptualize the components of the issues which affect the efficacy of the special education identification process, which could possibly be a practical contribution to current education practice by making specific recommendations for those that are using RTI with ELL students.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Results**

#### **Introduction**

This study explored the perceptions of second grade classroom teachers on using the Response to Intervention (RTI) process for learning disability identification with English language learners (ELL). Teachers were chosen from three schools located in one western Oregon District, with the criteria that each school had a minimum of 25% ELL students in their student population and had used the RTI process for at least two years. The RTI model used in this district for the identification of students with learning disabilities was based on a blend of both the Standard and Problem solving protocols. The researcher operated from a working hypothesis derived from the literature that the second grade teachers would perceive the RTI process for ELL students as positive overall, but the attention to ruling out the language and cultural factors, as well as the amount of time that it takes would be perceived by all as challenges. There was also interest in whether elementary ELL students were being correctly identified as having a learning disability and then placed in special education through the RTI model. The other interest was if the Standard, Problem solving, or a mixture of both protocol was utilized. The researcher was attentive to conceptualize the factors in an open-ended manner throughout the study.

The rest of the chapter covers the demographics of the three schools in the study, a description of the participants, findings related to the research questions, and finally the themes gleaned from this study.

### **Demographics of Three Schools**

An overview of each of the three schools using site documentation in order to obtain information created context and enriched the final results. The overview included demographic data, state student achievement data, and student performance results from OAKS (Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) tests. Data for this section were collected from the District website and from the Oregon Department of Education website. The percentage of students in grades 3-8 who either met or exceeded state standards or met their growth targets was used when reporting the federal rating.

School A had a student count of 524 students in September 2011. Of those students, 321 were Hispanic, 170 were White, four were American Indian/Alaskan Native, 19 were Asian/Pacific Islander and seven were African American. Eighty-one percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunches and 28.7% of the school populations are ELL students. There were thirty teachers on staff. This school had an Oregon Report Card rating of *Satisfactory* and had a *Met* rating for the federal No Child Left Behind student achievement accountability requirements for Adequately Yearly Progress.

Student achievement data at School A for OAKS for all students in Math was 79% met or exceeded standards and 60.38% of ELLs met or exceeded in 2010-2011. Student achievement data for OAKS for all students in Reading was 96.94 % met or exceeded standards. 87.46% of ELLs met or exceeded and 97.96% of Multi-Ethnic met or exceeded in 2010-2011.

School B had a student count of 496 students in May 2011. Of those students, 371 were Hispanic, 131 were White, four were American Indian/Alaskan Native, 4 were Asian/Pacific Islander and six were African American. There were 87% of the students who were eligible for free or reduced lunches, and 43.9% of the total school population are ELL students. There are

28.5 teachers on staff. This school had an Oregon Report Card rating of *Satisfactory* and had a first year rating of *Met* for the federal No Child Left Behind student achievement accountability requirements for Adequately Yearly Progress.

Student achievement data at School B for OAKS for all students in Math was 85.73% meeting or exceeding standards and 78.74% of ELLs met or exceeded in 2010. Student achievement data for OAKS for all students in Reading was 95.36% meeting or exceeding the standards and 87.87% of ELLs met or exceeded in 2010-2011.

School C had a student count of 509 students in May 2011. Of those students, 394 were Hispanic, 97 were White, four were American Indian/Alaskan Native, five were Asian/ Pacific Islander and 7 were African American. There were 91% of the students who were eligible for free or reduced lunches and 57.5% were ELL students. The school had 28.5 teachers on its staff. This school had an Oregon Report Card rating of *Outstanding* and had a *Met* rating for the federal No Child Left Behind student achievement accountability requirements for Adequately Yearly Progress.

Student achievement data School C for OAKS for all students in Math was 95% meeting or exceeding standards and 98.72 % of ELLs met or exceeded in 2010-2011. Student achievement data for OAKS for all students in Reading was 100% met or exceeded standards and 98.12 % of ELLs met or exceeded in 2010-2011.

Table 1. Demographics of three schools in study

School	Enrollment	% Free & Reduced Lunch	% of ELL students	Number of students in subgroups	Number of staff members	% all students and % ELL students met or exceeded in OAKS Math		% all students and % ELL students met or exceeded in OAKS Reading	
School A	524	81	29	321 Hispanic 170 White 19 Asian or Pacific Islander 7 African American 4 American Indian/Alaskan	30	79	60.38	96.94	87.46
School B	496	87	44	371 Hispanic 131 White 6 African American 4 Asian or Pacific Islander 4 American Indian/Alaskan	28.5	85.73	78.74	95.36	87.87
School C	509	91	57.5	394 Hispanic 97 White 7 African American 5 Asian or Pacific Islander 4 American Indian/Alaskan	28.5	95	98.72	100	98.12

### Description of Participants

Seven second grade teachers participated in the study. They were all from the same district, but from the three different schools chosen for the study.

Participant A was a male and has been teaching for 16 years, eight of these at the current school. He was a first/second grade teacher, and had only second graders during the reading block.

Participant B was a female and has been teaching at the current school for 13 years, all of her career. She had an ESOL Endorsement.

Participant C was a female and had been teaching 12 years all at her current school.

Participant D was a female and has been teaching for seven years, with four years at her current school. She taught Special Education for three years.

Participant E was a female veteran teacher with 42 years teaching experience and thirty years in the current setting.

Participant F was also a female veteran teacher with 32 years experience as a classroom teacher and 21 years in this current school. She also spent time in her career as a Special Education teacher.

Participant G was a female teacher with seven years experience all in her current school. She had been both a classroom teacher and an ESOL teacher

Table 2. Description of participants

	Gender	Years of experience	Number of years at current school	Other teaching experiences
Participant A	Male	16	8	
Participant B	Female	13	13	ESOL
Participant C	Female	12	12	
Participant D	Female	7	4	Special Education
Participant E	Female	42	30	
Participant F	Female	32	21	Special Education
Participant G	Female	7	7	ESOL

### **Participant Responses to the Research Questions**

This study was guided by three research questions. The remainder of this chapter presents findings as a result of the research conducted. The research findings in this study were further linked with the literature that was previously presented in Chapter 2. An analysis of the teachers' perceptions was compared with previous research. The analysis specifically examines the interviewees' responses in relation to the three research questions that were the foundation

for this investigative study. First, how do teachers perceive the effectiveness of using the RTI process with ELL students? Second, how do the teachers perceive the challenges of using the RTI process with ELL students? Third, how do teachers perceive the opportunities of using the RTI process with ELL students?

The following sections of this chapter offer a discussion of the general findings associated with each of the three questions. The implications and conclusions of this research are presented in Chapter 5.

