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Response to Intervention: Are We on the Right Path?

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This mixed-methods study uses a design-based approach to school improvement. At the center of the study, a focus group was utilized to explore the current response to intervention process in place specifically in the area of third-grade reading. Working through Mintrop's cycle of inquiry, this study was embedded into the professional development of the research team with key questions used to gain an understanding of the intervention process as a whole. During the process, the research team, consisting of classroom teachers and an interventionist, designed and implemented an intervention that was then evaluated at the completion of the 90-day cycle of inquiry. Overall, this study aimed to take a closer look at the intervention process, with a highlight on data literacy, and determine additional supports that may be necessary using future cycles of inquiry. The study identified three main themes as they related to response to intervention: targeted interventions, time, and trust.

KEYWORDS: cycle of inquiry, intervention, interventionist, response to intervention, targeted intervention, teachers, time, trust

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T.J.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Problem of Practice

Literacy is a key component to any student's ability to learn. No matter the academic subject, if one cannot read and comprehend, one simply cannot learn. Thus, as an elementary school principal, literacy is one of my primary concerns. One problem of practice that emerges every day in my school is the application of assessment results to ensure that all students can read by the end of third grade. Often in practice, however, educators, principals and teachers alike, do not use assessment data in ways that support improvement in reading outcomes. One common reason is the lack of a shared understanding of data use and how to apply data to the system of literacy interventions that are a part of the school's instructional program. While there is often enough data available, it is simply not applied to student support systems as it should be. Bringing educators to a common understanding of how to use assessment results and then forming data-based instructional strategies presents a set of challenges for the elementary principal.

Problems of practice are significant challenges presented to educators that require professional collaboration to address wherein resulting improvements have the potential to make a real impact on the school and student achievement (Mintrop, 2016). My elementary school is the lone primary building in a unit district that is spread across two rural communities. The building houses pre-kindergarten through third grade as well as seventh and eighth graders and serves almost 500 students each school year. Our fourth through sixth grade students attend an intermediate school which is located in the neighboring town. Among the school staff of roughly 75, there are several staff members that help deliver different levels of MTSS/RtI interventions to students throughout the day. These staff members, called interventionists, meet with groups of students daily to implement programs designed to assist with reading and math skills. It is also important to note that the interventionists are not certified staff members; they are paraprofessionals. Throughout the school year, students are intended to move in and out of instructional interventions based on assessment results often on scheduled “data days.” During these data day meetings, teachers, interventionists, as well as the building principal, the school social worker, and the school psychologist collaborate to discuss a variety of different pieces of data available to ensure that intervention placements are appropriate and serve the students as intended. Students are initially assigned to interventions based on assessment findings, but students are never intended to remain in interventions without ongoing review of data to make sure that students’ needs are being met. During the meetings, the history of the student in interventions is also discussed. However, it is important to note that frequently, the conversation shifts to discussing how long a student has been in the interventions, and the assessment data is not considered. If a student has become “stuck” in an intervention, is the intervention really serving its purpose? If the team does not notice that students are stuck in interventions that are failing, then the data review system is failing students.

Dissertations in Practice and Cycles of Inquiry

As the problem that is being looked at is specific to the students at my primary school, the use of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate framework (CPED) is the ideal way in which to study this issue. This framework helps to outline a doctorate program that is designed to bring about equitable solutions to problems of practice, prepare leaders to make differences in their communities, help leaders build partnerships within their communities, explore problems in the field to develop solutions, and utilizes both research and practical knowledge to bring about change through the inquiry process (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2021).

This CPED framework, in combination with Rick Mintrop's design development model, then becames the basis for this research project. In the initial stages of the process, the development of the theory of action, which includes the framing of the problem of practice, making the theories of action explicit, and gaining an understanding of the problem through accessing the research base, and change process, is where this project began (Mintrop, 2016). With a clear understanding of the problem of practice, a research-based intervention could then be defined which would then be implemented and data would be collected before the final step of evaluation of the intervention (Mintrop, 2016).

Throughout this cycle of inquiry process, the utilization of one of the CPED framework's program design concepts (inquiry as practice), a critical lens was used to look at and analyze the data that is collected (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2021). This data, along with the pertinent literature, would help to drive the evaluation of the current system in practice as well as look at the need for changes within the program in place.

Assessment Data Usage

Along with the test results from a variety of sources, teachers and interventionists also bring in classroom assessment data and their own opinions on the students. However, gut feelings and teacher opinions are not acceptable bases for an intervention continuation-decision (Mandinach, 2012). It has been noted that students benefit from the teaching and learning that is a result of true assessment literacy (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010). The reverse then is also true. When classroom assessment data is used in an ineffective way, educational decision making can be inappropriate and misdirected (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010). Assessment data can come in multiple forms. Teachers use both summative and formative assessment data. Summative assessments are final decisions on the success of the instruction, while formative assessments are intended for improvement as teachers and students can use the information to make adjustments in the instructional program (Popham, 2009). What is often missing are these adjustments which might include releasing a student from instructional interventions as progress is made. What we have is assessment data in various forms, qualitative and quantitative, and from various sources (i.e., the classroom andpurchased assessments like MAP and easyCBM), and all the data should be considered. Thus, assessment literacy is also an important topic to explore. Assessment literacy includes conversations about how to collect evidence, discussions on the reliability of assessments and elimination of assessment bias, as well as the determination of appropriateness of evaluating the quality and effectiveness of instruction (Popham, 2009). Although there is much to learn about assessment literacy, learning every detail is not important. What is important is that educators have a basic understanding of assessment literacy and understand the components that are likely to affect educational decisions (Popham, 2011). Thus, the main question that arises is whether the team really knows how to use the data to make informed decisions about the interventions and the students that are placed in them.

Data Literacy

While the use of data to drive instruction is the ultimate goal, the teachers must first become data literate to be able to use the data effectively (Mandinach, 2012). While there may be various types of data available, teachers must not only be aware of what is available, but they must also have an understanding as to how to best use the data to drive their instruction including how to triangulate the data and see the evidence taken together. Although professional development is often used to inform teachers about data usage, it may not be in-depth or continuous enough to allow for assessment literacy to develop. Additionally, the best way to truly generate assessment literacy is through practice in teacher preparation programs

(Mandinach & Gummer, 2016). While teacher preparation programs may be able to provide the best instruction in this matter, the interventionists and classroom teachers have all been in their positions for several years, so we must work with the situation as it stands with high quality professional development through using data in a collaborative team (Mintrop, 2016). Regardless of whether we are preparing teachers beforehand, or we are targeting this need now, there are several key functions that need to be considered and dealt with when using data to support instruction. The inputting of data needs to be functional, reports need to be accurately interpreted, classroom assessment must be enhanced, teachers need to be aided in the accessing of the data, data sources triangulated, discussions need to be had on the implications for instruction, and actions need to be taken (Young, 2006). Focusing on only one, or just some, of these functions will not suffice. To fully implement the data usage successfully and meaningfully, care must be taken in all aspects of the process. The teachers and staff must also understand the distinction between formative and summative assessment. In adding layers to what we currently do, we must take great care to best prepare our teachers and interventionists and show that the assessments we administer and the use of what we find have a direct educational impact.

Current Programming

Currently, the main program that the school uses for its main data points is easyCBM, a program developed by researchers at the University of Oregon (Alonzo, Tindal, Ulmer, & Glasgow, 2006). However, the 2021-2022 school year brought about the return of Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) at the third-grade level. MAP is a computer-based program that has both a reading and a mathematics benchmark test. The easyCBM program is also a computer-based and is used in both the core areas of math and reading for kindergarten through second grade in the district. Three times a year, all students are benchmarked using the program in areas designated for each grade level. For our third graders, MAP Growth, an assessment designed to assess students at three different points throughout the year (fall, winter, and spring), is used to benchmark all students. The assessments are designed to be given at certain weeks of the year providinga score based on their performance compared to a national average. These percentile ranks then become helpful in looking at which students are falling, on average, below their peers. Students that are in interventions then take easyCBM assessments for progress monitoring.

For this study, the area of reading will be the focus although math is also benchmarked three times each year. Reading was chosen as the area of focus due to its impact and influence on all other subjects. Using easyCBM, at the kindergarten level, students are tested in letter names and letter sounds, phoneme segmenting, and word reading fluency. First grade looks at letter sounds, phoneme segmenting, and word and passage reading fluency. Passage reading fluency continues into second and third grade along with vocabulary and multiple-choice reading comprehension. The MAP Growth benchmark assessment gives an instructional level score, a Lexile level, and it also breaks down the score into three sections: vocabulary, informational text, and literary text.

Importance of Literacy in Education

At the heart of the entire intervention program is a need for students to increase their literacy skills. Especially at the primary level, as students begin learning letters and eventually learn to read, those students that are lacking in some of the basic reading skills are bound to only fall further and further behind if their skill deficits are not addressed. “Constructing meaning from, or comprehending the meaning of, written text is the ultimate goal of all of Response to

Intervention (RTI) reading instruction programs" (Bulat et al., 2017, p.2). Simply put, RtI is a tiered system that provides increasing levels of interventions based on student need. Reading is a skill that must be explicitly taught; it cannot be learned through natural exposure like speaking (Lyon, 1998). That being said, while some children may be able to acquire some basic skills with less formal instruction, most will need explicit instruction with multiple opportunities for practice to be successful (Bulat et al., 2017). This explicit instruction comes in the form of five different components, which together, build an effective reading instruction program. From Bulat et al., those components include phonemic and phonological awareness (the ability to discriminate sounds and focus on those sounds), phonics (the representation of sounds by letters), fluency (the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and expression), vocabulary (the understanding of the meaning of words), and comprehension (the ability to understand what is read).

It has often been said that third grade literacy is an important predictor of later success in life. The inability to proficiently read has been linked to higher dropout rates which can then be linked to an individual's future earning potential and often results in teenage pregnancy or arrests (Fiester & Casey, 2010). One study which looked at almost 4,000 children born between 1979 and 1989 found that one in six students who did not read proficiently in third grade did not graduate on time (Hernandez & Casey, 2011). In a study of 26,000 Chicago Public Schools', studentswere split into groups based on their third-grade reading scores; the findings of this study showed the link between third-grade and eighth-grade reading as well as the ability of eighth-grade scores to predict success in high school (Goerge, Lesnick, & Smithgall, 2010). In one significant finding, those students reading above a third-grade level in third grade were enrolling in college at a higher rate (Goerge et al., 2010). Along with not reading at a proficient level in third grade, those students that have also lived in poverty are three times more likely to drop out of high school or fail to graduate (Hernandez & Casey, 2011).

Introduction to Response to Intervention

Using interventions, teachers and interventionists have the ability to target the skills that the learners may have deficits in. In today's classrooms, many different tools are necessary to meet the needs of the various types of learners that walk through the doors of a school building, an expectation placed on today's schools that was uncommon historically. The students come to school representing all types of learners and at all levels of learning, and supporting each of these students is a monumental task that educators must face head on each and every day. One model of problem-solving, Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) provides effective instruction through educational resources based upon student outcomes. (Riley-Tillman, Burns, & Kilgus, 2020).

Along with MTSS, another multi-tiered support that is often used for academic interventions is Response to Intervention. Response to intervention (RtI) uses a three-tiered model with increasing levels of interventions based on the needs of the students, and decisions are made in regard to resources based on the interventions (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020). For example, depending on whether the interventions go beyond academics, schools typically use the MTSS model which includes areas beyond academics, or the RtI model which is strictly academic and does not include behavioral interventions. According to Basham, Israel, Graden, Poth, and Winston (2010), 43 states and 60% of districts had RtI programs in place. As a result, our understanding of RtI is critical as practices based on the model are widespread and have considerable influence over educational practice.

The multi-tiered approach, often a three-tiered approach, closely monitors student progress and considers a multitude of differing interventions to provide support to students at differing levels (Kuo, 2015). A definition of an intervention is also key. To RtI, an intervention is whole-school initiative of individual modifications for the purpose of altering behavior (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020). One important item to note here is that there are various models, or versions, or RtI in place (Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016). However, while there may be varying models, research has identified several necessary features of RtI. These include research-based instruction in a general education setting, all students are screened on academic skills, research-based interventions are provided for students identified as low-performing, progress of students is monitored, decisions are made based on data, and referrals to special education are made if students are not responsive to the interventions provided (Preston et al., 2016). These interventions are designed to work with the students where they are at and give them support in core instruction. These interventions are not meant to be permanent placements for students.

