A CASE STUDY OF A MIDWEST SCHOOL OF DISTINCTION IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL-WIDE RTI AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

by

Pamela Suzanne Stark

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive single-case study is to present practical applications and instructional practices of one Wisconsin secondary school currently implementing universal response to intervention (RTI) practices within the general education classroom as identified by the Wisconsin RtI Center. For this study RTI was defined as a prevention model of instruction used within a three-tiered system where teachers evaluate the success of students' academic interventions through growth monitoring. The guiding principle of this study, the growth mindset theory, believes intelligence is malleable and therefore educators have a tremendous impact on the mindset, and by extension, growth-mindset of students. The research questions grounding this study are: (a) How are RTI factors (Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III) implemented across all ability groups in a universal manner? (b) What support factors are needed for faculty to feel confident implementing Tier I RTI modifications to general and gifted education students? (c) How is the school using the universal screener to identify students in need of Tier I, II, and III instructional modifications? Data was collected from Twelve adult participants, all of whom were under full time teaching or administrative contracts at a singular Midwest secondary public school identified as a *School of Distinction* by the Wisconsin RtI Center. Specifically, this case study focused on gathering and analyzing data through individual interview sessions of full-time faculty members and administrators, as well as observations of a professional learning community (PLC) meeting with a focus on RTI reflection and application, and a teacher-led focus group session. This case study found that while a consistent understanding of universal RTI screening tools were present among faculty, there were discrepancies between the middle and high school by way of application of tools.

Keywords: *response to intervention, RTI, Wisconsin, universal screening, intervention*

Copyright Page

Dedication

To the Lord, my God, and the blessed craft I have been called to serve.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I am grateful for the loving and supportive collective community of Liberty University. LU instilled within me, and by extension this study, a drive to exceed established standards in order to achieve optimal outcomes in the service of others. I would also be remiss if I did not thank the Wisconsin RtI Center, and specifically, Mr. Dan Seaman for his expertise and willingness to share valuable resources throughout this study.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude for the support and resilient leadership of my committee members, Dr. Erik Lovik (LU), Dr. Fred Milacci (LU), Dr. Wendy Dzurick (Marinette Public Schools, WI), and Dr. James Swezey (LU). Their honest and continuous feedback throughout this process helped guide me in my quest for organic and holistic professional growth.

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I acknowledge with a heavy heart the dedication and sacrifice my children have had to endure over the last four years of this journey. Please forgive me. I love you more than anything. Of course, none of this would have been possible without my best friend and husband, Joseph. I love you. Thank you for always believing in me. And finally, I would like to thank my parents to whom *I'll share all the happiness I've found, a reflection of the love in your eyes.*

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

Achievement Orientation Model (AOM)

Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)

Common Core (CC)

Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESA)

Cultural-Historical Theory (CHT)

Curriculum-based Measurement (CBM)

Department of Public Instruction (DPI)

Dynamic Systems Theory (DST)

Evidence-based Practices (EBP)

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

Highly Qualified (HQ)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Learning Disabled (LD)

Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)

Midwest American Indian Tribe (MAI)

Midwest Middle/High School (MMHS)

Milwaukee Public School (MPS)

National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)

National Institute for Child Health and development (NICHD)

Oral Reading Fluency (ORF)

Regional Educational Laboratory (REL)

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Response to Intervention (RtI)

School-Wide Implement Review (SIR)

Special Education (SPED)

Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR)

United States (US)

United States Department of Education (USDE)

University of Wisconsin (UW)

Wisconsin (WI)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Secondary schools throughout Wisconsin are struggling to properly implement Response to Intervention (RTI), a culturally responsive and equitable multi-level system of instructional support for student learners (Wisconsin RtI, 2017a). Supported by the growth mindset theory, this case study seeks to provide evidence of a working RTI system at a single public Wisconsin School of Distinction facilitating RTI with fidelity through a multi-level system of support to all students within the secondary general education setting (Callahan, Moon, Oh, Azano, & Haily, 2015; Walsh, Kemp, Hodge, & Bowes, 2012; Washington, 2014). Chapter One of this case study begins by exploring the background and history of rural Wisconsin's education program, including how Wisconsin's RtI Center, an independent RTI advocacy agency, is currently working to develop a universal system of support for RTI implementation throughout Wisconsin schools. Spanning from the overview to the summary, Chapter One includes the background, situation to self, problem and purpose statements, significance of the study, research questions, and common term definitions to develop a synopsis of this study.

Background

With the reauthorization of 2004's Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Response to Intervention (RTI) became a national phenomenon tied to Title I and II funding, as well as annual yearly progress (AYP) accreditation (20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004). However, the means by which individual states implement RTI's universal screening and instructional modification strategies are not federally mandated (Wisconsin RtI, 2017a). Thereby, RTI is in effect autonomously implemented across US states as a preventative model of instruction with growth monitoring to improve student academic and behavior proficiencies (Gallagher &

Gallagher, 1994; Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2014; Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016). Furthermore, there is concern that within the academic community professional confusion, as well as case law confusion, may be impacting the fidelity and integrity of how RTI is being utilized for identifying K-12 students that may possibly have a specific learning disability under the IDEA (Daves & Walker, 2012). There are two major fronts in which the confusion stems from. The first divide stems from addressing the core question of what is considered a response to intervention (Daves & Walker, 2012). There is a false narrative that uses the intervention as a noun insisting that RTI be used, "within the limited context of identifying students with a learning disability" (Zirkel, 2011). However, RTI, like any intervention is a series of strategies, not an absolute. In addition, those strategies are to be used within the general education setting and curriculum by the teacher(s) to monitor student progress in order to make informed decisions concerning each learner's academic and intellectual growth (Daves & Walker, 2012; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012).

The second area of confusion lies within the core characteristics of RTI's scientific research-based interventions (Daves & Walker, 2012). While comparing the foundational elements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and IDEA are outside the scope of this study, legislation established under each of these education acts have added to the overall confusion at the application level. Both acts specify the term, "scientifically, research based," however, NCLB does not link the word intervention as IDEA does (Daves & Walker, 2012; NCLB, 2008; Zirkel, 2010, 2012). While IDEA specifically addresses the needs of students with learning disabilities, NCLB maintains that all learners will learn on grade level using appropriate assessments to track growth and data. NCLB's all learners' policy gives weight that the preventative scientifically, research based RTI method must be universally implemented with all

learners within the K-12 setting. RTI represents a fundamental rethinking and reshaping of what the general education classroom instruction looks like (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). Transitioning from a traditional uniformed instructional delivery style to a multilevel system of early intervention and preventative support, RTI should not be seen as a prevention method to special education identification, but rather as a supplemental tool used by teachers for all students to help decrease school dropout, unemployment, incarceration, poor health, while increasing the student growth mindset (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012).

Schools across the US continue to struggle with the practical application of implementing RTI modifications and interventions across diverse learning contexts (Callahan et al., 2015; Gavin et al., 2009; Little, Feng, & VanTassel-Baska, 2007; VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007). Traditionally reserved as an instructional modification tool for special education students, RTI has become complacent among non-special education students (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2014; Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016). Emerging from the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004), RTI's framework was designed to promote high-quality core curriculum, indiscriminate of aptitude or ability, and based on performance to meet the diverse learning needs of all students (Amundson & Hartwig, 2010; Brown, 2012; Wisconsin RtI, 2017a).

With saturation of RTI research focusing on universal screening and instructional modifications within Tiers I, II, and III for special education students, the intellectual growth needs of general education and gifted learners are not being instructionally met by K12 schools when it comes to practical application of RTI (Brendle, 2014; Ciullo et al., 2016; Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016; Washington, 2014). Walsh, Kemp, Hodge, and Bowes' (2012) concluded there was no evidence of any reviews, "focusing exclusively on educational interventions for gifted

children in early years" (p. 105). This deficiency in RTI application is of national concern. RTI itself is a complicated system. The Department of Education's mandate 300.307(b) stipulates that while RTI criteria must be permitted within schools and may be required for usage, additional scientific research-based interventions are also permissible in determining a child's academic performance level (Questions and answers…2007). RTI has been deemed a scientific research-based intervention for identifying students with learning disabilities; although, it is not the only diagnostic tool (Ritchotte, Matthews, & Flowers, 2014). A crucial element of RTI is that the federal Department of Education (DOE), which controls federal education funding, mandates the implementation of RTI, but does not dictate how RTI must be implemented (Questions and answers…2007). States across the US are then left to implement RTI programs as they see fit. There is no standard universal RTI program in practice. While RTI has established three tiers of interventions, most commonly represented in a visual pyramid, the practical applications of (a) what is used as a universal screener, (b) what is the benchmark of proficiency, and (c) what and how are instructional modifications delivered to students in Tier I, II, and III are not consistent.

Wisconsin's RtI Center, an independent RTI advocacy agency, is currently working on developing just such a universal system of support for RTI implementation throughout Wisconsin schools. Traditionally, RTI has been utilized as a special education service, but not as a universal instructional service for all students (Gavin, Casa, Adelson, Carroll, & Sheffield, 2009; Little, Feng, & VanTassel-Baska, 2007; VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007). However, there is a demand for further studies featuring schools that are effectively utilizing RTI principles across diverse learning contexts, including general and gifted education (Callahan et al., 2015). Justifying this need for further studies, Callahan et al. (2015) found gifted students exhibited

more growth when they were directly instructed using a tiered intervention as opposed to no intervention. By showcasing a Wisconsin School of Distinction, as identified by the Wisconsin RtI Center, currently utilizing practical application of RTI strategies for all students, this study seeks to provide a working model for how other rural schools in Wisconsin can provide universal RTI screening and consequently Tier I, II, and III instructional services to all students, not just those who may qualify for special education services (Callahan et al., 2015; Walsh, Kemp, Hodge, & Bowes, 2012; Washington, 2014).

Historical

Wisconsin is currently home to just over 5,700,000 registered residents (Neitzel, 2016; US Census Bureau, 2015). Ranked 20th overall in population size, Wisconsin's education system has evolved from what historian Mark VanOverbeke (2008) once described as a rigidly structured and methodical educational system. Between 1877 and 1931, University of Wisconsin (UW) professors were responsible for inspecting all Wisconsin public high schools to establish accreditation (Gough, 2010). The first college inspection of a mid-west high school was recorded in 1871 in Michigan (Gough, 2010). The brainchild of University President James Angell, Michigan University became the first to begin inspecting local high schools establishing a certification system validating high schools, which in turn meant graduating high school seniors of said certified schools would have acceptance into certifying post-secondary learning institutions (Vanoverbeke, 2008). This type of college acceptance program defied higher academia norms of the time as leading east coast colleges relied on traditional standardized testing measures to assess students for admission. Even educational reformer John Dewey reportedly took part in the high school inspection process, as he and Angell both endorsed the unconventional method proclaiming students who entered college based on certification status

performed better academically than students who were admitted through standardized test scores (Gough, 2010; Williams, 1998).

As the rural population of Wisconsin continued to grow throughout the turn of the twentieth century, the demands of having UW professors personally visit each public secondary high school campus became too cumbersome given the sheer size of Wisconsin's 65,498 mi^2 spanning geography (Gough, 2010). This did not deter the desire of emerging rural towns to seek accreditation, especially upon the return of World War II veterans. To keep up with the growing demands of K12 schools seeking accreditation, Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI) established Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESA), still in existence today (CESA, 2008a). Dividing the territory of Wisconsin amongst twelve independent CESA educational agencies, these specialists work with local school districts to provide a wide array of educational services including professional development, student services, accreditation assistance, educator certification support, professional consulting and coaching, and in-state networking for academic and career planning, RTI support, Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS), Title I and III assistance, and charter schools (CESA, 2008b). Wisconsin's DPI maintains control over each CESA, but on a day-to-day basis carries out state level control over teacher and administrator licensing, the Choice School/voucher program, and all state testing including Wisconsin's Forward Exams, the ACT and Civics testing (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.).

History of RTI in Wisconsin

RTI officially entered the national academia arena with the reauthorization of the 2004 IDEA (Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016). However, as a multi-level system of support for student learning, the design of RTI has roots in the special education forum. While exploring the

history of special education is outside the scope of this study, due to increasing demands and skyrocketing percentages of US students qualifying for special education services between 1975 and 2000, RTI emerged as a preventative model of multi-tiered instructional support with a minimum of three tiers (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007, Fuch & Fuchs, 2006; Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002). A goal in the formalization of RTI was to promote results driven procedures using preventative models for student growth within the general education instructional setting (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

At the core of RTI's inception was a three-tier model having teachers tasked with evaluating student growth through the use of academic interventions by way of progress monitoring (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). While multiple versions of RTI are in existence, unlike federal legislation requiring public school systems to abide by such documents as Individual Education Plan (IEP) and 504 plans, districts in Wisconsin are not required to implement RTI. This can cause wide discrepancies, as RTI was designed to be a preventative model to help students increase academic growth within the general education setting. In other words, evidence of RTI modifications and interventions should be in place within the general education setting prior to a student being referred to a child study team for a possible special education evaluation.

Current RTI Model in Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, CESA outsources contracting work to other DPI accredited independent educational agencies on an as needed basis. One such agency is Wisconsin's RtI Center. Wisconsin's RtI Center, which lowercases its t in Response to Intervention, was established in 2009 as a collaboration between the Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) and

Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI). This was as a product of study results concluding that educators understood the basic principles of RTI, yet still had a strong need for more specific guidance as to the practical application of RTI, particularly at the secondary school setting (Regan, Berkeley, Hughes, & Brady, 2015).

The Wisconsin RtI Center (2017a) actively promotes the following necessary features of the federal RTI campaign in compliance with IDEA's reauthorization to take place within the general education setting: (a) culturally responsive practices, (b) high quality instruction, (c) balanced assessment, (d) collaboration, and a (e) multi-level system of support. In addition, Wisconsin's DPI, which does not copyright their RTI model for the purpose of universal sharing and education (see appendix W), has altered the traditional 3-tiered visual triangle model of RTI to reflect a RTI wheel.

Figure 1. 1 Wisconsin RtI Center Tiered Approach

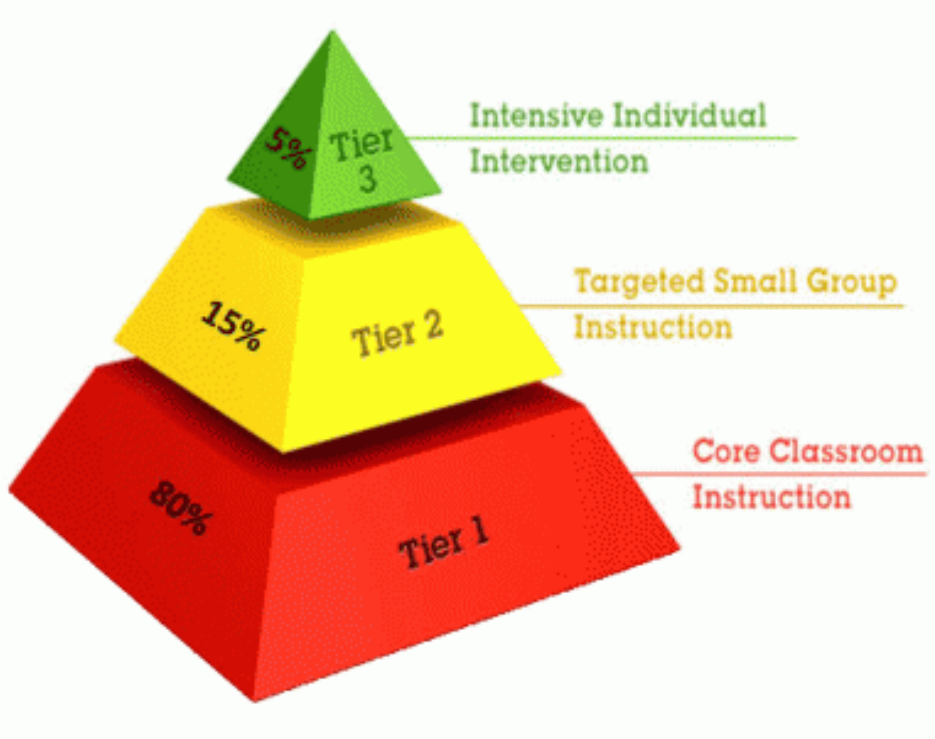

Figure 1. 2 Traditional RTI Tiered Approach

The RTI wheel model of Wisconsin still outlines the parameters of a high quality RTI framework, however, by forgoing the strict angles of the triangle, the wheel allows for "flexibility that districts require to build systems to meet local needs" (Wisconsin RtI Center, 2017). This also allows districts to choose how to structure their RtI system based on available resources, programs, and practices. This is imperative since Wisconsin's socio-cultural-economic makeup varies so vastly around the state (D. Seaman, personal communication, December 19, 2017). The Wisconsin RtI Center (2017f) promotes culturally responsive practices at the heart of RTI, believing the circular model of RTI represents a system's lens of the process as opposed to the triangular model which represents a singular student lens. To help clarify the how of implementing which RTI lens is best for individual schools throughout the state, the Wisconsin RtI Center (2017f) created the 2010 edition of, A Guiding Document, to assist schools wishing to implement RTI instructional models.

In addition, the Wisconsin RtI Center provides RTI-centered professional development and training to both public and private schools throughout the state. With a mission to, "build the capacity of Wisconsin schools to develop and sustain a culturally responsive multi-level system of support to ensure success for all students," the organization has established a multi-tiered approach to assess WI school fidelity of RTI implementation (Wisconsin RtI, 2017a). This multi-tiered assessment, accredited by the DPI, is called the Wisconsin RtI Recognized School Process. Comprised of two groups broken into four levels of distinctions, this fidelity tool measures the application, self-assessment, and staff assessment of RTI implementation at a school (Wisconsin RtI Center, 2017b).

Table 1. 1 Wisconsin RtI Center Levels of Distinction

	Level	Qualifying Descriptor
GROUP 1	Bronze	At full implementation/fidelity in one content area at the universal level for at least one year
	Silver	At full implementation/fidelity in one content area at the universal level for at least two years and selected level for at least one year
GROUP 2	Gold	At full implementation/fidelity in two content areas at the universal and selected levels for at least two years
	Platinum	At full implementation/fidelity in all three content areas, at all three levels, and for at least three years

Group 1 consists of schools identified as bronze or silver. To earn the recognition of a bronze school, the building, not district, must earn fidelity in one content area for one year. Awards for any level must be re-earned each year. Fidelity is set at 80%. To qualify for silver distinction, a school must qualify with two years of fidelity in a single content area and one-year fidelity at a secondary content area. For these first two distinctions, schools do not have to direct apply. The Wisconsin RtI Center automatically notifies schools based on state reporting, RTI trainings attended by the school representatives, and online surveys completed by school administration (D. Seam, personal communication, December 19, 2017). Schools who do not implement RTI or

do not wish to participate in the RTI trainings or online surveys cannot earn distinctions. Once a school has earned bronze or silver status, they may choose to apply for gold or platinum recognition. Gold and platinum require schools to earn fidelity not only with RTI, but also with positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS). In other words, bronze and silver acknowledge the rigorous academic growth and maintenance of student success utilizing RTI methods, while gold and platinum status recognize both RTI and PBIS fidelity. Wisconsin has a separate PBIS association, which is why schools seeking gold or platinum distinction must directly apply to the Wisconsin RtI Center. While PBIS is outside the scope of this study, it is a part of the selection criteria tool for the top tier of distinction.

As evidenced by the low numbers of schools qualifying as a school of distinction, the Wisconsin RtI Center's highly coveted honor is of great significance to schools deserving of its recognition. According to the 2016 Wisconsin's Public Schools at a Glance publication by State Superintendent, Tony Evers, there were 2,215 public schools in Wisconsin. Of those 2,215 public schools, only 10% have met the qualifications as a school of distinction at any level in accordance with the Wisconsin RtI Center's matrix (see Appendix). Specifically to date, no school has earned platinum fidelity, 14 have earned gold status, and just under 200 schools have been identified as either silver or bronze (Wisconsin RtI, 2017c). In addition, of the identified schools of distinction, there are only one gold secondary school, six silver, and 12 bronze recipients throughout the state. The majority of Wisconsin's school of distinction recipients are in elementary schools. Herein lies a great need to provide models and examples of how to implement RTI with fidelity within the secondary instructional setting. With a goal to increase RTI proficiency and implementation from a mere 10% statewide, this study seeks to provide a model for the remaining 90% of Wisconsin schools to mirror in implementing sound RTI

practices across universal domains of instruction, specifically within the secondary instructional setting.

Social

The population of US students identified as having special education needs doubled between 1975 and 2000 (Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016). At the turn of the twenty-first century, the special education population accounted for 6% of American K12 students (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002; Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002). RTI is a scientifically research based instructional method designed to increase intellectual performance of all students. RTI traditionally identifies student-learning needs into three tiered levels of intervention based on a universal screening tool (Brendle, 2014; Ciullo et al., 2016; Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016; Washington, 2014). However, in practical application RTI is not a universal solvent for student success. Roughly only 10% of Wisconsin public schools have been identified as a *School of Distinction* for successfully implementation of RTI Tiers I, II, and III (Wisconsin RtI, 2017c). RTI has become complacent to non-special education students (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2014). Advocates for implementing RTI instructional support for gifted learners, Gallagher and Gallagher (1994) have campaigned for universal screeners to use varying levels of proficiency to account for increased performance levels of gifted learners. Gallagher and Gallagher (1994) found:

> Failure to help gifted children reach their full potential is a societal tragedy, the extent of which is difficult to measure but which is surely great. How can we measure the loss of the sonata unwritten, the curative drug undiscovered, or the absence of political insight? These gifted students are a substantial part of the difference between what we are and what we could be as a society. (p. 4)

The gifted learner population is quite substantial as roughly 3 million gifted and talented students are currently identified in K12 U.S. classrooms (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC] & Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted, 2011). Furthermore, gifted students are not challenged at levels reflective of aptitude or ability capabilities (Callahan et al., 2015; Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross 2004; Marshall, 1994; Renzulli & Reis, 1991; Robinson & Moon, 2003). 40% to 50% of traditional classroom instruction at any given grade is redundant for gifted students, as up to 80% of instruction requires gifted students to be subjected to uniformed Tier I curricular instruction (Reis & Purcell, 1993; Reis et al., 1993; Yang & Siegle, 2006) designed on the level of special education and general education resulting in a "lost opportunity to learn" (Callahan et al., 2015, p. 139).

Teachers and administrators are also struggling to maintain proficiency in utilizing RTI mandates. While federally recognized as a scientifically research based method of instructional delivery, states have been left to their own design as to the means of implementing RTI at localities (Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016). Teachers and administrators throughout Wisconsin are working with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and Wisconsin's RtI Center to substantiate the differences between differentiation and special education services as RTI is not the end all or absolute solution for special education services, nor has it been designed to be solely utilized for the special education community (Ritchotte, Matthews, & Flowers, 2014).

Theoretical

One of the most misunderstood concepts of the Growth Mindset theory lies in the belief that a student's intellectual growth is tied to effort (Dweck, 2015). Dweck's (2010) theory distinguishes between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset. The belief that intelligence cannot be improved or altered, is known as a *fixed mindset,* whereas the belief that intelligence is

malleable is *growth mindset*. When teachers employ Dweck's (2010) growth mindset theory within instructional learning environments such as with the use of RTI modifications, there are measurable improvements of student "motivation, learning, and school achievement" (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015, p. 49). By using a universal screener to identify a student's intellectual and academic performance level, schools are able to establish a baseline of proficiency. As a cautionary, Dweck's (2010) growth mindset warns of the limitations educational institutions may construct upon learning the potential of students when there are established ceilings of mastery for content knowledge. For example, when universal screeners use 70% as the ceiling for Tier I intervention, 50% for Tier II, and 0% as the floor of Tier III, students who earn a score of 71% or above are, in essence, exempt from RTI instructional modifications for intellectual growth, which goes against the premise of the growth mindset philosophy. Specifically, a general education student who earns a 64% on a universal screening assessment may be eligible for Tier I RTI interventions to demonstrate increased performance evidence of learning. Yet, a student who earns an 84% may not receive any instructional support to further his or her intellectual growth because they have already reached the ceiling of proficiency set at 70%. Learning is continuous (Dweck, 2015, Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). General education students and gifted learners require an elevated ceiling to receive RTI instructional modifications (Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2014). Dweck's (2010, 2012) growth mindset establishes the baseline that not only can all students learn, but also that said learning is evolving and highly conditional upon the learning environment.

Situation to Self

This study will extend existing knowledge in the field of practical application of RTI, serving as a model for Midwest schools who seek to implement best practices using RTI as a

universal screening and instructional strategy for all students within a secondary general education learning environment. This study is not a focus of the impact or influence of RTI on the special education population, but rather a descriptive single-case study showcasing a Wisconsin School of Distinction that can serve as a model for other rural Wisconsin schools wishing to mimic RTI universal screening processes as well as practical application of RTI best practices for Tier I, II and III instructional modifications for all students: special education, general education, and gifted learners.

My motivation for conducting this study is to provide a working model of an exceptional Wisconsin school, as identified by earning a School of Distinction label from the Wisconsin RtI Center, that is successfully implementing RTI universal screening and instructional modifications for all students within a secondary general education classroom. There is a current shortfall of successful schools implementing RTI with fidelity and an even smaller number utilizing RTI at the secondary level. As a teacher and administrator for the past two decades, I have watched the ever-revolving cyclical changes in education. Almost as though a puppy chasing its tail, new mandates tend to be thrust at classroom teachers with little to no support, direction, or follow through. This is frustrating as the success and growth of the students are at jeopardy. Students want to learn, and children have a desire to please adults. Yet if those very adults do not have the tools to properly instruct the students in their care, then no amount of time or resources will be the magic potion for success. RTI is not excempt. The teaching profession is seeing a decrease and shortage in professionals and what used to be a craft and calling is quickly turning into a bureaucratic paper-driven profession. I acknowledge there is not one way to do anything, yet being able to see a working plan in practice can help others in the field of education alleviate stress and paperwork, enabling the joys of education to return.

As educators, there is a united brotherhood. Accepting that public education policies are established for the betterment of all students, for their success, regardless of innate or learned performance it is imperative to provide as many working examples of successful schools that have been able to implement RTI methods within the secondary instructional levels so that we as a collective community can continue to learn from each other, grow in our knowledge and continue to serve our students in the best possible learning environments. Education is personal and with that comes a sense of heart. While there is no singular perfected way to teach anything to all persons, there are personal motivations that drive the human experience as a teacher. While outside the scope of this study, each person's teaching experiences and philosophies are different, yet my own personal dedication to the success and growth mindset of all students is the driving force behind this study.

With that in mind, the philosophical assumptions I bring to this study include both epistemological and axiological. Accepting that epistemology consists of four main knowledge bases: divine revelation, experience, logic and reason, and intuition, I intend to use this study to showcase a working RTI School of Distinction that has successfully been able to demonstrate data-driven results using RTI methods reflecting student growth (Lynch, 2018). Since the practical application of RTI is not regulated throughout the United States and school districts have leniency to design individual RTI programs, this study will showcase the unique experience of one Wisconsin school of distinction's RTI design and model that has proven success. I intend to investigate, through onsite interviews of teachers and administrators and observations of teacher planning meetings, the logic and reason behind this model and how the teachers and administration at Midwest Middle/High School (MMHS) were able to achieve such student growth using RTI methods. This is valuable as I believe there is a lack in working RTI models

within the secondary educational setting for current educators to study and learn from. It is my belief that students should be subjected to unknown instructional practices at the lowest possible increment. Therefore, by finding and sharing a successful school that is utilizing an RTI model within a middle/high school setting can help not just myself as an administrator, but countless schools throughout the Midwest who are also struggling and do not know where to begin or how to strengthen their RTI program.