### **Research Question #1.**

*How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of using the RTI process with ELL students?*

The focus of research question one was on the overall effectiveness of the RTI process with ELL students from a second grade teacher perspective. The following paragraphs summarize the findings.

**Participant A.** This participant regarded collecting data and setting goals as an effective piece of the RTI process with ELL students. Aligned with this was the progress monitoring which occurred on a regular basis, allowing the teacher and the team to see how the child is progressing toward the goals. During the RTI meeting, the team discussed why the student may not be on track for meeting the academic goal, and then collaborated on variables to change in order for the student to have success.

A significant benefit of the RTI process for ELL students was that in these collaborative meetings, the discussion eventually came to asking whether an ELL student's lack of progress was related to a language or a comprehension issue. Participant A commented,

We talk about where the student is in their continuum of gathering language and at the same time gathering content. Answering this gives us a better feel of where each individual child is in their progress in both of these areas.

This is a key component of the RTI process with ELL students. This participant summarized by saying,

RTI seems way more realistic than using the previous model of discrepancy between a student's achievement and academic abilities. In the previous process so many times we would say, 'well, those are the scores you are looking at, but that really isn't what the student is truly like.' RTI is more holistic.

He continued to describe the way that the RTI process looks at all elements of the child, including attendance, behavior, data progress, cultural and language factors.

**Participant B.** This teacher strongly believes that her specific school team and the supportive staff are a significant factor in the effectiveness of the RTI process for ELL students. A key to the process is providing intervention early and offering many types of interventions. In their process, once students register they are immediately tested and placed in appropriate instruction with the necessary supports.

Participant B highlighted the fact that the RTI committee met weekly to discuss the needs of students, with the teacher involved once a month. An important component was closely analyzing whether the supports in place were working for individual students, and making adjustments if the student was not making progress. She gave an example of this,

Say, we are doing small group interventions that are working outside of the classroom and it's not working for one student, the team might recommend tweaking the core curriculum, changing the curriculum, changing the expectations, or possibly changing the trend line.

It is an ongoing process of evaluating, making adjustments, and then tracking the student's progress.

This teacher recognized a strong sense of community in her school and that all of the staff advocated for the needs of the ELL students. She viewed her role as a teacher as one who worked diligently to find out what the needs of each of the students were and then collaborated with others to ensure that those needs were met.

A celebration of the RTI process is that from her perspective no child fell through the cracks. In her own words,

For any child on the cusp or at the very bottom, we are treating them constantly, and they are at the forefront of our minds. So, I think that assessing to see if they qualify for learning disability identification is everyone's total responsibility. This student needs to catch up.

**Participant C.** This participant believed that using a variety of interventions and supports for ELL students was one of the main reasons for an effective RTI process. She also cited this as a struggle, since so many interventions were used before determining whether a student has a learning disability.

This teacher was extremely impressed with the abilities the ELL students have, and the fact that many of them speak more than one language. She said, "They are very smart!" She related to their hesitancy to try the English language, since she would be reluctant to speak in her limited Spanish at parent conferences.

**Participant D.** Clearly, Participant D cited monitoring the progress of students as the number one effective part of the RTI process. She stated,

We don't just use Dynamic Instrument of Basic Skills (DIBELS), but also other types of assessments to track where kids are. Some of these are vocabulary, comprehension or

fluency measures. It is the same with Math, where an awesome district wide fluency assessments is used, along with our in class chapter and fluency tests.

In her school, they used a small quantity of different language based assessments to determine the student's language level. They also utilized the Indicadores Dinámicos del Éxito en la Lectura (IDEL), Language Assessment Survey (LAS) and the English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) to ascertain the beginning levels and then the progression as students moved through the grades. Another critical strategy was comparing the student's language level to see how it relates to the comprehension and math level.

**Participant E.** From this participant's perspective the most effective piece of the RTI process is the EBIS monthly meetings where time was spent reviewing all aspects of each child that was considered at-risk. This was the same for both ELL and non-ELL students. There was a representative from the ELL department on the team, so when it was an ELL student, there was an advocate and someone with information and expertise in what should be considered. The focus of the team was to talk about what was going well, whether a student needs an intervention, specificity of the person providing the support and how the intervention would progress them toward the goal.

**Participant F.** This teacher cited the monthly EBIS meetings as critical in the RTI process for ELL students. At these meetings the team discussed students who were not making progress, teacher observations, various data and all facets of students' academic life. Many types of resources were used to give the interventions the students needed. Interventions could include the classroom teacher, an Instructional Assistant, a volunteer, or specialist. The interventions were offered as a pull out, during recess, after school, before school, and were normally for a six week period. They were implemented individually or in small groups. If, after this, a student

was still not progressing, the team made a decision about what to change or adapt, including potentially another six weeks of intervention. The process is long, but it allowed for students to have the opportunity to respond to the intervention and for other factors to be ruled out as reasons why a particular student was not making the progress he or she should. At times this is due to a language barrier, cultural factors, limited parent support, lack of instructional foundation or a combination of any of these. The teams believe that flexibility in the process is important for ELL students.

The procedure is enhanced with a strong team of people from the school who work closely together along the way to do what is best for each student. The services provided by the Title I-funded positions support both reading and math interventions.

***Participant G.*** This participant confidently explained the RTI process used for ELL students and made the comment that it is “consistent, concise and follows four major decision points.” She perceived that in her school setting the same process was used for both ELL and non ELL students. The first step in the process was the decision made in the team meeting on whether the intervention that has been in place for the student has been successful and if the student needs another intervention or can be placed back in the classroom’s core curriculum for all instruction. If an intervention wasn’t working for a student, a decision was made to continue with the intervention and monitor or make adjustments. The third point was to analyze the group intervention to determine if changes should be made with the group size, delivery or pacing. Finally, if the student had not made adequate progress during two intervention periods, then the team would decide whether to proceed with individualized intervention. ELL students that appeared to have a learning disability based on language deficiency received an extra six months of intervention at this point. This was delivered as an additional “dose” during the day. This

teacher felt that “this makes it clear for the classroom teacher, in collaboration with the EBIS team, the distinction between an ELL disability and a general learning disability.”

In the seven years she has been teaching at this school, Participant G has been impressed with the fact that all of the teachers support the RTI process, and the fact that it is a group decision, with all of the key players involved. She stressed that the consistency in the process is why it works so well.

Participant G felt strongly that the Spanish Literacy instruction that is provided for students has aided in ruling out the language factor sooner. The way she explained it is that, “if the student can show their proficiency in reading in Spanish, but can’t in English, that tells us a lot.”

## **Research Question #2**

*How do the teachers perceive the challenges of using the RTI process with ELL students?*

The focus of research question number two was the perceived challenges and obstacles that are experienced when using the RTI process with ELL students. The following paragraphs summarize the findings.