Commonly, two models of response to intervention have emerged and schools often choose one or the other, or they may even utilize a combination of the two. The first of these models is the problem-solving model in which instruction is tailored to individual student needs including an identification and analysis of the problem, generation of an intervention, student achievement is monitored, revisions are made if necessary, interventions are assessed for effectiveness, and a new plan is made (Fuchs et al., 2010; Preston et al., 2016). In the second model, the standard treatment protocol model, a universal screener is given to all students in the school, low-achieving students are given an intensive intervention for a set amount of time and monitored, and if progress is not made, they are moved into a program of specialized instructional intervention (Preston et al., 2016). From there, if students are still not responsive to instruction, the students are then evaluated for special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs et al., 2010).

Illinois also gives guidelines as to the percentages of students that should fall within each of the categories as well as explanations of each Tier in MTSS. According to the Illinois State Board of Education (2008):

Tier 1: Core curriculum that is aligned to standards, differentiated to meet a broad range of needs, and meets the needs of 80% of the students

Tier 2: Supplemental interventions for small groups with targeted interventions to meet specific skills; addresses roughly 20% of the students

Tier 3: Very small groups of students in interventions and focused on narrowed skill areas; frequent progress monitoring; roughly 5% of a school's population.

Overall, at the heart of RtI is a need to meet the needs of all of the students. While the core curriculum is designed to meet the needs of the majority of students, some students will need additional support in the form of tiers. With the goal of the tiers being specific, targeted interventions, the tiers are not designed to be a permanent placement for students.

Response to Intervention at the Primary School

While a Response to Intervention (RtI) program of tiered interventions is in place for all grades at the primary school, the focus of this study is solely on third grade reading given its significance. In the third-grade band, the teachers and the interventionists are not making instructional decisions based on data which leads to this problem of practice. Decisions are routinely being made based around classroom formative assessments and teacher impressions. When impressions dominate, the students may remain stuck and the program of interventions cannot function as intended. When looking at the data that easyCBM provides, the team typically looks at the 35th percentile as a basis for students needing interventions. This marker was chosen by the school psychologist as the baseline several years ago when the program was first implemented in the school. In 2021, due to social distancing, and spacing requirements, the team used the 20th percentile as the marker which is the standard that the program uses as its baseline marker. Students under this mark are frequently placed in an intervention, and students are usually moved out of the program once they achieve this percentile. At the third-grade level, the instructional tiered intervention is the Read Naturally program which looks at fluency, comprehension with multiple choice and written responses, and retell with a writing component. The next level of intervention is LEXIA which is computer based and places students in different levels of differing skills based on the area that needs the most practice in the area of reading. In looking at the progress monitoring data from easyCBM, one area seems to be an area of struggle for many students. When looking at the data for second and third grade reading comprehension, most of the students are not making progress. In fact, when looking at the third-grade data alone, none of the students in the programs have made significant gains, and none are even close to exiting out based on the 35th percentile line. This factor alone helps to explain the significance of this problem. If the whole basis of the RtI program is to provide interventions to help students make gains, are we really problem-solving when students are virtually in the same place in which they started? While the current system in place provides interventions for students to work on their math and reading skills, we still have several students that have been placed in tiers for multiple years, and they are not making gains, especially in the critical area of literacy.

Proposed Research Project

The primary purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of what is preventing the current multi-tiered system that is already in place from improving third grade literacy outcomes. The proposed study considers how formative assessment evidence and data from commercially available tests and planned interventions might be the key to the failure of the interventions at third grade through the lenses of three research questions focused on the highest tier of interventions, Tier 3, characterized in length in Chapter 2. In working with the intervention team, I ask the following:

1. What factors influence the data-based decision-making process of the third-grade literacy team when planning and delivering tiered interventions, especially monitoring the progress and impacts of individualized interventions?
2. How does they cycle of inquiry support the development of individualized literacy interventions based on assessment data?
3. What does this cycle of inquiry imply about needed supports for data teams to individualize interventions?

By looking at the each of the research questions and gaining a greater understanding of the data that is available, my first framing of a theory of action prior to working with the teacher team would be to create a common understanding and language of the program amongst all users. In this theory of action, such commonality would create a more fluid system that would better serve the students in need and help to make clearer the lines between interventions and supports to special education.

My initial proposed intervention was to gather all the information and resources that we currently had available as a place to start and study them as a team (the four third grade teachers, one grade-level interventionists, and myself as the building administrator). Once the team had a grasp on what data was even available and how to apply that data both formatively and summatively, we would then be able to have conversations based around the second and third research questions. Using focused groups, and individual interviews, all members of the team would collaborate to understand each member of the team's current knowledge of the process that is in place. Once this information was obtained, we were then able to move forward with dialogue that would help outline the additional support that was needed to achieve the common goal.

Summary

In conclusion, making sure all members of the RtI team have a common understanding of the referral and intervention process is the major goal of this research project. As a small group, we will work through Mintrop's process, and we learn and understand together how to set our students up for literary success. Chapter two will work to explore the research behind the project, and chapter three will look at the methodologies that will be used throughout this dissertation in practice.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

When it comes to making decisions, having all stakeholders on the same page is paramount. When those decisions are centered around literacy in education, the stakes are magnified. As third grade reading skills have been found to be an indicator of later success that is where the focus of this research project lies.

At the primary school, there are roughly 300 students, 15 teachers, and five interventionists. Throughout the year, data meetings allow team members to move students in and out of the interventions that are provided daily. These tiered interventions are part of the Response to Intervention (RtI) initiative that made its way into schools almost two decades ago. The school currently has both Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions in both reading and mathematics available for students that are identified through the three data days that occur after each benchmark assessment.

In the seven years that I have been a building administrator in the building, the team of teachers and interventionists, the school social worker, and the school psychologist have met at several points throughout the year to look at data available to make decisions on which students would receive the interventions available. The school, up until this year, has used easyCBM to both benchmark students at three points throughout the year and progress monitor those students that are receiving interventions. Along with the easyCBM data, the team also uses classroom data which includes formative and summative assessments.

Brief History of Response to Intervention

An understanding of the history or special education, as well as a clear picture of early intervention, is key to understanding the response to intervention model. From the opening of the first public school for students with disabilities in 1817 to the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, much has changed in terms of special education in the United States.

On April 15, 1817, the American School for the Deaf opened in Hartford, Connecticut marking a huge milestone for people with disabilities and, along with the words of Governor Oliver Walcott would change the public's attitudes toward deaf people ("History & Cogswell Heritage House," n.d.). According to "History & Cogswell Heritage House" (n.d.), the Governor, in 1818, in a speech to the public, proclaimed that, ". . . in elevating the condition of a class of mankind, who have been heretofore considered as incapable of mental improvement, but who are now found to be susceptible of instruction in the various arts and sciences, and of extensive attainments in moral and religious truth." (p. 7) This was considered one of the first crucial steps toward recognizing those with disabilities. While many other institutions popped up across the United States, many court cases also addressed the issue of inequalities. In the 1919 Wisconsin Supreme Court case of Beattie v. Board of Education, the court authorized the removal of a student who had facial contortions, drooled, and had a speech impediment although he had the physical and academic ability to participate in school (Daniel, 1997). Shortly after, in 1922, the Council for Exceptional Children was founded to help ensure that children with special needs would receive a free and appropriate public education, and it is the largest organization still that works to ensure the success of children with special needs (Council for Exceptional Children, n.d.). In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson would extend the federal government's role in public education and would put federal money in the hands of public schools to address the costs of educating students at a disadvantage (Klein, 2015). A landmark Supreme Court case in 1971, Mills v. Board of Education, would further extend the right to a free and public education to all disabled students

(Daniel, 1997). In 1973, the first law was passed protecting students with special needs; Section 504 specifically states that an individual cannot be excluded from, or denied the benefits of, and program or activity that receives federal financial aid (Dobson, 2013). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 would further push this idea to include that all children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education and in the least restrictive environment (Hernandez, 2013; McGovern, 2015). EAHCA would eventually become the basis for the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1990 which would include the provision for a free, public education, an individualized education plan, and implementation of the least restrictive environment (McGovern, 2015).

Responding to the Needs

While there is no actual mention of response to intervention in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), response to intervention (RTI) or multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) are often used in conjunction with the act. This reauthorization is different from the previous version in that it does not require districts to use the IQ-achievement discrepancy to determine students with special needs, and it also allows schools to use up to 15% of their money allocated to special education for early intervention activities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). When combining this 2004 reauthorization of IDEA by President Bush with the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, RTI often serves as a consideration in both the general education and special education worlds (Sugai & Horner, 2009). While MTSS runs with a main goal of providing instruction and intervention in the most effective manner through the allotment of resources, it is typically used in a three-tier format with increasing levels of interventions based on student needs (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020). An RTI model is often used to help identify the students who need the most significant levels of support and can serve as a transition to eligibility into special education (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020).

Ultimately, Tier 1 is a more generalized curriculum that is going to meet the majority of the students' needs. Essentially, looking at whether a child is progressing at a normal rate or not is enough to determine the effectiveness of Tier 1 for a particular student (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020). Tier 1 also includes a universal screener that is administered three times a year, which in the case of this school, is easyCBM for kindergarten through second grade, and NWEA MAP Growth for third grade. The universal screener is given to all students and serves as a baseline to help determine students that need additional supports. Interventions at both the Tier 2 and Tier 3 levels can be used to explicitly teach one of the foundational skills that a student is struggling to master when a student is not successful (appropriately making gains) in the previous Tier. By spending extra time on the coreabilities, learners can gain the necessary skillsto get the full literacy picture. So while the practice of learning to read begins well before students enter school, it is the job of educators to make sure that while they are in school, they continue to learn the skills and acquire the strategies that make them successful readers.

Throughout the RTI framework, resource-allocation decisions are made as students transition into Tier 2 interventions, and then potentially into Tier 3 interventions (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020). Ultimately, the goal of both MTSS and RTI is to identify interventions that make a child successful. However, when the child needs resources that are beyond the scope of the general education allotment, a transition to special education is necessary.

A Closer Look at the Three Tiers

The traditional RtI model is one of the top-three educational practices that has been shown to increase student achievement assuming there is a highly effective core curriculum in place to begin with (Buffum, Mattos, & Malone, 2018). That core curriculum is one that must be available to all students and is where the discussion on the RtI pyramid begins. The purpose of Tier 1 is to provide all students within the school building access to the core curriculum. Sometimes called the primary or universal Tier (Brown-Chidsey, Bronaugh, & McGraw, 2009), this Tier is fundamental in that we must give all of our students access to the grade-level standards that are vital to a student's success in school (Buffum et al., 2018).

However, there are students that have not yet mastered the essential standards for their respective grade levels. These students are then referred to a Tier 2 intervention. At this level, the interventions should be specifically targeted to the deficit of the students. Tier 2 does not function on its own. Classroom teachers should be highly involved in the process as the outcomes from the interventions will have direct results on the students' classroom performances. With most students, the combination of the core curriculum in Tier 2, and the targeted interventions of Tier 2, most students should be successful in the classroom.

Students who still need extensive remediation at this point should be referred into a Tier 3 intervention. One of the most important features of Tier 3 is that students should also still be receiving Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction as the goal of RtI is multi-tiered supports (Buffum et al., 2018). As with the jump from Tier 1 to Tier 2, the shift to Tier 3 brings a shift in intensity. This intensity increases with each Tier in the areas of time, format, assessment, and grouping (Brown-Chidsey, Bronaugh, & McGraw, 2009).

For reading specifically, Brown-Chidsey, Bronaugh, and McGraw suggest appropriate measures for each Tier in the areas of grouping, time, assessment, and format. Tier 1 includes all students for 90 minutes a day in both small groups and a whole group setting. The material is adapted from the core curriculum to meet the needs of the students and address grade-level standards. At this level, all students are monitored quarterly three times a year. At the Tier 2 level, small groups are monitored once per week or twice a month with an intervention that typically lasts for 30 minutes and occurs two to three times a week. The intervention itself is targeted toward each student's specific area of need. Within Tier 3, students that are well below grade level meet five days a week for 30 minutes a day with a small group of two to three students. The students are then monitored once a week while receiving an intense, targeted intervention (2009).