This study is also axiological as it is my intent to make value statements and present the nature of reality within the selected school of distinction (Creswell, 1997). The purpose of this study is more than simply providing a road map for how schools can increase student performance. Teaching to end of year exams could be covered by extensive test-taking strategies. That is not the purpose of this study. Ethically, the purpose of this study, and of RTI's core principle, is to help struggling students increase their intellectual awareness, capabilities, and personal accountability for learning. Yet, there is no one way to do this. Therefore, it is imperative that I report on the educational morals and personal instructional values of the teachers and administrators I am interviewing and observing for this study. It is the voices of those who teach and lead within MMHS that must be present in this study. Aesthetically, it is also important for me to report about the quality of life for the teachers and leaders of MMHS. If my research focused solely on student data, there would again be a disconnect not reflecting the entire process of successful implementation. Successful instructional methods are something that should be shared for all within the professional field to access. By giving a voice to one such school of distinction, I am freely providing value-laden information to other instructional institutions wishing to learn more about successful RTI methods within the secondary setting.

Problem Statement

The problem is RTI has become complacent to non-special education students (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2014). RTI was designed to be a preventative model of instruction with growth monitoring to improve all students' academic and behavioral proficiencies through universal screening and tiered instruction (Brendle, 2014; Brown, 2012; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2014; Preston, Wood, Stecker, 2016). However, IDEA does not federally regulate RTI's Tier I universal screening process, nor how schools implement RTI intervention accommodations or modifications (Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016; Wisconsin RtI, 2017a). As a scientifically research based support method of instructional delivery, the RTI system itself substantiates a difference between instructional differentiation and special education services (Ritchotte, Matthews, & Flowers, 2014).

RTI is in effect not sole property of the special education community and should be utilized school-wide for all students (Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016). With saturation of RTI literature concentrating at the elementary and special education forums, there is a gap in the literature calling for the need of working and practical models of RTI implementation at the secondary level (Preston et al., 2016; Regan et al., 2015). This study seeks to fill that gap by providing a working example of a Midwest School of Distinction, as identified by the Wisconsin RtI Center, implementing RTI with fidelity at the secondary level within the general education setting.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive single-case study is to showcase a rural Wisconsin School of Distinction implementing universal response to intervention (RTI) Tier I screening and instructional modification practices within the general education setting at the

secondary level. At this stage in the research, RTI will be generally defined as a preventative model of multi-tiered instruction with growth monitoring (Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016).

The theory guiding this study is Carol Dweck's (2012) Growth Mindset. The Growth Mindset theory is based on the premise that: (a) students believe their intelligence can be developed, (b) intelligence is malleable, (c) educators have a tremendous impact on the mindset of students, and (d) through positive interactions, students can develop a growth mindset, building intelligence and intellectual confidence. RTI complements the Growth Mindset theory through the universal screening component where all students are assessed to determine a baseline for performance and growth potential in order to develop instructional modifications and interventions to advance the intellectual and self-confidence of students. While traditionally reserved for special education students, RTI interventions are applicable for all learners, as all students have capacity for intellectual growth and performance.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is paramount to increasing the vitality and relevancy of rural secondary Wisconsin schools and other primary and secondary educational settings wishing to implement effective RTI programs but lack the resources, knowledge, data, experience, or knowhow to begin or enforce such a program. By providing a working model of how one rural Midwest secondary school implements a successful RTI program to increase student instructional and curricular proficiencies across ability levels, other schools may be able to mirror said strategies to build student success through RTI methods.

RTI has become a go to buzz word among the educational circuit. Yet on average, very few schools in Wisconsin have achieved desired or effective RTI implementation (Wisconsin RtI, 2017c). This study will provide examples of instructional modifications other secondary

educational institutions may be able to apply to increase student proficiency in content performance, especially to those institutions who may not be able to financially afford an instructional specialist or who are still struggling to understand how to fully implement RTI strategies within the general education setting for student growth. This study adds to existing studies by examining exemplary RTI practices used not only on special education students (Gavin, Casa, Adelson, Carroll, & Sheffield, 2009; Little, Feng, & VanTassel-Baska, 2007; VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007), but specifically within the general education population. Furthermore, this study seeks to expose a model RTI program showcasing how educational settings can implement, "guiding principles effectively into practice with diverse learners in various contexts" (Callahan et al., 2015, p. 138-139).

Research Questions

The following research questions will serve as the basis for this case study. A series of recorded interviews and forums will be held at MMHS to solicit feedback from volunteer participants based on the designed research questions. With the main focus centering on the premise that RTI was designed to universally screen all students to meet and accelerate learning (Brendle, 2014; Brown, 2012), yet general education and gifted learners are often not included in such universal screeners or Tier I modifications, this study seeks to answer the following three research questions:

RQ#1: How are RTI factors (Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III) implemented across all ability groups in a universal manner?

The first research question is based on Carol Dweck's (2012, 2014, 2015) growth mindset theory upon the premise all students believe their intelligence can be developed and that intelligence is malleable. Research gaps reflect a lack in practical application models of a

working RTI program, specifically within a secondary educational setting showcasing how content teachers implement RTI modifications and interventions within the general education setting (Preston et al., 2016; Regan et al., 2015; Ruffini, Miskell, Lindsey, McInerney, & Waite, 2016). Since RTI's Tier I has traditionally been a method of universal instructional intervention, and if we accept the growth mindset theory that all students have growth potential, then in effect all students within a general education classroom should be provided RTI modifications and accommodations to some degree (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Preston et al., 2016). Therefore, this first research question is seeking to solidify if RTI methods are being implemented with all students within the general education classroom, and not just students who may be below grade competency or qualify for special education services. In addition, multiple questions designed for the individual interview sessions conducted with school administrators and faculty members, will be linked to the theme of this first research question.

RQ#2: What support factors are needed for faculty to feel confident implementing Tier I RTI modifications within the general education setting?

Educators have a tremendous impact on the mindset of students, which in turn affects student academic performance (Dweck, 2015). Furthermore, through positive interactions, students can cultivate a growth mindset building intelligence and intellectual confidence. While RTI is intended to benefit all students' intellectual growth, it is also an important tool for educators identifying K-12 students that may possibly have a specific learning disability under the IDEA (Daves & Walker, 2012). There is evidence of within the academic community of professional confusion that may be impacting the fidelity and integrity of how RTI is being utilized within the general education classroom (Daves & Walker, 2012). A false narrative is circulating that uses the intervention as a noun insisting that RTI be used, "within the limited

context of identifying students with a learning disability" (Zirkel, 2011). Yet, RTI, like any instructional intervention is a series of strategies, not an absolute. Such strategies are to be used within the general education setting in conjunction with established curriculum by the teacher(s) to monitor student progress in order to make informed decisions about each learner's academic and intellectual growth (Daves & Walker, 2012; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012).

This second research question is attempting to solicit from the educational professionals at MMHS the needed resources, tangible and intangible, to effectively implement RTI across all ability groups to enable other instructional entities to model a successful RTI educational intervention approach. In addition, multiple questions designed for the individual interview sessions will be linked to the theme of this second research question.

RQ#3: How is the school using the universal screener to identify students in need of Tier I, II, and III instructional modifications?

This third research question again relates back to the growth mindset principle that intelligence is malleable (Dweck, 2012, 2014, 2015). Since RTI substantiates a difference between differentiation and special education services, the bar of mastery for students identified as special education, general education, gifted learners, or duel exceptional should reflect differentiated ceilings (Ritchotte, Matthews, & Flowers, 2014). IDEA does not federally regulate RTI's Tier I universal screening process, nor intervention accommodations or modifications (Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016; Wisconsin RtI, 2017a). Therefore, if the purpose of RTI is to increase student proficiency based on the premise of Growth Mindset, then it is in effect not sole property of the special education community and should be utilized school-wide (Preston et al., 2016).

Definitions

The following terms are pertinent to this study and are listed and defined below.

1. *Response to Intervention (RTI)* - a preventative model of instruction with growth monitoring (Preston et al., 2016)
2. *Universal screener* – An assessment tool that measures a student's content knowledge based on grade proficiency.
3. *Growth Mindset* – "The understanding that abilities and intelligence can be developed" (Dweck, 2017).
4. *Fixed Mindset* – The belief that intelligence is static (Dweck, 2017).

Summary

Chapter One addresses the gap in literature where previous studies concerning RTI universal screening measures and Tier I, II, and III instructional interventions failed to include general education, gifted learners, or the secondary educational setting (Callahan, 2015; Preston et al., 2016). The problem remains with the misunderstanding and misallocation of RTI application within the conventional educational setting. The purpose of RTI was to preventively and universally screen all students, not simply the special education population, to meet and accelerate learning (Brendle, 2014; Brown, 2012). However, since IDEA (2004) does not federally regulate the implementation process of RTI within the K12 school setting, schools are free to adjust and modify the program as they deem fit (Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016; Wisconsin, 2017a). With RTI grounded in the theory of Dweck's (2015) Growth Mindset, RTI is in effect not sole property of the special education community and must be utilized school-wide for the intellectual and academic growth of all learners (Preston et al., 2016; Washington, 2014).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tiered preventative model of instruction with growth monitoring integrating assessment and intervention tools designed to maximize student achievement and reduce behavior problems (Kuo & D., 2014; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2014; Preston et al., 2016). Chapter Two takes an extensive look at published studies and scholarly articles as applicable to RTI conception, policies, and implementation within the educational setting. The information was gathered from a multitude of sources including, but not limited to scholarly journals, The World Wide Web, the United States Department of Education (USDE), Wisconsin's Department of Instruction (DPI), Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA), the Wisconsin RtI Center, Jerry Falwell Library, books, and interviews. Chapter Two presents the rational for this study through the theoretical framework, the history of response to intervention, key components of RTI, models of RTI, RTI within both the general and gifted and talented educable (GATE) education populations, RTI in rural and mid-western schools, as well as additional relevant and recent studies.

Theoretical Framework

The intent of this descriptive single-case study design (Yin, 2014) is to showcase a Wisconsin School of Distinction utilizing RTI universal screening and corresponding Tiers I, II, and III instructional interventions within a general education classroom for special education, general education, and gifted learners. A descriptive single-case study design (Yin, 2014) is appropriate for this study because a small geographic area will be showcased and the study will investigate the real-life contemporary phenomenon of RTI. I will also conduct a holistic and in-depth investigation using interviews and observations. This study extends and strengthens

previous research through shared experiences (USC, 2017). There are two notable gaps in the literature and research this study seeks to fill. The first pertains to how K12 educational institutions successfully utilize RTI intervention methods within an inclusion-based general education classroom for general education and GATE population learners (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Seedorf, 2014; Wisconsin RtI Center, 2017a). The second is how to implement with fidelity RTI within the secondary educational setting (Preston et al., 2016; Regan et al., 2015).

Carol Dweck's (2017, 2015a) growth mindset learning theory helped shape the foundation for this study. Grounded in the premise that students believe their intelligence can be developed and is malleable, educators have a tremendous impact on the mindset of students (Hochanadel, & Finamore, 2015). "Growth is the heart and soul of education" (Dweck, 2015b). The growth mindset is indiscriminate of age, gender, ethnicity, ability, or any other characteristic. The growth mindset is predicated on the theory that the desire to learn is innately within each person (Dweck, 2015b). Arguably, it bars society from simply accepting that some students are more gifted or talented than others and to then not challenge those learners to increased intellectual capacities or proficiencies. The growth mindset shatters the idea of a learning ceiling, promoting the philosophy that all learners must be intellectually challenged to continue honing his or her own academic growth.

Within the growth mindset theory, the learning environment is invaluable to a student's success (Dweck, 2015). The environment sets the stage for whether a fixed or growth mindset will be nurtured and developed (Dweck, 2015). By definition, the learning environment is everything that affects the input, reception, and processing of information by both the teacher and learner (Dweck, 2014, 2015). The teacher is included in the learning environment as both the

teacher and learner must be emotionally stable in order to adequately retain impressions from sensory information. The learning environment is also directly affected by the "students' general cognitive ability and their content pre-knowledge" (Seidel, 2007, p. 268). The way teachers' present information to their students most effect the learning of content for students (Dweck, 2012). Teachers who possess and model a growth mindset are more apt to promote a learning environment of engagement and effort amidst a challenging working environment (Dweck, 2012, 2014, 2015).

In opposition to a growth mindset, is the fixed mindset of learning. Those who possess a fixed mindset believe learning is achieved and finite (Dweck, 2012). While both growth and fixed mindsets are not absolutes and can be altered by perspective and life choices, students who harness a fixed mindset believe his or her, "basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them. They also believe that talent alone creates success, without effort" (Dweck, 2010). Dweck (2016) found student mindsets are the prevailing indicators of success. In layman's terms, students who believe his or her intelligence is malleable, a growth mindset, outperform peers (Dweck, 2015). All people have a bit of both growth and fixed mindsets, but most favor one or the other more dominantly (Dweck, 2012, 2015).

The goal of education is to authentically engage the learner in the content promoting a personal investment in the learning process (Dietrich & Balli, 2014, p. 22). Such a simple statement, yet at the same time, loaded with complexities. Students by nature, act almost entirely from an emotional plane of existence (Furlong, 1991; Slee, 2014). Therefore, if all actions stem from a child's emotional cortex of the hippocampus, effective instruction must in some way either feed or suppress that appetite (Samuelowicz, & Bain, 2001). Designing and implementing

student-centric models of instruction within a growth mindset help foster student's personal responsibility and accountability for his or her own success (Dweck, 2016).

Furthermore, Dweck's (2015, 2016) studies show evidence that when students are given the opportunity to learn in a structured, student-centric program, they could "grow their brains", increasing intellectual abilities (p. 20). It is this very process of learning that yields more return and leads to life-long learning that is of grave importance rather than simply focusing on the finish line (Dweck, 2015; Gaston, 2006; McHale, 2005). If students only focus on the finish line, then what happens when the course of the race changes? How do educational systems prepare students for different routes if all the training has ever focused on are the end results? It is also important to acknowledge that each and every person is in some way, both of the fixed and growth mindset (Dweck, 2015). "If we *ban* the fixed mindset, we will surely create false growth-mindsets. But if we watch carefully for our fixed-mindset triggers, we can begin the true journey to a growth mindset" (Dweck, 2015).

However, educational institutions often promote a fixed mindset by establishing learning ceilings. Students who earn proficiency levels at the capped ceilings, whatever level they may be set at, are then often deemed adequate in their studies. These students also tend not to be included in Tier I interventions for RTI. In a growth mindset learning environment, these students would be given a deeper and wider breadth of information on the learning target to further challenge their knowledge and understanding. In a growth mindset, it is through hard work and dedication that the mind is developed as well as a love for learning (Dweck, 2010). Thereby, Tier I of RTI applies to all learners, not simply those qualifying for special education, as there is no ceiling of proficiency, but rather a base bar to which he or she must show growth from.

Through positive interactions within the learning environment students can implore a growth mindset, building intelligence and intellectual confidence; the foundations of RTI. RTI complements the growth mindset theory through the Tier I universal screening process, which identifies student performance levels in order to develop instructional modifications to advance all students' intelligence and intellectual confidence. Tier I instructional modifications should address the space between a learner's measurable development of problem solving skills and abilities in relation to potential development. Within the general education classroom, this space will vary greatly from student to student, which is why utilizing key elements of the growth mindset theory including how a learner's intellectual potential is tied to self-confidence, and in effect the learning environment itself, can help students reach his or her individual growth goals (Dweck, 2017; 2015a). While the purpose of an inclusion-based classroom is outside the scope of this study, maintaining such a social learning setting has been shown to have great influence on the learner's desire to achieve and expand his or her own intellectual growth potential (Dweck, 2017, 2015a). Thereby, all learners have the potential to increase intellectual capabilities, negating RTI as sole property of the special educational community, since all learners have the potential to increase his or her intellectual capabilities and can increase performance through a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017, 2015a, 2015b, 2012, 2010; Karimi-Aghdam, 2017).

Traditionally, academic institutions have relied solely on IQ tests to predict achievement success negating performance abilities that often go undetected on such standardized assessments (Hochanadel, & Finamore, 2015). The growth mindset theory believes all learners have an aptitude and ability to perform at increased levels of proficiency if given the ability to explore failure, opportunity, development, and ultimately create solutions (Dweck, 2015). In

line with Dweck's (2015) growth mindset, the learning environment and instructional figure plays a huge role in the cognitive development of the learner. In parallel with IDEA's (2004) least restrictive environment, RTI methodology is in alignment with the aforementioned theory as special education, general education, and GATE student learners within a tiered RTI problem-solving model are all instructed within the same learning environment.

Related Literature

Current RTI based research studies reflect a saturation of literature found at the elementary setting and within the special education community (Allain, 2015; Ciullo et al., 2016; Gersten, Jayanthi & Dimino, 2017; Kuo, 2014; McCallum et al., 2013). The gap in the literature calls for a practical application model of a working RTI program, specifically within a secondary educational setting and showcasing how general education content teachers implement RTI modifications and interventions within the inclusion setting to enhance the learning potential of all students (Preston et al., 2016; Regan et al., 2015; Ruffini et al., 2016).

History of Response to Intervention

RTI is the only current federally supported scientifically research-based intervention strategy under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) Part B (IDEIA 2004, PL 101-476). RTI is classically defined as a prevention model of multitiered instruction with a minimum of three tiers (Bradley et al., 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Preston et al., 2016). While RTI has historical roots spanning multiple genres including data-based program modifications (Deno & Mirkin, 1977), behavioral consultation (Bergan, 1977), and learning disabilities (LD), a comprehensive review of each area is outside the scope of this research. This research focuses on how one Midwest secondary school is successfully implementing school-wide RTI within the general education setting to serve as a model for other

Midwest schools wishing to implement RTI with fidelity. To understand the need for such a case study it is imperative to expose how RTI has evolved into the living system it is today. At the center of ongoing discussions about educational reform, RTI represents a fundamental rethinking and reshaping of general education instruction into a multilevel system of support for early academic intervention (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012).

As an alternative to the more commonly used IQ-achievement tests, RTI began its inception during the 1970s (Washington, 2014). Samuel Kirk (1962) coined the term learning disabled (LD) in his textbook in which he presented characteristics on exceptional children. Special education then became federal policy with Public Law 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975) (Preston et al., 2016). Based on IQ findings during the 1970s, Rutter and Yule (1975) identified a pattern of IQ scores that followed a prototypical bell curve, yet student achievement scores did not (Preston et al., 2016). Rutter and Yule's (1975) found more students scored at the lower end of the IQ reading portion than expected serving as a basis for the ability-achievement gap. Then in 1983, Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Epps' (1983) study shattered the glass ceiling of special education identification calling for a new way to validate special education criteria. Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Epps' (1983) proved the IQ test to be an invalid means of identifying students as special education or in need of special education services. Between 1970 and 2000, special education became the largest represented student school-aged population at 6% with 50% of students with disabilities being identified as learning disabled (Preston et al., 2016). An over-correction was needed. Herein became the inception for RTI.

Heller, Holtzman, and Messick (1982) theorized RTI by claiming multiple instructional modifications should be conducted for struggling students within the general education

classroom before a student was referred for special education services on the premise that simply having a discrepancy between ability and achievement alone should not be the only criteria for special education identification. Furthermore, it was the responsibility of the general education teacher to document the means by which such instructional modifications and interventions were used and the effectiveness of said practices in keeping with student growth goals (Preston et al., 2016; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982). A major obstacle to this was that general education teachers were not formally trained in special education identification, modifications or intervention strategies. Large discrepancies began to appear between low achieving students and students with special needs increasing the number of false positives for students who were then identified into special education programs (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

RTI was designed to be an early intervention multi-tiered instructional support model, replacing the wait to fail discrepancy model, which was deemed ineffective for identifying students with learning disabilities or special needs by the National Institute for Child Health and Development (NICHD) (Preston et al., 2016). RTI was not a replacement for special education, but an early intervention practice designed to assist all students within the general education classroom who were not currently receiving special education or remediation services (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

Then in the early 2000s, the push for RTI was reignited into the spotlight by George W. Bush's administration (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016). In 2001, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education suggested three key areas of improvement including (a) the use of procedures that are data-driven as opposed to procedure driven, (b) the use of preventative models of instruction and intervention, and (c) the use of least

restrictive environment when instructing special education students, ie: inclusion-based general education classroom (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). Eventually, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act evolved into the modern IDEA (2004) legislation. The special education identification label was carried over onto the IDEA (2004) making RTI the only scientifically research based and approved method meeting all criteria and regulations for school districts who use federal funds under IDEA Part B for special education students, kindergarten through twelfth grade (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007; Preston et al., 2016). Furthermore, under IDEA's new 2004 reauthorization, local educational agencies were permitted to allocate and use up to 15% of federal funds towards services for students not currently receiving special education services, but who would benefit from additional academic or behavioral support in order to be successful in a general education setting (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016).

While RTI has been promoted as a more valid method of disability identification for US schools, in application RTI is virtually impossible to universally define and describe, as countless variations are in play throughout the United States (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Hauerwas, Brown, & Scott, 2013; Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007). There are currently no federal mandates as to how schools implement RTI, nor are there stipulations requiring practical application methods or accommodations for schools. There are various models and examples of RTI methods schools may mirror, but there is no singular mandate from the DOE. Therefore, schools and school districts are left to their own accord to figure out if they will implement RTI, how they will implement RTI, and how they will measure and report data on RTI.

RTI was originally designed to specifically detect targeted learning needs within all students, not just the special education population. However, the USDE revamped RTI to be

included within 2004s amendments to IDEA as well as indorsing RTI's reformation as the Federal Department of Education's go-to tool for assisting educators in improving the academic performance within the general education classroom (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn; Washington, 2014). Since the language of RTI is evidence-based practices, which compliments special education legislation and IDEA (2004) allows school districts to use funds towards instructional needs of struggling/low achieving students, it is understandable how RTI has become synonymous with special education. However, "Tier I is completely a general education function" left to the practicality and implementation of the general education teacher and administration (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016, p. 147). Regardless of RTI's application discrepancies, there are a handful of components that should be evident in some fashion within all schools utilizing RTI.

The Three Tiers of RTI

Traditionally, the main component of RTI consists of three tiers of instructional intervention designed to assist all students in meeting growth goals through instructional accommodations and modifications (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Kuo & D., 2014; Wiliam, 2010). In its most archaic form, RTI is represented as a pyramid with Tier I as the base, Tier II in the middle, and Tier III as the top. Tier I is typically comprised of the majority of a prototypical inclusion-based class of students, reflecting on average 80% of a classroom population (Kuo & D., 2014; Wisconsin, 2017a). Students are identified into Tier I based on a universal screening process based on a set base proficiency, pace, and mastery of desired learning targets. Tier II, represented in the middle of the pyramid, is the first major step designed to provide further instructional interventions and accommodations to struggling learners who are not demonstrating growth or mastery as desired by the targeted growth goal. Tier II is typically composed of 15%

of the class population (Kuo & D., 2014). Tier III, the smallest tier at the top of the pyramid, is reserved for roughly 5% of the students who demonstrated the lowest targeted learning proficiencies or growth and who are in need of intense instructional support as evidenced by data-driven results (Kuo & D., 2014). Within all three RTI tiers, students may be found eligible for special education services and still be identified within any one of the three tiers. Likewise, a student may find him or herself in Tier III and not be found eligible for special education services. RTI complements special education services; it is not a replacement.

The first key component of RTI is the screening process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). A well designed and universal screening process is crucial for student success within an RTI instructional model. Unfortunately, studies have revealed a high percentage of false positives contributing to over identification of students being placed in Tier II or recommended for special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). False positives can be combatted by using a gated screening process designed to exclude students who clearly are not at risk for Tier II or III interventions (Compton et al., 2010). A universal and credible screening process is crucial for establishing a solid baseline of RTI interventions. The medium by which educational institutions use to screen students is not mandated, however, all students within an institution should be screened using the same instrument. Educational institutions tend to use standardized testing as a baseline to justify effective teaching and learning through the collected data of summative test scores (Wiliam, 2010). For example, a school in Virginia may choose to use Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) data as a universal Tier I screening tool, while a school in Wisconsin may opt to use summative end of year data from state Forward Exams. As long as all students are measured using the same tool within the instructional environment he or she is taught, the instructional interventions of RTI are considered equitable. Through the screening process

students are then categorized into one of the three tiers. Tier I is designed to meet the learning needs of the majority of students as well as to identify students who may experience poor academic performance if their instruction is limited to only the classroom (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Wisconsin, 2017a). Again, Tier I is typically made up of 80% of a general education classroom (Kuo & D., 2014; Wisconsin, 2017a) and is not a replacement for special education services. As RTI is designed to be a prevention model of multitiered instruction, all students regardless of aptitude or ability benefit from RTI modifications and interventions at the Tier I level (Bradley et al., 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Preston et al., 2016).

Students within Tier I who do not demonstrate adequate progress toward growth goals as set forth by the instructional institutions are then placed into Tier II. Tier II interventions are commonly utilized by 15% of a given student body population (Kuo & D., 2014; Wisconsin, 2017a). Within this tier, evidence-based interventions are used specific to individual student needs based on academic deficiencies evidenced on data-driven growth goals (Preston et al., 2016). This is where more tiered and differentiated instructional support is designed and carried out by the general education teacher to assist the student in reaching his or her growth goal. Again, this is not a replacement for special education intervention. These curricular modifications and adaptations are taking place within the general education classroom by the general education teacher with core curriculum.

On average, 5% of the student population within the inclusion-based general education classroom will require intense educational interventions and modifications to meet the desired learning and growth goals (Kuo & D., 2014; Wisconsin, 2017a). These students are categorized as needing Tier III interventions. RTI interventions are designed to be in addition to and may complement students who receive special education interventions, but not all students in Tier III

must or may qualify for special education services as RTI is an instructional tool designed for all learners within the general education learning environment. For example, a GATE student may set a learning growth goal that is at a considerably higher level than a general education student. Even though the GATE student has shown mastery at the general education level, if they do not meet his or her establish growth goal, then he or she may qualify for Tier II or Tier III interventions within the general education classroom to help assist that student in achieving their growth goal, even though the student is deemed proficient by summative state assessments and does not qualify for special education services (Callahan et al., 2015). It is also important to note that students are not pigeonholed into a tier for the duration of the instructional year or semester. Students may move laterally throughout the pyramid as he or she demonstrates proficiency or lack thereof for the instructional content or learning goal. This will vary depending on how the learning institution sets up student learning growth goals.

