Feature Article

Response to Intervention (RTI) for English Language Learners: Exploring the Experiences of an RTI Team in a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse School

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Response to Intervention (RTI) is a framework used to determine if classroom instruction is effective for students and to identify students in need of supplemental support, including special education services. Culturally and linguistically diverse students, including English language learners (ELLs), are often disproportionately represented in special education. The present study used an interpretive, qualitative research design to explore the experiences of an RTI team providing intervention for ELLs at an elementary school in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The specific research questions asked were: (a) How do RTI members define and apply services and interventions in the process?; (b) How is native language taken into account in RTI assessment and intervention?; and (c) How does the RTI team engage with other staff members to provide services? Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and analytic induction were employed to analyze data collected over a period of two months. Three assertions emerged from the data: (a) Staff definition of services and intervention differs for ELLs in the RTI system; (b) Native language is not always considered in the assessment and placement of ELLs in the RTI system; and (c) Staff collaboration varies in terms of structure and communication between general education teachers, RTI teachers, and ESOL teachers. Implications include recommendations for tiered instruction for ELLs, as well as training for school staff to provide culturally and linguistically responsive RTI.
Keywords: assessment, culturally and linguistically diverse students, English language learners, identification, Response to Intervention, special education

The processes used to identify students with disabilities have been debated and criticized for years, and can vary significantly by state (Reschly & Hosp, 2004). The Response to Intervention (RTI) model is used to identify students in need of supplemental support, including special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006); it is currently the most prevalent practice for identifying students with learning disabilities (LD) and the recommended federal practice, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004; Vanderheyden, 2011). RTI consists of multiple tiers of instruction, with each tier increasing the intensity of support (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007; Hoover & Patton, 2008). Tier I usually consists of general classroom instruction for all students, Tier II increases in intensity by providing instruction through small-group or collaborative teaching models, and Tier III is intensive small-group instruction that is similar to the targeted intervention provided in special education. The degree to which educators and family members collaborate in RTI can be variable, and often depends on school context.

When students are "unresponsive," as defined by their performance, to instruction at Tier I and II of the intervention model they enter Tier III, to receive the most intense level of support (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). Students who are unresponsive to Tier III instruction are often considered for special education evaluation. Decisions regarding moving students within each tier of the RTI framework is based on assessment data and classroom instruction, and determined collaboratively by an intervention team consisting of school personnel (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003).

RTI is still a relatively new phenomenon, as both a structure for increasing intensity of intervention for struggling students and a system to identify students for special education services. RTI is not a prescribed curriculum; instead, it is a framework that spans general and special education classrooms. RTI implementation differs by state, district, and school context (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010); schools can adapt the RTI framework to fit their student and teacher populations. Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students are often disproportionately represented in special education (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Trent, 2010), and this trend of disproportionality is consistent for ELLs in special education (Sullivan, 2011). Specifically, longitudinal data analyses indicate that ELLs are often underrepresented in special education at kindergarten and first grade, but then overrepresented in third grade and above (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Samson & Lesaux, 2009). While RTI is considered to be better than previous "wait to fail" models, such as the discrepancy model (Bradley et al., 2007), further research is needed to determine how RTI practices influence the identification of ELLs for special education.

Samson and Lesaux (2009) found that language-minority status, teacher ratings of language and literacy skills, and reading proficiency level were all significant predictors of placement in special education. In addition, students who are not proficient in either their native language or in English are at an increased risk of special education identification (Artiles et al., 2005). Under previous identification models, once the referral process was initiated for a CLD student, he or she was more likely to be diagnosed with a disability (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Further research is needed to determine if RTI practices influence the disproportionate identification of ELLs with disabilities.