Another key aspect of Tier 3 instruction is diagnostic teaching. At the Tier 3 level, studentsneedintensive support, and diagnostic teaching, while time consuming, allows the teacher to both target specific skills and track data on the student's progress (Brown-Chidsey, Bronaugh, & McGraw, 2009; Hall, 2018). Many schools use a universal screener to group students and then expect success. This may be due to a lack of knowledge of the types of assessments and a lack of knowledge as to how to evaluate and use data to promote student growth (Hall, 2018).

Tier 3 Essentials

By the time a student reaches Tier 3, ensuring that the intervention matches the needs of the student is key. With that, there are eight keys to an effective intervention at the Tier 3 level. Focusing on a targeted skill, teaching that skill in sequence (which is determined by the diagnostic testing), explicitly and systematically instructing, using multisensory techniques, giving ample feedback, minimizing teacher talk, and utilizing instructional routines are all tools to help provide the best intervention to support student growth (Hall, 2018). Buffum, Mattos, and Malone suggest a site intervention team to help both design and implement the Tier 3 interventions (2018). This team is critical in that, by this point, a student in a Tier 3 intervention has likely been in front of trained teachers for years, and alternative ways in which to reach the student need to be explored. The team needs to assume that what is tried first will likely not work perfectly as the students have possibly been failing for years and have complex problems (Buffum et al., 2018). Finally, the teams need to have a clear understanding and belief that not every student in a Tier 3 intervention needs the support of special education and that with the use of a clear, targeted intervention, the student can be successful (Buffum et al., 2018).

Response to Intervention at the Primary School

According to the Illinois State Board of Education, the Illinois model is a three-tiered system that addresses student needs in both academics and behavior (2008). This same model, as presented by the State of Illinois, is what is presented in the primary school's handbook as well. Currently, through teacher recommendation and data from easyCBM, primary students are discussed one by one and placed into what the team feels is an appropriate Tier. (See Figure 2) Students that are placed in Tier 2 reading in second grade become a part of a Journeys intervention. Journeys is the current reading series being used at the primary level and is a part of the 2017 Houghton Mifflin Harcourt curriculum series. This intervention uses a supplemental program provided by the reading series that the district uses. In the intervention, phonics, comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, writing, and grammar are all addressed along with reteaching what was taught in the classroom. Tier 3 in second grade utilizes Read Naturally which focuses on fluency, comprehension questions with multiple choice and written response, retell, writing, and vocabulary. The current version of Read Naturally that is being used is from 2006 and is a paper-based version put out by Read Naturally, Inc.In third grade, Tier 2 also uses the Read Naturally program while Tier 3 uses Lexia, a computer-based program that places students at the level of skills where they require more practice. It includes letter naming, phonics, and comprehension activities.

Throughout these interventions, students are monitored daily and progress monitored weekly or bi-weekly. If students make significant progress, or there is a classroom need that has come about (likely a move in), students are added or deleted from interventions as needed. Other than that, students are moved in or out at one of the three yearly data days (fall, winter, and spring).

Cycles of Inquiry – Based on Mintrop

In a design-based school improvement model, a cycle of inquiry can be utilized to help facilitate collaboration and address problems within the school. With a problem of practice being a problem in which a local remedy can be executed to solve the problem, the issue with the current RtI system at my primary school fits well into this category and can be explored using Rick Mintrop's cycle of inquiry which can be broken down into two major components. The first is the development of the theory of action followed by the second main component which is the implementation and revision of the theory of action. This cycle can be broken down even further into six areas: identifying of the problem of practice, making theories of action explicit, understanding the problem and change process, designing the intervention, implementing the intervention and collecting data, and evaluating the intervention (Mintrop, 2016). This in turn results in a revision to the theory of action to be applied and evaluated in a new cycle of inquiry. This model responds to the features of the best professional development (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The original cycle of inquiry would be discussed with the team as the group began its work to help set the outline for the meetings. Upon conclusion of the original cycle of inquiry, a recommendation would then be made as to an additional cycle of inquiry to continue the research process.

Theory of Action in Context of Dissertation in Practice

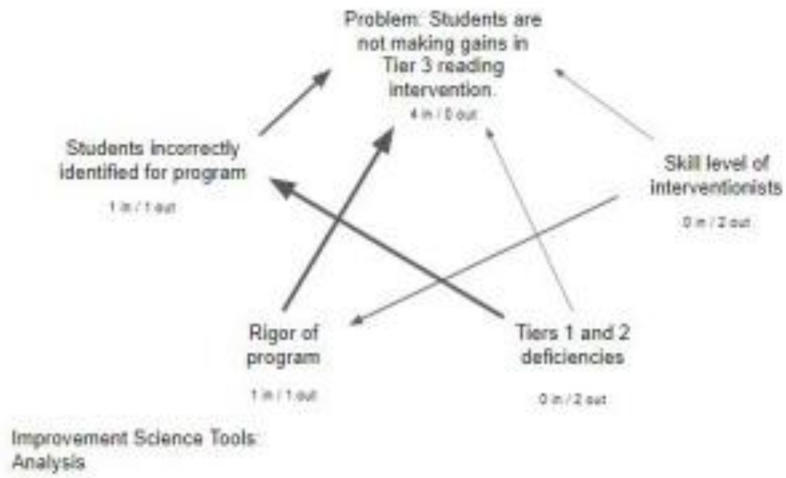
The use of the theory in action model is one that is well suited for the purpose of this project. This model, as designed by Mintrop, will help to lay out the collaborative research process that is followed, as well as provide the cyclical nature that is necessary to identify the problem and create the changes that are necessary within the response to intervention system that is in place at the primary level.

The root of this study, and the beginning of the theory of action process, is to first work to identify the problem of practice. The problem of practice is something that needs to be remedied and is focused on at a local level (Mintrop, 2016).

The current problemaddresses many of the aspects of Mintrop’s questions used to identify the problem of practice. These questions include asking about the urgent problems in the organization, looking at the capacity limitations of the organization, analyzing overall goals, and looking at the current practices as indicators of the problem. The first of these questions led me to a closer look at the current response to intervention program. As a member of the data team, continually looking at data from the interventions, a red flag was raised specifically in third grade reading. This issue was also identified using a root cause analysis, or method in which to get to the heart of the problem, as an example of an Improvement Science tool used as a research method to explore a problem and elevate its causes. Some basic characteristics of this model include a problem that is identifiable, it is something that can be fixed, and the members must be on board (Crow, Hinnant-Crawford, & Spaulding, 2019). Figure 1 illustrates my initial attempt to explore the problem of practice and determine possible root causes.

Figure 1

Improvement Science Tools – Analysis of a Problem of Practice in Third-Grade Literacy



Note: This figure shows the initial root causes that came about in regard to the overall problem of practice.

In my initial analysis, the skill level of the interventionists, deficiencies in Tiers 1 and 2, rigor of programming, and incorrectly identified students all led me to the main problem of students not making necessary gain within the Tier 3 reading intervention program. The team would then repeat this process early on in the research process as well.

The use of this root cause analysis along with the guidelines set forth by Mintrop, led me to the core issue that is at the heart of this CPED dissertation. Our students that are in Tier 3 reading intervention in third grade are not making the necessary gains. Following Mintrop's cycle, once the problem has been identified and well understood by the team, the process of designing an intervention, implementing the intervention and collecting data, and then finally evaluating the intervention can begin. While this was the original process that I used to determine this topic, this process would also be used with the research team to identify the root causes of the issue and would lead to conversation amongst the group as to how the members of the team understood and interpreted the information.

Assessment Literacy and Formative Assessment

Assessment literacy is an area in which many teachers and interventionists seem to be less familiar. Although many teacher education programs have changed over the past several years, the topic of educational assessment was not a requirement for many years (Popham, 2009). Assessment literacy has become an increasingly important aspect to education today. Having a basic understanding of assessment is key to being able to use the data and information in a way that is beneficial (Popham, 2011). Assessment literacy can be defined as understanding and utilizing appropriate assessment practices to help improve teaching and thus benefit student learning (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010).

In general, summative assessments are used to make final decisions about the success of the instructional program whereas formative assessments are more focused on using information to make adjustments and improve the instruction to meet the goals (Popham, 2009). Without a proper understanding of how to use the formative assessment data, the whole purpose of those assessments may be missed. If teachers cannot utilize the data from the formative assessments, they may be missing the mark on making the adjustments necessary before the summative assessments. It can be estimated that between 30% and 50% of teachers' time is used on assessments, and thus ensuring that teachers are accurately drawing inferences from the information can lead to better educational decision making (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010). Thus without assessment literacy, the assessment results may not actually be useful, and the time that teachers are spending on assessments may be wasted time. Professional development in this area and continuing to work with teachers and interventionists in regards to assessment literacy could prove to be beneficial to the overall process.

Summary

Chapter two explored the history of RtI as well as what the current process looks like at the primary level. Mintrop's cycle of inquiry and the dissertation in practice process was also discussed. Along with this, assessment literacy and formative assessments were also tied into this research project. As assessment literacy is a major piece of the puzzle, continuing to work in this area could also prove beneficial. Chapter three will look at the methodologies that will be used to put this project into action.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In a 90-day cycle of inquiry, I tested the effect of using a shared vocabulary and having a common understanding of data use on RtI staff working on third-grade literacy interventions. This practice-based scholarship explored the current perceptions of the team and worked through the 2016 eight-step Mintrop cycle of inquiry model, further developing and framing a shared understanding of a problem of practice through the use of a book study. The book study was chosen by the group as a tool in which to explore current research on best practices and compare them to the current practices that we have in place. This process helped to identify the supports that were needed to help create a common language for use within the Response to Intervention (RtI) process to support third grade literacy interventions that accurately reflect student learning and allow for discriminating assessments of learning.

This chapter provides an outline of the methodology I used in this study. It includes the research design, information on participant selection, ethical considerations, data collection procedures, and the procedures for analysis.

Research Design

This dissertation in practice used the design work of Rick Mintrop as outlined in the 2016 book titled *Design-Based School Improvement: A Practical Guide for Education Leaders*. The initial stages of this process, the framing of a problem of practice, and the development of the theory of action in three stages, were accomplished in the initial meetings with the research team in the fall of 2022. Through a series of meetings with the team, the initial step, defining and framing the problem of practice, was addressed. A root cause analysis was used initially to identify the areas of concern and the main problem to be addressed.

This research project followed an action research methodology based around the following three research questions.

1. What factors influence the data-based decision-making process of the third-grade literacy team when planning and delivering tiered interventions, especially monitoring the progress and impacts of individualized interventions?
2. How does the cycle of inquiry support the development of individualized literacy interventions based on assessment data?
3. What does this cycle of inquiry imply about needed supports for data teams to individualize interventions?

Within the first initial meeting, a series of questions drove the conversation and served as the basis for the development of the theory of action. The questions asked of the team were:

1. Why does third grade literacy matter?
2. What is the problem with the third grade reading RtI program as it currently stands?
3. What information do we currently use to make our decisions?
4. What data do we currently have available to us?

In the second meeting, the team then discussed the next step which was to make our intuitive theories of action explicit. As a group, our second meeting then focused on what we needed to do. As we were able to discuss each of our intuitive theories, we focused our discussion on what each member of the team believed we needed to do. Only as we made our intuitions explicit were we able to best understand the problem at hand. As we moved forward in our meetings, we also had to work on a true understanding of the change process. The focus in this section was centered on what assets were available to address our problem, what we needed to learn and unlearn, and what the main drivers were that fostered this learning (Mintrop, 2016).

Finally, before we could officially begin the 90-day cycle of inquiry in the fall of 2022, the research team needed to choose an intervention with which we would focus the discussions about how the team ultimately came to understand the theory of action, possibly rooted in my original perceptions about the need to be on the same page with a shared language and approaches to data use to enhance student learning through literacy intervention. The group chose to use a book study to work through this process.