**Participant A.** This participant stated that the one main challenge was that a majority of the hard data presented in the RTI meeting was for reading and that math does not have the same type of progress monitoring or the same quantity of data as reading. In his opinion, the discussion in the RTI meetings was focused on academics and not on the issues related to the student being ELL. He stated that “the biggest drawback right now is the fact that there is not a weekly progress assessment for language.” In reading and, to some extent, math, there were available data graphs and ways to show measurable growth, but nothing was in place like this for ELL. This resulted in the decisions being more anecdotal and based on discussion versus hard data in graph form. There were a few language acquisition assessments in place for determining

the proficiency level of the ELL students, but in his opinion there should be more available and they need to be integrated into the process more purposefully.

He believed that the identification with RTI is sound, but was complicated when a student moves in mid-year with a mixture of data from previous schools or instructional settings. In these cases, the team starts from square one, and consequently it takes longer to move students through the process.

***Participant B.*** Participant B defined the main challenge as answering the question of whether it is a learning disability or a language issue. She stated, “You definitely want to be sure that you have ruled everything out as much as possible, before moving to making a learning disability identification.”

After taking “Beyond Diversity” training, her new thinking included race and culture in the discussions. This meant making a meaningful connection with the families, discovering ways to involve them more effectively, and gleaning more about their perception of the process, and how their culture connects with this. It also meant taking the students to the next language proficiency level. She contended that the more families are involved, the better students will do in school.

***Participant C.*** Like several other interviewees, this participant reported trying to figure out if a student’s progress is a language or learning issue is one of the key challenges in the RTI process for ELL students. Also, another challenge was all of the interventions that have to be done before a determination of a disability is made. Aligned with this is the difficulty of the time and resources to give the intervention instructor. The teacher expressed it in the interview, “it is difficult sometimes to have those interventions because there aren’t people to do them or

time in our schedule to provide the one-on-one opportunity to provide the intervention in the classroom.”

Another point that was discussed in this participant’s interview was that the challenges for a non-ELL student were similar, with the difference being the language factor. Poverty-related issues may show up in both ELL and non-ELL students. She stressed that the key was determining it case by case, student by student.

According to Participant C, the teachers do not know enough about the details of the RTI process. Similar to the previous discrepancy model, the specialists have been more involved in the logistics of the process than the classroom teachers. Even though the collaboration between the teachers and the specialists is strong, there is a point in the process where the specialists made the next level of decisions and the classroom teacher was no longer directly involved.

This participant would have liked more support in knowing how to help the struggling students in the learning process. She believed that more people and resources were necessary to meet the growing needs of ELL students and to assist teachers in figuring out next steps. With the class sizes increasing, it is becoming more difficult to know all the varying personalities and learning styles, as well as individualizing the support. Additional staff or volunteers would be able to teach small groups language development, vocabulary, supporting what is taught in the core curriculum, and provide native language instruction.

The participant cited some recent research on the benefits of bilingual education, and her belief that students could progress at a faster rate if they were learning in their native language, along with English. This would enable the team to rule out the language and/or cultural factors faster and perhaps reduce the number of English interventions that the ELL students are in

during the RTI process. With a growing group of Marshallese students, she was concerned regarding the lack of support for their native language needs.

*Participant D.* In this interview the participant identified the biggest challenge as the language and along with the different kinds of language are represented among the ELL students. In her school there was a large number of Spanish-speaking students, but also a growing population of Marshallese-speaking students. Some of these non-English groups do not have a native written language. She described it this way,

I think that the hardest part is when you have a newcomer, and especially one from a country where they didn't have an education, and they don't have a strong native language or control of the English language. These students are so far behind their peers, and we don't have a system where we can give them a one on one to catch them up. This is really hard!

In these situations, the student may have characteristics of a learning disability, but once again it could only be that they have such a large achievement gap. The teacher went on to describe the strong desire teachers have to do whatever it takes to help a student succeed, but it is challenging to only work with what you have available.

Participant D shared the need for smaller class sizes in order to give the ELL students more opportunities for individualized support, and to enable classroom teachers to provide more intervention, versus students being pulled out of the classroom. She passionately explained, "Overall, there needs to be an understanding that our students are just seven years old and we pack a lot in their day, and expect a lot from them."

The second thing she discussed was the need for a direct language program, which could fulfill the requirement of English Language Development for the ELL students. If classroom

teachers were allowed to teach this, the benefit would be that ELL students would spend more time in the classroom.

Thirdly, in order to improve the RTI process for ELL students, this teacher would pick very specific language programs to be used for interventions that are outside of the ELD block. In addition there is a need for a better roadmap to follow for making decisions about student's specific needs. An example is when the student has comprehension skills in one content area, but not in another. The question becomes is this only a vocabulary or language concern, or is there something else that is effecting the student's ability to comprehend? This has been a "gray area" in her setting. Many questions arise about when the student will receive additional support. Who will provide the support and, more specifically, what the support should be? She stated, "It is a big job and a huge puzzle to figure out." She questioned, "How can we do it all?"

The final difficulty with the RTI process with ELL students is that the population of ELL students is increasing, and the number of languages is growing. Many of these subgroups move to where there are others with the same language, which can add to problems that come with transiency.

*Participant E.* In a similar way, this participant began with the challenge of knowing whether a student's struggles are the result of a language issue or truly a learning disability. Related to this is the dilemma of time: time to do what it takes to sort out if the child does have a learning disability, especially when the child is only given the opportunity to learn English and not also in the child's native language. There are students who have Spanish literacy and then come back to class where English is being taught, and without the proper transition this can hinder their progress. She asked, "Is it because they have Spanish reading and they can't progress or is it because they really don't know?" For teachers, this becomes a frustration

because either way the student needs help and extra support. This is exacerbated by the amount of time that it takes for the child to go through the process with several interventions. Teachers are frustrated with knowing a student needs help, but do not have the time and/or tools needed to stabilize the student as quickly as they would like to.

This participant experienced both discrepancy and RTI in the district. She believed that with the newer process there are more choices for intervention. She pointed out that for ELL students it is more complicated. She expressed concern that for these young students learning English, it could be more detrimental to pull them out of the classroom so much and away from their peers. The benefits of these native English speaking friends and the sense of belonging are critical. It made her sad for the ELL students who come in from pull outs, and they have missed instruction, and are not sure what is going on. In her words,

As a teacher you don't want them to miss things, but you have to move on because you have the rest of the class sitting in there, and you have to go, because they need it to.

They need something going on and you know, their learning here, so anyway that's the frustrating part.