Identifying ELLs with LD is a complex issue (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003; Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006; McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Cutting, Leos, & D'Emilio, 2005). Although RTI is considered to be more favorable than the traditional discrepancy model for ELLs, the intersection of language, assessment, and instruction within the RTI framework still poses the risk of disproportionate representation of ELLs in special education (McMaster, Kung, Han, & Cao, 2008). Assessing ELLs with English-only assessments can be problematic, as there is debate about when non-native English speakers are ready to demonstrate their understanding of content in a second language (Figueroa, 1989, 2005). Direct translations of English assessments into native languages can also be problematic, as this process can still have cultural biases (i.e., dialects). In addition, there are mixed results on the feasibility and effectiveness of assessing students in their native language when instruction and content are provided in English (Townsend & Collins, 2008). While some research (Huang, 2011) recommends assessing

students in their native language, special education practices often use English-only assessments to make eligibility decisions (Wagner, Francis, & Morris, 2005). Such practices can leave room for error and cultural bias when making decisions on whether an ELL has a LD.

Determining students' "responsiveness" to instruction and assessment in their nonnative language is challenging and can vary depending on the measures used (Richards-Tutor et al., 2013). There has been an increase in the availability of interventions and assessments available in Spanish (e.g., Vaughn et al., 2006)—which is a sign of progress—but these do not yet address the diverse needs of the native languages spoken in the current school landscape. While evidence suggests the benefits of culturally responsive instruction for CLD students (Gay, 2010), and despite current recommendations for culturally responsive instruction at all tiers of RTI (i.e., Klingner & Edwards, 2006), there is little evidence if and how this is happening at all RTI tiers. Thorius and Sullivan's (2013) systematic review of existing literature on RTI for ELLs revealed only 13 empirical studies, of which 11 focused on Tier II interventions. The remaining two studies included Tier I interventions, indicating a critical gap in the research on Tier I and III interventions for ELLs.

In sum, there is a scarcity of evidence to guide appropriate services for ELLs at risk for LD as they move throughout the RTI framework. Specifically, it is unclear how native-language and second language acquisition are taken into account in current RTI practices. Klingner et al.'s (2006) review of the literature on ELLs and identification of LD suggests further research is needed to account for the complexities between second-language acquisition and demonstrated achievement in the second language.

Purpose of Present Study

Characteristics of ELLs, with and without disabilities, are not adequately addressed in current RTI practices (Barrera & Liu, 2010). Because RTI is commonly used in schools to improve student achievement and to identify students needing special education, it is critical to understand the processes and experiences of teachers and staff engaged in RTI for ELLs. The purpose of this study is to better understand the micro-politics in the social organization of RTI practices for ELLs to challenge the standard notion of student and school failure.

This study used qualitative methodology to explore the decision-making and interactions of intervention teachers engaged in RTI at a culturally and linguistically diverse school. Specifically, I investigated how one RTI team provided intervention for and engaged with ELLs in a public elementary school. Three main research questions guided my research:

1. How do RTI members define and apply services and interventions in the process?
2. How is native language taken into account in RTI assessment and intervention?
3. How does the RTI team engage with other staff members to provide services?

In this paper, I discuss the methodology employed to collect and analyze data, key assertions that emerged during the study, and implications of these findings for future research and practice.

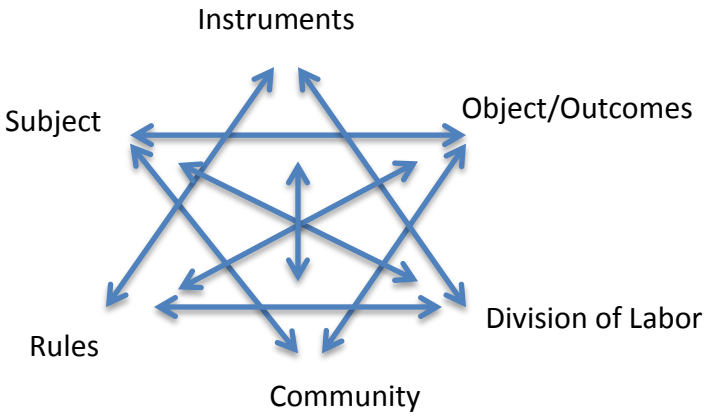
Methodology

To answer these research questions, I used an interpretive paradigm, employing qualitative methods of in-depth observations, interviews, and field notes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), to make sense of the collected data. Current special education practices of instruction, intervention, and identification for special education may be influenced by historical perspectives of "failing" students, socio-cultural issues regarding disproportionate representation of minority and low-income students, and the politics of power that span from the classroom to the national level (Trent, 2010). Teachers, interventionists, administrators, students, and family members are interconnected in the RTI system, and their interactions must be examined within the local school context.