It is important to know that there are multiple versions of RTI in practice throughout the United States. Yet, researchers have identified six key features of RTI that should be present for RTI to function in its desired design: (a) research-based instruction within the least restrictive environment; (b) academic skills of all students' are screened using a common assessment; (c) research-based interventions are provided to students demonstrating low growth performance or ability; (d) all student progress is monitored; (e) all decisions related to instruction are data-driven; and (f) referrals for special education can only be made after students are unresponsive to RTI modifications and interventions (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

School administration also plays an intricate part in the success or failure of RTI. RTI is not solely at the discretion of the classroom teacher. A quantitative cross-sectional correlational

design study conducted by Maier (2016) unearthed the current status of RTI implementation and the relationship that passive/avoidant, transactional and transformational leadership styles have on RTI implementation within various school settings. Maier's (2016) study concluded that while a majority of studied schools reported full implementation of RTI, there was a vast discrepancy between how states define and incorporate the varying RTI models among the states and ultimately, in the trickle-down effect to school districts, leadership, and to student intervention. The findings also indicated that while significant progress has been made to incorporate RTI within the general education classroom, current efforts fall short of the RTI model put forth by the National Center on Response to Intervention and that there is still confusion amongst educators as to best practices for the practical application of RTI within the general education classroom. In addition, there is also a lack in universal modification and intervention tools for teachers at the secondary level to use within core curricular instruction (Maier, 2016). This raises awareness and supports the need for this proposed study as there is value-rich practical application benefits to providing a working RTI program model, specifically within a secondary educational setting, which can help provide support for other educational institutions looking to gain fidelity within their own RTI programs (Preston et al., 2016; Regan et al., 2015; Ruffini et al., 2016).

Models of RTI

Since the 2004 inception of RTI within IDEA's Part B, RTI has emerged into two predominate models. One reflects an individualized model based on problem solving, while the second tends to be a more standard protocol system for all students (Preston et al., 2016; Maier, 2016). For this case study, Wisconsin's RtI Center supports the problem-solving model of RTI as an early intervention means of providing precise instructional tools for each student to meet

and exceed his or her individual targeted growth goals within a culturally responsive learning environment (2017b). Furthermore, a meta-analysis conducted by Burns, Appleton, and Stehouwer (2005) support the Wisconsin RtI Center's claim for a problem-solving model finding that when RTI was fully implemented with fidelity at 80% or higher using the problem-solving method in the least restrictive environment, less than 2% of the student population was found eligible for special education services as opposed to 6% that was previously found eligible. Keeping in mind that RTI was designed to increase the growth potential of all students, this decrease in the eligible special education population reflects a direct correlation to the preventative multi-tiered instructional model provided by RTI (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). Henceforth, this correlation also reflects a gross overidentification in students qualifying for special education services, where tiered and curricular modifications within the general education setting proved to be ample support for students to meet his or her learning targets without special education accommodations (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005).

The problem-solving model of RTI has been found successful in academic areas in which students felt the learning environment was supportive (McClintic-Gilbert, Corpus, Wormington, & Haimovitz, 2013). Complementing the growth mindset theory, such types of self-reported supportive instructional and learning environments increased students' self-motivation, a major key to student learning, particularly at the secondary levels (Dweck, 2015b). When students take a personal interest becoming more vested in the curricular content, student learning and attention increases leading to deeper cognitive understanding and performance (McClintic-Gilbert et al., 2013). Regardless of a student's innate ability, there is always room to improve. By providing a nurturing, safe, and challenging learning environment within an RTI model, students are able to

set personal growth goals empowering him or her to take personal responsibility for self-achievements.

The human brain develops most effectively when exposed to hands-on learning, real-life experiences, social engagements, complex situations, and problem-solving (Jennings, 2010). With only 20% of school-aged learners thriving in a lecture-based didactic instructional model, modern educational institutions must adapt more effective means of instructional delivery to meet the diverse needs of all learners (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). RTI's problem-solving model should more effectively help schools improve long-term learning outcomes for students with and without specific learning disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). As opposed to the surface and superficial methods employed by the protocol model of RTI, the problem-solving model is designed from a holistic lens using a team of educators to work through the problem-solving process for each student of concern beginning with defining the problem and determining the cause, to developing a plan to address said problem, even working collaboratively to implement and evaluate the plan on an ongoing basis (The Iris Center, 2007). The problem-solving plan is more of an institutional-based plan, rather than a content drill-and-kill plan to move students from below proficiency to proficient. Although it is outside the scope of this study, both models have proven viable and there are numerous contributing factors to determine which RTI model is most effective for individual school systems.

RTI within the General and GATE Populations

Studies have found that general education and gifted and talented educable (GATE) students instructed under a standard protocol model of RTI are often exposed to surface strategies or superficial strategies, neither of which enhance cognitive development (Jennings, 2010; McClintic-Gilbert et al., 2013). More specifically, this type of RTI model establishes a

ceiling of proficiency instead of an open ended linear scale of development for students to achieve his or her own growth goals. Additionally, schools implementing a protocol model maintain competency rather than mastery learning (Jennings, 2010). Surface strategies include rehearsal and rote memorization, which do not enhance cognitive development nor have a definitive relation to student grade point average or exam results (McClintic-Gilbert et al., 2013; Watkins, 2001). However, a benefit of surface strategies is evident for struggling learners who need to memorize a set standard for a limited time (Liem, Lau, & Nie, 2008). This sensory to short-term memory tool has been shown to increase intrinsic motivation (McClintic-Gilbert et al, 2013). Superficial strategies on the other hand are strategies used by students who wish to do the bear minimum to complete an assignment without becoming personally invested in the learning. Examples include guessing, copying work, not checking work before turning it in to the teacher, etc. These are reasons the Wisconsin RtI Center has adapted the problem-solving model rather than the protocol model of RTI. The Wisconsin RtI Center believes an inclusion-based learning environment is both healthy for behavioral and emotional development, but also for increasing students' self-motivation through growth goals helping students personally vest in his or her own learning and progress (D. Seaman, personal communication, December 19, 2017).

Accepting the definition that RTI is a preventative multi-tiered model of instructional support with growth monitoring (Preston et al., 2016), it is reasonable to also accept that RTI's instructional tools can and should be available to all student learners. A student's IQ and performance skills may not always demonstrate authentic learning ability levels, therefore special education, general education and gifted learners should not be held to the same learning ceilings or floors, nor should students be constricted to the same learning restrictions as their age or grade-level peers (Ritchotte, Matthews, & Flowers, 2014). For example, the preconceived

notion that GATE learners will pass standardized exams no matter the classroom environment they are placed in should not hinder these learners from receiving additional intervention services to increase potential intellectual performance levels (McBride, 2011). If this was true, educational institutions would stunt the potential of countless gifted individuals who are intellectually and cognitively well advanced for his or her age or grade level. Additionally, a general education student not identified as GATE, but achieving at GATE levels, should not be hindered to achieve or set growth goals mirroring GATE peers simply because he or she was not identified as GATE. These students are high achieving students able to demonstrate mastery, yet often with much more effort and determination than a GATE student. Adversely, when bars of low or universal mastery are set within a classroom, it not only stunts the cognitive and spiritual development of learners, it causes catastrophic ramifications to future generations as the cycle of perpetual mediocrity becomes the norm holding all learners to the same educational benchmarks (McBride, 2011). There is no drive to surpass or seek out knowledge. The desire to unearth the why question is removed from learning. When this happens, education as a system loses. RTI recognizes that all learners are not equal in ability, but are entitled to equitable instruction through tiered modifications and interventions. Since all learners have an innate desire to fit into a developmental niche; a student's intellectual growth could be hindered if instructed at an educational setting lower than their cognitive and metacognitive learning level (Dweck, 2015; Miller, 2011). Therefore, all learners have distinct learning needs that require planning and strategic action within curricular instruction in order to meet targeted growth goals. RTI cannot and was not designed to be a unilateral special education tool.

A major element of RTI centers on the premise that students should receive equitable instruction in the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 2004). A practical example of how a

standard-protocol system impacted a single inclusion-based preschool class is evidenced by Odom's (2012) study. Odom (2012) observed that preschool students identified as receiving special education services in conjunction with problem-solving RTI interventions within the general education classroom reflected greater gains on standardized measures of language and social competence. However, such inconclusive environments using a standard-protocol RTI model also demonstrated "deleterious effects for typically developing children" (Odom, 2012, p.3), citing Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) for the need for future research studies. Vygotsky's ZPD as supported through the Sociocultural Theory in conjunction with the social constructivist paradigm and Dweck's growth mindset theory, substantiates the role learning environment plays on the intellectual and cognitive growth of learners (Wang, Bruce, & Hughes, 2011). Educational learning environments cannot sacrifice the development or advancement of one learning population for another. The ethical responsibility remains that all students have the right to an equitable and reasonable education. When RTI interventions place a universal ceiling on mastery, students who exceed the ceiling are then left with no growth goals to strive toward. This inevitably hinders student motivation for learning (Nagengast, & Marsh, 2012; Wilson et al, 2014). Yet many modern classrooms find themselves pigeonholed due to increased demands of standardized testing (Jeweler & Barnes-Robinson, 2015). Many summative end of year testing set universal mastery levels at 70% thereby pressuring schools to ensure students pass the test to make annual yearly progress, which impacts school funding (Virginia General Assembly, 2017). With this type of pressure on schools and teachers, it is understandable that rote memorization and test-taking skills often trump a teacher's ability to offer tiered RTI interventions for high achieving students.

However, the long-term effects greatly outweigh the instant gratification of annual yearly progress reports as the US is experiencing a foreseen shortage in math, science, and skilled laborers (Nagengast, & Marsh, 2012). By not challenging students to reach his or her growth potential, the nation is losing possibilities of what could be. By putting ceiling on a student's learning by saying he or she has reached proficiency at 70% or even 80% and therefore does not need instructional interventions or increased rigor through RTI, the nation is forfeiting the possibilities of what that student could have unlocked in the future.

Another facet to consider is that students are not inherently born with content knowledge. Even GATE students do not have an increased awareness of content prior to being introduced to said content (Brulles, 2012). Arguably, early exposure from home, parental support, lifestyle, socio-economics, travel, etc. all play into a child's awareness, but all knowledge is learned from somewhere. Part of RTI's success is that within the least restrictive environment, all interventions must be data-driven and scientifically proven, meaning high achieving students should not be destined to live out their academic careers as tutors for less able peer learners (Brulles, 2012; Wilson et al., 2014). At the same time, inclusion-based instruction is healthy for the social development of general education and GATE learners. Based on data from a 2006 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) of 398,750 15-year-old gifted identified students, early inclusion-based classroom instruction at the primary and secondary levels are key to ensuring student motivation and ultimately personal achievement (Nagengast, & Marsh, 2012; Wilson et al., 2014).

These types of personal connections were also drawn between a student's academic achievement, academic self-concept, and career intentions and how these three areas affect the productivity and advancement of a developed nation's ability to acquire qualified technical

workers in the subject area of science (Nagengast, & Marsh, 2012; Pfeiffer, & Shaughnessy, 2013). The theory behind this inclusion-based model is known as big-fish-little-pond (Nagengast, & Marsh, 2012). This concept of big-fish-little-pond describes how GATE students placed in homogeneous learning environments often lose their sense of accomplishments because a universal bar of comparison is set at such a high ceiling, students believe they cannot possibly live up to the expectations and mentally fall short in anticipation. This also circumvents back to Dweck's fixed mindset that when a learner believes his or her intelligence alone creates success and the learner falls short of achieving a universal mastery rate, his or her self-worth is then questioned (Dweck, 2010). Learning is more than simply content knowledge. Developing a passion for life-long learning within students is the goal of any reputable academic institution. Thereby, creating and fostering a growth mindset through RTI affects more than simply summative test scores.

This is why utilizing RTI methods within an inclusion-based classroom with a GATE population is necessary to maintain both healthy intellectual and social development. Interestingly, the opposite was true for lower achieving students. When placed in homogeneous grouping, lower achieving students increased their self-concept because the bar of comparison was within grasp. Although not specifically stated, the most likely cause of this was a lower bar of mastery within a fixed mindset (Nagengast, & Marsh, 2012).

While there is a plethora of case studies on inclusion-based classrooms and RTI interventions within the special education realm, there is a high demand for working model representations of inclusion-based RTI interventions within the general education classroom at the secondary setting (Callahan, Moon, Oh, Azano, & Haily, 2015; Washington, 2014). Specifically, in Washington's (2014) study results, he calls for further studies to show how

detailed RTI strategies of effective interventions within high schools can be showcased through exceptional instructional practices to help all students succeed in school. In addition, schools need to meet the learning needs of specifically identified gifted students through the use of Tier I interventions as opposed to no interventions (Callahan et al, 2015). Studies conducted by Callahan et al., (2015) found GATE students receiving Tier I interventions were more consistently able to achieve growth goals than students who received no intervention support. It is reasonable to assume similar results would hold true to general education students, although there is a gap in the literature to definitively reflect the impact of RTI on growth goals of general education students as RTI has traditionally been used as a special education tool and not as a universal multi-tiered instructional tool for the general education population (Preston et al., 2016).

How RTI Has Overlooked the GATE Population

Since the mandate of PL 94-142 by Congress in 1975, special education has been funded and regulated by the federal Department of Education (DOE). With both positive and negative outcomes to this legislation, studies reflect that at the helm of the practical application of this program reside the leadership qualities of K12 school administrators (Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2014). Since the RTI model by itself does not provide enough support for general education teachers to know how to apply virtually endless modification and intervention practices within the inclusion-based instructional setting, K12 administrators are charged with a grueling responsibility to help design, facilitate, and implement additional tools, resources, and guidance for teachers (Seedorf, 2014). Additionally, with states requiring specialized credentials to teach GATE courses, yet many GATE programs being cut due to decreased funding, more and more GATE students are finding themselves within with the general

education setting without any supplemental tools or teachers with GATE certification for advanced instruction. While the original intent of RTI was to incorporate a multi-tiered and differentiated instructional approach for all students, most schools across the US are not utilizing RTI for GATE students (Seedorf, 2014).

Education of the gifted is unique to the field of special education as GATE students are not currently protected under any federal mandates, including IDEA; thus, "there are no federal funds available to operate programs at the local level" (Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2014, p. 1; Grassley, 2014). Three decades ago, Sidney Marland called attention to the educational needs of GATE students by pleading for identification and differentiation services for advanced learners (Seedorf, 2014). Marland claimed GATE learners are a distinct learning group on the special education spectrum to be recognized by administrative leaderships in which such leaders are then expected to remain in (a) compliance at the federal, state or local levels, (b) exhibit effective identification procedures, (c) maximize program options to meet individual learning needs, (d) extend parent involvement to plan and maintain effective individualized services and (e) explore program changes based on program evaluations (Grassley, 2014; Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2014; Ritchotte, Matthews, & Flowers, 2014). If it is accepted that learners demonstrating a gap between ability and performance below the average bar of proficiency receive additional academic funds and support for instruction, then it is conceivable for learners at the opposite end of the learning spectrum, those reflecting a gap surpassing the average bar of proficiency should also be entitled to enrichment instruction as arguably neither of the needs of these two distinct learning groups are being met (Seedorf, 2014; Tefler & Howley, 2014; Walsh et al., 2012).

An advocate and respected leader in the world of gifted instruction, Renzulli (2012) believes gifted learning should be the "culmination of natural learning, representing synthesis

and an application of content, process, and personal involvement through self-motivated work" (p.155). Another element of RTI success in the least restrictive environment is evident in the levels of Bloom's taxonomy, which in practice is more readily accessible and differentiated to students. GATE students should be instructed at the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (Jones & Hebert, 2012). These levels however, are not predominately the instructional models utilized in traditional non-RTI general education, special education or inclusion-based classrooms. Furthermore, inclusion-based settings typically do not allow for high quality discussions necessary for students performing at gifted levels to "develop original ideas and critical thinking, [and] essential skills needed to … analyze varying perspectives" (Jones, & Hebert, 2012, p. 256). RTI interventions, if differentiated for the GATE learner, could help breech intellectual performance gaps and learning ceilings. Walsh, Kemp, Hodge, and Bowes (2012) contend there have been no reviews "focusing exclusively on educational interventions for gifted children in the early childhood years" (p. 105). RTI, however, is that early educational intervention tool. Currently federal legislation covering the rights of students with special learning needs is contained within IDEA (2004). By extension the rights of gifted, talented and high achieving students are not mandated under IDEA, unless the student is identified as duel exceptional (Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2014). Duel exceptional students receive additional support through special education services via an IEP or 504 plan. Thereby it is imperative that RTI practices are implemented as a universal instructional tool for all students.

One such reason GATE students have been overlooked when it comes to RTI interventions is that instructional reading interventions tend to focus on students who are not meeting adequate progress or benchmarks on grade level assessments (Stuebing, Barth, Trahan, Reddy, Miciak, & Fletcher, 2014). "Decker et al. (2013) argued that the inclusion of cognitive

assessments facilitates understanding of individual learning differences that directly affect the efficacy of academic interventions" (Stuebing et al., 2014, p. 396). However, the purpose of RTI is to increase a learner's proximal development, possible when students believe and are supported through a growth mindset. Another reason GATE students are often not included in RTI practices is that teachers already feel overwhelmed "having to differentiate for at-risk and struggling learners" (Seedorf, 2014, p. 251). When schools place the emphasis on achievement, in order to meet AYP, the focus of the classroom teacher turns to the underachieving and nonproficient student as opposed to the student who is already achieving at or above grade level.

Another obstacle for GATE students receiving RTI support is that the system itself is viewed as a problem-based model to close achievement gaps, rather than a needs-based model (Seedorf, 2014). Assuming GATE students achieve proficiency on end of year summative state assessments, there would not be any gaps to close in this particular learning group's proficiency as far as AYP is concerned. This mentality again negates the cognitive development needs of GATES learners as instruction is halted at targeted ceilings as opposed to individualized growth goals.

Other studies have found developing RTI interventions for GATE learners have been slow to develop due to "scheduling conflicts, limited access to reliable progress monitoring tools aligned with grade-level content, and a more complex curriculum" (Ciullo et al., 2017, p. 45). Ciullo et al (2017) found one unpublished dissertation study by Kethley (2005), A Case Study of the Reading Instruction of Four Middle School Teachers, revealing the usage of decoding and fluency interventions but no support for vocabulary instruction or reading comprehension evident within the general education classroom. Because GATE learners are achieving at or above grade level benchmarks, interventions are typically not designed to increase the mastery

ceiling level for these learners because he or she has already met the learning ceiling. In effect, such practices are negating the nature of RTI as each learner has an individual learning need and growth goal and should be enabled to fulfill his or her individual learning needs. Many RTI models only identify students whose academic performance in reading or math is at or below a particular benchmark score in relation to his or her same-grade peers. Thereby, GATE students often do not meet this criteria (McCallum et al., 2013). This is a disservice to GATE students as this population's proficiency levels should be set to ability peers and not grade or age level peers. Currently there is very limited literature available on the implementation of RTI at the secondary school inclusion setting warranting further research on this topic (Ciullo et al., 2017).

One of the few studies to tackle this topic was conducted by Robertson and Pfeiffer (2016). The study exposed a lack in RTI invention with GATE students by developing a 3-phase mixed methods design for their study; including a field testing procedural guide for implementing a RTI model with gifted students (Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016). What Robertson and Pfeiffer (2016) found was that Phase 1, Curriculum Compacting, was not practical in school settings. The process itself was far too labor intensive. Schedule restraints also hindered and created logistical concerns negating students from taking advanced courses creating a need for a second phase of the study. Phase #2: Multidimensional Rating Scale, enabled administrators to develop course sections based on self-recommendations by the students. Finally, Phase #3: Parental Involvement was sought out based on narrative feedback, as it was determined team-based decision making was needed to support RTI models within the gifted forum. Experts also showed concern that Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) and traditional approaches to curriculum-based measurement (CBM) may not be the best progress-monitoring tools for GATE students as

identified gifted learners tend to demonstrate above grade level fluency in these areas entering the grade level negating a true measurement of growth (Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016).

While traditionally reserved as an instructional tool to assist underperforming students, the intended purpose of RTI is to assist and increase the intellectual abilities of all students (Brendle, 2014; Brown, 2012; Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016). When students, in particular those identified as GATE, are placed in inclusion settings, observational studies reveal less direct instruction observed in comparison to peers leading to higher instances of student disengagement (McCormick & Plucker, 2013). Gate students complain that within the inclusion setting they are used as peer tutors, limiting their ability to converse on levels that challenge his or her cognitive ability (Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016). This ultimately accounts for decreases in both participation and personal accountability of students' life-long learning (McCormick & Plucker, 2013).

Furthermore, Jones and Herbert (2012) strongly advocate developing multicultural educational opportunities for gifted learners honoring the sociocultural diversity within the inclusion-based classroom as well as recognizing and acknowledging their own self-worth to foster, "mutual respect and accountability" (p. 254). Without establishing growth goals, a challenging, yet healthy instructional learning environment, GATE students will not be able to perform at his or her full aptitude or ability. When schools place AYP before student growth goals, GATE students lose; they lose the possibilities of what could be, can be, and what is possible through challenging rigor and fail-forward learning moments.

RTI in Rural and Mid-Western Schools

One of the largest barriers to RTI instructional interventions facilitated within the greater inclusive classroom setting may very well be the clichéd belief inadequate teacher training is leading to ineffective instructional techniques (Bianco, 2005; Barnard-Brak, Johnsen, Hannig &

Wei, 2015). A primary result of Brendle's (2014) rural area school study found that both special education and general education teachers are in dire need of ongoing professional development in practical application of RTI strategies. Interestingly though, Brendle (2014) uncovered that special education teachers perceived themselves as more knowledgeable in the RTI process than general education teachers, when it is the general education teachers who are supposed to be implementing RTI within the general education classroom. Additionally, teachers with more RTI training hours, not necessarily teaching experience, referred more eligible students for RTI intervention than teachers with less training (Brendle, 2014). While the latter reflects more training, more knowledge, it is burdensome to the greater education system that RTI training is still predominately reserved for special education teachers and not the general education teacher.

Similar studies showed general education teachers believed themselves to be proficient in Tier I strategies but felt frustrated overall with Tiers II and III (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015). General education teachers seemed to know how to make data-based decisions for Tier I, yet lacked confidence in collaborative decision making for Tiers II and III. Results also unearthed teacher frustration at the lack of professional development and support from school administration as well as the limited resources to assist in RTI implementation. Interviews and focus group consensus revealed a theme of overwhelming anxiety by general education teachers who felt RTI was in many ways more burdensome then helpful to student growth. Coping became a running theme of the focus group and interviews (Brendle, 2014; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015).

A similar quantitative study conducted in a western US school revealed interviewed teachers reported not having enough time to fully implement RTI universal screeners or modifications for gifted students (Seedorf, 2014). In particular, these teachers reported time was

the most valued article most limited to them. Administration also reported not wanting to add more onto the teachers' charges, as they were already overwhelmed with so many responsibilities. Many times, this is why administration choose to not address RTI strategies at professional development sessions even though teacher responses showed a theme that more professional development in the area of RTI was highly desired (Seedorf, 2014). There was an overall sense from administration that they did not want to burn teachers out.

In 2012, the Milwaukee Public School (MPS) system asked the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest to conduct an audit to determine if the system was properly implementing RTI with fidelity (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Ruffini, Miskell, Lindsey, McInerney, & Waite, 2016). The MPS system reported teachers were provided with two years of extensive independent consultant training in RTI before the audit commenced. Partnering with the National Center on Response to Intervention, REL Midwest indexed the fidelity of RTI implementation at 68 of the 70 schools within the MPS system on a 33 item rubric and scored on a 5-point scale. Basing fidelity on a 6-point framework of data-based decision making, universal screening and assessments, differentiated instruction, leadership, collaboration, and evaluation, the audit found an implementation score of 3.61 across all 68 Milwaukee schools (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). 53% of schools were found to be implementing the framework of RTI with fidelity, while 49% were still void in demonstrating adequate fidelity in implementing an evaluation component, specifically at Tier III (Ruffini et al., 2016). Implications also revealed across all school types that leadership and collaboration components were implemented with the strongest levels of fidelity. While multitiered instruction and evaluation components were evidenced as making the least amount of progress after two years of intense RTI training. A take away from the MPS study is that schools wishing to implement RTI with fidelity should

ensure a strong curricular support department for teachers as well as ongoing professional development specifically in the areas of tier III and cultural and linguistic responsiveness instruction. The Milwaukee study holds immense value within the field of RTI as there are "so few evaluations of RTI as a system …and still fewer evaluations that document the fidelity of implementation" (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017, p. 262).

Schools across Wisconsin are facing similar challenges. Little time and even less funding for professional development. Unclear expectations of how to implement RTI within full inclusion settings. What should Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III instruction and interventions look like when there are varying ceiling and benchmarks for student learners (Wisconsin, 2017a)? Telfer and Howley's (2014) qualitative study used a case study method to present significant strides two rural school districts have taken to close achievement gaps between students with and without learning disabilities. For this qualitative case study, the results found six common practices the two rural districts exemplified on a consistent basis. Both schools used data well, established and maintained focus, implemented shared instructional practices, provided continuous feedback and support to students, instruction demonstrated evidence of inquiry and learning, and depth and rigor was evident in instruction (Telfer & Howley, 2014). How those common practices were applied in a practical sense however, were not modeled. By not modeling the practices, other rural schools are not able to mimic the districts' success. There is a distinct difference between RTI theory and RTI application.

With so many elementary and special education variations in play, there is a need to showcase and model a successful RTI inclusion-based general education model at the secondary educational setting. Comprehensive discussions on the evolution of RTI analyzing current practices are desired to seek a better understanding of future practices to enable educational

professionals to better implement the intricacies and benefits of the RTI model (Preston et al., 2016). One notion greatly discounted is the often-overlooked difference between students with low achievement and students with a learning disability (Preston et al., 2016). Current studies have shown schools to be successful in implementing RTI Tier I interventions within the general education classroom by way of intense individual instruction. However, very few are able to demonstrate efficiency with Tier II and III interventions and recommend further research to determine the effectiveness of Tier III for general education and GATE learners (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Preston et al., 2016; Ruffini et al., 2016). With a goal to increase the performance proficiency for all students, rather than simply establish a bar of proficiency, RTI remains a highly debated and sought-after model for tiered instructional intervention (Wisconsin, 2017a). This is all relevant when designing a workable RTI model for inclusion-based general education settings. Socially, inclusion-based instruction is healthy for all students, but within that setting, RTI tiers must be tiered themselves to account for the various ability levels of different learners. In other words, the RTI mastery levels should be tiered themselves based on students' individual abilities, aptitudes, performance levels, and growth goals. This again, is a gap in the literature where schools and teachers are looking to model best practices for RTI intervention strategies at the secondary level.

There is also an accountability of educational leaders to take an active role in facilitating positive change through RTI (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2011). "America's educational system is not improving, and hasn't been for decades" (Surface, 2014, p. 567). Seemingly, US schools flat-lined with the arrival of national standards and testing, benchmarks of AYP and federal funding (Surface, 2014). Presenting the same material to all students indiscriminate of ability, while providing an equal education, denies an equitable education opportunity (Vatterott,

2015; Mukadam, Vyas, & Nayak, 2014). The Nation has been under an attack of drill and kill instruction for years in order to meet annual yearly progress for federal and state funding. Such teacher-centric instruction has direct links to an increased number of high school dropouts reported nationwide (Fall, 2012; Dorn, 2003). Arguably, there are countless reasons students give for why they drop out of school, but in the end, students drop out of high school because they value something else over his or her high school education. When this happens the school, the school system and the educator have failed the student. Student disengagement does not equate or give causation to student dropout, but it may play a factor. By utilizing RTI within the general education classroom as a tiered multilevel system of support for all students, high schools can help increase student engagement and decrease dropout rates (Fall, 2012).