To help explore the team's tacit assumptions about third grade literacy and our shared use of assessment evidence in RtI and to develop an initial theory of action, the team participated in meetings much like the focus group conversations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design-based approach to school improvement required mixed research methods based on the data we already had and after we assessed any data needs the team identified. To best help me understand the true nature of the design-based improvement process, the action research team committed to completing the testing of an intervention based on a theory of action generated by the team, the participants were engaged in the work, and the process was an organic sampling of the work they complete as a part of regular school improvement work. Throughout the cycle of inquiry, data was collected in many different forms. The main form of data collection included focus groups. As the minutes of the focus groups were transcribed, individual follow up interviews were utilized as necessary.

Frequently used in educational studies, action research has many benefits which suited this study. First and foremost, action research is rooted in the idea that research is not conducted on one another, but it is conducted with one another (Jacobs, 2016). This concept often involves cycles of observation and reflection, and it often uses interviews or observations to transfer into an additional phase with action becoming a central feature through the planning, implementation, and evaluation of an intervention (Glesne, 2016). This process has the potential to bring about change as the researcher, and the participants, are stakeholders in the game and can allow for schools to be centers for change (Glesne, 2016; Jacobs, 2016).

Focus groups have been a popular method for gaining information and were primarily used in market research until the 1980s (Glesne, 2016). In more recent times, focus groups have been used for action and evaluation research as they can be a forum in which multiple participants can offer up multiple different perspectives. More importantly, focus groups can be utilized when the participants are familiar with the research site as they can help the researcher to understand the current processes and contribute to the overall growth and knowledge development (Glesne, 2016). As such, the focus group model was used in the cycle of inquiry throughout many stages. The group was not only a part of the originaldevelopment of the theory of action, but the group was also used to design, implement, and evaluate an intervention.

Among the assessment data that was discussed was information that had been collected through easyCBM testing, MAP testing, district assessments, and teacher-created classroom assessments. Data collected through both easyCBM and MAP included benchmarking data in the area of reading. Specifically, easyCBM tracks reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. MAP benchmarking breaks down reading skills into the areas of vocabulary, literary text, and informational texts. District assessments include assessments that were centered around the Journeys curriculum, a Houghton Mifflin Harcourt program, that all first through third grade teachers use. Teacher-created assessments include other assessments that have been made over the past several years by the teachers for their classrooms.

Participant Selection

This Dissertation in Practice (DiP) convened a team to develop and then test a theory of action that was collaborative in its design and implementation. This year there were four third grade teachers for the 2022-2023 school year along with one interventionist.

For the purpose of this DiP, each of the third-grade teachers and the third-grade interventionist along with myself as the building principal served as the research team. The use of purposefully selecting individuals helped to target the individuals that I believed could give me the best insight into the problem and thus start to identify solutions as we move forward (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). They are the individuals in the building that were best tied to the problem of practice and need to work in a collaborative manner to help create and implement a solution to the problem. These are the individuals that are currently selecting students for interventions as well as the ones implementing Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 interventions, so their shared understanding of literacy language and data use to enhance learning outcomes matters to third grade literacy achievement.

Each of these participants was chosen as they all are a valuable piece to the puzzle. Information on each of the participants can be found in Table 1. The members of the team represent a range of experience and preparation.

Table 1

Focus Group Participant Information

Participant Position	Gender	Years of Experience	Highest Educational Level
Teacher 1	Female	21 years	Masters - Curriculum
Teacher 2	Female	20 years	Masters - Reading
Teacher 3	Female	15 years	Bachelors
Teacher 4	Female	8 years	Masters - Reading
Interventionist	Female	22 years	Associates

Throughout the course of the day, this team has the most interaction with the third-grade students, although these meetings are among the few interactions they typically have with each other. They would also be the team that would implement any ideas or changes that came about because of this project.

Ethical Considerations

Starting in the 1970s, the federal government mandated the establishment of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) which works to review the protection and ethical treatment of research participants (Glesne, 2016). Prior to data collection, permission for this project was granted by the school district, and the IRB was obtained. All participants were given information about the study as well as an opportunity to sign the letter of consent from the IRB.

Throughout the entirety of this research project, the ethical principles utilized were based around the 1979 Belmont Report. This report established the three basic principles involved with human research: respect, beneficence, and justice (Glesne, 2016). Respect for the subject ensures that they were participating voluntarily, and that consent would be protected, beneficence refers to the principle of doing no harm, and justice ensures everyone involved will share in the benefits of the outcomes of the research (Glesne, 2016).

This research project was embedded into the professional development of the research team. As the district works to improve the whole of the RtI process, this group was conceptualized as a focus group working with key questions of interest to understand and improve the intervention process as a whole.

As an action research project, this project is one that can bring about meaningful changes for teachers in their classrooms. However, action research projects come with their own set of ethical considerations. Any potential issues that arose within the project were addressed in the IRB and approved.

Data Collection

Based on the intervention chosen by the research team, this study was framed around a 90-day cycle of inquiry. Throughout the 90 days, there was an in-depth look at the intervention through interviews with both the whole team and individual interviews conducted when necessary to follow up with comments made during the whole group sessions. Discussions were based around new understandings and new perceptions based on the information learned throughout the process as the intervention was implemented. The entire cycle was meant to be as collaborative as possible. Meetings were centered around the information that was currently available, each member of the team's understandings of the process, the data available, and areas in which there was a need for more information for a greater level of understanding.

With the cycle running from mid-August through mid-December, this time frame allowed for several meetings with each of the members of the team as well as time for a complete analysis of the data available.

Identifying the Problem of Practice

The research project, based around the idea of improvement science, helped the team to learn more about their practice and explore some realities that may have been hidden under the surface (Hannan, Russell, Takahashi, & Park, 2015). To start with, once the problem with the third-grade reading RtI program was recognized, a root cause analysis was then utilized to understand the reasonings behind the why of failure in the ability of the intervention to show student growth. Using this format helped to create a more cohesive process that was created with the buy-in of staff members necessary to help carry out a process that will move the team forward.

Making Theories of Action Explicit

To begin the study, the team started with four baseline questions to help see where everyone started in the process. This initial piece started the process of the development of the theory of action in which the problem of practice was defined and framed. However, it was important to being with current levels of understanding and the predictions of the group as to how to best address the issues at hand.

Understanding the Problem and Change Process

As the first meeting ended, I saw the need to work through some of the material and get the group to focus on what they believed to be the main causes of the problem at hand, so during the second meeting, the group worked to create an interrelationship diagram. An interrelationship diagram can be used when a problem is not necessarily linear in nature and can showcase relationships between contributing factors (Crow et al., 2019). This diagram was used to determine the issues at hand and look at how they were related to one another. Using this diagram, the group then worked to determine which of the causes was at the forefront. Arrows were drawn between the factors with darkened arrows where the relationship was the most intense. After determining the main cause of the issue to be the gap that students were already entering third grade with, the group then looked at the data that was available to them.

Designing the Intervention

This entire process is consistent with work on improvement science as referenced in *The Educational Leader's Guide to Improvement Science: Data, Design, and Cases for Reflection* (2019) by Robert Crow, Brandi Nicole Hinnant-Crawford, and Dean T. Spaulding. With a better understanding of the problem and the change process, the group was ready for the intervention phase of Mintrop's cycle. At this time, the group then chose a book to use as a method in which to continue the conversation on best practices with data collection and RtI practices. The group chose *Taking Action: A Handbook for RtI at Work* (2018) by Austin Buffum, Mike Mattos, and Janet Malone.

Implementing the Intervention and Collection of Data

As the group continued to meet for the next seven weeks, the group implemented the intervention through planned weekly readings. Each week, the group would then meet to talk about the pages read. Before jumping directly into the Tier 3 information, the group read sections on Tier 1 including information on essential actions in general and Tier 1 essentials for teacher teams. The group then moved into the more targeted Tier 3 information looking at both schoolwide and intervention team essential actions.

Evaluating the Intervention

At the conclusion of the book study, the group then circled back to the original four discussion questions to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Those answers were then able to be looked at and compared to the answers from the same four questions from the first week of the cycle.

The work of this project took place over one 90-day cycle of inquiry. A timeline of the meetings can be found in Appendix A. A timeline of the meetings structured around Mintrop's cycle of inquiry can be found in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

Throughout the process, each of the meetings with the research team was voice-recorded. After each meeting, the recording then needed to be transcribed. The first meeting utilized four introductory questions to serve as a baseline. Meetings two, three, and four then looked to give a true understanding of the problem and the change progress. The intervention was chosen in the fifth meeting, and the following seven meetings worked to implement the intervention and collect data. Finally, the last meeting was designed to evaluate the intervention as a group. Once all data had been collected, it was organized, read, and coded per the steps as outlined in Creswell and Creswell (2018). Once the information had been coded, using inductive coding, and themes emerged, the analysis of data in this dissertation in practice focused on thematic analysis. With thematic analysis, the researcher could then look at the themes or patterns that emerged from the coded data, shared below in Chapter Four (Glesne, 2016). One question that arose was the amount of data in which to code. As the team met weekly for thirty-minute sessions, there was a lot of data to be coded. However, Saldaña (2021) recommended only coding the most pertinent data. As the project progressed, the material was coded, using initial coding, after each weekly session so that the data could be compiled throughout the 90-day cycle.

While some may see coding, or chunking data, as simply naming information, coding is a form of analysis of the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Coding can be used to help the researcher categorize information so that it can be quickly found and used to help draw conclusions, in this case around the team's exploration of literacy data for the team and book study intervention (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). A mixture of coding techniques was used. In Vivo coding was used to identify and pull out key words and phrases that showcased the participants's own language. Along with this, values coding was also used in combination to show the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the participants (Saldaña, 2021). This method was used as I worked through the transcripts to really get at the heart of what the participants were thinking as I worked toward exploring our theory of action through the book study intervention to determine how to more forward based on what we studied together.

Once the initial cycle of coding concluded, a second cycle of coding began in which the previously coded information could then be grouped into categories. This pattern coding was important in that it condensed the large amount of data, started the analysis process, and helped to create the cognitive map that was used to understand the process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). It was this pattern coding that helped bring the themes present from the action research to the forefront.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an important component to any research. As school – and improvement –based action research, participants' views and findings must be portrayed accurately, not only to be able to trust the findings but to ensure that future cycles of inquiry can be built on the initial work the team did. This is one of the components in planning action research, and it must be considered as plans are made and the research is carried out (Glesne, 2016). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), there are multiple ways to increase trustworthiness that include triangulation, member checking, the use of rich descriptions, clarification of bias, spending a prolonged amount of time in the situation, and peer debriefing.

In this dissertation in practice, member checking was one of the main modes in which validity was ensured. As a focus group was the main methods of data collection, having follow up questions allowed the researcher to ensure that the findings were an accurate representation of what the participant intended (Creswell & Creswell, 2016). Thus, clarifying responses throughout the focus group sessions served as the main means of member checking as well. As the current administrator in the building, I spent quite a bit of time with the team sharing the work on the project. Thus, the amount of time in this area that I have currently spent, in addition to the time during this study, also allowed for trustworthiness to be established.

Positionality Statement

As a researcher, it is important to consider one's positionality in relation to the project. Positionality is a term that is used to help the reader understand where the researcher is coming from, and it can influence the research project (Holmes, 2020). Understanding positionality allows the researcher to consider how their personal experiences affect the entire research process and how I can guard against bias. It is also important to note that one's positionality can change over time as well (Holmes, 2020).

Over the course of my last 17 years in education, much has changed. While I started out as a high school social science teacher, I transitioned to become a junior high social science teacher, a junior high reading and English teacher, an athletic director, and now a principal in a building that houses both primary and junior high students. As a junior high reading and English teacher, I would often be in meetings we called “data days” where we would discuss our students and determine which students needed interventions. Those interventions were then led by me at the end of each day. We looked at classroom scores and benchmark scores, but that was it. I would try to find materials for my students to bridge the gaps in their understandings to help them find success. This was a process we did for years.

It was not until becoming the building principal that I got to see the process at both the primary level and the junior high level. As it turns out, the process looked similar. Both classroom scores and testing scores were used to determine placements within interventions, and the process did not seem to be effective. The one main difference in the processes was the utilization of interventionists, or paraprofessionals that carry out the interventions, at the primary level. Students that were selected for the interventions would be pulled from the classroom daily to work with an interventionist using a pre-made curriculum that was intended to build the students’ skills. On the surface, this seemed like a great plan.