Framework

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is an appropriate conceptual framework for exploring RTI practices for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Trent, Artiles, & Fitchett-Bazemore, 2002), because it analyzes interactions within context at a systematic level. The CHAT conceptual framework asserts that human development and learning are situated in cultural and historical contexts (Trent et al., 2002). This conceptual framework analyzes the discourse, actions, tools, and group members to understand a phenomenon (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) Framework (Trent et al., 2002)



The CHAT conceptual framework can be used to examine how issues of power exist and influence the sorting functions (Erickson, 1986) inherent in RTI. Flyvbjerg's (2001) assertions that power is omnipresent in all interactions and meaning making are in line with the underpinnings of the CHAT framework. Studying how the RTI team at Brookville Elementary School selected instruments for assessment and intervention, as well as how they divide responsibilities across different contexts, can reveal the power dynamics at play in the RTI framework.

Setting

This study took place at a culturally and linguistically diverse elementary school in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Brookville Elementary School (BES) is a pre-

kindergarten through fifth-grade public school serving a high percentage of diverse learners, including refugee and ELL populations. The student population at BES is 50.5% male and 49.5% female. Racial composition includes 32.5% Black, 19.4% Hispanic, 28% Caucasian, and 20.1% "Other." Student demographics also include 10% students with disabilities, 31.8% limited English proficiency, and 69.1% receiving free or reduced lunch. Students at BES speak a variety of native languages, including Spanish, Arabic, Nepali, Russian, and Korean.

The majority of observations occurred in the RTI intervention room, which served as a multi-purpose area for RTI services and interventionist professional learning community (PLC) meetings as well as for Tier III instruction. The room was full of literacy assessments, student-level books, and teacher-related resources. One large table was set up toward the back of the room, where the RTI team holds their weekly PLC meetings. In addition to this area, several small tables were set up for instructional purposes. Observations also occurred in the library, bookroom, and general-education classrooms.

Participants

Upon receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the local school district, informed consent was obtained from members of the RTI intervention team, comprising three Caucasian females—Maria, Andrea, and Kyla. Maria provided Tier II and Tier III instruction for kindergarten, second, and fourth grade; Andrea provided Tier II and Tier III instruction for first, third, and fifth grade; and Kyla focused on Tier III instruction across the grades. All three have prior classroom teaching experience, and Maria and Andrea were considered "Title teachers" (i.e., intervention teachers funded by Title I) before overseeing the RTI program at the school. Kyla, who had been a special education teacher, serves as the main liaison between the RTI team and the special education team. Maria and Kyla credit Andrea for creating "The BES Way: RTI and SBIT (School Based Intervention Team)," a document that guides RTI and special education evaluations at the school. In addition to the RTI team, the English as a second language (ESOL) teacher, the district ESOL coordinator, the school psychologist, and general-education classroom teachers participated in interviews and observations study (Table 1).

Table 1
Participants and Settings Observed

Participant Role	Settings Observed
RTI intervention team: Kayla, Maria, and Andrea	Small-group instructional settings Weekly PLC meetings School-based professional development
General education teachers	Second-grade classroom Kindergarten classroom Weekly PLC meetings School-based professional development
ESOL teachers	Second-grade classroom Kindergarten classroom Small-group instructional settings Weekly PLC meetings School-based professional development
District ESOL coordinator	District ESOL office

Follow-up interviews were conducted with these secondary participants to represent the multiple perspectives involved in the RTI process.