In order for RTI to be successful, learning must be personal, to both the teacher and the student. It is imperative both remember they are equally life-long learners. When one forgets that the other is just as delicate and fragile in their exposure to the learned world, it is easier for abuse, neglect and complacency to step in. In short, it is important for educational leaders to always put the needs of the student before their own, which could mean sacrificing personal time and resources for the betterment of the learning experience. This also means that educational leaders may sometimes need to step out of their comfort zones to challenge the very system they represent when something is not right or just. Challenging the system may lead to healthy rejuvenations (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Surface argues the notion that just such a "change in the educational system will come from the countryside, from rural educational leaders with a deep commitment to true education in their particular place on earth" (2014, p. 567). Challenging current RTI implementation by providing a working model of a Midwest School of Distinction may be just the change rural educators need to find their own RTI fidelity.

Summary

Throughout this study, researchers have described the ongoing practicalities that are plaguing the implementation and fidelity of RTI within the general education setting at the secondary level. From a lack of time to a lack in teacher and administrative training, schools across the nation are experiencing similar misgivings when it comes to the application of RTI interventions within the general education setting. What current research does reflect is how RTI is predominately used as an instructional intervention tool for underperforming special education students at the elementary educational setting (Callahan et al., 2015; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Kuo, 2015). All the while, students performing at or above grade level on summative screening assessments for Tier I identification are often not given the opportunity to increase intellectual performance through RTI modifications. The three tiers of RTI are designed to be preventative research-based multi-tiered instructional support tools for all students, indiscriminate of aptitude or ability, but rather performance based (Preston et al., 2016). While Midwest schools such as Milwaukee Public Schools was found to implement RTI Tier I with average fidelity, 69% of MPS had yet to begin implementing Tiers II and III of RTI (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). RTI has in many ways failed to meet its intended purpose. This scientifically research based instructional tool designed to help all students meet and expand his or her growth mindset, has fallen into a bit of despair. More than forty years after RTI first entered the academic arena, teachers and administrators at the secondary level are still unsure what RTI should look like and how to implement instructional interventions within a general education classroom for non-special education learners (Amundson & Hartwig, 2010; Brown, 2012; Dweck, 2015, 2017).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This qualitative descriptive single-case study (Yin, 2014) seeks to observe and interview teachers and administrators of a rural Midwest secondary school currently implementing Tiers I, II, and III RTI interventions with fidelity, a real-life contemporary phenomenon, within the general education classroom. As described by Yin (2014), the case study method is the most effective and best fit research model for this study. RTI was designed to be a preventative multi-tiered instructional model with growth monitoring (Preston et al., 2016). Carol Dweck's (2012, 2014, 2015) growth mindset serves as the guiding theory supporting this study based on the premise that intelligence is malleable (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015); the guiding principle of RTI. Chapter Three methodically presents the descriptive single-case study design of this study, the guiding research questions, setting, participants, procedures, and trustworthiness that ultimately went into this case study design.

Design

In order to more fully represent the values and perceptions that underlie and influence the RTI model at a Wisconsin secondary school of distinction recognized for successful RTI fidelity, a descriptive single-case study design (Yin, 2014) will be utilized for this study. The intent is to showcase a rural Wisconsin middle/high school, as identified by the Wisconsin RtI Center, who implements RTI universal screening and corresponding Tiers I, II, and III instructional interventions with fidelity within the general education setting. Due to the nature of this study, the qualitative research method provides a better means to explore human behavior with the intent to share learned research with the greater educational community (Roshan & Deeptee, 2009). Qualitative studies seek to better understand how and why people are influenced to

behave in a certain way. It is important for this study to use a qualitative approach in order to capture the language, perceptions, and potential strategic direction for other educational institutions to mirror or use as a foundation for future improvements of respective RTI models. Therefore, research must reflect human behavior from the participant perspectives, assuming a known reality through administrative and teacher interviews and observations of teacher focus groups and a professional learning community (PLC) meeting. Arguably, qualitative research has been referred to as a soft research method, however, it is imperative for social science and society to acknowledge quantitative research cannot always express phenomenon of the natural world solely by numeric values (Yin, 2014). This descriptive single-case qualitative research method will be used to observe, organize, analyze, and present data to reflect how things occur in real-world practice as the gap in literature identifies great confusion amongst educational professions as to practical application of RTI within the secondary setting and calls for what RTI should look like and how the RTI method can be implemented with fidelity within the secondary general education classroom (Amundson & Hartwig, 2010; Brown, 2012; Dweck, 2015, 2017).

According to Yin (2014), this qualitative research method is appropriate because (a) a small geographic area will be showcased by way of a single school; (b) the study investigates the real-life contemporary phenomenon of RTI; and because this study (c) extends and strengthens previous research through holistic and in-depth investigations of shared experiences using administrator and teacher interviews and observations of teacher focus groups and a professional learning community (PLC) meeting (USC, 2017). The case study method of this qualitative research enables the collection of descriptive data to fill gaps in existing theories (Creswell, 2013; Roshan & Deeptee, 2009). For example, this case study will require building upon Carol Dweck's (2015, 2017) substantiated theory growth mindset, and seeking to provide through

interviews, observations, and patterns to provide a credible answer to questions grounded in the premise of how (Dresch, Lacerda, & Miguel, 2015; Yin, 2014). Those how questions to the application of RTI within the secondary general education instruction are represented in the research questions for this case study.

In particular, I will be using the descriptive single case study method to study and report findings on how one single secondary educational institution, MMHS, implements RTI practices with fidelity within the general education instructional setting. Permission was obtained by MMHS administration to conduct the study on-sight (Appendix A). By using the single case study method, and after obtaining IRB approval (Appendix B), I will be able to conduct through administrator and teacher interviews and observations of teacher focus groups and a professional learning community (PLC) meeting, enabling a more intense examination of this real-life event.

Research Questions

This descriptive single-case study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how one rural Midwest secondary school successfully implements RTI interventions within the general education instructional setting. The following three research questions guide this descriptive single-case study design:

1. How are RTI factors (Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III) implemented across all ability groups in a universal manner?
2. What support factors are needed for faculty to feel confident implementing Tier I RTI modifications within the general education setting?
3. How is the school using the universal screener to identify students in need of Tier I, II, or III instructional modifications?

Setting

The study setting will be one rural Wisconsin secondary school, which has been identified as a RTI School of Distinction by the Wisconsin RtI Center. The exceptional rating criteria per the Wisconsin RtI Center's (2017b) rubric in conjunction with accreditation requirements from the WI Department of Public Instruction (DPI) was used as the selection tool (Appendix C). This tool was selected based on its universal screening of all schools in the state of Wisconsin and approved by the DPI with support from federal funds (Wisconsin RtI Center, 2017b) for consistency and credibility of standards based on a common rubric and standard accreditation requirement (Wisconsin RtI Center, 2017b). In order for any school within the state of Wisconsin to be considered for recognition as a School of Distinction, the building site, not the district, had to qualify as a bronze, silver, gold, or platinum level by the Wisconsin RtI Center (2017b) using the 2016-2017 rating matrix (Appendix C). Schools across Wisconsin have begun implementing a culturally responsive positive behavioral intervention system (PBIS) and RTI programs increasing support levels to students within all content areas. All DPI K12 schools within Wisconsin are eligible to be recognized within the following levels by the Wisconsin RtI Center (2017b):

Table 3. 1 Wisconsin RtI Center's Levels of Distinction

	Level	Qualifying Descriptor
GROUP 1	Bronze	At full implementation/fidelity in one content area at the universal level for at least one year
RTI	Silver	At full implementation/fidelity in one content area at the universal level for at least two years and selected level for at least one year
GROUP 2	Gold	At full implementation/fidelity in two content areas at the universal and selected levels for at least two years
RTI & PBIS	Platinum	At full implementation/fidelity in all three content areas, at all three levels, and for at least three years

Midwest Middle/High School was selected as a Midwest school of distinction to showcase in conjunction with the Wisconsin RtI Center and the WI Department of Public Instruction (DPI), as MMHS qualified at a bronze level for mathematics (Wisconsin RtI Center, 2017c). It should be noted that than 10% of schools throughout WI qualify as a School of Distinction at any level (Wisconsin RtI Center, 2017c). Bronze and Silver represent distinction in RTI implementation, whereas Gold and Platinum represent distinction in both RTI and PBIS implementation; currently there are no schools in WI at the platinum level. The vast majority of schools who qualified with the 2016-2017 rubric for RTI distinction were at the elementary level. Of the total Bronze schools, elementary included, 103 qualified for math, and 98 qualified for reading. However, of those schools, over fifty where repeat schools of distinction, meaning schools qualified in more than one core area. Of the total schools earning bronze distinction, only 2 were distinct high schools and 2 were trade schools. With over 2,238 schools in WI, I believe MMHS is well qualified to serve as the setting for this study as a school of distinction for implementing RTI with fidelity, especially at the secondary level.

MMHS is located within the town of Midwest, Wisconsin. The 2010 US Census Bureau reported a total population of just over 1900 with a median age of 40.0 years old. The male to female ratio reported was 48.4:51.6 with children 0-19 years of age carrying 26.4% of the city population at 507 (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Of the 1,920 registered citizens of Midwest, 1,650 self-identified as white, 178 as American Indian/Alaska Native, 8 as Black or African American, 6 as Asian, 1 as Hawaiian, 4 as other race, and 70 as two or more races (United States Census Bureau, 2017). 40 residents also self-identified as Hispanic. As of the last reported 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate for Midwest, the median household income was $38,031, with the majority of employment stemming from service,

healthcare, and education fields. 19.1% of Midwest citizens qualify under the poverty mark, with 261 citizens currently without health insurance. MMHS has a combined 29 faculty and staff members to service the 2017-2018 student body population. Ranging from a middle school teacher who doubles as the activities director at the high school to the school nurse, even the principal has a collateral duty as a middle school coach (The School District of Midwest, 2017).

Participants

Per Wisconsin's RtI Center qualification criteria for Schools of Distinction in conjunction with Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI) accreditation requirements, MMHS in northern Wisconsin will serve as the setting for this descriptive single-case study. Permission to perform this study on campus at MMHS was approved by Midwest Superintendent, Dr. A, under the supervision of onsite district administrator, Ms. B, Director of Pupil Services (Appendix A). An administrative team, comprised of the Director of Pupil Services and the middle/high school principal, as well as a faculty team will be used for this study. Nine teachers and two school counselors will be identified by the site administrator ranging from within the different core content areas (Appendix D-F). Each of the participants were selected to volunteer based on his or her experience implementing RTI within the general education instructional setting or for working with teachers implementing RTI within the general education instructional setting. The general education setting included students identified by the district as (a) special education, (b) general education, and/or (c) gifted learners (GATE). All participants are volunteers to this study and are free to exit the research study at any time. All participants will be made aware in writing and with oral directions of all possible IRB or ethical concerns prior to signing a consent to participate form (Appendix G-H). Signing the consent form still enables volunteers to leave the study at any time. All volunteer participants will be adult, DPI licensed, educators or

administrators under contract with MMHS. There will be no direct contact with students for this study. Nor will there be compensation to volunteers for participating in this study.

Procedures

Prior to obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, I submitted all data collection questions to Dr. Wendy Dzurick, an expert in qualitative research methods (Appendix I-K). It was important to make sure each interview question related to one of the three research questions. After two reviews of the questions, the questions were solidified as relevant and structurally significant to this study. Dr. Dzurick's expert review provides content and face validity of the data collection tools for this study. In addition, with the assistance of Mr. Dan Seaman from the Wisconsin RtI Center, a few of the schools on the Wisconsin RtI Center's (2017c) Schools of Distinction list were contacted to begin building relationships. While no onsite interactions or data collection was conducted, it was important to have an idea of which schools would be willing to allow such a study to be conducted on their site and with their faculty. Permission was granted by MMHS district administration to conduct the study on campus with faculty and staff members (Appendix A). The Wisconsin RtI Center, represented by Mr. Dan Seaman, accepted my request to serve as an external auditor on this study.

After acquiring IRB approval, I will conduct the study at MMHS. In order to conduct this descriptive single case study, it will be confirmed with the Wisconsin school of distinction exact dates acceptable to be on campus to begin the onsite research portion of this study. Onsite research will begin with individual face to face semi-structured interviews with the administrative team who oversee RTI implementation. One interview will be with the district superintendent and the other will be with the school principal. After those two interviews are conducted, a teacher PLC planning meeting of RTI data desegregation and modification planning

will be observed. Next, I will facilitate a focus group session of 5-8 teachers who implement RTI modifications within a general education instructional setting and who also volunteered to be participants in the individual interview sessions. Next, I will conduct individual interviews with the identified 12 faculty members. It will be within both the focus group and individual interviews that semi-structured questions will serve as discussion prompts for the volunteer participants to discuss his or her perception of the workings of RTI interventions at MMHS. All interviews and observations will be digitally recorded using the Voice Record app as well as a hand-held tape recorder and transcribed verbatim by an independent auditor to ensure accuracy and credibility (Yin, 2014). Field notes will also be taken for additional memory tracking (Appendix N). All data will then be analyzed, coded, and categorized into general themes aggregated to form a common idea using a portfolio model (Cassell & Symon, 2012).

The Researcher's Role

As the researcher, I serve as the human instrument in this descriptive single-case study. In this qualitative study, I will attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants in order to present the real-life application of RTI within the general education instructional setting. It is my responsibility to safeguard participants and their data. I will articulate such safeguards to all volunteer participants both orally and in writing. Safeguard techniques will include study anonymity, member checking, and the safe guarding of all collected data in a locked safe and password protected electronic device. I have no personal relationships to any of the participants in this study. I am not, nor have I ever been employed by the participating educational community where this study takes place. As the human instrument, I will be asking semi-structured interview questions and observing how teachers and administrators believe they are able to successfully implement RTI practices within general education instructional settings to

showcase specific strategies that can be replicated in other general education instructional learning environments to benefit student learners.

Data Collection

For this case study, triangulation through semi-structured individual interview sessions, a focus group meeting, and an observation of a teacher-led PLC meeting, I will collect in-depth information on the shared experience of RTI fidelity to see if there are corroborating strategies to attest as to why and/or how the identified Wisconsin School of Distinction is able to achieve the success levels of the RTI model within the general education instructional classroom. Archival records of publicly accessible state Forward Exam data from recent years will also be used as state accreditation further attests to the RTI success of MMHS. The state of Wisconsin releases Forward Exam data results based on school averages per content test in accordance with AYP. Publicly released test results are not student specific. Therefore, student identities are protected and not specific to this study.

All interviews as well as the focus group will be digitally recorded to ensure accuracy in transcription and credibility in member checking. With the goal to develop convergent evidence through open-ended interviews, documents, observations, and focus interviews, I intend to strengthen the construct validity of this case study (Yin, 2014).

Interviews

While interviews can be a time-consuming form of data collection, they are also an important means of gathering interpersonal and intrapersonal forms of information. This type of data requires extensive preparation, allocated time to conduct scheduled interviews, and sufficient time to accurately transcribe each interview. For this study there will be three different types of interviews conducted. The first type of interview will be referred to as semi-structured

interview questions for administrators. These interviews will be composed of face-to-face individual interviews with the school principal and district superintendent. Both administrators oversee RTI implementation from a district level and are responsible for reporting annual yearly progress to the DPI based on RTI growth goals. Open-ended semi-structured interview prompts grounded in the themes of research questions will be used to better understand the district's support, foundational concept, and implementation of RTI. The second set of interviews, entitled *semi-structured interview questions for faculty members* are different from the aforementioned interview questions as the latter are designed specifically for teachers and faculty that directly interact and implement RTI within the general education setting. It is expected that 12 faculty members will participate in this set of interview questions. The third set of interview questions are designed for a focus group session comprised of five to eight teaching faculty members who partook in the initial individual interview sessions. These semi-structured interview questions for focus group members are designed to better understand the shared experiences of RTI across curricular settings (see Appendix I). While all interview questions directly link to each of the three research questions for this study, the three different sets of questions have been specifically designed to reflect the different roles that administrators and faculty play with regard to MMHS's RTI model. The Wisconsin RtI Center also played a role in the development of these questions to ensure practical application. All interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Semi-structured Interview Questions for Administrators

1. When did this school begin the transition to RTI?
2. From inception, how long did it take for the school to fully implement RTI interventions across all ability groups?

3. How many years would you recall it taking before the teachers were fully committed to the RTI system?
4. What do you think helped get the teachers to a level of comfort where the school is now recognized as a Wisconsin School of Excellence?
5. How much professional development time is specifically allocated to RTI training for faculty?
6. What about for you as an administrator? Do you have any support for RTI training?
7. How is the school using the universal screening tool to identify students in need of tier I, II, or III instructional modifications?

Interview questions 1, 2 are directly linked to research question 1. The purpose of the first two administrator interview questions is to gain insight into how MMHS was able to implement RTI interventions across all ability groups in a universal manner (Milligan et al., 2014). Interview questions 3,4,5, and 6 are designed to support the second research question. It is important to explore support factors needed for faculty to feel confident implementing Tier I RTI modifications for general education and gifted learners as the learning environment itself holds a tremendous impact on the learning potential of students (Burns et al., 2005; Dweck, 2015, 2017). The final semi-structured interview question is linked to the third research question as this case study seeks to showcase an exceptional school implementing RTI interventions. Therefore, it is imperative to critically identify and analyze the universal screening tool used by such a school in order to better understand how students are identified and then instructed based on tiered interventions (Ciullo et al., 2016; Fuchs et al., 2012).

Semi-structured Interview Questions for Individual Faculty Members

1. What is the percentage of special education to general education to gifted in your classes?

2. How are initial Tier I screenings conducted?
3. How are students identified for your class into Tier I, II, or III for instructional support?
4. How are general education and gifted students included in the RTI model?
5. How do you adjust your lessons accordingly in order to address intervention plans for RTI Tier's I, II, III for each ability group?
6. Do you see RTI as a helpful instructional tool for you as an educator to help students achieve their learning goals, or is it just more paperwork?

Carol Dweck's (2017) growth mindset believes the learning environment greatly impacts the learning potential of students. These initial semi-structured interview questions are designed to better understand the structural development and format of the educational institution's philosophy on RTI (see Appendix J). At the core, these questions are attempting to solicit the practical principles of RTI at the Wisconsin RtI Center's (2017c) selected school of distinction and how this school makes RTI practical and accessible for the betterment of all students. Faculty interview questions 1, 4, and 5 are directly linked to the first research question. The purpose of these faculty interview questions is to gain insight into the shared experience of how faculty members at MMHS implement RTI interventions across all ability groups in a universal manner (Bradley et al., 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006. Interview question 6 is designed to support the second research question. For this study to maintain credibility and transparency, it is necessary to explore the shared experiences of teachers who implement RTI interventions within his or her classroom and as well as to explore what those teachers need to feel confident implementing Tier I RTI modifications to general education and gifted learners (Dweck, 2015, 2017; Wang et al., 2011). Interview questions 2 and 3 are linked to the final research question which seeks to critically analyze the shared faculty's perspective of the universal screening tool

used to identify students into one of the three RTI model tiers (Jeweler & Barnes-Robinson, 2015; Odom, 2012; Preston et al., 2016). There is a distinct difference between identifying a student in need of RTI instructional interventions v the practical application of modifying instruction to meet instructional needs.

Document Analysis

Analyzing documents can be more objective than reflective data such as interviews or focus groups. Therefore, documents including, but not limited to Midwest's School-Wide Improvement Review (SIR), faculty notes and calendar dates such as professional development and in-service trainings relating to RTI instruction, lesson plans reflecting Tier accommodations, publicly accessible Wisconsin Forward Exam results, and non-Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) records maintained by faculty such as anonymous student growth goals may be analyzed for relevancy toward this case study (Yin, 2014). While the majority of this case study will focus on shared teacher and administrator feedback, there is the possibility that such objective evidence may lend credibility to the RTI model being employed by MMHS. The goal of RTI's multi-tiered instructional intervention model is to provide instructional differentiation to all learners. That being accepted, a MMHS faculty member's opinion to the effectiveness of RTI would be subjective at best if not supported by some type of outside assessment or accrediting agency. Documentation from the Wisconsin RtI Center (2017d) as well as MMHS's accreditation history, which is grounded in the state's standardized test scores from the Wisconsin Forward Exams, will help validate the effectiveness of the RTI model and strategies used to achieve AYP. Furthermore, it is partially based on the fidelity of the SIR that serves as a factor in the Wisconsin RtI Center's (2017d) selection of MMHS as a school of distinction per the Wisconsin RtI Recognized School Process rubric. Faculty in-service and

professional development training sessions, evidence of tiered and/or differentiated lesson plans, as well as formal anonymous student growth goals may assist this study in developing a more solid foundation for practical application of the RTI model, again called for in the literature gaps (Amundson & Hartwig, 2010; Brown, 2012). In addition, it may prove beneficial to the greater educational community to identify how volunteer participants from the secondary level (a) design and/or use formal tiered and/or differentiated lesson plans based on the three RTI tiers, (b) use formal student growth goals to guide instruction, and (c) whether professional develop and in-service trainings align with strategic school year instructional goals.

The purpose of analyzing these types of RTI related documents, in addition to the interviews, focus group, and observation of a PLC meeting, is to be able to see the world from the perspective of the volunteer participants. Quantitative data alone cannot tell a holistic story of how such a small rural Midwest school is able to fully implement RTI with the success levels it has obtained and with the honors for which it has been recognized. Most importantly, the data analysis for this study must be true to the voices of the participants at MMHS and not reflect any bias or preconceived notions held by the researcher.

Focus Groups

Open-ended semi-structured interview prompts will be used within the focus group session to better understand the shared experience participating volunteer teachers perceive the universal screening process to be and how Tier I, II, and III instructional modifications impact instruction within the general education classroom. The focus group, unlike the faculty interviews is designed only for content teachers. In the individual interview session, special education teachers and a guidance counselor were included in the interviews as those faculty members had direct contact with the RTI process at MMHS. However, for this focus group, it

will be important in an attempt to not only delve deeper into understanding the nuances of how RTI is successfully implemented at MMHS, but also to better understand the shared experience of the content teachers who are responsible for daily lesson plan development, student growth goals, classroom management, and student referral for special education services. Content teachers are the first line of defense when it comes to academic growth and knowing the abilities of his or her students. As professionals carrying valid state teaching licenses in a field or fields of study at the secondary level, it is reasonable to use teachers from MMHS as content experts and to rely on his or her knowledge and experience to gain insight into how Midwest was able to successfully implement a practical and workable RTI model.

Five to eight volunteer content teachers will participant in the focus group session, anchored by open-ended interview questions. The focus group session will be digitally recorded using the Voice Record app and a hand-held tape recorder and transcribed verbatim by an external auditor to ensure accuracy. The first focus group question is designed to be an ice breaker as it is not an individual session, but a group session. This is not a quantitative study. Therefore, the likert-themed question is only being used to start a conversation and to segue into question two. It is important that the volunteer participants feel comfortable to share their thoughts and opinions openly and without fear in order for this study to obtain reliable and objective feedback.

Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions for Teachers

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not comfortable at all and 5 being completely comfortable, how would you rate your own knowledge of the RTI process?
2. To what extent do you use RTI's universal screening tools to identify instructional strategies within your classes?

3. How are general education and gifted students included in the universal screening process?
4. How does the proficiency bar for Tier I, II, and III vary for general education, gifted, and special education students?
5. How to you adjust your lessons accordingly to needed RTI Tier I, II, III instructional strategies for each ability group?

These semi-structured interview questions will be used during the focus group session (see Appendix K). Focus group interview questions 4, and 5 are directly linked to the first research question. Looking to gain deeper insight into how RTI factors Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III are implemented across all ability groups in a universal manner, these two focus group questions seek to solicit specific examples of teacher interventions at each learning level (Brulles, 2012; Callahan et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2014). The first focus group question is strongly grounded in Dweck's (2015) growth mindset theory and seeks to solicit the comfortability, self-confidence, and learning environment of the shared teacher experience in implementing the RTI model. Focus group questions 2 and 3 support the third research question, again looking to better understand the shared experience of how MMHS teachers use the universal screening tool to identify students in need of Tier I, II, or III instructional modifications. Similar in nature to many of the individual interview questions, the focus group questions also serve as a reassessment looking for patterns in the shared experiences of how this identified Wisconsin school of distinction is able to successfully implement RTI intervention patterns within the general education instructional learning environment.

Observations

A direct observation of a volunteer teacher-led PLC meeting will help increase the reliability of focus group data. The intent of observing a teacher-led PLC meeting is to obtain insight on teacher-driven instructional planning and curricular pacing of MMHS, a Wisconsin School of Distinction (Wisconsin RtI Center, 2017c). Teachers at MMHS hold weekly RTI PLC meetings, so this type of meeting is not out of the norm, nor is it cause for the creation of a new process at the school. Information uncovered from the focus group questions should in some form be present in the teacher-led PLC meeting. Information such as, but not limited to, lesson plan development, student-class growth goals, and RTI modifications and interventions are all topics of discussion for a typical RTI-based PLC meeting. With this type of direct observation, I will strive to be as unobtrusive as possible so as not to bias the observation. My goal is to maintain a detached perspective while observing the PLC meeting. Field notes as well as audio recordings will take place during the PLC meeting. Unlike the face-to-face interviews and focus-group session, as the researcher, I am merely observing and not participating in the meeting. The goal is to video tape the PLC meeting as to alleviate the possibility of distraction from the researcher being present during the observation. This will help in transcribing the meeting as well as allow for play-back to fine tune observations of non-verbal cues from participants. During the PLC observation session, individual interviews and focus group session, digital recordings will safeguard the session for transcription accuracy and credibility. An independent consultant from the Wisconsin RtI Center will also have access to the recordings to ensure transcription accuracy.

Data Analysis

The analysis for this study will examine transcribed audio interviews of administrators and faculty, as well as a transcribed audio recording of a teacher focus group session, relevant RTI

documents from MMHS relating to RTI, and field notes taken during an observation of a planned RTI PLC meeting. For this process I will use open coding to analyze participant responses because I want to be able to chunk data into categories of what I observe and hear from the participants, as opposed to fitting data into predesigned categories. Open coding will allow me to focus on the information presented, rather than on existing theories (Creswell, 2013). Then I will attempt to filter through the data files in an attempt to identify any relationships among the open codes via axial coding. Finally, if there are any relationships or connections identified among the codes, I will try to figure out the core variable or variables present before going back to reanalyze each of the participants interviews in a selective coding format. All data will be collected and housed by the researcher on a secure computer file as well as a locked portfolio located in a home safe for three years. This model will serve as the foundation for the development of a matrix of evidence figure inspired by Yin's (2014) convergence and non-convergence of evidence matrix, to help strengthen the construct of this case study.

Organization of Data Files

Particularly examining the proposed research questions, this descriptive single-case study will begin the data analysis by analyzing all collected data, including transcriptions, documents, and fields notes. The data will first be reviewed and organized into session files: (a) interviews, (b) documents, (c) focus group, (d) PLC meeting. Then each file will be coded into concepts as categories (Creswell, 2013), and then classified into general themes aggregated to form common ideas (Yin, 2014). Once each file is aggregated into common ideas, the files will be cross-references and aggregated using triangulation to identify if there are shared experiences of RTI instruction at MMHS.