However, as I began to look closer, there were a few red flags that jumped out at me. I have never been afraid of change, and I have found that maybe our process needs some adjustments. Continually, I would sit in meetings, and we would talk about the differing needs of the students. Is it a fluency problem? Is it a comprehension problem? It didn’t seem to matter. All students were being thrown into the same intervention. This approach, however, can cause several different problems. First off, one of my goals is to keep the students in the general education classroom as much as possible. If a student is leaving the classroom for an intervention that is not targeted to the skill deficit, he or she is leaving unnecessarily.

One of my biggest peeves is continually trying the same thing and expecting different results each time. As the leader of the building, I cannot sit back and watch it happen. That has never been who I am as a person. What I am not interested in is having students continually placed in programs that are not benefitting their individual needs. This is what led to this project in the first place. If we want to see our students be as successful as they can be, we must make a change. For that to happen, we need to have a clearer understanding of the RtI process, acknowledge the data sources we have available, and make adjustments to the both the interventions and the process in which we place students into Tiers.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodology for this dissertation in practice. This action research project used a focus group which included four grade level teachers, an interventionist, and myself, to work through Mintrop's cycle of design-based improvement. The collaborative nature of this work allowed for the group to work from the defining and framing of the problem of practice through the implementation of a book study as an intervention. During the 90-day cycle, information obtained through the focus group was then coded which led to the presentation of the themes that arose from the action research. Chapter IV will then look at those themes with a tie into the methodology described within this chapter.

CHAPTER IV: THEMATIC FINDINGS

Introduction

Chapter IV looks at the shared understandings of the research team and the themes that emerged throughout the cycle of inquiry through the intervention process. The intervention in which the team participated, the book study, is where the themes emerged. During the seven weeks of the intervention, data was collected through the conversations that were recorded and transcribed. The chapter identifies the themes that were a result of the intervention and ties in direct quotes from members of the research team to help build the foundation for each theme. Each of the themes, time, trust, and targeted interventions, along with the shared understandings, would then be used to support the answering of the three research questions.

1. What factors influence the data-based decision-making process of the third-grade literacy team when planning and delivering tiered interventions, especially monitoring the progress and impacts of individualized interventions?
2. How does they cycle of inquiry support the development of individualized literacy interventions based on assessment data?
3. What does this cycle of inquiry imply about needed supports for data teams to individualize interventions?

Each of the meetings for this cycle of inquiry took place at the school building in which I am the principal. Selecting the members of the research team, as the problem of practice was centered around the Response to Intervention (RtI) process as it pertains to third grade reading, it only made sense to include each of the third-grade teachers as well as the interventionist that serves the third grade Tier 3 students. For the course of the cycle, the team would meet each week pending the attendance of each of the members of the team. I did not conduct any of the meetings without every member being present. Meetings were conducted starting in mid-September and concluded in mid-December (see Appendix A). The first four meetings were all designed to see what each participant currently thought about the RtI process and gain some insight into their thoughts on data. From these initial meetings, one major theme emerged. Starting in week five, the research group started a book study with the text, *Taking Action: A Handbook for RtI at Work* (Buffum, Mattos, & Malone, 2018). The text that was chosen by the group was one of several books. To start off, the book gives a general overview of the RtI process and includes a representation of the RtI pyramid. Within the book, there are sections on each of the Tiers regarding essential actions at both the school and teacher team level. Throughout the book, there are also several different forms that can be utilized to help organize the RtI process. The conversations in weeks five through twelve would all be centered around the text with three major themes emerging from those conversations. The final week, week 13, was the culmination of the cycle in which the original four questions that kicked off the cycle were revisited. As the research project began, along with information coming to the forefront about system incoherence, there were three themes that emerged and held true throughout the nine weeks. Those themes were centered around time, trust, and targeted interventions

Shared Understandings

"There is no evidence that having teachers work in isolation is an effective way to enhance student or teacher success" (Buffum et al., 2018, p.59).

From the first four introductory meetings, I was able to get a picture of their initial thoughts and shared understandings on the RtI process. What because clear was that they did not have a shared understanding of the data process. While the first meeting was about some basic questions to see where the participants started, it was valuable in that I was able to get a picture of what each person believed to be true about our current RtI system and how data could be used. Early in the first meeting, Teacher 1, referring to the easyCBM probes, asked,

> *Do you remember when we switched to reading a passage with questions that you really didn't have to read the passage, well, short one passage, and then really simple like two very obvious yeses, and then if they guessed they could still get a very decent score that week?*

This comment was one that resonated throughout much of the initial meetings. Even though we have used easyCBM for multiple years as our tool to progress monitor our students, there is still a lack of understanding on the part of the teachers. Each of the teachers made comments about the interventions that were being used, but each, at some point in time, questioned what the intervention was really doing. The group of teachers valued the interventions, but they did not fully address the skill needing to be addressed. It was as though they understood that their students had skill deficits, and we had an intervention in place, but what was actually happening in the intervention was unknown. At several points in the first few meetings, the interventionist had to step in to clarify and/or explain what she believed was happening during the intervention time. She had to clarify what the program was and what skills were being targeted. Teacher 3 went on to say,

> *I didn't realize that easyCBM focused on more than fluency . . . I understood that we tested it, but I didn't understand that if there was a low vocabulary score that there was an intervention based on vocabulary.*

Clearly a misconception as we do not have a targeted vocabulary intervention. This was particularly concerning as it meant I had at least one teacher was referring kids to an intervention with a major misconception about that intervention. One of the main interventions that is used, especially at the Tier 3 level, is Lexia. Lexia is an online intervention program that, upon completion of a placement test, provides students with differing literacy skill practice based on individual student need. However, even that intervention was called into question as Teacher 2 explained,

> *But even if you miss problems, you can still kind of get around it, and if you miss so many problems, it reteaches. Even if you haven't 100% mastered the skill, you can get on to the next level. It's really good for practice, but I'm not really sure if they are mastering the skills. It's phonics based, but we teach phonics very differently in the classroom, so I'm not sure if they are really connecting to each other.*

This can also be seen when looking at the data from student usage. For some students, they may need multiple attempts to pass a level, but is this really helping to reach the skill deficit? The program is also teaching our students in a different manner, so the teachers are also not seeing the translation into the classroom. So while this program is being used, usually for Tier 3 students with decoding or fluency issues, this program also has its flaws. We are placing all our Tier 3 students into the program regardless of deficit area, and it is not matching what we are expecting in the classrooms. This same teacher continued to talk about another method that she uses with her Tier 3 students. Again, this is a strategy that Teacher 2 uses with all her Tier kids and is not necessarily tied to a specific deficit. There was also no discussion of the data behind this method either.

I do a lot of sight words with my Tier 3 kids and also like fluency sentences. I don't really do it as an assessment but when I have such a low reader that they struggle with those skills that I just know that they need to stay in Tier three.

This comment came on the heels of each of the others in the group talking about general fluency issues that are seen amongst the third-grade students on classroom-based assessments. While there is not necessarily a link to the passage reading fluency scores on the easyCBM test, this teacher has her own intervention for her students that she thinks need assistance. In this "intervention" students are given groups of sentences that they are to read daily to work on their fluency skills. There is no score on these, and these students are not identified based on the easyCBM benchmarks. They are only chosen based on classroom performance.

Much of the data that was being used to determine Tiers was based on classroom performance. Teacher 1 commented,

I'm looking at more in class assessments to see if they are improving.

While this may be beneficial to have this information if we were to look at the scores across the grade level as a whole, looking at individual students only tells us a small snapshot of the whole picture. And in relation to the use of the benchmarking data from easyCBM, Teacher 4 finished up with,

It's all just kind of kept in the back of our minds unless it's something significant.

Again, the conversation shifted back to the interventions themselves. Questions arose such as, is that the Lexia program? Is that Tier 2? It became clear quickly that there was a disconnect, and a lack of a common understanding, between what "data" we were using and what interventions were being utilized.

One of the assessments that was added this year, at the request of the teachers, was the NWEA MAP benchmarking for all third-grade students. However, when questioned about looking at the breakdown of the scores, none of the teachers reported that they looked at the breakdowns. In one example, Teacher 4 commented,

> *. . . as far as comprehension strategies go, it's not a good judge of what they can do at their level.*

Several of the teachers felt as though the content on the test was too difficult for students, and many students were not getting an accurate score because the lack of fluency for many students was getting in the way of the students being able to comprehend the passages. This assessment was called into question even farther as Teacher 4 continued to say,

> *Everything on MAP is independent, so when you asked us to talk about comprehension strategies, we continue to talk about fluency strategies, fluency things that they were lacking. I don't think for the most part Tier 3 is not even at the point where we're worrying about comprehension. I mean they're still getting comprehension instruction in Tier one but the focus is on the fluency*.

In essence, the teachers voiced concerns that until the fluency issues are addressed, they will continue to see struggles with comprehension in the classrooms. Doubt about the reliability of the scores on the easyCBM passages were addressed as well. From Teacher 3,

> *I don't feel like easyCBM is so overwhelming, but I also feel like you can guess on easyCBM a lot easier and get more questions right and come out looking like you're a higher reader.*

Overall, the teachers did not seem to give much value to either the MAP scores or the easyCBM scores. The discounting of this data shows a lack of data triangulation. In a truly functional intervention system, the team needs to trust the assessments, understand the interventions, and acknowledge the value and importance in each of the tiers.

Time

"The task is not to find time for collaboration but rather to make collaborative time a priority" (Buffum et al., 2018, p.69).

As the intervention began, there were three themes that emerged and held true throughout the nine weeks. Those themes were centered around time, trust, and targeted interventions

The first of the themes, time, came up in almost every meeting with the group. I feel as though time comes in every aspect of teaching as we continue to ask more and more of our teachers.

In talking about the RtI process, the book we chose discussed the need for collaboration and how to use time slots for meetings and interventions. To start off, the group began the conversation based around what data meetings would look like regarding time.

> *I wrote something down about the time like making sure there's time to collaborate. It spent a lot of time talking about like how district leaders, you know, need to make sure that it's built into the day and doesn't have to happen outside contract, or whatever. And everybody says I don't have time, 'I don't have time,' but really it's just not being made a priority of the time. – Teacher 4*

This is a component that was well flushed out throughout the readings. For the teachers to see the value in the process, we must make time for the process which according to Teacher 2 can come in many different ways.

There's just so much other things that we that we do that I think this kind of gets pushed off even though we all know the other things that we need to talk about. A lot of it just comes down to just like the instruction that we need to do every day and not necessarily the Tier kids. But then also like finding a time to meet, you know. When we meet as our problem-solving team or, when do our data days, I mean, I think a lot of the information you just put on that document, and then you kind of like just talk about what you put on the document when you come to the meeting. But every teacher only gets 15 minutes and then in years when you don't have very many kids or you don't have any, you're like, 'I'm good,' but or like other times you just real quickly go through the kids who you want to talk about and then go on to the next teacher. – Teacher 2

This has been the process for as long as I have been the principal in the building. On the data days, three times a year, each teacher is scheduled a fifteen-minute slot in which they come to talk about their students. During that time, the teacher brings the classroom list and talks about the students that she thinks need to be in an intervention. While we can incorporate the interventionists on these days because we cancel interventions for the day, other meetings throughout the year are with the classroom teachers only. Typically, the times when the classroom teachers are available, the interventionists are with the students. While the group sees value in changing this process, they also noted that this would take time and coordination. According to Teacher 4,

I think if the model was set up differently though, like we have talked about where we break our groups down differently, and we focus on certain skills at certain times, there's going to be a planning component that we would need time for.

This model, of meeting as a whole group only three times a year, would have to change. If we were going to really break down the groups by skill, we would need to meet as a whole group much more frequently. Though, the group, by the end of the second meeting in the intervention, determined that more time would be the one place to start to really benefit the system.