Classroom instruction was also observed for general education classroom teachers and the ESOL teacher to better understand the characteristics of each RTI tier and ESOL instruction. Each grade level has one teacher who is assigned all the ELL students in the grade, known as the "ESOL cluster." The same is true for students receiving special education services, known as the "SPED cluster." Often, these two clusters will be spread between teachers in a grade level, but occasionally the same teacher will have both the ESOL and SPED clusters in a grade level.

Positionality

I first learned about BES' student population and RTI program through a previous research project at the school. Shortly after, I began working in the special education department as a part-time teacher, and engaged in the project as a participant-observer. As a result of my role at the school, I was granted access to staff and student interactions, PLC meetings, and documents. This access has both benefits and drawbacks, but I believe the benefit of being immersed within the context outweighs the limitations of working at the school site. My special education role did not intersect with the RTI process for ELL students until after they had already been evaluated and moved out of the RTI system. For instructional observations, I remained an unobtrusive observer. In staff interactions and PLC meetings, I alternated between being an outside observer, who sometimes engaged in conversation relevant to the context, and being an active participant. It is important to note that none of the participants had direct authority on my role and responsibilities at the school, nor did I have direct authority

over any of the participants. The principal at the school was aware and supportive of the project.

As a former special education teacher in low-income schools, the majority of my experience has been with CLD students who have been identified as having a disability. Consequently, I brought in my own biases and beliefs regarding special education identification practices. Specifically, I believe students can be misdiagnosed as having a learning disability when other cultural and linguistic factors are at play. I also believe students from a racially diverse background who live in low-income communities are at increased risk of being overrepresented in the RTI and special education systems. As a special education teacher, I am interested in the supports and structures in place to provide targeted intervention that meets individual student needs. To protect against my personal bias, I constantly checked my own assumptions and worked to avoid projecting my own biased interpretations as the interpretations of my participants. In the data and results I present in this paper, I carefully describe my participants' interactions and attempt to capture the meaning they ascribe to their actions.

Data Sources

Multiple sources of evidence were essential to triangulate data and understand the phenomenon of study (Erickson, 1986). Over the course of the two months of this study (March–April 2013), data collection comprised observations, formal interviews, document analysis, and informal conversation. Each data source provided a different perspective on the RTI team's interactions with the ELL population and their collaboration with colleagues (Table 2).

Table 2
Data Sources

Source	Subject	Frequency	Total
Observations	• Tier I instruction • Tier II instruction • Tier III instruction • ESOL instruction • Weekly PLC meetings • School-based professional development	• 2–4 times a week over 2-month period • 20 to 90 minutes each session	• 25 hours
Formal structured interviews	• General education teachers • RTI team members • ESOL teacher • ESOL district coordinator	• One interview per participant	• 5–7 hours

Document analysis	• BES RTI and special education evaluation handbook • District instructional guidelines and staffing for • ELL portfolios used in student-led conferences • ESOL handouts given during staff professional development	• As available	• 30+ pages

Observations. Several aspects of RTI/ESOL instruction, PLC meetings, and staff professional development were observed throughout the course of two months. Observations were made two to four times a week, ranging from 20 to 90 minutes each session; there were 25 observation hours in total. Observations occurred over shorter periods of time to accommodate the nature and schedule of elementary school intervention. Tier I instruction, with an emphasis on oral language development, was observed multiple times in the ESOL cluster kindergarten classroom. Tier I math and content (i.e., social studies and science) instruction was observed twice in the ESOL/SPED cluster second-grade classroom. Tier II literacy instruction, provided by the ESOL teacher, was observed multiple times in the ESOL/SPED cluster second-grade classroom. Tier III pull-out instruction was observed with the ESOL teacher in second grade, Andrea in third grade, and Maria in kindergarten.

In addition to instructional observations, the weekly RTI team PLC meeting, consisting of the three RTI interventionists and the school psychologist, was observed four times throughout the course of the study. The grade-level PLC, title/intervention teacher PLC, student SBIT meeting, two grade-level data analysis/professional development meetings, and a whole-school professional development on creating content objectives for ELLs were also observed. Field notes, including a description of setting, participants, interactions, dialogue, and researcher inferences, were recorded for the observations.