Coding

Explanatory in nature and guided by the research questions, the process of coding qualitative data will serve as a way for me to wear an analytic lens to label, compile, and organize my data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The desire is through coding, I will be able to create a storyline that unites and integrates the major themes of this study. I will begin the coding scheme by identifying the story I want to communicate to others. The story I want to communicate to others is how rural Midwest schools can implement RTI with fidelity at the secondary level within the general education classroom. With that being identified, I will establish initial preset, priori, codes derived from the conceptual framework and research questions. My prior knowledge and my subject matter expertise of RTI will also help in the development of these priori codes. Initial priori codes will include: (a) modifications, (b) instruction, (c) support, (d) comfort, (e) professional development, (f) general education, (g) gifted, (h) special education, (i) Tier I, (j) Tier II, and (k) Tier III. After data is collected, I will go through my transcripts, field notes, and observational notes in a systematic way assigning a word or phrase to the priori coding categories. This will be done by attaching labels to lines of transcribed text from interviews and observations so that similar or related pieces of information may be compared. During this process, another set of codes may emerge. These emergent codes may collapse or inflate priori codes into concepts not thought of prior to the initial collecting of data. As part of the coding process, I will also maintain thoughts and ideas that emerge during the coding process using marginalia (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Classified into Themes

The idea/s I will be analyzing and coding are looking for patterns of best practices for general education educators seeking to implement RTI practices across all ability levels within

the secondary educational setting. Based on the three foundational research questions of this case study, the coded themes will be analyzed into a matrix based on the Wisconsin RtI Center's Wisconsin RtI Center's School-Wide Implement Review (SIR) rubric (see Appendix K). This rubric is a self-assessment for schools wishing to be recognized as a School of Distinction and includes best practices for educators looking to implement RTI within the general education classroom. The matrix I will use to classify the codes into common themes will develop as I begin the open coding analysis for this study (see Appendix L). In addition, a consultant from the Wisconsin RtI Center will help peer check patterns for accuracy.

Aggregated to a Common Idea

Once each participant's responses have been coded into concepts as categories (Creswell, 2013), and classified into general themes aggregated to form common ideas in accordance with the Wisconsin RtI Center's SIR, each theme will be aggregated into common ideas. Those common ideas will then be cross-referenced and aggregated using triangulation to identify if there are shared human experiences of RTI instruction at MMHS.

Trustworthiness

Considering the limited amount of research showcasing a secondary school implementing RTI intervention strategies within a general education classroom, it is imperative that this case study maintains credibility, accuracy, and dependability (Brendle, 2014; Ciullo et al., 2017; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015). With the intent to become a working model for other educational institutions to mirror RTI strategies used by MMHS, this case study maintained all safeguards including, but not limited to obtaining IRB approval, providing volunteer participants with written and oral information about the study, gaining written consent from all participants, collecting only information that will be used for this research, and encouraging member checking

of all interview responses before publication. All information and data will be stored unidentifiable, and all participant names will be altered to protect identities. An external audit was conducted by the Wisconsin RtI Center to ensure authenticity of the selection tool used for this study as well as accuracy of the study process.

Triangulation

I will use triangulation to validate this study. By collecting data from multiple perspectives for this study, I will be able to develop convergent evidence strengthening the construct validity of this descriptive single-case study. Triangulation will consist of comparing and analyzing administrator responses from the individual interviews to faculty responses. Such use of evidence from multiple sources should increase confidence in the rendering of the event with accuracy assuming converged findings adopt a single reality (Yin, 2014). Next, participant responses from the individual interviews will be compared and analyzed with responses shared during the focus group session. In addition, I will compare participants' verbal responses and action plans during my observations of the RTI PLC meeting with RTI related documents from MMHS. As another means of safeguarding the validity of this study, an external audit will be conducted by a member of the Wisconsin RtI Center.

Credibility

Credibility will be maintained through the use of an external selection tool for the school of distinction, member checking, and an external peer review conducted by a member of the Wisconsin RtI Center. The tool of choice used for the selection of a qualifying school for this study stems from the Wisconsin RtI Center (2017b) and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) with support from federal funds. The four-tier rubric known as the Wisconsin RtI Recognized School Process, upholds the fidelity of RTI models within schools throughout

the state of Wisconsin. Based on specific universal rating criteria per the Wisconsin RtI Center's (2017b) rubric in conjunction with accreditation requirements from the WI Department of Public Instruction (DPI) (see Appendix C), schools must meet specific criteria to qualify as a school of distinction.

Member checking will also help safeguard credibility during this case study (Creswell, 2013). Volunteer participants from MMHS will have the opportunity to examine preliminary analysis of his or her interview transcription before publication for authenticity and accuracy. A content expert from the Wisconsin RtI Center will also be utilized as an external audit of the research and data analysis process.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability will be maintained through the triangulation of interviews, observations, and focus groups. Through the analysis of collected files, results will be coded and then classified into general themes aggregated to form a common idea (Yin, 2014). This study will use the themed data from the three different sources to showcase how an exceptional rural Wisconsin school implements RTI instructional interventions for all students within one learning facility. An independent consultant from the Wisconsin RTI Center will also member check data results to ensure accuracy, dependability, and confirmability.

Transferability

Great consideration will be given to the individual interviews and focus group session with faculty members and administrators as the intent is to observe and report a working RTI model that other Midwest and small rural schools wishing to implement RTI strategies across mixed ability classrooms can mirror. Volunteer voices will be presented in this study by way of direct quotes. All participant names, including the name of the middle/high school, will be

altered to protect identities. The names of the State of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin RtI Center have been maintained to lend credibility to this study and to allow a support outlet for follow-up conversations or studies.

Ethical Considerations

In every research method involving human subjects, ethical considerations are of the utmost importance. Therefore, in keeping with ethical considerations, I will obtain full IRB approval prior to conducting any data collection. Case studies, in particular, gather a great deal of highly detailed and sometimes personal information about individual people (Yin, 2014). Informed and voluntary consent, as well as IRB approval will be secured before any interaction with volunteer participants commence. Since this study is focusing on how a Midwest school is able to successfully implement RTI within general education instructional settings from an institutional perspective, no students or children under 18 will be used in this study. Student names and identities will also not be used on any corresponding RTI documents such as student growth goals, lesson plans, or publicly accessible state exam results. I will also not meet with, interact with, or interview any students for this study. It is also important for all participants to understand they are volunteering for this study and that (a) there will be no monetary compensation for participating, (b) they may exit the study at any time with no repercussions, and (c) all information gathered for this study may be accessible for their review via member checking prior to publication. I will also give all participants a phone and email contact to reach me should they have any concerns during the study they wish to have addressed immediately.

Confidentially of all volunteer participants is of upmost importance. As such, confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for both site and volunteer participants. Records of all interviews, observations, and data will be kept in a locked safe at my

house. I will be the only persons with the code to the safe. The safe is located in a password protected saferoom my basement only accessible by myself. All walls are fireproof and there are no windows. Electronic files will be maintained in a password protected drive account for three years. The only persons having access to the electronic data files will be myself and my committee members. When it is time for member checking and peer reviewing, electronic copies will be moved to a secondary password protected online cloud account where volunteer participants and the external auditor can access the information without fear of loss or altering of data. Neither my employing agency nor subordinates were used in this study.

Summary

With the reauthorization of 2004's IDEA, Response to Intervention (RTI) become a national phenomenon tied to Title I and II funding and AYP accreditation. However, the means by which states implement RTI universal screening or instructional modification strategies are not federally mandated, oversaw, or regulated (Wisconsin RTI Center, 2017a). This means RTI is in effect autonomously implemented across the United States. Wisconsin's RtI Center is working on developing a universal system of support for WI schools. By showcasing an exceptional WI school that is currently utilizing RTI strategies for all students, this study hopes to provide a working model demonstrating how secondary schools in rural WI can provide universal screening and consequently Tier I, II, and III instructional interventions for a general education classroom (Callahan et al., 2015; Dweck, 2012; Walsh, Kemp, Hodge, & Bowes, 2012; Washington, 2014).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive single-case study was to showcase a rural Wisconsin School of Distinction implementing universal response to intervention (RTI) Tier I screening and instructional modification practices within the general education setting at the secondary level. More specifically, the purpose was to discover how the faculty at one such educational setting was able to implement universal RTI practices indiscriminate of content area and to seek out whether there was a working RTI model for other rural secondary schools who are looking for Tier I universal instruction, modification, and accommodation support to mimic. This chapter is organized into the following subsections: participants, results, emergent themes, research questions, and summary.

Participants

All volunteer participants for this study were non-compensated for their participation. Each participant was under a fulltime contract by the MMHS school board as either a teacher or administrator and carried a Wisconsin DPI educator's license in his or her respective field. In total, there were twelve participants; two administrators, eight teachers, and two school counselors. Of the twelve participants, nine participants took part in individual interview sessions. One administrator, one special education teacher, and two school counselors were part of the PLC observation; while the focus group session was comprised of two special education teachers, one high school guidance counselor, and two core teachers. All of the participants appeared comfortable during his or her respective interview sessions and answered all of the researcher's questions without hesitation. Each of the interviews were scheduled through the MMHS principal and took place in each respective administrator's office, teacher's classroom or

in the teachers' lounge sans students. The focus group interview, also scheduled by MMHS principal, was held in a currently vacant classroom within MMHS, as was the PLC observation. Both of these sessions were also conducted without students present. Below are descriptions of each individual volunteer who participated in the study.

Ms. B

Ms. B currently serves as the Director of Pupil Services for the Midwest School District. Ms. B holds a Lifetime Teacher (T001) license from the DPI with specific certification areas of: Specific Learning Disabilities (1811) and Cross-Categorical Special Education (1801). Ms. B also holds an initial administrator certification (A001). Ms. B was part of the initial curriculum team as a classroom instructor that began the transition to RTI at MMHS. Ms. B recalls the transition beginning about twelve years ago with the administrative and faculty team, "starting to have conversations about that. About providing the interventions, and talking about the best instructional practices" (personal interview, October 9, 2018). Shortly after MMHS fully incorporated the RTI model within all instructional courses, Ms. B left MMHS for another position at a different school district. However, she recently returned to MMHS after accepting the Director of Pupil Services position.

Ms. C

The 2018-2019 school year was the first academic year for Ms. C as principal at MMHS. New to the Midwest School District area, Ms. C had recently relocated to the area and was in the initial stages of getting to know her faculty and staff during this study. On a daily basis, Ms. C strives to be an effective educator both in and out of the classroom by promoting lifelong learning, accountability, and diversity. Even though Ms. C only served in the traditional classroom as a teacher for 5 short years before making the transition to administration, she was

able utilize multiple 21st century learning strategies earning her a teacher of the year award in 2012. While currently seeking a professional certification in administration, Ms. C currently holds a Lifetime Teacher (T001) license in political science (1735), English (1300), and broad field social studies (1701), as well as a provisional administrator license (A001).

Anna

A veteran and Lifetime License (T001, 1088) educator, Anna, is the MMHS elementary and middle school math interventionist. She has been at MMHS for a number of decades, beginning her career in education in 1988. Anna seems like your typically grandmother. Sweet, calm, and compassionate, but also firm. Students respect Ms. Anna. She has been through the ringer of the educational cycles and believes that while she has seen her fair share of latest educational mandates come and go, she will also be an advocate for what works for her kids. Anna was part of the 2016 team that received the Wisconsin RTI Center's School of Distinction award. Anna is well respected among her peers and the extended MMHS community. She has her pulse on the history of the school and community culture and is a staple of what was and what is MMHS.

Ben

Ben is the MMHS social studies teacher for grades 9-12. Teaching at MMHS for over 20 years, Ben has borne witness to the shifts in curricular tides throughout his tenure. Ben has a very colorful classroom filled with a lot of historical posters and 3D objects to try to engage students in the study of the various social science courses he instructs throughout the day. Ben is a stronger-looking man in his fifties. While Ben is very mild-mannered and has a quick wit and obvious sense of humor, he easily looks like he played football back in the day. He is the teacher

who when he stands in the hallway, the kids know they ought not misbehave. Mr. Space was also part of the 2016 MMHS faculty. Ben is a Lifetime License (T001, 1701) DPI teacher.

Charlie

Teaching since 1999, Charlie is currently the Freshman and Sophomore English teacher at MMHS; although he has taught all levels of English at MMHS. Charlie is known as the laid-back cool English teacher at Crandon High School. He dresses like he is going either to the beach bonfire or to an Abercrombie runway show. He has long hair and loves to engage the students in literary debates to make them think about symbolism and the bigger meaning of life. Charlie also holds a Lifetime License (T001, 1300) for teaching from the DPI. Charlie was not part of the faculty at MMHS during the 2016 academic year when MMHS was awarded Bronze recognition from the Wisconsin RtI Center, but he was on faculty at MMHS prior to 2016 and has since returned to teach again in the English department.

Donna

Donna began her teaching career in 1999. She is currently teaching special education at Midwest high school under a Lifetime License (T001, 1088, 1300). Donna's classes are 100% students with disabilities. She also pushes in as an instructional support teacher to general education math classes at MMHS. Donna's voice is exceptionally peaceful and when interviewing Donna, she radiated a sense of calm that must also be reassuring and nurturing for her self-contained students. Donna is a veteran teacher at MMHS, and she, like Anne have seen their fair she of the many changes in academia over their tenures. From instructional practices to administrative changes, Donna and Anne have been two constants the greater MMHS community have been able to rely on throughout the years. Donna was on faculty at MMHS' 2016 distinction year.

Erin

Teaching under a Lifetime License (T001, 1088, 1605) from the DPI, Erin is the middle school science teacher at MMHS. Erin is a bit reserved and quite when one first meets her, although it is evident once she warms up that she is passionate for her craft and the students she teaches. Erin was vocal in the focus group in addressing how RTI practices have not affected her instruction as much as other disciplines because she teaches science and RTI for the most part at MMHS focuses RTI within the English and Math arenas. Erin was a faculty member at MMHS in 2016, and is an advocate of universal instruction within the RTI model.

Fran

One of the most senior teachers at MMHS is Fran. Fran is a MMHS high school special education teacher and interventionist who serves on a number of school improvement committees including the RTI PLC. Fran is a ray of energy. Fran is full of ideas and wants to be proactive about supporting all students in whatever their needs may be; not just the special education population. When interviewing Fran, she was very talkative and kind, and made sure that I was comfortable. Fran is the type of person that wants everyone around her to be happy. She radiates joy. Beginning her education career in 1983, Fran holds a valid DPI Teacher Lifetime License (T001) to include Intellectual Disabilities (1810), Specific Learning Disabilities (1811), and Elementary/Middle Level Education (1088). Fran was on faculty and part of the MMHS team that was awarded the 2016 RTI school of distinction award.

Gwen

Gwen, who holds a Lifetime License (T001) from the DPI, is in an unusual position. A self-proclaimed advocate for gifted learners, she is currently teaching 6 and 7 grade reading, but is certified in Intellectual Disabilities (1810), Elementary/Middle Level Education (1088), and as

a Reading Teacher (1316). Gwen is a wealth of knowledge about MMHS and the innerworkings of the political system behind the scenes. Gwen used to be the gifted and talented interventionist at MMHS, until the district cut the position due to budget restraints. The 2015-2016 school year was the last recognized year of gifted intervention for MMHS, which coincides with the year that MMHS was recognized as a school of distinction. Gwen clearly articulates the need to reinstate the program and feels that the gifted and talented population at MMHS are not being serviced. She is now become the self-proclaimed advocate for this student population group.

Harry

Harry, a Lifetime License (T001, 1088) teacher by the DPI, has been teaching since 1981. Harry is the 6-8 math teacher at MMHS and was part of the 2016 RTI recognition staff. Harry is the jokester middle school teacher. He is a happy teacher. He truly cares about his kids and has a warm, yet sarcastic sense of humor to him. He likes to laugh and has a huge infectious giggle, which matches his frame. Harry's classroom is even setup so that he sits almost within the student seating area when instructing so that he is in the mix and can really relate with the kids and help them as they go through lessons. Harry is a close friend of Gwen's and is in the classroom right next door to her. Harry is also a veteran teacher at MMHS.

Jackie

Jackie is the high school guidance counselor at MMHS. Jackie holds a Lifetime License (P001) in Pupil Services and was a leading member in the 2016 application process for Wisconsin RtI Center's School of Distinction process. Jackie serves on both the RTI PLC and focus group, and has also been MMHS' contact representative with the Wisconsin RtI Center as well as the DPI for RTI related trainings. Jackie is soft spoken, yet when she speaks, it is with purpose and commands respect. Jackie is a leader without being overbearing. She has a way of

listening to people and making recommendations without others realizing she is really making protocol. Jackie works closely with Ms. C and Kathy to help bridge the emotional stability and intellectual growth goals of the students at MMHS.

Kathy

Kathy, also certified through the DPI under a Lifetime License (P-001), is the middle school guidance counselor at MMHS. Kathy is part of the RTI PLC and works closely with Jackie to monitor student growth and transition between the middle and high schools. Kathy is a bit quieter than Jackie when put in situations with the administration. Kathy seems to feed off of Jackie's energy and suggestions, which seem to make the two of them a productive partnership at MMHS. Kathy is also younger than Jackie, so Kathy may also be learning from Jackie the art of compromise and maneuvering within the educational arena. Even so, Kathy is keenly aware of the MAPs process and what the middle school teachers and students needs and wants are for the upcoming testing session. She advocates for her 6-8 grade peers and is looking for ways to continue the MAPs program into the high school level. As Kathy is newer to MMHS, she was not part of the RTI team that was awarded the RTI school of distinction.

Results

As discussed in previous chapters, RTI is the only current federally supported scientific research-based intervention strategy under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) Part B (IDEIA 2004, PL 101-476). RTI has been classically defined as a preventative model of multitiered instructional support for learners with a minimum of three tiers of interventions (Bradley et al., 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Preston et al., 2016). While RTI is federally supported, and nationally instituted throughout American public educational institutions, there is yet to be a universal model of practice. Based on participant

interviews and researcher observations at MMHS, a school awarded the bronze level School of Distinction by the Wisconsin RtI Center in 2016, emergent themes revealed practical applications of RTI relating to foundational concepts of this study's research questions.

Emergent Themes

This case study was guided by the conceptual framework of Dweck's growth mindset theory, and in many ways was used as the foundation for developing the research questions and for coding data during the analysis process. Using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, two themes and three sub-themes emerged from the interview and observational research sessions conducted with the faculty and administration at MMHS relating to RTI practices within the general education setting (Creswell, 2013). I chose to use open coding to analyze participant responses because I wanted to be able to chunk data into categories of what I saw and heard from the participants, rather than fitting data into predesigned categories. Open coding allowed me to focus on the information presented, rather than on existing theories (Creswell, 2013).

To begin the data coding process for this study, I read through each of the interview transcripts which had been professionally transcribed by Temi©, an online advanced speech to text recognition and transcription service, to have all recorded interview and observation session audio files transcribed into PDF files. After reading through each interview and observation transcription file multiple times, I began to create tentative labels using Open Coding. The tentative labels were designed to help me chunk data that I was seeing revealed through multiple participant responses and or weight of responses in each interview and or observation session. By weight of responses, I mean the participant spent more notable time explaining or focusing on one particular subject than another. The properties of each of the tentative labels are shown below:

Table 4. 1 Open codes for RQ 1

Open code	Properties	Examples of participants' words
Universal instruction Differentiation	Being able to meet the learning needs of each student	Different angle Based on AP and MAP scores Teacher efforts Gifted students not included Lessons are differentiated by choice I don't have groups based on ability Student choice Tier I is the universal tier Progress monitoring

Table 4. 2 Open codes for RQ 2

Open code	Properties	Examples of participants' words
Professional development	Having high faculty and administrative turn over in recent years, there was frustration over a lack of professional development training opportunities for core teachers.	Felt more comfortable at the elementary level Last year we had a data team, a group of RTI coordinators We had staff turnover

Table 4. 3 Open codes for RQ 3

Open code	Properties	Examples of participants' words
Universal screener Screening process	Collaboration among teachers at the high school level Believing there was a singular process at the middle school level	General meetings MAP testing ACT at the high school level Forward exams Universal screening Teacher input Teacher referral Don't have universal screeners for science Tier 1 was largely considered everyone Behavioral issues Extra staff in class

Once I was able to establish priority codes from the participant responses, those priority codes were further analyzed through axial coding to see if there were any significant relationships among the open codes. I was looking to see if there were there any connections or unexpected codes that emerged from the open coding. From axial coding, the following relationships were identified:

Table 4. 4 Axial Codes

Open codes	Axial codes
Universal screener Screening Process	There is no identifiable RTI screening system used at the high school MAP Testing is universally used at the high school
Professional development	High turnover has caused a lack in unity and system follow-through for RTI process' among faculty
Universal Instruction Differentiation	Faculty express a belief in providing universal instruction to all students Differentiation is described as meeting learning modalities, as opposed to meeting RTI tiers of academic support

Further analysis of the axial coding of participant responses revealed a need for a uniformed understanding of both the district's expectations for a universal RTI screener and universal instruction. However, an unexpected variant coded in the data matrix (see Appendix L) linked to research question three was also discovered. While faculty from both the middle and high school settings concurred a universal screener was used to identify students in need of Tier I, II, or III instructional modifications, there was an outlier in that the middle school faculty clearly and universally implemented the MAP testing system, whereas the high school faculty were not able to clearly articulate a singular universal system or program used as their universal screener. This inconsistency resonated among faculty who during the PLC meeting and focus group began discussions addressing this void. There was also an unexpected realization

unearthed during the interviews that MMHS has suffered high faculty and administration turnover in recent years. This high turnover has impacted the effectiveness of RTI practices and systems at MMHS.

Finally, I decided to take my analysis a step further by seeing if there were core variables in each of the participant responses that connects all the data together. Analyzing the axial coding chart, I identified 3 core variables that repeatedly emerged throughout the interviews and observation sessions (APPENDIX L). Those variables were: (a) the RTI process, (b) instructional interventions, and (c) leadership and organizational structures. Looking for patterns in responses such as repeated words or terms from the newly formed axial codes, I went back and reread the original transcripts now looking specifically for these terms or phrases. This time as I was reading each of the responses, I was purposely looking to selectively code data into the identified core variables designed from the axial code relationships identified in table 4.4.

Based on faculty interviews, observations, coding, and data analysis of this case study, two main themes were consistently evident in almost all of the interviews and observations. These themes were coded as (a) identification process for RTI and (b) instructional intervention. Through the selective coding process, the axial code of leadership and organization was found to be insignificant in most faculty responses in comparison to the identification process for RTI and instructional interventions. The majority of responses that specifically addressed leadership and organizational structures derived from current administration or non-core faculty members. These members made up four of the twelve participants of this study.

Three sub-themes also emerged from the instructional intervention theme including: (a) universal instruction, (b) differentiation, and (c) rigor. Below, each of the coded themes and subthemes have been described through the participants' narrative accounts. In addition, each

theme is linked to principles of Dweck's (2015, 2017) Growth Mindset, the foundational theoretical framework for this case study.

Theme 1: Identification for RTI

Based on research question three, both of the administrators and all eight of the teachers interviewed at MMHS recognized there was a universal screening process for of RTI at MMHS. Universally, at the middle school level, MAP testing was identified as the benchmark for RTI screening. However, there was a lack in identifying how data from the MAP was used to place students into RTI tiers of support. At the time of this study's observation and research, the PLC was still discussing what and or if there should be bands of proficiency and to what levels those bands should be set.

At the high school level, there too was a consensus understanding that there was a system for RTI identification, yet the faculty did not share a unilateral understanding of what that system was. Ranging from class grades, to teacher recommendation, Forward Exams, ACT/Aspire results, and even behavioral evidences as part of PBIS, there was a lack in a centralized identification process for MMHS' high school RTI process. Yet even with the lack in uniformity of an identification process, the interviewed faculty all stated there was (a) an identification process, and that (b) based on that process, students received individual support needed to meet learning needs. As Fran stated during her interview, "we would try …tier one supports first and then move farther if we need to…regroup and see if we need to add more instruction or more layers or if what we're doing is working" (personal interview, 9 October 2018).

Theme 2: Instructional Intervention

Not to be confused with IEP or 504 support, RTI instructional interventions, accommodations, and modifications were evidenced through the various interview and

observation sessions of this research study. Grounded in research question one, aside from the universal screener used to identify RTI tiers of support, this research revealed a clear understanding of active instructional interventions practiced at MMHS. As a major theme to this study, the interviewed teachers and administrators not only described the types of instructional interventions used to assist student learners, but identified (a) universal instruction, (b) differentiation, and (c) rigor as the cornerstone of MMHS' RTI success and thereby subthemes of this study's findings. Utilizing both classroom teachers and special education instructors, MMHS provides support to all students demonstrating needed growth in English or mathematics skills. Intervention was described as ranging from extra time on tasks, to one-on-one teaching, preferential seating, modified assignments, assignment choice boards, and small group work settings.

Sub-Theme 2a: Universal Instruction

Collectively, the most common response during the interview sessions when asked how students are included in the RTI process or how teachers adjust their lessons to address individual student learning needs for the distinct RTI tiers, was universal instruction. This was explained by Erin as, "all students get universal instruction in my classroom" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). As one of MMHS' science teachers, Erin further elaborated that it was the responsibility of the classroom teacher to ensure student learning needs were being met through the universal instruction of Tier I. Erin noted that universal instruction should be rigorous, high quality, and differentiated to meet the learning needs of each student.

Charlie further stated, "Our tier one largely was considered everyone, was universal…we used our tier one as interventions that we would use with any student" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). By utilizing a base level universal instruction such as RTI's Tier I for all

students at MMHS, faculty are working to create meaningful instruction to promote student learning in harmony with Dweck's growth mindset theory (Dweck, 2010b). "Meaningful work not only promotes learning in the immediate situation, but also promotes a love of learning and resilience in the face of obstacles" (Dweck, 2010b). Students at MMHS, through this universal approach to instruction, are being challenged, given choices, and are held accountable for a basic level of proficiency learning, regardless of additional RTI supports in place.

Sub-Theme 2b: Differentiation

Ben, like many of his colleagues, tries to, "make assignments that can be more of a choice for the different students" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). Ben, Gwen, Erin, and Anna each specifically used the term, *differentiation* when referring to how they modify universal instruction to meet the learning needs of their students. Gwen specifically uses differentiation at each level of RTI, trying to "incorporate and include different options for [students] to review and practice" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). Fran used the term, "different angle" and "different strategy" when referring to modifying instruction for learners (personal interview, 9 October 2018). Charlie, when interviewed, used the phrase, "structuring the curriculum for the individual's learning … and how they would adapt to that" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). Yet, the universal key to this subtheme is the differentiation of a universal instructional lesson designed to be presented to an inclusion-based general education classroom. At MMHS, that inclusion-based general education classroom is identified as RTI level Tier I. This means the differentiation with that RTI Tier I is geared toward student learning style and choice. Maintaining that the teacher still retains authority to approve or guide student's final selections, this type of differentiation within the general education Tier I classroom enables MMHS to provide a universal instructional setting for all students indiscriminate of aptitude or

ability. This also helps to promote student ownership in the learning process and a love of learning (Dweck, 2010b).