A model where the support pushes in would be better for the ELL students. Also, the classroom teacher does not always know specifics about the instruction they are receiving outside of the classroom.

Even though the discrepancy model took time, the RTI process is even longer, in this teacher's opinion. She explains it in this way,

With discrepancy it seems to me it was easier because we could just sort of start the paperwork, and we could get the parents involved and talk right away. It seems like that

was a much quicker process, although I think we were over identifying, so we trade one thing for another.

It is more complicated with more students having layers of factors that need to be accounted for in the process.

This participant felt like the process needed to be shortened. There were too many steps to go through, and it takes most of the year in many cases. Sorting through the language and cultural factors takes a lot of time and energy, and then the student has to be in a set amount of interventions before taking it to a higher step in the process. All of this is dependent on how much progress the student has made.

***Participant F.*** The length of time for the process is what Participant F believes is the biggest challenge. This is related to the short amount of time in a school day, as well as the number of interventions and data collection that is required to determine if a student is learning disabled. The actual EBIS meetings were long because there are so many facets of each student that need to be discussed in order for decisions to be made.

This teacher had concerns about the instruction ELL students are missing from the regular classroom, while they are out receiving the additional interventions and supports. She wondered if this adds to the growing achievement gap. As far as the RTI process in general, many ELL students are falling into this category. Even though there is a strong process in place, it is not perfect and has faults.

This second grade teacher was thankful for the RTI process, and her knowledge about teaching ELL students has increased through what she is learning. Her major concern was the length of the process, and felt that it should be shortened. The teachers get frustrated with how many steps need to be taken and at the same time watching kids continue to “sink.” She

expressed concern that she doesn't know exactly what to do to change things, but would like to have direction from the district, with input from teachers about their concerns. It was important in her mind that the district stay consistent across all schools, with whatever is in place. The amount of support has to stay in place or the schools will not be able to carry out the RTI process.

***Participant G.*** One of the biggest challenges of using the RTI process with ELL students was the frustration following the protocol brings to the classroom teacher, according to Participant G. In her words,

I think it can get frustrating for the general education teacher because a lot of times we know these students so well and we still have to follow the RTI protocol and give the extra six months and the double dose to the ELL students. Even then we don't know if it is always working. We want to just dive in and figure out how we can meet the needs of the student and find a program that works. We feel that there are some extra loop holes we have to go through and it just prolongs identifying the disability.

She was also frustrated by the fact that in their RTI process ELL students have to be in an intervention an additional six months with the decision in her school to decrease the number of students in Spanish literacy. In her school, the team followed a Standard Protocol, instead of a Problem-solving model that would have allowed for more flexibility.

Another challenge was insuring that the cultural components or acculturation was reviewed and ruled out as a potential factor for the student's achievement gap. This involved considering the student's cultural background and how that may result in the instruction not being appropriate for them or "out of step." For example, some students come from a culture where girls are expected to not speak to boys, which is contrary to the expectation in an

instructional setting that is focusing on oral language development or fluency. The parents and/or family members play a critical role in assisting the teacher in figuring out the cultural barriers.

This teacher also viewed the dilemma of determining the difference between a language-based issue versus a learning disability as a challenge in the process. She believed that the family can support the classroom teacher with relevant information and data to help this determination be valid. This decision was a challenge in the older discrepancy model, too. It was one of the reasons that ELL students tended to be over identified as learning disabled.

### **Research Question #3**

*How do teachers perceive the opportunities of using the RTI process with ELL students?*

The focus of research question #3 was on the declarative and experiential knowledge base of the opportunities afforded second grade classroom teachers when using the RTI process with ELL students. The following paragraphs summarize the findings.

**Participant A.** This teacher mentioned that being involved with ELL students in the RTI process resulted in a school-wide focus on development of using explicit language enhancement tools, such as pictures and graphics, when teaching and using vocabulary words. The teacher's skills in pre-teaching and re-teaching vocabulary and other concepts have strengthened. There is more use of individual white boards, kid friendly definitions and discourse among the students. She explained it by saying, "We've really, really worked on this and if you go into every room you'll see lots of pictures and words everywhere!" This came out of getting some data and realizing what the students were lacking and noticing that in many cases the student could not comprehend what was being said. All teachers have been trained in Sheltered Instructional Observational Protocols (SIOP), Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) and/or

Systematic English Language Development. All of these programs support scaffolding the language for ELL students.

According to this teacher, one of the ways to improve the RTI process is to have a separate meeting to discuss the ELL factors, which is different than the meeting where the academic data are shared. The factors are those around language acquisition, specific instruction in the student's native language or success with scaffolding English strategies. With limited time, the meetings are too rushed and lack adequate opportunity to delve into all of the factors that should be considered. This teacher believed another way to solve this problem would be to divide the meeting agenda in a way that every area can be covered, with a possible follow up meeting.

A second idea for improving the process would be to ensure that teachers are familiar with the protocol flowchart and to add a flowchart specifically for moving through the steps with ELL students. His school is presently working on a flowchart for math, which will assist them with following a more standardized protocol. The reading flowchart and protocols are in place and are effective.

***Participant B.*** This participant discussed how being involved in the process increased the efficiency and the effectiveness of the teamwork among the classroom teachers, Title I staff and ESL Department at her school. All teachers go above and beyond the minimum expectation to provide additional instructional support and are flexible with their limited schedules. This includes offering an extended-day session for at-risk Kindergarten students. The communication between the specialists and the classroom teachers is strong, and they partner in keeping students on track with behavior support, incentives, motivational awards and other strategy that support students in their success.

An additional creative solution was put in place for the ELL students that require ELD instruction. In order to use instructional time efficiently, ELL students' ELD instruction is integrated into the writing block and taught by an ESOL-endorsed classroom teacher whenever possible. This is one of many creative scheduling tactics that this school has used to solve the dilemma of not enough minutes in the day to provide all that struggling ELL students need.

This participant was passionate about helping families to support their students in the learning process. She believed this is one of the keys that would improve the RTI model. Her school has an ELL parent group which meets monthly, with a focus on being a parent of a student of color and how to deal with the issues that come with a language or cultural barriers. The staff discussed various ways to truly support the families with the goal of doing whatever is possible to find out what helps the families to be able to assist their students in the learning process. She described it like this,

We have talked a lot about support for our families, so they feel that they are helping their child at home, even if they don't have the education to understand the homework. We invite parents to a homework support session, so there is a focus on 'it's all of us teaching your child.' When the middle class white family comes in, they get the system; they know it and have been successful with it. The parents of color are not as familiar with these parts of the schooling.

She talked about the fact that we are a nation of immigrants, which makes this piece even more critical and that any teaming with the parents is helpful to the ELL students in the RTI process.