Formal interviews. After establishing context for RTI at BES, formal interviews were conducted with Maria, Andrea, and Kayla. Kayla and Andrea were interviewed together, and Maria was interviewed separately; each interview lasted approximately one hour. The primary interview protocol was developed based on observations, and interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. Additional formal interviews were conducted with the kindergarten and second-grade general education teachers after observations of Tier I in their classrooms. After observing PLC meetings and through informal conversation, I determined that the ESOL teacher and ESOL district coordinator's perspectives should also be reflected through interviews. Protocols for each of the additional interviews were modified from the original RTI team protocol to fit the intended participant.

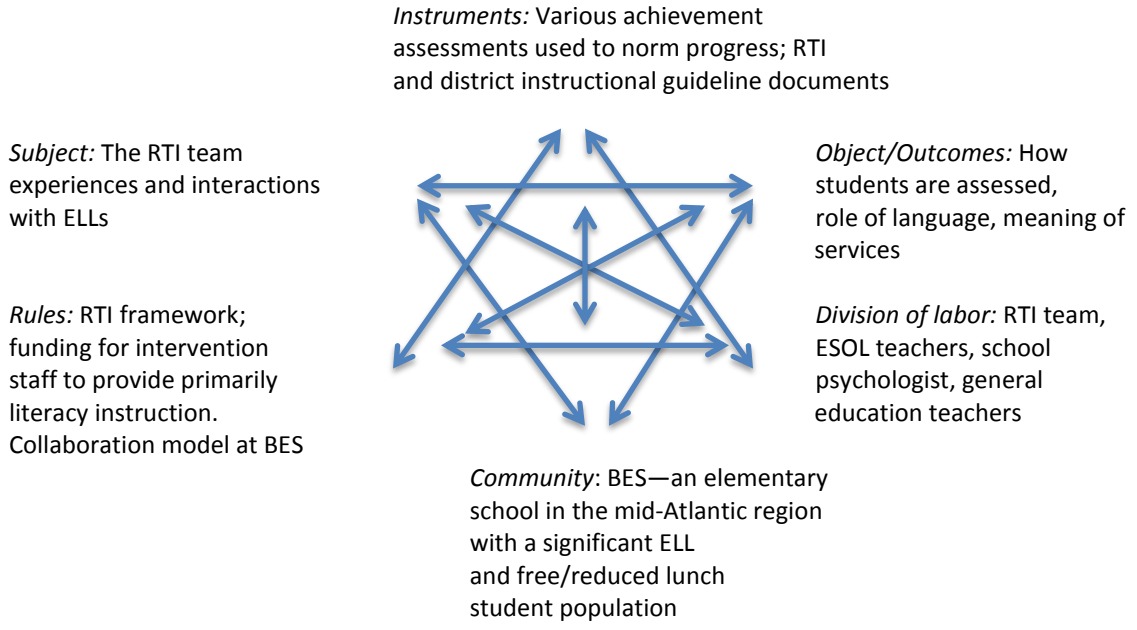
Documents. Two documents in particular were key to exploring the phenomenon of study. The first was a document created at the school level to guide RTI and special education evaluations; the second was an instructional guidelines and staffing for ELLs document created at the district level by the ESOL district coordinator. In addition, ELL portfolios used in student-led conferences and ESOL handouts given during the staff conference were also reviewed. Over 30 pages of document data were summarized and analyzed using an adapted version of Miles and Huberman's (1994) guidelines (e.g., date, setting, significance, and summary of document).

Informal conversations. As a result of my increased access and role in the school context, there were several informal conversations that also became part of the collected data. Informal conversation by classroom teachers, the special education team, the ESOL team, and the RTI team were especially helpful in formulating interview questions and scheduling purposeful observations. Direct quotes or statements made by individuals who did not give informed consent were not included in the analysis or report.

Data Analysis

This study was conducted using CHAT to collect and analyze data in a reflexive manner (Figure 2).