Sub-Theme 2c: Rigor

The term rigor was identified as a subtheme for this study, not because MMHS validated an innate ability to authenticate or demonstrate rigorous instructional lessons, but rather because the teachers interviewed during this research study overwhelmingly identified a lack in rigor available for learners demonstrating gifted and or advanced academic performance skills. Anna, for example, believes the gifted learners are left out of the instructional planning process (personal interview, 9 October 2018). Charlie commented during his interview session that it would be helpful to have "more models to look at and more in certain instances. What would you do" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). In particular, Charlie was very open about seeking out what he called, go-to strategies for RTI intervention and rigor. Donna, also shared Anna's views recalling that MMHS has not focused much effort on challenging the curricular learning needs of the gifted or general education population and that much of the intervention focus and energy is spent on struggling learners (personal interview, 9 October 2018). Erin, however, who self-proclaims she does not tier her lessons because she teaches science and RTI at MMHS only focuses on English and mathematics skills, does advocate that the general education teacher work to, "make sure that our universal instruction is rigorous and high quality and differentiated" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). Yet when Harry was interviewed, it was clear that MMHS does not "do a lot for the gifted and talented", other than what Harry can add to his own lessons through differentiation. Harry also pointed out in his interview session, "[the gifted] get the short end of the stick a lot of the time" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). All the while, rigor is not reserved only for those demonstrating above grade level performance skills. Rigor is

needed at all levels. Healthy rigor provides meaningful learning tasks to challenge each student on an individual basis. This is crucial to the growth mindset as rigor gives all learners a sense of purpose and teaches a healthy balance of risk taking and reward (Dweck, 2010b).

Research Questions

Accepting the premise that RTI was designed to universally screen all students, indiscriminate of performance ability, to meet and accelerate learning (Brendle, 2014; Brown, 2012), this study used the following three research questions to anchor the study: RQ#1: How are RTI factors (Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III) implemented across all ability groups in a universal manner? RQ#2: What support factors are needed for faculty to feel confident implementing Tier I RTI modifications within the general education setting? RQ#3: How is the school using the universal screener to identify students in need of Tier I, II, and III instructional modifications?

Research Question 1: How are RTI factors (Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III) implemented across all ability groups in a universal manner?

All participants in this study were asked a series of questions relating to RTI. Three of the questions related specifically to how RTI factors were implemented across all ability groups:

1. How are students identified for your class into Tier I, II, or III for instructional support?
2. How are general education and gifted students included in the RTI model?
3. How do you adjust your lessons accordingly in order to address intervention plans for RTI Tier's I, II, III for each ability group?

Of the twelve participants, eleven specifically stated the terms *identification* and *intervention* in their responses. This included both faculty and administrator responses, thereby creating the two emergent themes for this study. Further alignment is evident from the interviews and observations that there is uniformity between faculty and administration's understanding of what

MMHS uses for identification of the RTI process at the middle school level. All nine of the middle and high school teachers at MMHS who participated in the individual interview sessions concurred that the nationally normed Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing system was the primary identification tool used to help begin the process of identifying students who may be in need of Tier II or Tier III instructional interventions. This identification process was described at MMHS as a universal screening process that all 6-8 grade students participate in. According to Ms. B, Director of Pupil Services, "MAP is the primary universal screening for grades K through eight", however, the high school does not administer MAP testing. Ms. C, MMHS's principal, identified ACT Aspire testing, the Wisconsin Forward exams, student class grades, and teacher observations as the benchmarks of datapoints for identifying and placing students into RTI tiers for interventions of support.

Comparing the middle and high school interview responses, there was a much greater consensus among the middle school faculty for the means by which students are identified into tiers of academic support. As evidenced below, high school teachers at MMHS did not share a singular party-line describing the identification process. Evidence even reflects some high school teachers utilizing RTI tiers II and III as PBIS interventions as opposed to academic support interventions. Follow-up questions regarding the use of RTI tiers to address PBIS modifications for behavior were not sought as the study of PBIS is outside the scope of this research study.

Table 4. 5 Research Question 1: Universal Screening

MS/HS	Participant	Response
MS	Anna	Initial Tier I for the whole middle school would be MAP testing…that's done on a computer. Six to eight.
HS	Ben	The RTI committee would go through and run the screenings. We had meetings once a month, identified students that were struggling and then those students would be referred to the RTI committee, would go through their processing and then they

		would get back to the classroom teachers and make modification or determine what we needed to do to try to help them out in the classroom.
HS	Charlie	Our Tier I largely was considered everyone, was universal. Two and three were more, behavioral. Just sort of case by case. On referring them, working as a group over students that we had specific concerns over.
HS	Donna	Our primary one we're looking at now is ACT. They discontinued using MAP testing for high school students. So we also look at the D/F list and attendance.
MS	Erin	We use MAP testing for universal screening of students.
MS/HS	Fran	We generally look at our MAP scores, the Forward Exam, what the behaviors or what the difficulties are in the classroom.
MS	Gwen	Tier I is the universal tier, and all of our students receive Tier I. To identify students who are at a Tier II level, we again look at MAP data and the Forward Exam and we look at class grades and we generally look at students that are in the 25th percentile or below on the MAP data. And then from there, we would actually do screenings on those Tier II kids and use the MAZE, a timed test, and then the second thing that we do is we do the actual placement test that goes with the Corrective Reading Program. And then for Tier III instruction, we're doing progress monitoring four weeks and if they're not making gains every four weeks, then we look to change our instructional strategy.
MS	Harry	Regular ed grades, MAP scores, [Forward Exam], and teacher input.
DO	Ms. B	MAP is the primary universal screening for grades K through eight
DO	Ms. C	We're using things differently [at the high school], to mainstream the supports, to mainstream the collaboration so we don't have all these layers and steps in place to go from using that data to getting the students the support that they need. We'll look at the previous years ACT Aspire data, we'll look at in September and October we give a practice ACT, so we look at that data and then we'll look at whatever Wisconsin Forward data we have for at least the high school because there's some of the grades obviously have to take that. But a lot of it too is based on teacher concern, teacher observation.

MS/HS/DO	PLC	Do you just want to look at if they have a D or F or do you want to consider, I mean, another thing we talk about always was attendance and other, you know, do you want to look at any kind of comparative with ACT score or I guess middle school would ne MAPs?
MS/HS	Focus Group	Our universal screening tool is MAPs.

While the elementary school of the Midwest School District was not included in this study, it was evident that MAP testing was the primary universal tool used for RTI intervention screening for grades K-8. Within the high school, however, there lacked a clear sense of what the universal screening tool was and how exactly the data would be deciphered to determine which students would be identified into Tiers I, II, and III for instructional support. There also seemed to be some confusion or overlap between RTI and PBIS within the tiered system. While PBIS is outside the scope of this study, MMHS was awarded the bronze level of distinction due to meeting the RTI instructional gains. If MMHS had met both the RTI and PBIS gains, they would have been eligible as a gold or platinum school of distinction by the Wisconsin RtI Center.

Unilateral consensus between both the middle and high school faculty was found when asked how general education and gifted students are included in the RTI model. For and prior to the 2015-2016 school year, MMHS offered an instructional program for students identified as gifted and talented. However, due to high administrative and faculty turnover and recent budget cutbacks combined with continued decreased enrollment, the gifted program of MMHS was discontinued. Gwen, currently the middle school language arts teacher, was the last gifted and talented instructor for MMHS. Her long-standing history of the school served as much of the primary source for information regarding MMHS's gifted program. There was a trend among the faculty at MMHS when interviewed reflecting a lack of specific academic supports targeted

toward those who exhibit gifted learning trends. There was a clear understanding by faculty that RTI interventions are focused on learners who are performing below proficiency, and that the three-tier model was singular in nature and not inversive. Meaning, those students who are performing above grade or subject expectation are not receiving specific RTI academic interventions to meet his or her individual learning needs in comparison to their underperforming peers.

Table 4. 6 Research Question 1: General and Gifted within the RTI Model

MS/HS	Participant	Response
MS	Anna	Well, they're all included in the tier one, support. Unfortunately, I think the gifted are the most often left out. So that's something that we're still working on to try to accommodate them as well. For now it should be done by the classroom teacher in that, in that tier one system for the gifted kids, the teachers should make the accommodations and the differentiation within their classroom.
HS	Ben	I don't know if I can answer the question correctly for you or not. I know that we have had the gifted students involved in RTI through the committees and things, but I don't know if, I guess I understand. I guess I shouldn't probably answer it because they don't really know and I don't want to give an answer that would be not very accurate. I guess I just would assume not.
HS	Charlie	Well… they would fit into what we would consider a tier one. Tier one is just, just sort of looking at each student individually and saying these are what are specific or what their specific needs would be. So again, for gifted students it would be saying, all right, so we're seeing that you're having an easy time with, with the regular curriculum. How can we challenge you more, for someone in that we might not think is gifted, obviously we're looking at always trying to push those students and just, you know, having them in a position that, that… they're best served.
HS	Donna	So, I don't think we're focusing, I don't think we've focused on the gifted population as much as we should. I think we spent more time focusing on how can we support our struggling learners and bring them up more than we've focused on how can we challenge the gifted learners. So I think that is an area that our RTI system has fallen short.

MS	Erin	I guess the part of the RTI model that is used with general education and gifted students would just be our efforts to make sure that our universal instruction is rigorous and high quality and differentiated. I don't know that we necessarily speak about tiered interventions for those students in any way … formality. Other than that, we are always working to improve our universal instruction to meet those, those needs of those students.
MS/HS	Fran	General education students would be included by just looking at the needs that they have and trying to adjust the interventions or the strategies that we have. With the general education, I'm thinking because we have a math interventionist and a reading interventionist, so if they're needing additional instruction, they would be able to go see those specialists. Otherwise, as the whole teaching staff, we would try to implement interventions within our regular instruction. I am not aware that we have any gifted students identified, so I can't speak to that.
MS	Gwen	Our general ed students are basically just tiered into the tier one universal model and our gifted students should be placed in either a tier two or tier three, but really honestly we haven't been addressing our tier two or tier three students as far as their giftedness and that's especially bothersome to me because I used to be the gifted education teacher here and I was asked to vacate that position with the promise that there would still be gifted programming for students to do to take on another role. And that did not happen.
MS	Harry	Mostly off of the MAP scores and the [Forward] exam, assuming you've talked with [Anna], and she's the math interventionist for middle school, and she the one who pulls out the tier threes, and works with them. She goes through it pretty much identifies them. She looks in to the data, more than me.
MS/HS/DO	PLC	Do we think there should be a reading enrichment and math enrichment?
MS/HS	Focus Group	All of our kids are screened… If they are noticed to be having struggle, are struggling in an area, then we dig deeper. Like you said. But we don't always seem to do much when it's the other end of the spectrum.

From interviewing the teachers at MMHS, Tier I is most commonly utilized as the universal tier in which all students are identified and what is referred to as universal instruction.

It is in this universal instruction tier of RTI's Tier I that the teacher indiscriminately instructs his or her designed lesson to the whole class. Then, based on MAP results at the middle school, or a combination of grades, teacher input, and ACT and/or Forward Exam results at the high school, students may receive additional supports in the form of interventions and/or modifications in RTI's Tiers II and III, not to be confused with IEP or 504 accommodations. The interventions and/or modifications vary based on the academic needs of the individual learner. Gwen, for example, uses a corrective reading program with her middle school English Tier III students as she said, "there's actually an extra layer of an extra scaffold that you can give them on a one to one level that goes with the things that they're getting into the tier two level" (personal interview, October 9, 2018). Corrective reading programs focus on building decoding and comprehension skills for students that perform below grade level. Accommodations at MMHS for Tiers II and III are geared toward underperforming learners, with little to no evidence of academic accommodation or modifications made for gifted or advanced learners.

Additionally, when MMHS teachers were asked how they adjust their lessons to address intervention plans, there again was not a uniformed method, but rather individual accounts ranging from behavioral interventions to progress monitoring, with one participant acknowledging that there are no adjustments made to her classroom lessons as all students within the class are considered Tier I and therefore receive universal instruction.

Table 4. 7 Research Question 1: Adjusting Lessons for Intervention Plans

MS/HS	Participant	Response
MS	Anna	With my students that I work with either one to three students at a time is, I have my little notebook over there and I take notes, what I see when they're working on problems and doing things. So if I see, oh wow, they're missing this skill, they really don't understand it. I'll take a note that that's something I need to work on. But I also do progress monitoring, biweekly and I have a

		couple in the elementary that I do weekly progress monitoring them.
HS	Ben	I try to make assignments that can be more of a choice for the different students where, options, I guess for assignments if we're doing projects so that there's different ways that they can do the same assignment that might fit their learning style or their needs better than all students...I might go back and check with some of the students more often to see where the, if they're on track and if they need additional help on something. Also we take tests or quizzes or pretests or even pre quizzes, in the classroom to go back to those groups and see if there's any way we need to modify things to get them the information they need.
HS	Charlie	Most often, if we have a behavioral issues that, that would constitute an RTI model three, we would have, staff, extra staff in class. So we might have a tutor or we might have a special education teacher that would work specifically with those students. They also, usually talk with the teacher on a fairly regular basis to, talk about students that they might include as well. I mean not just that would fit into that upper a smaller group, but it might be helpful to have a tier one student or even a tier two students sit near that person just so that we were able to give them additional support.
HS	Donna	I adjust them according to my students' needs in my classroom as being students with disabilities. And I know, like I work with students more one on one if they're struggling and I will allow students to do more, independent work if I feel like they're understanding and I'll give them tasks to challenge them. Like using the same skill but maybe figuring something out a little higher level than what I'm, you know. Then the basic, you know, if that makes sense.
MS	Erin	I don't. We don't. The students that come into my room receive a universal instruction. My lessons of course are differentiated. You know, students have choice in my room and things of that nature, , so they choose according to their need, from a, from a, options, but I don't have groups that are, I guess prescribed where I would say you must do this and you must do that. The students guide their learning and that they, a, sort of choose the, the level of what they need at the time that they need it. Obviously I give input in that and assist with those decisions. But ultimately students have, have choice.
MS/HS	Fran	I think that anytime that you plan a lesson or looking at, what the needs are of our students and trying to be able to present the

		material in different in a variety of ways, so it might be that one day if it's just introduction, we're introducing a strategy. Maybe the next day trying to introduce it or talk about it in a different manner so that we're trying to approach it from every different angle that we can come to help the students understand. Yeah, I think then after the lessons were kind of like constantly going back to see what could I do different, what's another strategy I could add? Trying to. I know for myself, I like to use a lot of anchor charts, so there's that, that information that's on the walls that they can refer to what, whatever lesson we're having. Yeah, I, I just tried to hit it from every angle that I can.
MS	Gwen	Well, for one thing, I do a lot of differentiation even at a tier I, so especially for my students, I'm always trying to make sure that they are reading at their individual instructional levels and their independent reading levels, both. I also try to, when I'm planning my learning activities and practice activities that go along with what I am teaching, I always try to incorporate and include different options for them to review and practice. So maybe, they have a choice, you know, because some students do better with paper pencils, some do better with a technology instrument or a technology device. And at the tier two level [pause] at the tier two level. So in my classes I don't do tier two interventions within my regular class hours…We have about, [pause] we have about a 40 minute, between 40 and 45 minute block that we take students and students are divided up according to those tiers. So most of our students are go into a 45 minute block where we call it flex and they're just doing some universal things within their room, but in my flex I'm doing tier two intervention, so I see those students for 40 minutes every day in a small group and we see them at a minimum four times a week and it's at that time then that they are actually receiving a systematic program of corrective reading. [Pause] And then it would be the same three, same, same thing for tier three. However, for tier three, unfortunately there's not enough time in the day. So what ends up happening is those tier three students have to get pulled out of some class somewhere. Some get pulled out four days a week for 15 minutes, some get pulled out three days a week for 15 or 20 minutes. Which isn't the best case scenario, but.
MS	Harry	Changes on a daily basis. Sometimes you group them with other students. Sometimes you adjust their assignments, sometimes or at a lot of the times. I have an aide in here most hours, either from the school or MAI. I have an aide well not an aid, but assistant in here. He's [here] one hour or one day a week for eighth grade and two days a week for my seventh grade. He, he works with the, the lower end.

Research Question 2: What support factors are needed for faculty to feel confident implementing Tier I RTI modifications within the general education setting?

Faculty participants in this study were asked whether they saw RTI as a helpful instructional tool to assist students achieve their learning goals, or whether the process was more paperwork than what it was worth. This question sought to find out how teachers at MMHS felt about the RTI process from a personal perspective seeing RTI in practice. Of the seven teachers who answered the question, only two, Harry and Donna said it was helpful with no extra paperwork. The other five teachers responded with variations of whether RTI was helpful or not helpful in aiding their instruction.

Table 4. 8 Research Question 2: Is RTI Helpful?

MS/HS	Participant	Response
MS	Anna	If I'm going to be honest, I'm going to say that it is both. I mean, in theory it should be, it should be great. I mean if 80 percent of your kids are not achieving then you have to look at what you're doing in the classroom and sometimes I think that's more of a struggle for people in administration to carry out than it is. And in theory that sounds good, but there's all these other buts in there. It is a lot of paperwork. It's a ton of paperwork and if you've ever taught in public education, you would know that there's more and more and more and more to do and less time. But, it is helpful. I mean, it does make teachers accountable and it does provide us with a guide, you know, the series of steps and things to go through to make sure that our kids are achieving at the levels they should.
HS	Charlie	I think it would, I think it's helpful, but I believe at the same time that we probably should be looking at using it more specifically and having more models to look at and more in certain instances. What would you do? What would, what would be more of a go to strategy. I think a lot of RTI is done on the individual basis. I think we as teachers kind of do what we feel RTI is…When I used to do the RTI paperwork, I thought it was beneficial, but I also felt like it kind of went into a data tank and didn't really know or see what became of it. So it was something that I felt like I wished we had more contact with or more response to it, for us, as a staff.

HS	Donna	I think it can because I think when we then, once I've been referred to the coordinators, then we meet as teachers and talk about what's worked for that student, what hasn't worked, what might be getting in their way and you know, what, what are some things that we can change in our classrooms or do differently.
MS	Erin	In science instruction since we don't have universal screeners or any sort of screening for science instruction specifically, RTI is not necessarily that the tiering and things of that nature and not necessarily a help to us. I don't feel like there's burdensome paperwork associated with it from my end of things either. So I guess it's sort of neither nor proposition.
MS/HS	Fran	I think it could be viewed as both. I think coming from a special education background, I'm always looking at, we're used to trying different instructional strategies all the time, so we're constantly looking at a different strategy, a different way to approach the material. But I think it's very helpful in general education too, to have that list of resources to go to. So when we're looking at RTI and trying to find the different approaches, I think it's beneficial for the students and I, for the teachers, I think it's a learning process. I think we have to have a lot of buying into it, and a lot of support for the staff to realize that it is a good tool to use.
MS	Gwen	Well, I guess because my primary focus has always been tier two and that's all I've done. I would say yes, for me doing tier two RTI interventions that yes, it has been a helpful instructional tool because even though I'm taking a select number of students during those tier two interventions, I also have them during tier one, instruction so I can, I know them better, you know, and I know what they need and I can sometimes provide extra support right within the regular classroom for them. Is it a lot of paperwork? There's a lot of extra work that goes into a tier two program because you're progress monitoring and you're having to prepare for the lessons that you're doing. I mean, … there's a certain amount of practice and rehearsal that goes into doing that. Correcting things, know going through and evaluating, common planning time, planning with our, you know, the other interventionists. It's a lot of extra work, but I feel like it's made a difference. I feel like we've really been closing some gaps.
MS	Harry	For me? It's not that much more paperwork, no. I mean, one or two days a year we have to fill out forms, but ah, no, it's been a big help identifying who needs what type of help, who's missing what skills, that's where [Anna] works with them. She tries to build up the skills they're missing, and even for me to know what

> they're missing skills and I can give them extra help when I can, in class.

Interestingly, through the interviews it was discovered that even though the middle school uses the MAP testing series, MMHS is only utilizing the English/language arts and mathematics tests and not the science or social studies exams. This clarified the primary focus of MMHS is that of English and mathematics studies and thereby reflects how the RTI tiers and interventions at MMHS focus and reflect English and mathematics performance skills.

Ms. B and Ms. C in their interviews were asked what they thought helped teachers at MMHS get to a level of comfort where the school was able to be recognized as a Wisconsin School of Excellence. Ms. C. stated that MMHS has had, "peaks and valleys so to speak because obviously there's changeover in staff and when there's changeover in staff, you have varying levels of training in terms of RTI" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). Yet both Ms. B and Ms. C stated they believe there is always room for growth. Specifically, Ms. C recounted how some years MMHS focused on the instructional and learning needs of the middle school learners, and other years the priority was shifted to the high school learners based on data from MAPS, Forward Exams and the ACT/Aspire exams. At MMHS, there was not instant buy in from faculty. It took work, collaboration, time, patience, and professional development trainings. As Ms. B said, "I don't think there's always 100 percent buy in, but I mean that's something we're always continually trying to educate people about it. Especially when you have staff turnover and if it's a veteran staff coming from a different school who doesn't implement the RTI system with fidelity" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). That constant educating of faculty and administration has cost MMHS and the district approximately $60,000 for three years of instructional coaching from CESA and tens of thousands of dollars for academic intervention

trainings between corrective reading programs, math intervention, and now beginning a strong push to adopt a more aggressive PBIS program at MMHS. PBIS is outside the scope of this study. At the core of MMHS's 2016 success according to Ms. B, was having a strong, "core group of people that kind of pushed this through [and] out to everyone else" (personal interview, 9 October 2018). These faculty members were described as very motivated and believing strongly in the RTI system to promote student success. Ms. B also remembers that the initial implementation of RTI at MMHS was "not a top down thing…but I think just getting that strong core teaching staff and support staff, specialists involved was critical. And I think they still kind of drive that" (personal interview, 9 October 2018).

Ms. B and Ms. C were also asked how much professional development time is specifically allocated to RTI training for faculty, as well as for the administration at MMHS. One of Ms. C's biggest struggles in her first year as MMHS's principal continues to be faculty turnover. Working with a select core group made up of the middle and high school guidance counselors, and a high school special education teacher, Ms. C is transitioning the traditional professional learning community (PLC) to TAPS, team approach to problem solving. While observing this meeting, there did not seem to be any difference in approach to student intervention, but as Ms. C said during the PLC meeting, "PLC is…such a trendy thing right now. I've figured we'd try something else" (personal observation, 9 October 2018). The process discussed during the PLC/TAPS meeting included how this select group would push out information on RTI, what the identification process would be for the high school to place learners into tiers II and III for academic support, and the idea of introducing an accelerated flex class for learners who exhibited above grade level performance on academic assessments. In

addition, part of each faculty meeting would be dedicated to presenting and reinstalling the skills and importance of RTI and PBIS modifications and interventions.

Research Question 3: How is the school using the universal screener to identify students in need of Tier I, II, or III instructional modifications?

Similar in nature to the first research question, participants sited a variety of responses. Amongst middle school faculty, the MAP test was sighted as the universal screener for RTI testing. However, there was a lack of uniformity by faculty responses as to how students were then identified into tiers II and III based on MAP results. Extracting information from the following interview questions:

1. How are initial Tier I screenings conducted?
2. How is the school using the universal screening tool to identify students in need of tier I, II, or III instructional modifications?
3. To what extent do you use RTI's universal screening tools to identify instructional strategies within your classes?

There was a clear trend among all eight teachers interviewed that MAP testing was the initial Tier I screening tool used for middle school students at MMHS. The uniformity ended however when asked how the school is using the universal screening tool to identify students into the different RTI tiers for instructional support and how individual teachers are using the universal screening data to identify instructional strategies for daily lessons. For the most part, the faculty of the high school had a shared understanding that Tier I at MMHS was universal instruction and that all students are part of Tier I instruction. Beyond Tier I however, there was a lack in uniformed understanding of what identifies a student into RTI Tier II or Tier III for academic support. Interestingly, during the PLC meeting this was a major topic of discussion.

Ms. C brought up the topic of identifying benchmark percentiles based on MAPs for middle school as the initial screener for RTI Tiers II and III. The PLC group began this discussion by looking at a data spreadsheet of the entire Midwest middle school student body population. While I was not privy to the spreadsheet, an effort to protect the confidentiality of each student, it was described by Ms. C that the spreadsheet contained MAP scores for each student in grades 6-8 and was arranged by grade. Furthermore, Ms. C had someone else in the school color-code the students using the following format: (a) yellow = students who were currently receiving intervention for reading; (b) red = students who need intervention, but were not getting intervention; (c) purple = students who would benefit from enrichment; (d) bold = students who were members of the Midwest American Indian Tribe (MAI); (e) blue = students receiving special education services; (f) blue bold = MAI students receiving special education services. MMHS is one of only a few districts in the state that services a majority American Indian population. The MAI tribe works in partnership with MMHS providing a tribal member on campus a few times per week for academic and culturally responsive support to students.

The PLC group, using this color-coded data spreadsheet, began discussions of whether there should be cut scores of MAP testing for identifying students into RTI tiers for academic support. One suggestion looked at utilizing the school's flex class period as a way of proving Tiers II and III support and that those Tiers II and III support would be both verted and inverted to allow for support of students on both ends of the learning spectrum. In 2016, when MMHS was awarded the bronze level of distinction, there was a gifted program in place. Yet when this study was conducted, there was no program providing services for gifted or advanced learners at MMHS. Through flex, gifted and advanced learners would be offered the opportunity for curricular enrichment through multiage classes in the middle school.

The PLC group then discussed how and what those possible cut scores would look like. One suggestion for enrichment would be to make the cut score 80% and above based on MAP data. Using MAP data and not a traditional gifted testing system such as OLSAT or NNAT, students identified for an enriched flex period would still not be considered a *gifted learner*, but would have the opportunity for academic enrichment during the school day. There was discussion of the Tier I range being 79% - 51%, Tier II 50% - 25%, resulting in Tier III being 24% - 0%. Within this conversation, I observed there was discussion by the panel for further review and research as to what the range scores for MAPs should be specifically for the betterment of the Midwest middle school student population. There was also mention by Ms. C of having divisions within the tiers such as having a Tier Ib 36% - 50% and a Tier Ia 51% - 79%. By the end of the PLC meeting, there was no consensus on this process, but rather an agreement that more time and effort would be needed before a decision was made.

Summary

Through individual faculty and administrator interviews, focus group interviews and a PLC observation, the faculty and staff at MMHS shared their knowledge and understanding of the RTI process in practice at MMHS. Ranging from the MAP testing system used by the middle school as the universal screener, to a more diverse and differentiated RTI committee at the high school, students are MMHS all receive Tier I universal instructional support. However, evidence reflects a lack in uniformed RTI Tiers II and III identification and intervention methods. While MMHS has earned the Bronze level School of Distinction in 2016 from the Wisconsin RtI Center, high faculty and administrative turn over, combined with decreased enrollment, has left MMHS in a constant cycle of RTI retraining and readjustment.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive single-case study was to showcase a rural Wisconsin School of Distinction implementing RTI Tier I screening and instructional modification practices within the general education setting at the secondary level. Throughout this study, RTI was generally defined as a preventative model of multi-tiered instruction with growth monitoring (Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016). The theory guiding this study was Carol Dweck's (2012) Growth Mindset. The Growth Mindset theory is based on the premise that: (a) students believe their intelligence can be developed, (b) intelligence is malleable, (c) educators have a tremendous impact on the mindset of students, and (d) through positive interactions, students can develop a growth mindset, building intelligence and intellectual confidence (Dweck, 2012; 2014; 2015). RTI complements the Growth Mindset theory through the universal screening component where all students are assessed to determine a baseline for performance and intellectual growth potential in order to develop instructional modifications and interventions to advance the self-confidence and collaterally the intellectual ability and performance of learners. While traditionally reserved for special education students, RTI interventions are applicable for all learners, as all students have capacity for intellectual growth and performance. Chapter five organizes the research analyzed in chapter four and presents a summary of the findings as well as discusses implications of the study, delimitations and limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for future research concerning RTI within the secondary educational settings of Midwest schools.