This time conversation was not only limited to references to determining students within Tiers, but it was also discussed in terms of Tier 1 supports as well. Teacher 2 stated,

> *I think it's hard because like this year we are trying to find a guided reading time to meet some of our lower kids, and it was impossible. Like it was so difficult at the beginning of the year just to find a couple people with a common time that could do it. I mean, it worked out, and then it didn't work out, and we had to change, and we had to find somebody new. It was difficult, so I mean, I'm not saying it's not worth it because it is, but I'm so glad we're doing what we're doing. But it's just trying to find the time and people and the resources that are available. I think it's just difficult.*

Time was also discussed within the group in terms of length of intervention times. While the book suggested providing Tier 2 interventions only twice a week and Tier 3 interventions daily, but this is not the current system in place in my building. Currently, students receive both Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions daily. In conjunction with discussions around targeted interventions, Teacher 2 brought up the idea of splitting the time of the interventions.

> *. . . intervention kids get to go every day. I know some schools and districts you only get to go one day, and it really, is 30 minutes one day a week really going to make that much difference? I wonder if we could do like once-a-day special type of intervention where like you are getting your regular intervention, even if it was like you go four days a week, and then one day you go to something special.*

While it is important to think about the times of interventions, we must not lose sight of the fact that the majority of instruction should come from the Tier 1 level in the classroom. We cannot have an overreliance on our interventionists to do all of the differentiation and re-teaching. Regardless, the group found benefit with increasing the times that younger students were in interventions. Teacher 4 specifically mentioned this when she stated,

> *I just keep thinking we need to intervene sooner. And I know we do start intervention in first grade or even in kindergarten, but I don't think we spend, or we are not as intense maybe as we need to be because a lot of this also mentioned 50 minutes 5 days a week, and I don't feel that we do that. I feel like when we recognize the need at the end of the first-grade year, or the beginning of the second-grade year, at that point, that student needs intensive remediation to get them caught up before they just continue to get further and further behind*

Once they do seem to get further and further behind, our solution has been to keep them in Tier 3. We have students that entered third grade in Tier 3, and they will most likely finish the year also in Tier 3.

> *We don't want to keep a kid in Tier 3 all the time, so we don't lock them into the intervention for a long period of time, but yet it says, you know, if they're whole grade levels behind in multiple areas, how can we not have them in all the time? – Teacher 4*

Simply spending the time in the intervention is not enough to bring a student up to speed. If we are not addressing the actual skill deficit, the student is not likely to see the gains necessary in the classroom. The interventionist also mentioned this as she stated,

> *I do believe there's going to be certain students that are not going to come out. They need*

that full year-round support. That's strictly my opinion from what I have seen in 20 years of education.

However, if a student continues to struggle and not make gains, even when specific skills are being addressed, then we need to look deeper, and maybe take a different route.

Trust

"If teacher teams sputter, so will the school's efforts to achieve its mission of high levels of learning for all students" (Buffum et al., 2018, p.79).

The second of the major themes emerged for the first time in the second meeting of the intervention. That theme, trust, was one that would continue to run through the remainder of the sessions. Trust in its simplest form came about as how the teachers work together and believe in the abilities of each of their colleagues both in dealing with regular education teachers and special education teachers. Much of this has been a result of the way in which the system has been structured in the past.

RtI and Special Education

One of the most important conversations centered around what the relationship should look like between RtI and special education. There have always been questions as to how the two need to work together. RtI, at its basic level, is a systematic process to intervene using targeted interventions. Special education on the other hand is a system in which individualized plans are created for students with disabilities. While not the intention of RtI, we have historically used RtI, and the interventions, as a method of collecting data while working towards a special education evaluation as a means of justifying a specific learning disorder. When talking with the group about interventions and students in special education, one of the questions I posed to the group was about the benefits of the services in special education. This was an area that generated much conversation regarding what was currently happening. According to Teacher 2,

> *I do feel like we all really want our Tier kids, and we want all our kids to improve, but it was kind of like, I've been told numerous times, like, 'It's okay, they're SPED (special education), it's okay,' whereas I'm like I want them to be better. I have like really high expectations for them, but then sometimes other people just say, 'it's ok, they don't have to do this.'*

Teacher 1 continued with this thought by adding,

> *When those expectations aren't high enough, the kids are just going to meet that low bar that you've put there. When I had special ed inclusion in my room, there were quite a few times when it was automatically, 'well let's just you know, mark off half the paper. They don't have to do half of it.' Why? They can do it; they need the practice. We have the time. Why would I be marking it off? Fold it in half, so they can't see it. Do it half at a time sure, but just automatically, 'oh no that's just too much for them didn't make any sense you know.'*

To say there is a lack of trust between general education and special education is an understatement. While the teachers see a benefit in the possibility of having special education staff work with students in Tiers, there is also a lack of trust that is preventing this from happening. When asked if there were any students in Tiers that could benefit from being in a group with the special education teacher, Teacher 4 quickly responded and addressed the topic of trust in saying,

> *I couldn't answer that question because I don't know what they're doing.*

Teacher 3 continued talking about wanting that control piece and knowing what skills were being taught along with how they were being taught. With the connection piece, Teacher 2 added in that she sees a disconnect between what is going on in the small groups and in the Tier 1 instruction. When the two pieces of the puzzle are not matching, it only creates confusion among both the teachers and the students. It can also influence the relationships among the teachers.

Teacher Relationships

The interventionist alluded to trust as she stated,

> *I think it's because if somebody is talking about what I'm doing in group, or if things aren't working out, I take it personally, and I do that because I care about what I'm doing. I want to make sure I'm doing it correctly, so I struggle, I mean, I don't struggle with keeping an open mind and trying new things. I do struggle with constructive criticism, and I know that's something I would have to check at the door.*

However, to have the difficult conversations, we must be open with one another. There must be trust. This would also be difficult for Teacher 2 as well, as she stated,

> *I'm very controlling, I like to do things the way I like to do them, and I have different expectations for my students and sometimes I feel like I'm super hard on them, and I'm not as easy going as like what you are, and I think that sharing my kids and things like that would be really hard for me personally.*

Teacher 3 applauded her for acknowledging this, but then she also brought in her own personal perspective on it.

> *. . . like those are things that I don't think about because I don't struggle with them. That doesn't mean I don't care. I just come off that way, but that's the difference. Tthat's what people would assume. 'She doesn't care anyway.' No, that's just who I am, but it is just*

how people come across. But you have to be able to communicate with your team, but also the people outside of your team because you never know who you were going to have to work with.

Having to work with different individuals looks differently based on the relationships that have been formed. This group has been working together for many years, but the relationships within the group look very different.

You know if a team is friends, just straight up friends, like spends extra time outside of school together, then that makes it easier to have difficult conversations because you can move on, and you know you still care for one another. A professional relationship isn't as easy to feel that care or as easy to. I feel like it would be quite difficult for many people, for most people. – Teacher 4

Even if the teachers were able to find the time, and felt comfortable enough working closely with one another, there was still yet another concern that was brought up by Teacher 1.

There's also the factor of knowing just what's going on, you know. We have conferences coming up, so if I have a kid who has been in somebody else's room for weeks, do I know what has been happening in that group enough to communicate it to the parents? And you're trusting they are getting it done, so I mean that trust factor is there.

Again, the concept of sharing students was yet again brought up, but it was brought up with question marks as far as how it would work with trust being a major component.

Administration Accuracy in Classroom Assessments

Common classroom assessments were also another area in which trust became a central feature. When talking about data, one potential data piece the team talked about looking at in more depth were the common classroom assessments. However, to get a true picture of where all students stand, the team talked about the necessity for each teacher to give the assessment in the same manner. Teacher 4 added in,

> *That's where I was at when you were looking at all the data. We have to have really specific, at least at our level at third grade level, specifics how the test is given because a lot of times, there's like, we read that out loud together, or they read it on their own, or I you know went over this direction. Or I know sometimes we review something right before we take the test like. I feel like in order to look at the data and truly know, we would all have to give it exactly the same way right without help or you know.*

While we all want our students to succeed, if we truly want to be able to compare the data we have available, we need to ensure both the reliability and the validity of the assessments we are giving to our students as well as whether there is a common understanding of assessment in general and the specifics.

Targeted Interventions

"A system of interventions is only as effective as each individual intervention of which it is comprised" (Buffum et al., 2018, p.249).

The third theme, targeted interventions, was present in almost every conversation that the group had during the cycle of inquiry. The book talked at length about the value and necessity of targeted intervention, and the research team members agreed. Interventions are anything in a specific area that the school does that is considered above and beyond what all other students are receiving (Buffum et al., 2018).

Right off the bat on the topic of intervention, Teacher 1 commented on one of the common missteps in the RtI process which was an overreliance on purchased intervention programs.

I took it as if you're putting every child into that one program, and that's where the fallout would be because not everybody needs the same skills worked on.

And that is exactly what we have been doing. Even with the information we have available to us, students that need Tier 2 support are placed in one program together. Students needing Tier 3 supports are placed in another program. Even though this is what we have been doing, there were many different ways in which the teachers saw a possible way to change the current programming. According to Teacher 3,

. . . when we do groups for Tiers, like these are the skills that we need to focus on this week, these are the things that have to be focused on in either the group or the Tier.

In this comment, the teacher sees the Tiers as more of a way to work on skills that are being targeted in the classroom. It is no longer an intervention to work on skill deficits; it has become a time for re-teaching which should be part of the Tier 1 classroom instruction. She went on to elaborate on this idea as it was discussed in conjunction with pre-assessments.

The day after, the team assesses who needs work still on that, and then you know, your Tier from that. So like if you take that what is it screening for prior skills and you do a pre-test, and we go over it together, and we find the kids that would benefit from being in a Tier 2 for just one skill, that would be the Tier. And then after, we assess again. If there's kids that need extra help, they would stay in the Tier and other kids would move out if we do our assessment.

This idea of flexible grouping is something that Teacher 2 felt as though we were doing well. The book talked about Tier 2 supports being directly related to Tier 1 essential standards, and Teacher 2 felt like our interventionist did a great job at checking to see what was happening in the classrooms and tying it into the supports in Tier 2. Teacher 3 agreed as she commented on the benefits of having Tiers based on skills evidenced by data. She believed it would make the Tiers more fluid, and kids would be able to move in and out on a more regular basis based on what was needed.

While the group thought there were different ways in which they could do a better job of identifying students for intervention groups, they also felt that the interventions themselves needed to be more targeted. According to Teacher 4,

> *I think what comes up for me the most as it seems to keep coming up is, what I feel like we're lacking the most is targeting the intervention. It's not targeted to a specific standard at a specific time. I keep seeing that mentioned, and I feel like we put them in the group, and we stay there in the group. And they're getting practice, and they are doing it, and it's certainly not hurting them, but it's, I don't feel like it is like we are putting a lot of planning for forward on what we truly want them to accomplish in what amount of time and or makeup in the certain amount of time. What I'm seeing a lot is lots and lots of conversations and meetings and discussions with teams to make those decisions.*

Teacher 2 also saw this need as was shown with her comment,

> *I highlighted all students assigned to the intervention should have the same need. It's just hard because there's so many kids and so many needs.*

As this conversation continued, several commented that this may be difficult to find the time as well to meet every need of every student. The time would require the interventionist and the teachers to look at the data to determine the need, and the interventionist would also need time in the day to have similar needs groups as well. The amount of work that this could potentially place on the interventionist also was brought up as well.

The conversation surrounding interventions also brought about some very honest comments on the process. While one teacher said she did have a good working knowledge of what goes on in the interventions because of past experience, others were not in the same situation.

> *I think a lot of my questions that I have about it is because of my lack of knowledge in the program that we use. Like I don't teach the program or do the intervention, so I don't know anything about it really. I know that my kids go and take the test, but I don't know what goes on because I'm not there. – Teacher 3*

As the interventionist worked to talk about the current interventions, this brought up another question by Teacher 4.

> *. . . they were talking about targeting the intervention. As a teacher, would you prefer to have a Tier 3 intervention group of three students from the same grade level, one with phonemic awareness, struggling with fluency and another struggling with comprehension, or would you prefer a group of 8 with every one of them needing the exact same thing?*

This one was easy for the interventionist to answer. She would love to have all of her students grouped together with like needs, but she also noted that it can get overwhelming at times with larger number of students who need to be fully engaged at one time.