Figure 2. BES Analyzed within a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) Framework



This process includes analytic induction throughout the entire data collection processes. Analytic induction includes examining assumptions about the phenomenon, seeking to understand what actually happened, finding the structure and organization of meanings in the field, relating findings to the larger structure surrounding it, establishing validity by constructing a plausible and coherent account, and establishing

the evidence of this account (Erickson, 1986). Data collected through fieldwork were compiled into an electronic database. Observation field notes, recorded interviews, and document summaries were read and reread. Data were looked at holistically, and inferences were attached to make meaning.

Validity Criteria

Representing participants' voice and meaning making in their specific context is a key indicator of validity in qualitative research. Validity is judged by the importance of the topic, plausibility, credibility, and relevance of the account. To meet these criteria, an in-depth amount of time was spent at the site, rich and detailed descriptions have been provided in context, and multiple data collection methods have been employed to triangulate findings.

To counter possible threats to validity and ensure credibility of results, I spent over 30 hours of fieldwork (25 in direct observation) at the school site over the course of the two months. This length of time allowed me to observe patterns and related interactions in staff meetings and instruction. Throughout the process, material surfaced that I determined were relevant and supportive documentation. These multiple sources of data (observations, interviews, and documents) were then triangulated through ongoing reflexive analysis to develop an understanding of the RTI team's meaning making. Excerpts from the data are provided to support both confirmed and disconfirmed assertions.

Results

The present study sought to answer the three research questions—(a) Staff definition of services and intervention differs for ELLs in the RTI system; (b) Native language is not always considered in the assessment and placement of ELLs in the RTI system; and (c) Staff collaboration varies in terms of structure and communication between general education teachers, RTI teachers, and ESOL teachers regarding the experiences of the RTI team, the identification process for ELLs, and how teams make meaning of student and staff interactions regarding RTI for ELLs. These questions were examined through the CHAT framework (Figure 2), and analytic induction was employed to develop assertions from the data.

BES in the CHAT Framework

Interactions at BES were analyzed through a CHAT framework to understand how the RTI team made meaning. According to CHAT, the *subject* was the RTI team at BES and their experiences and interactions with ELLs. The *community* was the elementary school, BES, which has a significant ELL and free/reduced lunch student population. *Instruments* included a variety of achievement assessments used to norm student progress, as well as district instructional guideline documents for RTI and ESOL. The *rules* that governed interactions appeared to be the RTI framework, funding for intervention staff to provide primarily instruction (which was primarily literacy instruction), district policy, and the school-wide collaboration model at BES. The *division of labor* included the RTI team, ESOL teachers, the school psychologist, and general education teachers. The

object/outcomes appeared to be how students were assessed, the role of native language, and the various meanings of "services."

Assertions

As I engaged in reflexive data collection and analysis, assertions were developed out of these *object/outcomes* to answer the three research questions. Over the process of confirming and disconfirming evidence, these three critical assertions emerged: (a) Staff definition of services and intervention differs for ELLs in the RTI system; (b) Native language is not always considered in the assessment and placement of ELLs in the RTI system; and (c) Staff collaboration varies in terms of structure and communication between general education teachers, RTI teachers, and ESOL teachers.

Assertion 1: Staff definition of services and intervention differs for ELLs in the RTI system and does not always include ESOL instruction. BES staff, particularly the RTI team, often uses the terms *intervention, instruction,* and *services* interchangeably. Various staff members define their instructional delivery in different ways. For example, some ESOL teachers define what they do as Tier II or III instruction, while others do not. From interviews and informal conversations, it seemed that the general education teachers appeared to be the least clear on how their students' services were defined within the RTI framework; how services are defined does not seem particularly clear in this context. This may be problematic, considering the high staff involvement, level of collaboration, and importance of student responsiveness to services.