***Participant C.*** This teacher mentioned that the opportunities the RTI process has offered the teachers included the opportunity to better understand the whole student in order for the teacher to support the student to be the best learner possible. For students the process provided

them the benefits of various interventions outside of the classroom, which might not be available if the protocol did not include it as a part of the identification model. She described it in this way,

Things are different in the classroom and so what has changed is that we have more opportunities with the interventions and have to be more on top of things. With the world changing and poverty increasing, life is different for everyone than it was twelve years ago.

*Participant D.* Similar to other participants, this interviewee felt that being involved in the RTI process with ELL students increased the depth of professional development offered and taken by the teachers. There was regular SIOP-based training, native language curriculum education and professional development on English Language Development.

Another side benefit was having a large enough ELL staff and RTI members in order to make the process actually work. She explained, “The RTI process is a big piece of work the team is involved in, and we rely heavily on this team and we have a large enough staff that ELL is also a part of the team.”

*Participant E.* This participant started out by saying that she appreciated the opportunities that come from having a team that meets monthly, which did not exist in the discrepancy model. Being able to have the people who work with the student collaborating about the needs and solutions was advantageous. A key to the process was that what one person misses, another person brings up, and there was a group figuring out the best plan. The protocol directed the team in the next step to take, and gave ideas on what else to try, if an intervention or instructional strategy did not support the student in making adequate progress.

This teacher believed that the RTI process was advantageous because of its use of actual documented data and interventions used, so the team could get a better look at the overall student, and all of this could help prove that the child has been given the opportunity to learn. With the previous discrepancy model, there was a mathematical equation and the IQ of a seven year old was used to determine a learning disability. She claimed,

The RTI model at least offers the child multiple opportunities to gain whatever we are trying to get them to gain. It allows us to be flexible in that. In my experience with RTI, it has given an opportunity to pinpoint helping the student before a decision is made about whether there is a learning disability.

**Participant F.** The opportunity to delve into a student's learning to determine if there is a language issue, family issue or true learning disability was the biggest advantage of the RTI process for ELL students, according to Participant E. She said, "You have to go into all facets of their lives. Just because a child is in the RTI process does not mean that they will end up in Special Education. This should not be our goal."

The breadth of services provided for students going through the RTI process was another example of opportunities that were not there in the previous discrepancy model. "In that process there were no set interventions before we referred a student. Now, when we the team is concerned the students receive individualized support, and have a chance to show what they can learn, before moving to the learning disability stage", the participant stated.

Participant F liked the RTI meetings and the knowledge that she gains from them. She said, "I like the type of information we get to bring back to my classroom. Things have really changed, but for the good. I think we're more kid and data oriented." With the view of a former special education teacher, she liked the changes in the process, but was concerned with the

amount of time and lack of resources it takes to truly implement the RTI model effectively. She concluded with this statement,

I don't think there's a perfect way to do it, but this is what we have, this is what our district has and this is what we are using. I think it's improved since we started it and more teachers are finding answers and gaining knowledge about the student and the process. We can't do it by ourselves, it is a team effort!

**Participant G.** This participant believed that students benefit greatly from having a double dose of core instruction, small group instruction, extra attention from the teacher and individualized support within that small group. Another beneficial opportunity was the prolonged time in the interventions, which gave students an additional chance to show teachers what they know or have learned.

For the general education teacher there were opportunities for giving the team input about referred students and for identifying new students that should enter the RTI process. This teacher would like to be more deeply involved in the process than is part of the system at this point.

According to this teacher, fewer ELL students were being identified with a learning disability than before in the older model. She believed this could be because more of the students are born in the United States, versus having emigrated from another country, so the number of true ELL students is decreasing. Her own classroom data show this. "In my first couple years of teaching, I had twelve of twenty four students who were ELL. This year I had four ELL students."

As stated by other participants, this interviewee was concerned about the length of time the process takes for ELL students. Although she supported the double of intervention, she

wondered if this delayed the overall process even more. The difficulty is that for some students following a more strict protocol is necessary, but for others it could be more open ended.

Participant G believed another idea to improve the process is to utilize alternative interventions versus the more standardized list of options that are in place now. Examples of this are a specific language development intervention, a combination of standard interventions for a shorter time, or exploring some new options that are available for ELL students. There are situations where a student stays in the same intervention for two or three six week period, and this might be too long.

One of the key changes she advocated was to implement more bilingual education opportunities for ELL students. "I want to see if that child has a learning disability in his/her native language. I think that when bilingual programs are in place, we will be able to pinpoint the issues early on because we have the ability to instruct in the student's native language," she said.

### **Five Emerging Themes**

There are five interrelated elements that appear to be important for avoiding misidentification of students who are English language learners: adequate professional development, effective instructional practices, effective and valid assessments and interventions, team collaboration and clear policy guidelines (IES Practice Guide-National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2010). Among the teachers interviewed in this study there were several common themes and patterns in the participants' responses that align with these elements.

#### **Language variations of the ELL students.**

The first theme was the language variable that is a critical factor with ELL students, since ruling out whether at-risk characteristics are due to the fact that the student has not been given the opportunity to learn in his/her native tongue is an important part of the RTI process for ELL

students. A series of questions needs to be answered as part of the progression, such as whether the student speaks one language at home and one at school, hears the native language at home, but only speaks English or are there other cultural or language factors that have hindered the student learning English. Two participants discussed Spanish Literacy and the importance of ELL students being taught both English and their native language. Using Spanish Literacy as an intervention varies from school to school in the district. The most critical issue related to ELL students is the time that they are out of class. As a whole, the teachers see the advantages of the additional support, but question whether this outweighs time in the classroom with the homeroom teacher and connection with the English-speaking peers.

In a review of the literature, a challenge with the current process used for referring and identifying emerging ELL students for a learning disability is the elevated potential of either under- or over-identifying students. There are circumstances where ELL students are over-identified when the study team does not review the data through the bilingual lens (Elizalde-Utnick, 2008). Often teams omit bringing the home history or native language skills into the conversation. One question that arises is whether native language instruction is a necessary component of the identification process for ELL students (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2010). Although the participants did not directly mention over- or under-identification, their answers implied a concern for whether the process that is used does adequately rule out the language factor in ELL students that are referred for learning disability identification. The three schools in the study have Spanish Literacy for the Spanish speaking ELL students, which the teachers believed was an effective approach for the students becoming bilingually proficient and ensured to a certain degree that the native language would be considered through assessments in Spanish.