The idea of a targeted intervention came into play again, as the group discussed supports and services in the Tier system compared to those in special education. While special education can provide students with highly specialized and targeted skills, the group thought that potentially targeting skills earlier on in interventions could be a better avenue to help students and stop the track to special education. Teacher 1 felt as though many times the students are missing critical information in the classroom when they are being pulled for special education minutes, and if we could target those skills earlier on, and in interventions, they would not miss critical class time. Teacher 3 would close out the conversation with a potential way in which special education teachers could support a larger group of students.

> *I feel like if they can fit into a Tier with a group they should, even if the group is led by the special ed teacher. It's okay if they do that, and if there's a kid that happens to have an IEP in the same room, I mean you're a specialized teacher, you can help them also. I feel like even like if they can fit into a Tier, and they're getting that individualized or small group, I feel that would really benefit them.*

That was the general consensus of the group. A more targeted intervention will benefit the students that are in need of additional support. To achieve this, there needs to be less of a reliance on purchased programs, more flexible grouping, and a shift from simply re teaching lessons that students have missed in the classroom.

Summary

As the cycle of inquiry ended, there were several themes that emerged from the meetings with the focus groups. As the group first began its journey, the process of identifying the problem of practice and understanding the change process led to the emergence of a conversation on the core beliefs and initial understandings of the members of the research team. This was eye opening to say the least as comments were made that alluded to what I had believed from the start about the current perceptions of the RtI process. Each of my staff members was in a different place, and we were far from on the same page. Once the group landed on a book study as the intervention, the group got to work, and three additional themes emerged. Among these themes were time, trust, and targeted interventions. With time, the group was concerned about how to add even one more thing into the school day. If we were to truly implement a system in which we broke down student data and organized our Tiers by skill deficits, we would need not only the time to organize the changes, but we would also need time to implement it. Many conversations during the process also showcased a lack of trust amongst the group. Each teacher felt as though they knew their students the best and could serve their needs the best, but to facilitate the necessary changes, they will likely have to learn to trust one another. Finally, the group tackled the theme of targeted interventions. This was a topic that came up in about every meeting. By continually looking back at the data that we have available, we can see a clear need to do a much better job matching up the skill deficits that our children have with the interventions that they are receiving.

Using this information, Chapter V will look at the overall understandings of the research team, offer answers to the research questions, and give recommendations for future cycles of inquiry based around the presented themes.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter shares the findings from the previous chapter. As part of the design process of the cycle of inquiry, the research team meet weekly. During each week's meeting, the content was voice recorded, and the information was then coded and summarized in Chapter IV. By allowing the research group to drive the conversations in the first few meetings, there are several topics that repeatedly came about as we began our discussions on the current status of the RtI program at the third-grade level. As the group continued talking about the RtI program, the group then was able to choose a book to use to guide conversations in general RtI practice. The final week of the research meetings then was used to circle back to the original questions posed to the group. This chapter will consider the findings of those initial meetings, include important concepts discussed by the group during the book study, and look at the changes in perceptions by the end of the cycle of inquiry. Coming out of the cycle of inquiry, there were a few clear differences between the initial responses to the guiding questions from the start of the cycle to the end.

Key Findings

The initial questions posed to the group were used as a guide to start the conversations on the current RtI program at the third-grade level. While the focus was on grade three reading, there were several times in which the discussion branched to include the entire primary level RtI system.

To start off the discussion, the group was asked why literacy mattered. Initially, the group started with conversations centered around reading to learn. The group talked about third grade being the end of "learning to read." One of the teachers talked about this age group being a turning point for many students. For those that are struggling, they typically don't like to read, and they see the gap only get larger in third grade. Third grade was brought up as being a year more for vocabulary acquisition (based on the assumption that students can already read) and the usage of the vocabulary rather than working on the basics of learning to read. Learning the vocabulary is important as our students are becoming more content focused and need the ability to participate and understand classroom discussions as well. Along with the teachers already expecting students to have those skills, the content is also growing. By the end of the cycle, the main idea of reading to learn again returned. However, it was noted by multiple teachers that nonfiction reading becomes more pivotal as much of what is read in adult life is non-fiction, and the inability to read even sight words will likely make success as an adult difficult. A few members of the group also commented on the readability of global content. While there was some discussion back and forth about the readability being at the third or fifth grade level, either way, not being functional at the third-grade level is not going to lead to success in the future.

The second question asked directly what issues the group saw with the status of the third-grade reading RtI program. A mismatch between the screener and the actual third grade curriculum and expectations was the start of the conversation. The teachers felt as though they had higher expectations in their classrooms. Even though a student may be seeing success on the easyCBM screeners, they are not necessarily making the gains needed in the classroom. The discussion worked its way toward talking about the easyCBM program and the probes that were administered to the students. The interventionist talked about the aspects of the program including fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary probes that are administered to students. Each of the probes gives the teachers and interventionists scores in each of the areas administered. Beyond that, there are no diagnostic tests that are given to students to dive down deeper into each of the three areas. When looking at the data from easyCBM, it is then easy to see where the student is struggling as long as the student is not guessing. One of the teachers thought these probes were given and then those scores determined which targeted intervention was given; she did not realize we did not do this. Again, this is one of the major flaws of the RtI system that we currently have in place. Overall, the program needs to be more systematic.

This led to the discussion of the Lexia intervention program which is currently being used as the Tier 3 intervention. While the group liked it, they did see flaws within the program. For example, students can continue to new topics without full mastery of a concept, and the phonics that is being taught in the program does not match up with the phonics that is being taught in the classroom. By the end of the cycle, the discussion once again turned to Lexia. We seem to be using Lexia to try to cover as much as possible, but not all our students necessarily need all the topics. In essence, we are not targeting the specific skills in isolation that we need to be doing to best help our students. In addition to trying to use one intervention program to cover it all, the group also saw flaws in the program that we use to screen and benchmark our students. What they felt was needed was a program that broke down the results even further. For example, a student may be struggling in phonics, but without knowing a student is weaker in digraphs, we would not know which skill to hit the most. While easyCBM does currently break down the students' scores into categories, those categories are too broad to figure out what is specifically needed. However, just having that information may not be enough. For the teachers that also have a Masters in reading, they may be able to truly understand how to dive down further. Without specifically providing professional development to those that do not, this may be a much more difficult process.

By figuring out the specific area that needs targeting, we could send students into a targeted intervention, and they would be able to be back in the classroom as much as possible. While this cycle was ultimately focused on third grade, the group identified that by increasing these targeted interventions earlier on, and for a potentially larger amount of time, they may see fewer and fewer kids that would need Tier 3 by the time they got the third grade. Again, this would be a system change that could potentially help the current process become more fluid and better address the needs of the children.

In both the initial and final meetings, the discussions of the third and fourth questions ran together. Question three asked how we currently make decisions for placing students into interventions, and question four asked the group what data was available. In the initial meeting, the team commented that they rarely see referrals into Tier 3 unless a student is new to the school. Most of the students that are in Tier 3 at the third-grade level enter third grade already placed into the Tier. For those students that are in Tier 3, the interventionist commented that she rarely sees a student in the Tier struggling in only one area. Typically, the students are struggling across the board and scoring low on classroom tests, the screener, and the probes. Those classroom tests, which include comprehension and vocabulary, scores on Accelerated Reader, and NWEA Map scores among other things are used to help determine placements. One teacher also added in that she uses classroom observations as well. If a student is struggling to keep up, and constantly needs time to catch up, she sees that as a red flag as well. For the most part, the group agreed that once a student is in Tier 3 reading, he or she is likely to remain there the entire year.

In the final meeting, teachers were quick to note easyCBM and NWEA Map scores as what is currently used to make decisions. Teacher recommendation was mentioned as a huge piece of the referral. If a student is struggling in the classroom, the teacher will bring the name to the group, and the data from the assessments typically supports that decision. In this current system, the interventionist has little say about who is placed in the interventions. There is currently not time available within the current meeting time to look at each student and his or her data separately. Again, a flaw within the system. The group also did think that in this year, the process seemed to be more fluid. In the past instead of just taking kids out completely, we would drop them down from five days to two. This is not something we have done this year. However, the amount of time that students spend in Tier 2 is something that the book discussed in terms of having Tier 2 only meet two or three times a week. Tier 3 would still meet every day. When this was brought back up, the teachers wanted to continue to see the students meet daily to get the support. However, this I would argue is something that is more Tier 1 as we should not be simply re teaching material in the interventions. With that though, the group talked about the possibility of breaking up the students into groups to focus on specific skills each day. Some kids would attend a few times a week, and others would attend daily if they needed multiple skills. However, with our current intervention program, this system would not work. It is a daily, scripted program that continues to build on itself throughout the week, so students need to attend daily. If we do choose to change the intervention, and move away from a daily, scripted program, this may no longer be an issue. When discussing the idea of not having interventions daily, the interventionist did comment that she likes to see the students daily when they are deficient in fluency.

Answers to Research Questions

To begin this project, there were three questions that were at the heart of the problem of practice.

1. What factors influence the data-based decision-making process of the third-grade literacy team when planning and delivering tiered interventions, especially monitoring the progress and impacts of individualized interventions?
2. How does they cycle of inquiry support the development of individualized literacy interventions based on assessment data?
3. What does this cycle of inquiry imply about needed supports for data teams to individualize interventions?

Research Question 1: What factors influence the data-based decision-making process of the third-grade literacy team when planning and delivering tiered interventions, especially monitoring the progress and impacts of individualized interventions?

Current Programming

As it currently stands, while data from the two programs, easyCBM and MAP, is utilized to an extent, it would seem as though the major factor being used to determine placement into interventions is recommendation based on teacher input. The classroom teachers are using their own classroom assessments, both generated by the teacher and the current programming, to determine the placement into the intervention. As one of the themes that was identified was trust, without being certain that the teachers are all on the same page with classroom assessments, it is very difficult to make a decision as to whether or not we are equally identifying students for interventions.

The planning of the interventions was the same for every student identified. Tier 2 students are always placed in Read Naturally with the third-grade interventionist, and Tier 3 students are always assigned work in Lexia. Students that are in Tier 3 are still receiving Tier 2 instruction as well. Throughout the interventions, students are progress monitored by the interventionist. There are three probes: fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Students are progress monitored in comprehension every three weeks, fluency twice a month, and vocabulary once a month.

At each of the three data day meetings, this information is then brought to the table where the progress of each student is then discussed within each of the fifteen-minute time slots allotted to each teacher. While the information is highlighted for each student, it is not the only information that is discussed. Teachers also discuss classroom performances as well. It is then a combination of this information that is used to determine placement in the tiers.

There are times when a student has shown progress in the interventions, but the student remains in the Tiers based on teacher recommendation. The easyCBM and MAP data are just used as points of discussion, but they are not the only determining factors. In an additional cycle of inquiry, the team could work through professional development that would help them to understand how to bring all of the data together to make a more cohesive decisions.

Targeted Interventions

To say that the interventions are individualized is an absolute stretch. The only place where an intervention may be semi-individualized is with the use of the Lexia program. There is some flexibility within the program to choose certain topics for students, but the students are still working through a computer-generated program. While any computer-based program has its pros and cons, I struggle to see the value in placing our students with the highest needs in front of a screen as the only form of support if that is the only feature of the program that is going to be used.

Utilizing the data that we currently have available is an area that we could improve upon by triangulating data sources and using each in an appropriate way, requiring assessment literacy and shared understandings of literacy and instruction in this area. While the system may have seemed to be systematic and functional on the surface, the discussions that came about because of this cycle of inquiry proved otherwise. Yes, we used the data to identify students that had a skill deficit to an extent. But what we did with that information was another thing. Each time we met to talk about students we would look at the easyCBM probes. We would talk about classroom performance. However, the question was only about whether or not to place them in the intervention. There was never a question about what the intervention was or if it even matched the skills the student was lacking.

This is something that came out very clearly as we worked through the cycle of inquiry. We could list several pieces of data we had available to us, but we were not actually using if for what it was intended, suggesting differences in assessment literacy in the applied sense at the very least. While yes, we could benefit from a diagnostic test, if we do not learn to use the data we currently have, additional data would also be wasted. It does not make sense to continue to be able to label the skill deficits that our students have and then not take the next step.