Summary of Findings

The following summaries of this case study are organized by research question.

Research Question 1: Findings and Conclusion

Research question 1 asked how RTI factors (Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III) are implemented across all ability groups in a universal manner.

Research by Preston et al. (2016) and Ruffini et al. (2016) identified a gap in the practical application of RTI intervention methods within the inclusion-based general education classroom for general education and GATE population learners. At MMHS this gap was present. While classroom teachers were fluent in expressing various approaches to universal instruction, there was a notable gap in RTI Tiers II and III modifications offered to general education and gifted learners. As Gwen stated during her interview, "our general ed students are basically just tiered into the tier one universal model and our gifted students should be placed in either a tier two or tier three, but really honestly we haven't been addressing our tier two or tier three students as far as their giftedness and that's especially bothersome to me" (Personal Interview, 09 October 2018).

Data reflects MMHS is currently implementing a protocol model of RTI Tier I instruction. This type of universal instruction maintains competency rather than mastery learning (Jennings, 2010). Surface strategies identified during interview sessions include rehearsal and rote memorization, which do not enhance cognitive development nor have a definitive relation to student grade point average or exam results (McClintic-Gilbert et al., 2013; Watkins, 2001). At MMHS, it was evident through the interview sessions that special education students were receiving services as needed and from certified special education instructors. What was not evident was the often-overlooked difference between students with low achievement and students with a learning disability (Preston et al., 2016). Building on current studies which have shown schools to be successful in implementing RTI Tier I interventions

within the general education classroom, MMHS needs to develop specific student growth goals to guide intense individual instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Preston et al., 2016; Ruffini et al., 2016). This would help increase performance proficiency for all students, rather than simply establish a bar of proficiency (Wisconsin, 2017a).

Therefore, this study concludes that MMHS is implementing RTI Tier I instruction in a universal manner, but has not shown consistent evidence of RTI Tiers II or III factors in practice within the general education setting. High faculty and administrative turnover may be the cause of the recent lapse in RTI services. Also, it should be noted that within the PLC meeting, there was no core teacher involved. The PLC consisted of the school principal, two guidance counselors, and a special education teacher. Since RTI is a preventative model for all students to reach growth goals, and is not sole property of the special education community, there should be general education teachers in the PLC planning meetings, not only to help reach fidelity, but to promote buy-in to the program.

Research Question 2: Findings and Conclusion

Research question 2 explored what support factors are needed for faculty to feel confident implementing Tier I RTI modifications within the general education setting.

After meeting with the current principal and director of pupil services, it was revealed that MMHS has had high faculty and administrative turnover in recent years. With such high turnover, current administration believes they are restarting the cycle of educating the faculty about RTI and hoping to create buy-in. MMHS is also heavily investing in professional development for the administration. Purchasing trainings through CESA and other professional organizations, the administration is being trained of RTI intervention strategies and then reporting back to the faculty in a trickle-down method.

Yet data from teacher interviews at MMHS revealed two notable desires by teachers in regard to RTI effectiveness: (a) purposeful professional development related directly to RTI intervention modifications and strategies, and (b) to see relevancy from the RTI interventions. Rural educational settings in particular are in dire need of practical application professional development (Brendle, 2014). The on-going professional development of teachers is highly recommended, but teachers have to feel and see that what they are doing in their classrooms have added value to student growth.

There is also an accountability of educational leaders to take an active role in facilitating positive change through RTI (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2011). "America's educational system is not improving, and hasn't been for decades" (Surface, 2014, p. 567). Whether that is due to forced state standards or national testing, presenting the same material to all students indiscriminate of ability, while providing an equal education, denies an equitable education opportunity (Vatterott, 2015; Mukadam, Vyas, & Nayak, 2014). The Nation has been under an attack of drill and kill instruction for years in order to meet annual yearly progress for federal and state funding. MMHS is not immune.

In order for RTI to be successful at MMHS, learning must be personal, to both the teacher and the student. It is imperative both remember they are equally life-long learners. In short, faculty and administration at MMHS must continue to seek out professional development education opportunities on RTI and share success and fail-forward moments of their experiences implementing RTI strategies within their classes (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

Research Question 3: Findings and Conclusions

Research question 3 sought to understand how MMHS is using the universal screener to identify students in need of Tier I, II, or III instructional modifications.

Comparing the middle and high school interview responses, there was a much greater consensus among the middle school faculty for the means by which students are identified into tiers of academic support. All middle school students are screened using the nationally normed MAPs assessment. This assessment is available in language arts, mathematics, and science, and generates a percentage of where the student sits on a national average of his or her peers. The test also reflects growth and generates growth goals based on previous assessments. While MMHS middle school uses MAPs to assess students, there is still need for more intense and purposeful usage of the data from MAPs. This is something the PLC group was beginning to analyze and discuss during my observation. The PLC was beginning to discuss how or if they could develop a period during the day to address the learning needs of those students who scored exceptionally above or below the growth goals on MAPs; referred to as an enrichment hour. The PLC was also discussing cut scores for RTI Tiers. There was discussion of the Tier I range being 79% - 51%, Tier II 50% - 25%, resulting in Tier III being 24% - 0%. There was also mention by Ms. C of having divisions within the tiers such as having a Tier Ib 36% - 50% and a Tier Ia 51% - 79%. As the conclusion of this PLC, no decision was made on RTI tiers.

The high school faculty did not have a uniformed identification process for RTI. Being that the first key component of RTI is the screening process, MMHS needs to establish a well designed and universal screening process in order to establish student success within an RTI instructional model (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). Since the middle school is using MAPs testing, it would be prudent to develop a similar screener. In Wisconsin the ACT Aspire series is recommended by the DPI. However, each school district is entitled to establish a universal screening tool as they deem fitting for their student body population. Based on the data from this

study, it is recommended that MMHS establish a system that is universal, shared, and practiced by all faculty in the high school.

Discussion

Reflecting on the purpose of this qualitative descriptive single-case study, which was to showcase a rural Wisconsin School of Distinction implementing universal response to intervention (RTI) Tier I screening and instructional modification practices within the general education setting at the secondary level, three key elements were unearthed. The first was that the faculty and administration at MMHS have a shared desire to meet the learning needs of their students. The second is that high faculty and administrative turnover has impacted the school culture. Lastly, the dedication of the MMHS faculty to continue the quest to learn and improve their own professional knowledge for the benefit of the student body population reflects not only a growth mindset, but eagerness to hone their craft while redefining instructional strategies for the growth and success of each MMHS student.

Theoretical Literature

Student academic performance is greatly impacted by Educators (Dweck, 2015). Through positive interactions, students can cultivate a growth mindset building intelligence and intellectual confidence. This study adds to Dweck's growth mindset theory substantiating the difference between differentiation and special education services. Furthermore, this study calls attention to the need for secondary schools to identify differentiated mastery levels for students identified as special education, general education, gifted learners, or duel exceptional (Ritchotte, Matthews, & Flowers, 2014). Since IDEA does not federally regulate RTI's Tier I universal screening process, nor intervention accommodations or modifications (Robertson & Pfeiffer,

2016; Wisconsin RtI, 2017a), MMHS has taken the liberty to design and implement an independent RTI system.

Therefore, if the purpose of RTI is to increase student proficiency based on the premise of a growth mindset, then it is in effect not sole property of the special education community and should be utilized school-wide (Preston et al., 2016). However, this study revealed the faculty at MMHS was implementing universal instruction as a one-size-fits all Tier I approach to curricular delivery and using differentiation as a learning modality tool rather than a tool to meet or address the needs of academic or intellectual rigor. The growth mindset theory promotes a challenging, yet rewarding learning experience for learners. Dweck's work bridges the gap between motivation and self-regulation and a person's impact on his or her own achievement. If Tier I is being presented in a universal manner, where all students are receiving the same instruction, then there is no growth mindset present in the instructional delivery. Learners are not being given the opportunity to embrace challenges or face setbacks or learn from criticism since all learners will not be at the same academic level. Some learners will be challenged, but other learners will be bored at a universal level. RTI Tiers I, II, and III must be both inductive and deductive in order to meet the growth mindset and learning needs of all learners.

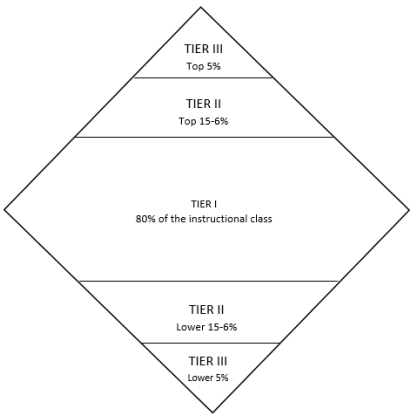

Figure 5. 1 Growth Mindset RTI Model

Empirical Literature

Since RTI's Tier I has traditionally been a method of universal instructional intervention, and if we accept the growth mindset theory that all students have growth potential, then in effect all students within a general education classroom should be provided RTI modifications and accommodations to some degree (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Preston et al., 2016). This student adds to and confirms empirical literature by presenting evidence that there is a substantial lack in practical application models of a working RTI program, specifically within a secondary educational setting showcasing how content teachers implement RTI modifications and interventions within the general education setting (Preston et al., 2016; Regan et al., 2015; Ruffini, Miskell, Lindsey, McInerney, & Waite, 2016).

Arguably, RTI is an important tool for helping educators identify K-12 students who may have specific learning disabilities under IDEA, however, the original intent of RTI was to serve as an academic support for all students indiscriminate of IEP or 504 accommodations (Daves & Walker, 2012). This study also confirms there is evidence of professional confusion that may be impacting the fidelity and integrity of how RTI is being utilized within the general education classroom (Daves & Walker, 2012). Through the interview process, there was evidence supporting Zirkel's study by which a false narrative was present using the word *intervention* as a noun insisting that RTI be used, "within the limited context of identifying students with a learning disability" (2011). However, RTI, like any instructional intervention, should be a series of strategies, modifications, and accommodations, not an absolute. These types of instructional strategies should be used within the general education setting in conjunction with established curriculum by the teacher(s) to monitor student progress in order to make informed decisions about each learner's academic and intellectual growth (Daves & Walker, 2012; Fuchs, Fuchs, &

Compton, 2012). Instead, what was discovered was the use of the term, *universal instruction*, as a catch-all phrase to describe a one size fits all lesson. In a way, this study was able to present the issue of equal instruction v equitable instruction. If all students are instructed in an inclusion-based setting, and given the same instruction, oral directions, lesson components, and desired outcomes to perform, where is the RTI differentiation? How are student needs being met? Challenged? Modified? There is no evidence in an equality instructed lesson of a growth mindset. Rather one must seek out an equitable lesson to see such growth mindset principles at work. Again, remembering that this study was based on the principles of the growth mindset.

Dweck believes, "growth is the heart and soul of education" (2015b), indiscriminate of age, gender, ethnicity, ability, or any other characteristic. Individually, there was evidence of MMHS teachers using RTI interventions and modifications to meet the learning needs of students. Although, this study did reveal the following inconsistencies among faculty and administration in regards to RTI understanding and application:

1. There was a lack of consistent understanding for the process by which high school students are identified into RTI Tiers I, II, or III.
2. No evidence of a uniformed growth monitoring template used by faculty to monitor student growth goals.
3. No specific intervention or modification lists faculty could pull from to assist student growth goals for each RTI tier.
4. RTI was regarded as only an English and mathematics focus.

Additionally, this descriptive single-case study was designed (Yin, 2014) to showcase a Wisconsin School of Distinction utilizing RTI universal screening and corresponding Tiers I, II, and III instructional interventions within a general education classroom for special education,

general education, and gifted learners. This study of RTI, a real-life contemporary phenomenon, revealed a notable gap in previous literature and research (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Seedorf, 2014). Where previous studies focus on the special education and primary learning levels for RTI intervention, this study makes a considerable contribution to the continued study of RTI practices and the field of academia and instructional leadership by focusing on the much-overlooked general education learning environments at the secondary educational level (Preston et al., 2016; Regan et al., 2015). By extending and strengthening previous research, the findings of this research study based on the aforementioned research questions (a) identified a critical need for practicing RTI models at the secondary educational level; (b) uncovered there was no uniformed method or understanding of RTI intervention or modification practices, and (c) there were clear distinctions between methods used at the middle and high school levels for RTI Tier I identification. Research conducted during this study revealed a need for model schools in the Midwest settings to successfully model RTI intervention methods with fidelity within an inclusion-based general education classroom (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Preston et al., 2016; Regan et al, 2015; Seedorf, 2014; Wisconsin RtI Center, 2017a). Midwest schools, MMHS in particular, due to a small student body population in combination with a lack of available resources, find inclusion-based classrooms a necessity rather than a choice for student success. Thereby, in order for MMHS to uphold RTI with fidelity, keeping in mind Dweck's growth mindset learning theory, more research and working RTI models at the secondary level need to be dissected and analyzed as this study attempted.

After careful analysis of data, this study corroborates and adds to previous research as cited in Chapter Two concerning how universal screening tools and RTI interventions are often misused or absent within the general education setting, which means the individual learning

needs of general education and gifted learners are not being met (Jennings, 2010; McClintic-Gilbert et al., 2013). While faculty at MMHS implemented instructional interventions and modifications within the inclusion setting, those interventions not necessarily based on RTI tiers. There was a sense among the faculty that RTI was the practice of universal instruction, rather than individual intervention and modifications to address individual learning needs per tiers. In addition, this study found a void in the link of using data-driven resources such as the universal screener to identify how general education students would be differentiated into the RTI tiers in order to receive the multi-tiered system of support with growth monitoring. All middle school students were given the MAP testing at MMHS, but there was no evidence that the results of the MAP testing identified RTI tiers of support for students.

The high school RTI process was a completely different experience. There was no universal screener for MMHS' high school at the time of this study, although Ms. C, the new principal, was in the early stages of developing a universal screening process with the PLC team. Currently at the 9-12 grade level, RTI was described as more of a committee decision. Even with that type of identification process, there was no evidence of a universal understanding of what factors identified students into RTI tiers I, II, or III. From a holistic lens, identifying the use but not the application of data adds to the field of academia as it is unlikely MMHS is the only Midwest school not applying available data to the RTI process. Being able to learn, both positive and fail-forward lessons, from a School of Distinction is valuable to greater educational community.

Additionally, faculty at MMHS expressed feelings of confidence implementing RTI within the general education population, yet interviews revealed a desire by faculty for more education, training, and practicing models of RTI. As Charlie shared during his interview,

“when I used to do the RTI paperwork, I thought it was beneficial, but I also felt like it kind of went into a data tank and didn't really know or see what became of it. So it was something that I felt like I wished we had more contact with or more response to it, for us, as a staff” (personal interview, 9 October 2018).

Implications

Theoretical Implications

Dweck’s (2015b) growth mindset establishes the theoretical implications of this study. The growth mindset is predicated on the theory that the desire to learn is innate within each learner. If educational institutions can merge both IDEA and Dweck’s growth mindset learning settings, an inclusion-based instructional classroom would be able to utilize RTI to meet the learning needs of all students by challenging learners to increase intellectual capacities and proficiencies using a universal screener and growth monitoring systems specifically designed for each learner. Regardless if a student has been identified as needing special education support or is excelling far above grade level, by properly and universally utilizing RTI tiers, the growth mindset shatters the idea of a learning ceiling and promotes a philosophy that all learners must be intellectually challenged to continue honing his or her own academic growth.

Empirical Implications

Empirically, without a clear understanding of the RTI tier structures and what interventions and modifications should be available to help students achieve individual intellectual growth, an educational system can inadvertently breed a misunderstanding of RTI as a whole. RTI should not be a catch-all phrase used to justify remediation or student make-up work. RTI is a structured and accountable multi-tiered system of support designed to individually meet the learning needs of students to promote academic and intellectual growth.

Each learner is an individual. As such, each RTI plan should differ and reflect the needs of each learner.

Advocating and educating Midwest teachers and administrators for the need to not only use the term, *RTI,* but to implement RTI with fidelity across districts and into classrooms to help students academic and intellectual growth, contributes to the field of academia as a whole. Undeniably, IDEA (2004) legislation mandates a major element of RTI centers on the premise that students receive equitable instruction in the least restrictive environment. Additionally, RTI supports may enhance special education accommodations, but must not serve as a replacement for special education services. RTI is an academic system of support for all learners. It is not the sole property of the special education community (Ritchotte, Matthews, & Flowers, 2014).

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are evident in MMHS' current reconfiguration and development of a growth monitoring system for all secondary students using the online platform, Educlimber, powered by Illuminate education. This type of online data tracker will enable MMHS to follow, track, and most importantly use student data for consecutive years and allow teachers and administration access to running records in order to more effectively monitor and set growth goals for students. It is not enough to simply say a school is utilizing RTI interventions by modifying assignments or providing additional time. RTI is a complex muli-tiered system of academic support designed to meet students where his or her learning needs are and then build ability and performance through the growth mindset to where they want to be.

Recommendations

While this case study at MMHS revealed a few areas for growth, it also serves as a working RTI model for peer schools wishing to enhance their own RTI platform. Small,

Midwest schools wishing to strengthen their own RTI policies may wish to utilize the following RTI practices of MMHS:

1. Construct a core group of administrators, guidance counselors, and faculty members to lead RTI. This core group should be highly motivated, reflect both the faculty and student body population, and demonstrate buy-in to the RTI system. This is the core group that would go to RTI trainings outside of the district and become the in-house RTI trainers for the building.
2. Utilize a continuous growth monitoring system to track student data and growth from year to year. While this study has no affiliation or sponsorship with any data monitoring system or brand, the system used by the MMHS faculty was found to be effective in student growth monitoring and goal setting because faculty had full access to the data; as opposed to only administration.
3. Establish and educate all faculty and staff on what tool will be used as the universal screener for RTI tier intervention placement.
4. Once a universal screener has been identified, utilize the RTI group from recommendation 1 to establish cut scores for RTI tiers of intervention. Cut scores should reflect growth goals as well as state summative assessment goals. For example, if students are expected to earn a fidelity score of 80% on end of year state assessment exams to qualify as advanced or proficient, then the following cut scores may serve beneficial for establishing RTI tiers: (a) Tier IA 100-90; (b) Tier IB 89-80; (c) Tier IIA 79-70; (d) Tier IIB 69-60; (e) Tier IIIA 59-50; (f) Tier IIIB 49-0.
5. Once RTI tiers have been established, again utilizing the RTI core group, establish an RTI growth goal template all individual student growth goals can be tracked using.

6. Provide faculty with a *go-to* list of interventions and modifications for each RTI tier. While certified teachers are professionals in their field of study, RTI is not specific to those educators trained in the needs of special education services. Having an easily accessible list of interventions and modifications can often ease and support teachers in providing needed accommodations within the general education classroom.
7. Continue to offer ongoing training in-house for all faculty and staff on RTI methods. Along with in-house training, be sure to demonstrate how RTI is or is not working effectively and celebrate the victories your students have demonstrated due to the dedication of faculty and staff utilizing RTI's multitier system of support interventions and modifications to meet growth goals.

Delimitations and Limitations

For this study, only schools that had been identified by the Wisconsin RtI Center as a School of Distinction for full implementation for RtI Tiers I, II, and III were considered. The last published report by the Wisconsin RtI Center was published in 2017 and reflected schools that had earned distinctions for 2016. Since 2017, the Wisconsin RtI Center had yet to publish an updated list of Schools of Distinction. Therefore, this study was limited to the schools listed on the 2016 Schools of Distinction list. Of all the recognized schools on the 2016 list, only those at the secondary level were then looked at for this study as the focus was on 6-12 grade intervention methods. Using only schools within the secondary level shortened the list of possible candidates to four potential schools. Two of the schools were located in the Milwaukee region, one in central Wisconsin and one in northern Wisconsin. Of the four school districts, one was willing to participate in the study.

A major limitation of this study lies in the sheer fact that so few secondary schools in Wisconsin have been able achieve the distinction of earning a bronze, silver, gold, or platinum School of Distinction award for RTI compliance. There also lies the argument that schools have simply not applied or sought recognition for such accolades. In both former cases, the academic institutions would not be known nor included in this case study. Another major limitation to this study was time. MMHS received the RTI accolade in 2016, but has since seen changes in not only principal leadership, but superintendent and teacher turnover. As with most changes, there is an adjustment period. The current principal, Ms. C, was not the administrator who initially charged the RTI program at MMHS. The RTI system of modifications and interventions within MMHS continues to transition as new administrators take the helm of the school.

Recommendations for Future Research

After careful consideration and based on the study's current findings, limitations, and delimitations, future research expanding to more than a singular secondary learning institution could greatly improve the transparency and serve as a better model of how Midwest schools of distinction implement RTI accommodations and modifications. In addition, conducting a quantitative study tracking multi-year ACT Aspire results for high school students or MAP testing results through nationally normed data for middle school students could help give way for similarly populated Midwest schools to learn which RTI methods showed positive or negative student intellectual growth rates.

Summary

RTI, the only federally supported, scientifically accountable multi-tiered system of support designed to individually meet and promote the academic, intellectual, and learning growth needs of students, continues to be an undefined area for professional development

(Preston et al., 2016). While educators continue to test new and innovative interventions and modifications to assist learners in meeting critical benchmark proficiency scores on summative assessments, RTI has become a catch phrase, rather than a universal data-driven system of support. Varying from a universal definition, to how students are identified for RTI tiered interventions, small rural Midwest schools are struggling to maintain the needed support to effectively engage RTI due to both limited faculty and economic resources. Even larger Midwest urban districts, such as the Milwaukee Public School System, have yet to fully implement RTI tiers II and III with fidelity (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017).

While in Wisconsin, public and voucher schools are entitled to utilize state RTI resources such as the Wisconsin RtI Center for professional development and instructional support, similar Midwest school districts could benefit from similar agencies providing specific guidance and modeling of practical applications of RTI; particularly at the secondary school setting (Regan, Berkeley, Hughes, & Brady, 2015). Independent educational agencies, such as the Wisconsin RtI Center could serve as a viable resource for small Midwest schools that do not have additional disposal or discretionary funds to support such trainings. Moreover, it is imperative that all public educational institutions are in compliance with the following necessary RTI features of the federal IDEA's reauthorization within the general education setting: (a) culturally responsive practices, (b) high quality instruction, (c) balanced assessment, (d) collaboration, and a (e) multi-level system of support. Within the IDEA structure, school districts do have autonomy to choose how to configure their RTI system based on available resources, programs, and practices. However, regardless of the physical format of the RTI system, via circle or triangle, there must be evidence of an RTI system in place (D. Seaman, personal communication, December 19, 2017). Today, more than forty years after RTI first entered the educational stadium, it is more

critical than ever to ensure and provide teachers and administrators at the secondary level with working models of what effective RTI practices look like and models of how to implement RTI within the general education classroom for non-special education learners (Amundson & Hartwig, 2010; Brown, 2012; Dweck, 2015, 2017). As each learner is an individual, so too must each RTI plan differ to reflect the needs of each learner and learning environment.

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APPENDIX A: Permission to Conduct Research

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF [redacted]
[redacted] HIGHWAY 8 W
[redacted], WI 54520-8499
[redacted]
[redacted]
"Learning today.
Leading tomorrow!"

[redacted]

March 21, 2018

Pamela Stark, Ed. S
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

Dear Ms. Stark,

Thank you for considering [redacted] Middle/High School in your research project "A Case Study of a Midwest School of Distinction Implementing School-Wide RTI." As I understand it, Dr. [redacted] had given you verbal consent for this project when you spoke to him earlier this year.

I have read through your plan to conduct research through teacher interviews and observation and support your efforts to showcase the work our rural schools are doing. Our teachers are committed to supporting learning which I think you will discover through your interviews.

At this time, I would like to grant you permission to conduct your research within [redacted] Middle/High School and let you know that we are looking forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

[redacted]
Director of Pupil Services

APPENDIX B: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 2, 2018

Pamela Stark

IRB Approval 3319.070218: A Case Study of a Midwest School of Distinction Implementing School-Wide RTI

Dear Pamela Stark,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.
Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

> 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
>
> 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

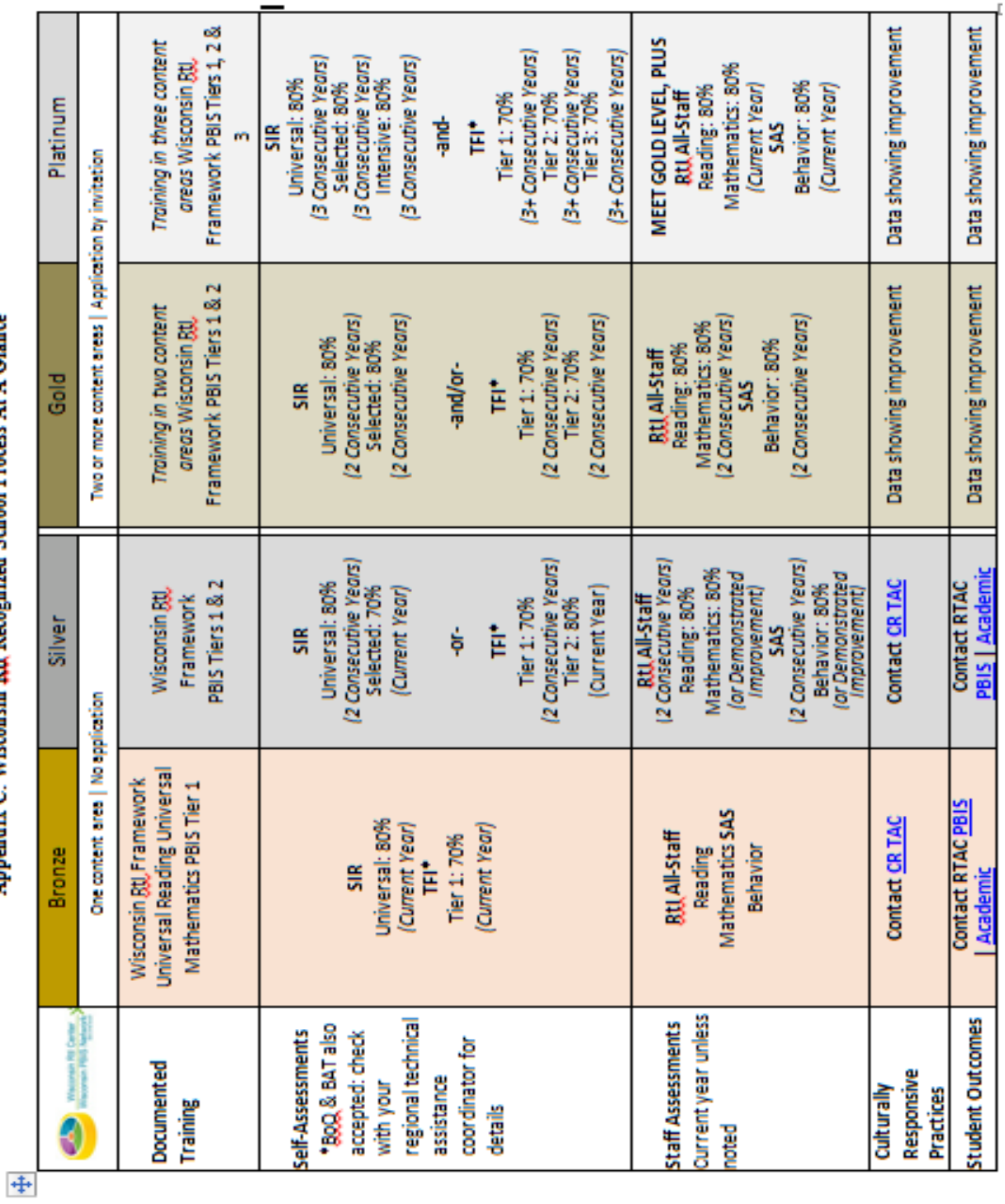
[redacted]

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971

APPENDIX C: Wisconsin RtI Center's Recognized School Rubric



Appendix C: Wisconsin RtI Recognized School Process At A Glance

	Bronze	Silver	Gold	Platinum
	One content area | No application		Two or more content areas | Application by invitation	
Documented Training	Wisconsin RtI Framework Universal Reading Universal Mathematics PBIS Tier 1	Wisconsin RtI Framework PBIS Tiers 1 & 2	*Training in two content areas* Wisconsin RtI Framework PBIS Tiers 1 & 2	*Training in three content areas* Wisconsin RtI Framework PBIS Tiers 1, 2 & 3
Self-Assessments *BoQ & BAT also accepted: check with your regional technical assistance coordinator for details	SIR Universal: 80% *(Current Year)* TFI* Tier 1: 70% *(Current Year)*	SIR Universal: 80% *(2 Consecutive Years)* Selected: 70% *(Current Year)* -or- TFI* Tier 1: 70% *(2 Consecutive Years)* Tier 2: 80% (Current Year)	SIR Universal: 80% *(2 Consecutive Years)* Selected: 80% *(2 Consecutive Years)* -and/or- TFI* Tier 1: 70% *(2 Consecutive Years)* Tier 2: 70% *(2 Consecutive Years)*	SIR Universal: 80% *(3 Consecutive Years)* Selected: 80% *(3 Consecutive Years)* Intensive: 80% *(3 Consecutive Years)* -and- TFI* Tier 1: 70% *(3+ Consecutive Years)* Tier 2: 70% *(3+ Consecutive Years)* Tier 3: 70% *(3+ Consecutive Years)*
Staff Assessments Current year unless noted	RtI All-Staff Reading Mathematics SAS Behavior	RtI All-Staff *(2 Consecutive Years)* Reading: 80% Mathematics: 80% *(or Demonstrated Improvement)* SAS *(2 Consecutive Years)* Behavior: 80% *(or Demonstrated Improvement)*	RtI All-Staff Reading: 80% Mathematics: 80% *(2 Consecutive Years)* SAS Behavior: 80% *(2 Consecutive Years)*	**MEET GOLD LEVEL, PLUS** RtI All-Staff Reading: 80% Mathematics: 80% *(Current Year)* SAS Behavior: 80% *(Current Year)*
Culturally Responsive Practices	Contact CR TAC	Contact CR TAC	Data showing improvement	Data showing improvement
Student Outcomes	Contact RTAC PBIS | Academic	Contact RTAC PBIS | Academic	Data showing improvement	Data showing improvement

APPENDIX D: Recruitment Letter – Individual Interview

01 May 2018

[redacted] Middle/High School
[redacted]
[redacted] WI [redacted]

Dear Faculty Member:

As a graduate student in the Education department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to showcase a rural Wisconsin School of Distinction implementing universal response to intervention (RTI) Tier I screening and instructional modification practices within the general education setting at the secondary level. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, under a teaching or administrative contract by the School District of [redacted], and are willing to participate, you will be asked to partake in an individual interview session regarding RTI. It should take approximately 15 minutes for you to complete the individual interview session. Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected. All interviews will take place on campus at [redacted] and the researcher will work around teacher schedules as to not disrupt class instruction. No students or minors are directly part of this study.