Lindholm-Leary (2010) outlines effective features of assessment and accountability for ELL students. The key factors to consider are that the assessments be conducted in both of the languages used for instruction. It is important that there is alignment with the vision and goals of the program. Interpretation and analysis should be accurate and the implementation consistent and systematic. English language learners with disabilities face many challenges in their academic career. Learning a new language and coping with their disabilities create obstacles in their academic progress. For this reason, it is critical that the most appropriate assessment and interventions be used in order to not hinder the potential identification, to ensure that the linguistic and cultural factors have been taken into account, and to plan the best instruction and/or accommodations. With these complexities, it is imperative that the team implements a process that always begins with considerations that are different than for English-only students. Quantitative case studies on the classification, assessment, and accommodation for ELL with disabilities students do not provide encouraging results (Abedi, 2009). These indicate that in many situations students are not assessed in their dominant language, or a test is used that is language rich, which in both scenarios may skew the data.

#### **Commonality & duration of the RTI procedures.**

The second area that emerged as a commonality dealt with the procedures and time elements followed in the regular EBISS meetings, with a focus on reviewing data, tracking interventions and strategies, and determining next steps. A majority of the participants expressed disappointment with the length of the meetings, the frequency and with the fact that in most cases only reading and/or math were covered.

A significant concern was how long the RTI process for ELL students takes and apprehension that the extra steps delay potential learning disability identification. For English-speaking students the RTI process is routine and the amount of time involved is dependent on the

response of the student to the interventions. For ELL students there is an additional layer to rule out any language and cultural factors before moving to learning disability identification. In some cases, being taught and assessed in both English and the student's native language speed up the process because of more valid assessments that assist the filtering out the factors that could lead to a misidentification.

In other situations, groups of ELL students are under-identified because many teachers are cautious about referring them or have the perception that it will be a long and messy process (Orosco & Klinger, 2010). The number one concern and obstacle voiced by all of the teachers in the study was the issue of the amount of time it takes to go through the RTI process for ELL students. In some cases it takes almost the full school year. It could be argued that this is an indication the team is being thorough in attempting to rule out any factors leading to misidentification. In other situations it could be related to waiting too long for native language assessments or having a child remain longer than necessary in an intervention that is not effective.

Brown and Doolittle (2008) advocate that there be a wide menu of options, both in English and the student's primary language. They believe that an RTI process for schools with a high number of ELL students should use a combination of both the Standard and Problem-solving protocols, so that ELL students are not forced into the same identification path that is used for English-only students. As indirectly indicated by the teachers and verified at the district level, this particular district has embraced a practice that is the blend of both types of protocols, which gives the teams more latitude in choosing interventions, allotting time, and integrating and/or eliminating factors that may cloud the identification process.

**The intervention process.**

An overarching and repeated response from each of the teachers interviewed was the fact that there are parts of the RTI process they are not knowledgeable about and/or involved in. One participant commented,

I am embarrassed that I don't know if there is a flowchart on the process for ELL students in the handbook. We have become somewhat robotic about the steps, so I haven't really thought more about the possibilities of what else we might do to improve the process.

A few answers indicated that either the Special Education or ESL departments deal with most of the details of the RTI process so the classroom teacher is not as intimately involved with many of the steps. Another participant reflected that she doesn't have enough knowledge and background about the process to give recommendations on how it can be improved. The interviewee who described how the general education teacher is not involved in the process beyond the initial EBISS meeting stressed how this takes away the sense of control from the classroom teacher and causes the teacher to be more disconnected.

**Effective classroom strategies.**

The use of effective classroom strategies, specifically designed to meet the needs of ELL students was the fourth common theme in the interview responses. Since the classroom teachers are responsible for teaching ELL students during the time they are not being pulled out for interventions or required services, it is critical that the limited time is utilized to the fullest with the most successful strategies. There was also mention of the need for conformity of strategies among all of the adults working with the ELL students.

Sheltering Instruction Observation Model (SIOP) is a popular framework for instruction that provides classroom teachers the skills to teach academic content and language systematically

and consistently to ELL students. The components include content and language objectives, building background, scaffolding, higher-order thinking, review and assessment. Lyster and Ballinger (2011) state that “English language learners benefit from English Language Development instruction, but they also need instruction in the use of English in the content areas. Teaching both content and language is a challenge for teachers” (pg. 4). In a SIOP-based classroom students are orally interacting with each other in cooperative learning groups and provided background knowledge to connect their learning (Echevarria & Vogt, 2011). A similar model that has been used successfully with ELL students is Guided Language Acquisition (GLAD). Teachers are trained on how to scaffold and shelter language and concepts through the use of visuals, graphic organizers, models, and other sensory-oriented techniques.

Over half of the teachers interviewed mentioned that progress monitoring was a regular and important part of the RTI process. Two people stressed the need for progress monitoring to expand to other subjects besides reading and math, and how beneficial it would be to have a progress monitoring specifically for vocabulary and language development for ELL students.

### **Professional development.**

The final theme in the responses is the fact that the teachers interviewed received targeted professional development in preparation for using RTI with ELL students, utilizing effective instructional strategies in the classrooms and specific training on intervention programs, curriculum and strategies. Even with this strong foundation, the need for additional opportunities was expressed, especially as the teachers faced more complex student needs, more ELL students and the influx of students from other cultures.

According to Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) not all teachers are willing or equipped to meet the demands of the RTI process. Thus, the eagerness of the teacher to implement RTI is

essential. He or she must be willing to develop and monitor interventions as well as document the results.

Additionally, some educators may be faced with time constraints, lack the knowledge of scientifically proven interventions, and lack skill in data collection. These constraints may result in RTI concepts that look better on paper than in reality (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009). Five of the seven teachers in this study indicated a high comfort level in implementing the RTI process and believed they had adequate training, but all of the participants commented on the need for additional, targeted professional development in appropriate interventions for ELL students and the need for a specific place in the process to rule out the language issue as a factor for learning disability identification.

As the number of ELL students increases, so does the need for teachers to be trained in English Language Development (ELD), academic vocabulary building, and sheltered language strategies (Collier & Thomas, 2009). The district in this study is systematically training the teachers in these targeted areas, yet a few of the teachers who were interviewed recommended additional and on-going professional development and practice with strategies that work the most effectively with ELL students.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

#### **Introduction**

This qualitative study was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of second grade classroom teacher's perceptions regarding the use of Response to Intervention (RTI) with ELL students. The participants interviewed were limited to teachers in three schools from one western Oregon school district that has been using RTI for at least two years and where the population of ELL students is at least 25%. Personal interviews were used to investigate the perceptions of using RTI with ELL students: the challenges, effectiveness and opportunities. Patterns and trends in the interview question responses from the seven classroom teachers were used in order to determine the perceptions they have on the impact of using the RTI process to identify ELL students with a learning disability.