Effectiveness

Additionally, we are not currently using the data that comes from the interventions effectively. Very rarely do we meet with the interventionists beyond the fifteen-minute slots on infrequent data days. Typically, a student is placed in an intervention, and he or she will sit there until the next data day to be discussed again. What about all the data that is being collected during the intervention? To truly have a system in place that is responsive to the needs of each individual student, we must be looking at that data and making adjustments as we go. We cannot have students sitting in an intervention that is not matched to their skills and expect progress in the classroom.

Research Question 2: How does the cycle of inquiry support the development of individualized literacy interventions based on assessment data?

Throughout the cycle of inquiry, the focus group worked through the process of identifying the problem of practice through the implementation of an intervention. The intervention chosen, the study of the book, *Taking Action: A Handbook for RTI at Work,* led the group through multiple conversations on the RtI process.

Targeted Interventions

Time and time again, the book stressed the importance of individualized interventions. Each time throughout the cycle that the topic was brought up, the teachers and interventionist were quick to recognize the importance of individualized interventions. At several times during the research team meetings, whether it be talking about Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions, the need for more targeted interventions was made clear as that was showcased in the exploration of the themes that emerged from the action research project.

Data Usage

One aspect of the targeted interventions that was also discussed was the need for more specific and targeted assessment data. While the current benchmarking system does break down reading into three categories, the three are too general to pinpoint the specific deficit. Without knowing that information, truly having a targeted intervention is difficult to implement. In the future, with the addition of diagnostic tests linked to specific interventions, we will be able to narrow down the specific skill deficits for our student. However, just knowing that information will not fix the system error.

Time

The biggest issue tied to not having targeted interventions would be time. As one of the major themes that emerged from the research cycle, time is affecting the goal of targeted interventions in multiple ways. First, the team expressed that they do not have enough time in meetings to talk about the students as a whole group. Each teacher only has a fifteen-minute slot which is not nearly enough time to talk about every student let alone dive into the specific skill deficits of each student. The group needs more time. More time to discuss each student. More time to look at the whole group of students together. More time to talk about the skill deficits. In having time to talk as a group, we would be able to group students together, identify our highest needs, and potentially identify some Tier 1 instructional deficits as well.

The second component of the time issue would be the time during the day to have the intervention groups. With an already tight schedule, going from one Tier 3 group, to multiple groups working on different skills, getting those to fit into the schedule could become difficult. However, if we spend the time upfront to better utilize our manpower, spending the time to find the time will lead to better results in the end.

Finally, the last time component deals with the time needed by the interventionist to prepare for multiple groups. This is a definite shift as we would not be able to simply follow a scripted program. Materials and lessons would need to be prepared for multiple groups of students daily. While we have access to many different resources, taking the time on the front end to get organized and be able to pull resources as necessary would be key. Since there was only one interventionist present in the original focus group, an additional cycle of inquiry in the future featuring all of the interventionists could provide us with the information necessary to know where to begin with the professional development needed.

Research Question 3: What does this cycle of inquiry imply about needed supports for data teams to individualize interventions?

Data Usage

Throughout the cycle, it became clear quickly to the members of the focus group that both teachers and interventionists need greater support when it comes to the data literacy piece. Learning to utilize data from the screeners, diagnostics, and progress monitoring is a key piece of the puzzle. The data piece becomes increasingly more important as we look at the students we have in our interventions and evaluate the effectiveness of the programs. No longer can we judge how a student is doing in an intervention solely based on what is being seen in the classroom. If the intervention is not being targeted to the student's deficit area, then progress will never be seen in the classroom. We need to utilize the data we have available to identify which areas to target and then build the intervention around the specific needs of the student.

Time

In addition to needing an understanding of the data that is available, interventionists, and teachers, need time to consider what it all means. This is time that must be built into the day and made a priority. The data that is being generated from our screeners, diagnostics, and progress monitoring means nothing if we are not using it to plan our next move. With the time, professional development is also likely necessary to train our interventionists how to look at the data and match the student needs with the interventions necessary. They will have to understand the resources that we have available and be able to identify which to use for each student. An additional cycle of inquiry with the interventionists could be utilized to determine exactly what is needed.

Trust

An additional component of the support piece ties back to the issue of trust. While the current system is set up with only one individual serving the Tier 3 third-grade interventions, there are several other interventionists within the building. By shifting schedules and groups, we could potentially open up several individuals throughout the building that would be able to provide interventions to students. For this to happen successfully, the trust component would have to be there. In addition to having multiple interventionists, teachers could shift their students throughout the day to work in a Tier 1 setting with students from other classes at their level. Again, this would require trust on the part of the teachers which could be built with support. The work here would be to provide support at a level that would lessen the fears of sending student out to other rooms. Preparation would be key. One of the biggest questions about "sharing" students was not knowing what was going on in other rooms. Having the teachers taking the time to work and plan together could ease some of those fears and work on trusting one another. Opening up classroom doors and sharing teaching with others can leave some feeling vulnerable, and we must prepare to support each other in those times.

Recommendations

Based on the cycle of inquiry with this team, the system would benefit from undergoing several changes. The findings would suggest that there are multiple aspects of the system that need to be overhauled. Simply making one change will not change the big picture. We cannot change the groupings of students without looking to change the interventions. We cannot look at changing the groupings without looking at the time aspect. The bigger overall question seems to be, where do we go next? An additional cycle of inquiry based on Mintrop's model could guide us in choosing where to start as we make changes to the overall system and the way in which we service our students. Teaching my teachers to utilize cycles of inquiry to evaluate their own needs could prove to be a valuable asset to the building as a whole. We would be able to identify our needs, create and implement our own interventions, and then evaluate their effectiveness to better the systems that we have in place.

What originally started as a closer look into the current third grade reading RtI program became much more. While conversations were directed around third grade specifically, the group could not help but to think about the status of the program a whole. The recommendations that came about because of the cycle are not necessarily specific to the third grade, but they are recommendations that are useful to the program as we work towards becoming a data-driven school that is focused on collaboration and the creation of a greater understanding of what is going on within and across our literacy instruction. There are two main recommendations that came about because of the cycle of inquiry.

The first recommendation that came about is based around the interventions and addresses the targeted intervention theme. At Dee-Mack Primary, we have used the same interventions for all tiers at the primary level since before I became an administrator in the building (prior to 2016). At the third-grade level, Read Naturally has always been used as a Tier 2 intervention, and Lexia has been used as a Tier 3 intervention. Regardless of the skill deficit area in the classroom, or on the easyCBM assessments, this is the pathway that students have taken. The number one thing that came out of the cycle of inquiry was the need for targeted interventions based on specific skill deficits. While we are not discounting the positive aspects of the programs we currently have in place, it is an area that has the greatest ability to help us grow as a whole. With the addition of the targeted interventions based on skill deficits, we would need to shift to more of a flexible grouping model. As skills are identified, and as students work to make progress in those skill areas, we are going to need to have more of a fluid method of placing students in interventions and removing them as well. Again, the trust factor will come back into play. Interventionists will be called upon to push students back out of groups and into the classroom when necessary. Teachers will have to also see the line between intervening and differentiating their Tier 1 instruction and buttress instruction in that Tier.

One of the new items on the docket for the 2023/2024 school year is a transition from easyCBM and NWEA MAP to a new system. Starting in the fall, the district will be using FastBridge for the universal screeners and diagnostic testing. The diagnostic testing piece was a large part of the data puzzle that was missing. However, even though we will have this new program, it will not fix any of the issues unless we train our staff on the data usage piece. Data literacy is a huge piece of the puzzle and will only come with targeted professional development. With this new program will come professional development that will walk the interventionists both through the testing process and also look at the utilization of the data from the program. The district is also taking part in piloting a program called Star Phonics with the kindergarteners this spring. From each of these programs, we are hoping to get more specific data that will help us to pinpoint more specific areas that can be targeted in an intervention. This change, along with more work on the data literacy piece, will hopefully lead the school to be more data driven. Part of the data-driven school process is a comprehensive data system, easy access for the staff, and a clear connection between the data being used and the intervention (Hyson et al., 2020). One of the comments made several times during the cycle of inquiry was that the teachers did not feel they had the data necessary to see what skills exactly needed to be pinpointed. With new data, and training on how to use the data, we can hope to eliminate that problem. With the changes coming, we are hopefully going to be able to target more specific skills.

With that being said, the second piece of that will be the connection between the data to the targeted intervention. In addition to providing the data, to be an effective data-driven school, we must be able to provide our teachers with access to information about research-based interventions that address the needs identified from the data (Hyson et al., 2020). For us, this means exploring new intervention possibilities through a potential second cycle of inquiry. Simply having one intervention per Tier is not an option. When we have students who are struggling in different areas, we need interventions that will target their specific needs. This is a goal for the upcoming school year as we start to get a better idea of what the data will show from the new comprehensive assessment system.

Having this new intervention, and looking at the need for new interventions, plays into the second recommendation for the future. The second recommendation is based around the structure of the data day meetings and addresses the time theme. Over and over again, the need for more of a team approach came up in conversation both in a physical manner and in the manner of trust. In the current setup, on data day meetings, which take place three times a year after benchmarking, each teacher comes to the meeting at a scheduled time. Currently, to cover the third grade, there are four separate meetings. My recommendation for the future would be for each of the four grade level teachers to attend at the same time. Scheduling this meeting during the day time would signal to teachers that this collaboration time is an integral part of their day (Hyson et al., 2020), and it also builds on the idea that having teachers work together is an essential aspect to improve student achievement (Buffum et al., 2018). By having the teachers work together and collaborate more on both the Tier 1 core curriculum and the flexible grouping for the interventions, trust will hopefully be an outcome as well. Each team member is a valuable part of the team, and we need to learn to use all of our resources to better meet the needs of our students.

Next Steps

As the original cycle of inquiry came to an end, several different options for a next cycle of inquiry emerged. While there are many different avenues that could be addressed, before moving on to the lower grade levels, I would like to continue work with the third grade team. With the information that came out of the first cycle, there are many questions left to be answered before I would feel comfortable rolling this out to the lower grades. I want to be able to give a more complete picture and have professional development in place.

Thus, the logical next cycle of inquiry would be based around the implementation of FastBridge for the 2023/2024 school year. It would be important to first get a feel for where my team is starting with this change. Going through the cycle would allow us to work together to determine where we need extra support and determine what that support looks like. It will only be with addressing the needs of my staff will we be able to fully utilize the data that will be available through the new assessment system.

Conclusion

Change can be a difficult process for anyone. However, through the action research process, the necessity of change can become apparent. Having a thorough understanding of the problem can lead to real conversations about what needs to happen to address the core issues.

With a goal of really meeting the needs of all of our students, the conversations around revisions of the current RtI program and processes are necessary. The current setup needs revision with the ultimate goal revolving around discussions about our students and directed student interventions. These directed student interventions could very likely become the issue at hand for the next cycle of inquiry.

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APPENDIX A: TIMELINE OF RTI RESEARCH MEETINGS

Timeline of RtI Research Meetings

Date	Purpose	Location
September 13, 2022	Introductory Questions	Conference Room
September 21, 2022	Interrelationship Diagram	Conference Room
September 27, 2022	Closer Look at Main Cause	Conference Room
October 4, 2022	Data Tracking	Conference Room
October 18, 2022	Introduction to Book Study	Conference Room
October 25, 2022	Tier 1 Essential Actions Readings	Conference Room
November 1, 2022	Tier 1 Teacher Team Actions	Conference Room
November 9, 2022	Tier 1 Teacher Team Actions cont.	Conference Room
November 15, 2022	Tier 3 Schoolwide Essential Actions	Conference Room
November 29, 2022	Tier 3 Schoolwide Essential Actions cont.	Conference Room
December 6, 2022	Tier 3 Intervention Team Essential Actions	Conference Room
December 14, 2022	Tier 3 Intervention Team Essential Actions cont.	Conference Room
December 20, 2022	Wrap Up	Conference Room

APPENDIX B: MEETING ORGANIZATION BASED AROUND MINTROP'S CYCLE

Meeting Organization Based Around Mintrop's Cycle

Date	Purpose
September 2022	Introduction; Identification of Problem of Practice
September / October 2022	Making Theories of Action Explicit; Understanding the Problem and Change Process
October 2022	Designing the Intervention
October/November/December 2022	Implementing the Intervention; Collecting Data
December 2022	Evaluating the Intervention