To participate, **complete and return the consent document to [redacted] in the main office by <u>May 15, 2018</u>.**

A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to [redacted] by May 15, 2018. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact [redacted] or the researcher, Pamela Stark, at: 757-373-2418 or pstark3@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Pamela Stark, Ed.S
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

APPENDIX E: Recruitment - Letter Focus Group

01 May 2018

[redacted] Middle/High School
[redacted]
[redacted], WI [redacted]

Dear Faculty Member:

As a graduate student in the Education department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to showcase a rural Wisconsin School of Distinction implementing universal response to intervention (RTI) Tier I screening and instructional modification practices within the general education setting at the secondary level. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, under a teaching or administrative contract by the School District of [redacted] and are willing to participate, you will be asked to partake in a focus group session interview. It should take approximately 30 minutes to complete the group focus session. Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected. All interviews will take place on campus at [redacted] and the researcher will work around teacher schedules as to not disrupt class instruction. No students or minors are directly part of this study.

To participate, **complete and return the consent document to [redacted] in the main office by <u>May 15, 2018</u>.**

A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to [redacted] by May 15, 2018. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact [redacted] or the researcher, Pamela Stark, at: 757-373-2418 or pstark3@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Pamela Stark, Ed.S
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

APPENDIX F: Recruitment Letter - PLC Observation

01 May 2018

[redacted] Middle/High School
[redacted]
[redacted], WI [redacted]

Dear Faculty Member:

As a graduate student in the Education department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to showcase a rural Wisconsin School of Distinction implementing universal response to intervention (RTI) Tier I screening and instructional modification practices within the general education setting at the secondary level. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, under a teaching or administrative contract by the School District of [redacted] and are willing to participate, you will be asked to be observed by the researcher during a professional development community (PLC) meeting. It should take approximately 30 minutes for the researcher to observe a PLC meeting. Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected. All observations will take place on campus at [redacted] and the researcher will work around teacher schedules as to not disrupt class instruction. No students or minors are directly part of this study.

To participate, **complete and return the consent document to [redacted] in the main office by <u>May 15, 2018</u>.**

A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to [redacted] by May 15, 2018. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact [redacted] or the researcher, Pamela Stark, at: 757-373-2418 or pstark3@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Pamela Stark, Ed.S
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

APPENDIX G: Consent Form – Individual Interview, Focus Group, & PLC

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
7/2/2018 to 7/1/2019
Protocol # 3319.070218

CONSENT FORM

A CASE STUDY OF A MIDWEST SCHOOL OF DISTINCTION IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL-WIDE RTI

Pamela Stark
Liberty University
School of
Education

You are invited to be in a research study showcasing a rural Wisconsin School of Distinction implementing universal response to intervention (RTI) Tier I screening and instructional modification practices within the general education setting at the secondary level. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a contracted teacher or administrator with the [redacted] middle/high school, which has been identified as a bronze level School of Distinction by the Wisconsin RtI Center in conjunction with the Wisconsin DPI. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Pamela Stark, Ed.S, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to provide a working model of a rural Wisconsin School of Distinction implementing universal response to intervention (RTI) Tier I screening and instructional modification practices within the general education setting at the secondary level.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. **Individual Interview Sessions:** Each teacher and administrator taking part in this study will be asked to participate in an individual interview session about RTI practices within the general education setting. As the researcher, I will be conducting each interview session. These interview sessions should take no more than 15 minutes. Each session will be audio recorded for transcription accuracy.
2. **Focus Group Interview Sessions:** All teachers who agree to participate in the individual interview session will be asked to participate in a focus group interview session about RTI practices within the general education setting. As the researcher, I will be conducting the focus group interview session. The interview session should take no more than 30 minutes. Each session will be audio recorded for transcription accuracy.
3. **Observation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) Meeting:** [redacted], personal communication, February 13, 2018) has granted permission for me to observe a 30 minute PLC meeting in which the main focus of the meeting is RTI topics. This is not an interview session, but an observation by the researcher. The PLC will be video recorded in order to review data for later analysis.
4. **Interview Transcript Review:** Participants will be given the option to review their transcribed interview for accuracy, which should take about 15 minutes.

Risks: Since no children are involved in this study and the interview questions are focusing strictly on instructional methods of RTI, the risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include sharing a working RTI model with struggling secondary educational institutions wishing to utilize a tiered intervention strategy.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- To protect the privacy of the participant(s), pseudonyms will be assigned. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded using the Voice Record app and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Limits of confidentiality: I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the School District of Crandon. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
7/2/2018 to 7/1/2019
Protocol # 3319.070218

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Pamela Stark, Ed.S. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at pstark3@liberty.edu or 757-373-2418. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Wimberley at adwimberley@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

☐ I would like to participate in the teacher focus group interview session.

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Investigator Date

APPENDIX H: Administrator Interview Questions

Semi-structured Interview Questions for Administrators

1. When did this school begin the transition to RTI?
2. From inception, how long did it take for the school to fully implement RTI interventions across all ability groups?
3. How many years would you recall it taking before the teachers were fully committed to the RTI system?
4. What do you think helped get the teachers to a level of comfort where the school is now recognized as a Wisconsin School of Excellence?
5. How much professional development time is specifically allocated to RTI training for faculty?
6. What about for you as an administrator? Do you have any support for RTI training?
7. How is the school using the universal screening tool to identify students in need of tier I, II, or III instructional modifications?

APPENDIX I: Faculty Interview Questions

Semi-structured Interview Questions for Individual Faculty Members

1. What is the percentage of special education to general education to gifted in your classes?
2. How are initial Tier I screenings conducted?
3. How are students identified for your class into Tier I, II, or III for instructional support?
4. How are general education and gifted students included in the RTI model?
5. How do you adjust your lessons accordingly in order to address intervention plans for RTI Tier's I, II, III for each ability group?
6. Do you see RTI as a helpful instructional tool for you as an educator to help students achieve their learning goals, or is it just more paperwork?

APPENDIX J: Focus Group Interview Questions

Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions for Teachers

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not comfortable at all and 5 being completely comfortable, how would you rate your own knowledge of the RTI process?
2. To what extent do you use RTI's universal screening tools to identify instructional strategies within your classes?
3. How are general education and gifted students included in the universal screening process?
4. How does the proficiency bar for Tier I, II, and III vary for general education, gifted, and special education students?
5. How to you adjust your lessons accordingly to needed RTI Tier I, II, III instructional strategies for each ability group?

APPENDIX K: Wisconsin RtI School-wide Implementation Review

PART ONE: HIGH QUALITY INSTRUCTION

High quality instruction (curriculum, instruction, and assessment) is engaging, standards-based, data-driven, and research- based and is grounded in culturally responsive practices.

	Do we have **HIGH QUALITY INSTRUCTION** on multiple levels?	Not in Place	Purpose-Building	Infrastructure	Initial Implementation	Full Implementation
	For instruction at the UNIVERSAL level, we…					
1	Use universal curriculum and instruction based on the **Wisconsin State standards** or **local standards**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
2	Deliver universal curriculum and instruction based on **grade-level/course benchmarks**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
3	Use **research-based** practices and/or programs within our universal curriculum and instruction	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
4	**Differentiate** universal curriculum and instruction based on student needs	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
5	Provide universal curriculum and instruction that **engages students**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
6	Provide universal curriculum and instruction that **uses the cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences** of our students	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
7	Use **formal strategies** to share our grade-level/course benchmarks with all **parents/guardians**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
8	Use a process to ensure that our universal curriculum and instruction are **delivered with fidelity** (i.e. as intended)	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
9	Use multiple measures to **review the overall effectiveness** of our universal curriculum and instruction **for all students** and **adjust accordingly**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
10	Use multiple measures to **review the effectiveness** of our universal curriculum and instruction **for demographic groups of students** and **adjust accordingly**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
	For instruction at the SELECTED and INTENSIVE level, we…					
11	Provide **interventions in addition to the universal curriculum** for students not meeting benchmarks	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
12	Use **evidence-based interventions** for students not meeting benchmarks	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
13	Provide interventions **relevant to the cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences** of our students not meeting benchmarks	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
14	Provide **evidence-based additional challenges** for students exceeding benchmarks	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI

15	Provide additional challenges **relevant to the cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences** of our students exceeding benchmarks	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
16	Use a process to ensure that our interventions/challenges are **delivered with fidelity** (i.e. as intended)	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
17	Regularly **review the overall effectiveness of our interventions/challenges** for students receiving selected and intensive support	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
18	Regularly **review the effectiveness of our interventions/challenges for demographic groups of students** receiving selected and intensive support	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI

PART TWO: BALANCED ASSESSMENT

Continuous review of student progress involves a balanced, systematic process of constant inquiry that uses multiple measures to determine the current skill level of students, how students are responding to core curriculum and instruction, and how students are responding to interventions or additional challenges.

Do we use **BALANCED ASSESSMENTS** to continuously review student progress?	Not in Place	Purpose-Building	Infrastructure	Initial Implementation	Full Implementation
For assessment of learning at the UNIVERSAL level, we…					
19 Use a **process to screen** all students on grade-level/course benchmarks multiple times each year	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
20 Use **valid and reliable** universal screening tools/processes	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
21 **Use** a screening process that is **relevant to our students' cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
22 Use **multiple measures** in our universal screening process	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
23 Use **decision rules to determine levels of support** for students based on universal screening results	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
24 Use a **system to document** universal screening results and instructional decisions	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
25 Use **formal strategies** that ensure **parents/guardians** know and understand **universal screening results**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI

26	Use a process to **analyze aggregated universal screening results**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
27	Use a process to **analyze disaggregated universal screening results** (i.e. by student demographic groups)	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
28	Regularly **review the effectiveness and efficiency** of our universal screening processes	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
For assessment of learning at the SELECTED AND INTENSIVE levels, we…						
29	Use **valid and reliable diagnostic data** to provide in-depth information about students in need of support at the selected and intensive levels	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
30	Use **valid and reliable tools to monitor the progress** of students receiving interventions/additional challenges	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
31	**Use a process** based on the intensity of the intervention/challenge **to determine the frequency of progress-monitoring** for students receiving support at selected and intensive levels	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
32	**Frequently review progress-monitoring data to gauge** whether students are making **adequate progress** in response to the interventions/challenges and **adjust accordingly**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
33	Use a system to **document student-level progress-monitoring data and instructional decisions** for students at the selected and intensive levels of support	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
34	Use a process to regularly **inform parents/guardians** of ongoing student progress in response to interventions/challenges	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI

PART THREE: COLLABORATION

Collaboration is a process where people work together to identify and provide supports to students to increase their academic and behavioral success through data-based decision making.

Do we **COLLABORATE** within our multi-level system of support?	Not in Place	Purpose-Building	Infrastructure	Initial Implementation	Full Implementation
To strengthen the effect of our UNIVERSAL curriculum/instruction, we…					
35 **Collaborate frequently in grade level/content area teams** about universal student data and instructional practices	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI

36	**Involve multiple staff roles** in grade level/content area team discussions about universal student data and instructional practices	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
37	**Demonstrate cultural competence when collaborating** in grade level/content area teams about universal student data and instructional practices	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
38	Follow a **consistent process to guide** grade level/content area **team discussions and decisions** at the universal level	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
39	**Collaborate** periodically ***across*** grade levels/content areas about universal student data and instructional practices	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
	To strengthen the effect of our SELECTED AND INTENSIVE interventions/challenges, we…					
40	**Involve multiple staff roles** in grade level/content area teams when **determining the appropriate type and level of intensity of interventions/challenges** for students in need of support at the **selected level**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
41	**Demonstrate cultural competence** when collaborating in grade level/content area teams about the appropriate nature of support at the **selected level**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
42	Follow a **consistent process to guide** grade level/content area **team discussions and decisions** about support at the **selected level**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
43	Use a process to **collaborate with and engage parents/guardians** of students receiving support at the selected level	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
44	**Work collectively to provide interventions/challenges** for students receiving support at the selected level	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
45	Use a process to **access timely building-level problem-solving team support** for students in need of support at the intensive level	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
46	**Involve multiple staff roles** in our **building-level problem-solving team** for students in need of support at the intensive level	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
47	Follow a **data-based process to guide building-level problem-solving team decisions** about the nature and level of intensity of interventions/challenges for students in need of support at the intensive level	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
48	**Use a culturally competent process** when collaborating in our **building-level problem-solving team**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI

PART THREE: COLLABORATION

Collaboration is a process where people work together to identify and provide supports to students to increase their academic and behavioral success through data-based decision making.

Do we **COLLABORATE** within our multi-level system of support?		Not in Place	Purpose-Building	Infrastructure	Initial Implementation	Full Implementation
49	**Engage parents/guardians** as active team participants at **each step of the problem-solving process** for students receiving support at the intensive level	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
50	Use a process to **measure the effectiveness** and **efficiency** of our **building-level problem-solving team** for students receiving support at the intensive level	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI

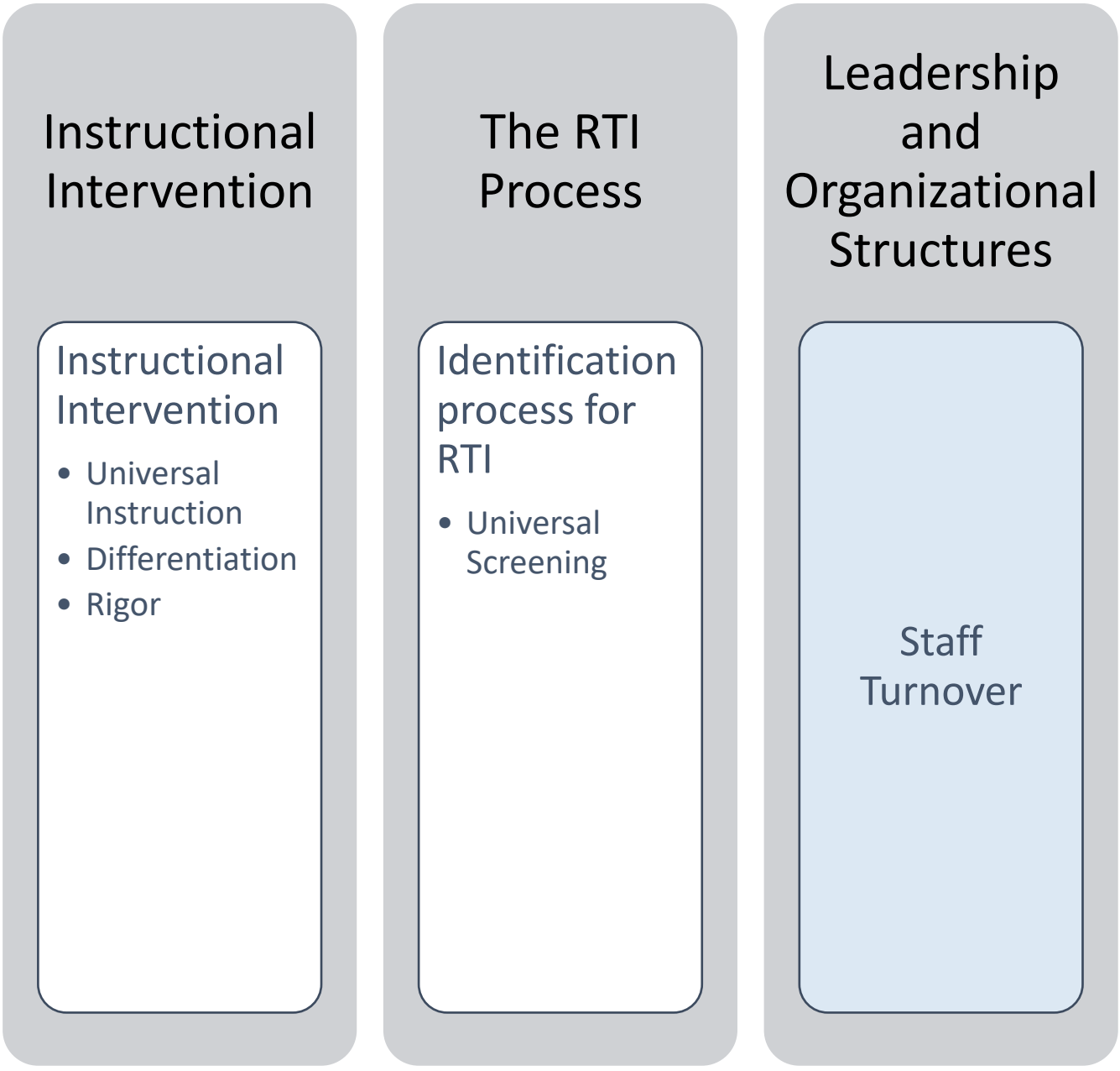
PART FOUR: LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Effective leadership is essential to the development and continuing improvement of any organization. Leaders are needed to focus efforts on excellence and equity in education. School leaders expect and hold staff accountable for challenging all students with a rigorous, culturally relevant curriculum and for demonstrating high expectations for each student. School leaders ensure that each school has financial, material, and programmatic resources adequate to provide each student an equitable opportunity to learn and achieve success. [Source: WI DPI Characteristics of Successful Schools]

Do we have school-wide **LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES** to support full RtI implementation?		Not in Place	Purpose-Building	Infrastructure	Initial Implementation	Full Implementation
51	Our school embraces an **RtI vision** centered on **achieving high levels of academic and behavioral success for <u>all</u> students**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
52	Our **principal** is **actively committed** to a multi-year RtI implementation	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
53	Our **school-wide schedules** are **aligned to support** delivery of **multiple levels** of high quality instruction based on the needs of our students	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
54	School **personnel and roles** are **aligned to support** delivery of **multiple levels** of high quality instruction based on the needs of our students	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI

55	The school **budget** is **aligned to** implement our **RtI goals**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
56	**Collaboration** around student data and instruction is **built into staff expectations, schedules, and the school calendar**	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
57	We commit **adequate time and resources to support professional learning** for all staff needed for full RtI implementation	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
58	We use a **system to easily document and access individual student-level data** for all of the years each student has been in our school	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
59	Our **school-level leadership team meets regularly** to **oversee implementation of** our school-wide RtI action plan	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
60	We use a **process to evaluate our short-term progress and long-term goals** toward full RtI implementation	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI
61	We use a **process to regularly communicate** our **school-wide RtI actions and results** to multiple stakeholder audiences, including all staff, families, school board members, and the community	NIP	PB	IS	II	FI

APPENDIX L: Data Matrix



APPENDIX M: Field Notes Template

Date:

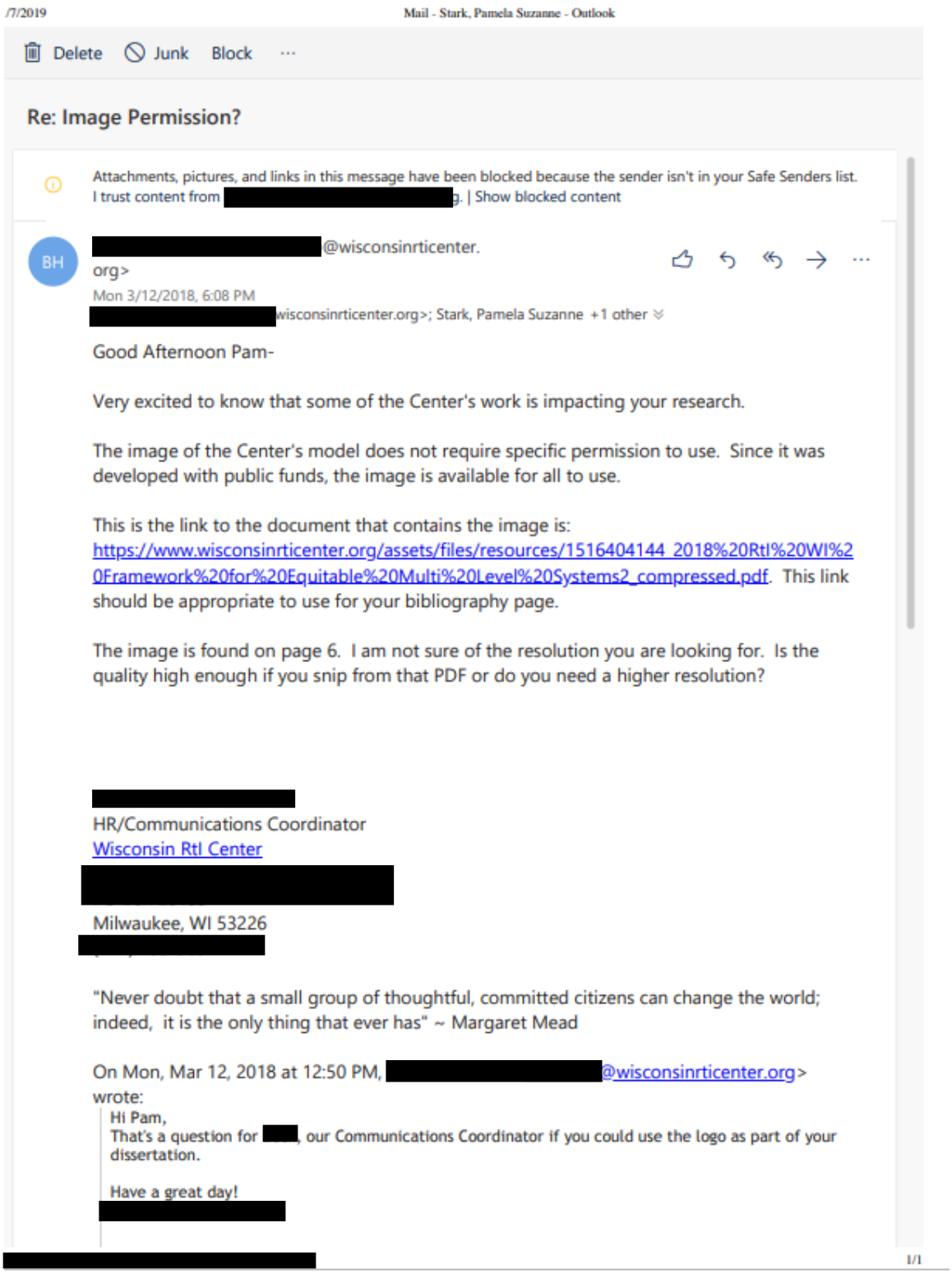
Time:

Participants:

Location:

Notes to Self	Observation

APPENDIX N: Image Permission from Wisconsin RtI Center



/7/2019 Mail - Stark, Pamela Suzanne - Outlook

Delete Junk Block ···

Re: Image Permission?

Attachments, pictures, and links in this message have been blocked because the sender isn't in your Safe Senders list. I trust content from [redacted]. | Show blocked content

BH [redacted]@wisconsinrticenter.org>

Mon 3/12/2018, 6:08 PM

[redacted]wisconsinrticenter.org>; Stark, Pamela Suzanne +1 other

Good Afternoon Pam-

Very excited to know that some of the Center's work is impacting your research.

The image of the Center's model does not require specific permission to use. Since it was developed with public funds, the image is available for all to use.

This is the link to the document that contains the image is: https://www.wisconsinrticenter.org/assets/files/resources/1516404144_2018%20RtI%20WI%20Framework%20for%20Equitable%20Multi%20Level%20Systems2_compressed.pdf. This link should be appropriate to use for your bibliography page.

The image is found on page 6. I am not sure of the resolution you are looking for. Is the quality high enough if you snip from that PDF or do you need a higher resolution?

[redacted]
HR/Communications Coordinator
Wisconsin RtI Center
[redacted]
Milwaukee, WI 53226
[redacted]

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has" ~ Margaret Mead

On Mon, Mar 12, 2018 at 12:50 PM, [redacted]@wisconsinrticenter.org> wrote:

> Hi Pam,
> That's a question for [redacted], our Communications Coordinator if you could use the logo as part of your dissertation.
>
> Have a great day!
> [redacted]

[redacted] 1/1