#### **Discussion**

Once the interviews were completed, I re-read the interviews looking for patterns and trends in the responses. Even though the teacher responses lacked the depth of understanding of the full RTI process that I had expected, there were five key trends that emerged from the data: language variations of ELL students, commonality and duration of the RTI process, the intervention process, professional development and effective instructional strategies. These trends are similar to five important interrelated elements that have been studied for avoiding misidentification of students who are English language learners: adequate professional development, effective instructional practices, effective and valid assessments and interventions, team collaboration and clear policy guidelines (IES Practice Guide-National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2010).

### **Language variations of ELL students.**

The researcher's working hypothesis was that second grade teachers would perceive the RTI process for ELL students as positive overall, but the difficulties around ruling out the language and cultural factors as well as time that it takes would be perceived as a challenge. These were confirmed through this qualitative study. The interest in whether elementary ELL students are being over- or under-identified and correctly placed in special education through the RTI model was not confirmed through the case study. The query about teams utilizing the Standard Protocol, Problem-solving or a mixture of both methods was indirectly addressed in the study, with the fact that the schools all use a combination of the two protocols, which allows for flexibility in problem solving, interventions and other parts of the process.

A qualitative study of school districts found that district leaders often think teachers are too quick to refer ELL students for special education, while teachers see administrators as waiting too long to refer (Zehr, 2009). The critical point is the need to examine, monitor and resolve issues related to both the over- and under-identification of ELL students as learning disabled. It is recommended to have a consistent application of the pre-referral process, specific staff training on how to address the cultural and language factors, strong instruction which engages students, and assistance to teachers addressing any misconceptions about the abilities of racial/ethnic students (Brown & Doolittle, 2008).

### **Commonality and duration of the RTI procedures.**

Generally, all participants perceived that using the RTI process with ELL students is effective in identifying students with learning disabilities, especially in comparison with the previous discrepancy models, but there are parts of the overall process that could be improved. One of the most advantageous benefits is the ongoing collaboration around the needs of the individual student. During the initial implementation and consequent intervention stages the

classroom teacher, ESL teacher, reading specialist, school counselor, and any other related specialists review the assessment data and instructional strategies on a regular basis.

The regular classroom teacher takes an active role in assessing each student and monitoring the results. There are several advantages to having the classroom teacher involved with the intervention process from the beginning. The teacher generally knows each student better than a specialist or substitute. He or she is also able to teach to the strengths of the student, determining which intervention might be the most effective. It was clear from the interview responses that the second grade teachers vary in their understanding of and involvement in the entire RTI process and knowledge of additional proven interventions to use. There was a consensus among the participants that using ongoing progress monitoring is a major factor in the success of the RTI process.

Overall, the responses from the second grade teachers in this study were similar to a study conducted by Greenfield and Rinaldi (2009) that examined how teachers view the implementation process of RTI, where the following question drove the research: "After the first year of implementation, how do educators view the RTI change process?" Data were analyzed using a consensual qualitative methodology. Results indicated that teachers viewed the reform effort as positive overall. However, many teachers in the Greenfield and Rinaldi study expressed concerns about the implementation of RTI. The majority of teachers associated the following positive outcomes with the first year of reform: data informed instructional planning, progress monitoring to measure the effectiveness of the instruction, and better knowing when to refer English language learners for special education services. Teachers identified the culture of the school as "positively mixed," meaning positive shifts were taking place and teachers were working along a continuum of understanding and adoption practices. Key concerns of

implementation were also raised as implications for effective adoption of the model at the elementary school level (Greenfield & Rinaldi, 2009). All seven of the second grade teachers interviewed in my study agreed that the implementation of RTI for ELL students has been positive and cited the stronger collaboration, targeted instruction and progress monitoring as a few of the key reasons it has been effective. Although they have learned more about ELL learners, there is still a lack of confidence in knowing exactly when to initiate a referral for an ELL student that is struggling. The concern about the length of time it takes for a student referral to complete the process was a significant obstacle to the teachers interviewed.

#### **The intervention process.**

The teams in the schools chosen for this study used a process that combined the approaches of both a Standard and Problem-solving protocol, which give them a level of flexibility with the type and duration of the interventions. Fuchs and Deshler (2007) suggested using a dual response where combinations of both approaches are used. The Standard Protocol is recommended for basic academic difficulties and the Problem-Solving approach for more complex academic challenges. The Problem-Solving model makes use of systematical and methodical plans to solve problems. Schwanz and Barbour (2004) gave examples of strategies which may be used in these protocols: modifying the environment to assist students, focusing on what the child can do rather than on weaknesses, using functional assessments that can be performed by teachers, using interventions that have a high probability for success, using strategies to ensure that the interventions are implemented consistently and accurately and utilizing a systematic way of collecting data and monitoring to see if the students are responding to the interventions.

All of the teachers perceived that there are challenges when using the RTI process with ELL students. One of the main concerns was the amount of time involved in the process and in

how long it takes a student to go through the interventions and related steps. The RTI procedure for ELL students contains additional steps, which prolongs the process. In the RTI model, team decisions about intensity and duration of interventions are based on individual student responses to various interventions.

### **Effective classroom strategies.**

A consensus among the teachers in the study was that it is imperative that the most effective classroom strategies be utilized for the ELL students in the regular classroom, and that these align with the interventions the student is receiving in the process. Collaboration between teams and ongoing professional development are important to ensure that this happens. The teachers agreed that without monitoring the fidelity of classroom instruction the process will falter.

A study conducted in 2009 with data from selected schools in several cities provided a few key recommendations for effectively improving the academic achievement of ELL students. The contextual proposals included developing a clear instructional vision and high expectations for ELLs, view meeting the academic needs of these learners as a priority and an asset, and building a culture of collaboration from all stakeholders in the process of the critical work of insuring that the appropriate and best instructional practices are in place (Horowitz, 2009).

### **Professional development.**

Several of the teachers interviewed discussed the breadth of collaborative opportunities available when using RTI. The model cannot work without strong networking and interdependence on other professionals for intervention support, best practice strategies, communication with parents, and a data tracking system that ensures the team is carefully monitoring how each child is progressing in the steps of intervention and eventual discussions of possible learning disability identification. As participants in the RTI model, the district has

provided a breadth of professional development opportunities for teachers on the steps of the RTI process, best instructional strategies for ELL students, and targeted training on specific interventions and programs appropriate for at-risk students.

The teachers in this study perceive that there are opportunities present when using the RTI process for ELL students that were not there previously and the new model offers opportunities for improvement to the existing system. There was consensus that even though the process is not faultless, it is a better system for ELL students than the learning disability identification using the previous discrepancy model.

For the past year, San Diego schools have been using a clearly articulate process for ELL students in the RTI model. The teams follow a protocol that rules out every possible outside factor, including mental health, nutrition, parental involvement and the quality of instruction the student has received, in order to ensure that the potential identification is as accurate as possible. In this outlined plan, the teachers follow a more prescribed set of interventions that align with these factors, before a student can move forward to evaluation for special education identification. An intense professional development plan supported the process and allowed for teachers to be as highly qualified as possible before the detailed RTI plan for ELL students was put in place. Still in its early stages, the district leaders are confident that following these steps, along with comprehensive training, will keep teams from over identifying ELL students (Maxwell, 2012). Based on the responses from the participants of the Oregon study, the San Diego pilot could offer specific insights for improving the timeliness of the process and ensuring that all teachers have full confidence in their professional knowledge about what to bring forward in problem solving discussions.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the study was to explore and conceptualize the components of the factors which affect the efficacy of the special education identification process, which could possibly be a practical contribution to current education practice by making specific recommendations for those that are using RTI with ELL students.

There are many advantages to using RTI for learning identification in ELL students. These include increased collaboration, monitoring progress using both English and native language, ongoing targeted professional development and a focus on appropriate and effective instructional methods and strategies.

Along with the benefits are challenges in the amount of time it takes for intervention, monitoring, and the other steps that ensure that each student has had the opportunity to learn and show growth and the complexity of providing appropriate interventions and assessment for second language learners.

The cultural and language factors for ELL students need to be addressed in order for any type of accurate and valid learning disability identification to occur. Otherwise, educators are likely to get the same results from RTI that they attained in the past with the discrepancy model. The attention to both culture and language is important for understanding why these factors make a difference in students learning and why their role is critical in appropriately identifying students for intervention and for designing the RTI process in a way that is effective.

Overall, using RTI for ELL students is being implemented in a way that is valuable for ELL students and teachers, but it is necessary to have a solid and clear process that combines both standard and problem solving protocols. It is highly recommended that the process be evaluated on a regular basis to ensure continued effectiveness, teachers receive ongoing

professional development and that all team members are knowledgeable in the complete progression of steps from initiating a referral to potential identification.

### **Implications for Educational Leaders**

As a researcher, the expectation was that teachers interviewed would be more versed in the elements of the protocol and involved in the process in a deeper way. All of the participants were familiar with the basic tenets of RTI, especially with how it differs from the previous discrepancy identification process and the first part of the process where classroom teachers are directly involved. None of the teachers was able to articulate the steps in the process after the interventions were implemented and particularly when it reaches the stage of actual identification. There was a range of knowledge on the particulars of RTI and how the language and cultural factors affect the identification process.

Since using the RTI process with ELL students is a fairly new practice, it is not surprising that the data from the study indicate the complexity of identifying learning disabilities in second language learners. The goal is to make adjustments along the way so that there is evidence in place that the student has been able to respond and learn. It means that data are reviewed and used for adjusting instruction before the student lags too far behind. Another advantage is that regular and special education teachers collaborate around the data and instruction along the way, versus waiting until the student is potentially referred for services (Echevarria & Vogt, 2011).

The validity of the data shared in this study is of concern to the researcher. One query is whether the questions asked in the interviews were crafted to obtain the most comprehensive and in-depth responses. Although an open ended question was asked at the end of each interview, the amount of insight shared with this question was limited. A second question is whether the teachers selected for the interviews were the best sampling for the topic.

My interpretation of the lack of depth in the responses to the interview questions is that the teachers have only received a base level of training and information about the RTI process for ELL students. Several of the participants commented about the limitation of their knowledge and personal involvement. None of the participants used the terminology of whether the process was considered a Standard or Problem-solving model. No one mentioned any specific research information about using RTI with ELL students. Two participants did comment about the RTI handbook and its usefulness, but they were not sure if specific pieces of information were in the handbook.

The implications of this study for educational leaders are that it adds breadth to the existing research on the relatively new topic of RTI and its use for ELL students. Specifically, this could potentially lead to enhancement of the special education identification process of ELL students through the use of appropriate assessments, review of language history, interventions, primary language instruction, and/or sheltered language settings. For schools at the beginning of implementation or have been using RTI for a limited number of years, the complex issues related to identifying ELL students with learning disabilities need constant monitoring, ongoing dialogue and revisions to the process, if necessary. The results of this small study and the aligned literature could be used as a springboard for evaluation and customization of the steps in their RTI process.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As the ELL population continues to increase it is vital that both quantitative and qualitative research continues in Oregon on this topic and educators keep abreast of the new learning on this important subject. In the future it would be important to continue to monitor the teachers and teams as they go deeper into the process of identifying learning disabilities in ELL

students. The recommended topics for study would be analyzing special education data for the number of ELL students identified using the previous discrepancy model and the new RTI model, school teams that use only the Standard or Problem-solving protocol, and how involved teachers are in the process from school to school. It is apparent from the responses in my study that classroom teachers and specialists need targeted and specific professional development on using RTI with ELL students, especially about the latter steps in the identification process and how bilingual instruction effects identification. An additional topic of research would be professional development as a foundation for using RTI initially and as school teams are further into implementation.

In conclusion, the topic of RTI and its use with ELL students is significant in many diverse school districts across Oregon and the United States. The longer that student identification teams are implementing the RTI process the more we will understand the impact of the identification of ELL students with learning disabilities which will enable us to refine the RTI model.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Letter of Informed Consent

Dear Second Grade Teacher,

I am an Oregon educator working with XXXX School District as a Director of Instructional Support and am also a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. I am preparing to conduct research for my doctoral dissertation on the implications of using Response to Intervention with ELL students, in order to identify them with a learning disability. Specifically, I am trying to gain a fuller understanding the impact of using RTI with ELL students.

I am conducting interviews with eight second grade teachers from your school district, since it meets the criteria of a demographic of at least 25% ELL students, and is also using the RTI model for identifying learning disabilities in students.

The risks associated with the research are minimal. No student names, names of schools or districts will be used. The results of this study will only be used for research purposes and may be used for presentations at a professional conference and/ or academic publications.

All research materials will be filed on a secure computer server and/ or locked in separate, secure locations for up to three years. I will be the only researcher who will have access to any of the materials and after three years I will be responsible for destroying all of the data.

Thank you for taking your time to consider participating in this research study. If you choose to participate, please understand this information will benefit the body of research on this topic. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Sincerely,

**Appendix B: Interview Format/Questions**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

School Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Classroom Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

How many years teaching? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years teaching in this school? \_\_\_\_\_

**Guided interview questions:**

What are the components of using RTI with ELL students that are effective and working well?

What challenges are there in using the RTI process with ELL students?

Are there opportunities that have been offered when using the RTI process with ELL students?

How else would you improve the RTI process with ELL students?

What else can you tell about the RTI process with ELL students?