In addition, the threshold of lack of response to intervention was not clearly defined and varies by student. It is up to the RTI team to initiate an SBIT meeting, but the timeline for this does not appear to be standardized. The variation in how services are defined and what actually happens in instruction may influence how students demonstrate progress on administered assessments. This is also problematic, in that some students may be evaluated too soon and some may not be evaluated soon enough. It is particularly unclear if ESOL instruction fits under the RTI framework as a "service." Depending on the staff member, it does or does not. In an interview with the district ESOL coordinator, he considered whether he would call ESOL an intervention:

> Do we define ESOL as an intervention? We can look at this many ways but no research to support either way. [This state] is an English-only state, and can only use native language to promote advancement in English. This might fall under the RTI system because students need to make significant growth in literacy, and if native language instruction is a vehicle to promote this than ESOL should be considered an intervention.

While some staff members believe terminology does not matter, and instead believe what matters is what actually happens in instruction, placement and labeling can have implications in SBIT meetings and future conversations about whether students are indeed "responding" to services. There is also the question of where services are delivered—in a push-in collaborative model or a pull-out small-group setting? BES has a full collaborative model, in which each general education teacher works with a partner teacher to meet their students' diverse needs. For classrooms with the ESOL cluster of

students, the ESOL teacher and the general education teacher are collaborative partners. In other classrooms, a special education teacher or interventionist may be the collaborative partner who "pushes in" to support integrating evidence-based practices and co-teach lessons. BES staff appears to have mixed feelings on when and where students receive intervention, and as a result, deciding how to structure intervention for students is an ongoing debate.

Assertion 2: Native language is not always considered in the assessment and placement of ELLs in the RTI system. Assessment is a common theme in the RTI and intervention PLC meetings, school-based professional development, and student SBIT meetings. On the staff level, assessments are the common language used to make decisions about student instruction, support, and educational placement. For all students, looking at multiple data points is key to understanding their progress and areas of need. Multiple assessments are used at the elementary level, with high emphasis on literacy achievement assessments. In her interview, Kayla noted the importance of assessment in the RTI decision-making process:

> Assessment is what guides the RTI process. Data from assessments allows us to push back on the old way of thinking and forces teachers to consider how their teaching supports learning. If the data says [*sic*] kids are mastering skills and concepts, keep doing what you're doing. If the data says [*sic*] most kids aren't, change the teaching. If the data says [*sic*] most kids are, but some kids aren't (and those same kids become a pattern assessment after assessment), then change something for that kid. Teams need data to have these types of conversations.

Assessment for ELLs appears to be a particularly complex phenomenon. The vast majority of educational assessments are in English, which does not reflect proficiency in students' native language. This complicates staff analysis of student progress at BES, as the available assessments provide an incomplete picture of their understanding. The RTI team, along with the general education teachers and ESOL teachers, were left to tease out what may be typical language acquisition for an ELL and what may be a learning disability. In his interview, the district ESOL coordinator emphasized the importance of considering native language:

> [We] need to be able to assess and instruct across both languages. We need to be able to norm student development and progress in both languages. Most assessments used in K–12 education are normed on monolingual speakers, so gives an incomplete picture. What's more important than a snapshot of performance is the growth.

To really understand the type of support ELLs need and align appropriate intervention, an understanding of proficiency in their native language is key. There appeared to be agreement between staff members at BES and the district that assessment should guide educational placement and intervention. In practice, however, there are limited achievement assessments in languages other than English. Limited options are available in Spanish but not other languages, which is beneficial for a portion of the students at BES. The WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and

Assessment) is the primary assessment used to place students in ESOL and monitor growth at BES; it is an English language assessment that determines student proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and is used across a number of states in grades K–12 (WIDA, 2014). Students are scored on their linguistic complexity, language forms and conventions, and vocabulary use. While helpful for providing a picture of second-language acquisition, the WIDA provides proficiency indicators only for English and not native language.

In interviews and conversations with participants, this emphasis on language-appropriate assessment was common. In observations of PLC and professional development meetings, however, school-based staff did not always question the appropriateness of assessment for ELLs. In one observation, Andrea, Kayla, and Maria discussed each student in the RTI framework in terms of the tier intervention they are currently receiving, and whether another SBIT meeting is necessary to move to the next tier or to "trigger an evaluation" for special education:

> You want multiple pieces of data to support [decision-making]. A range of assessment needs to be used to look at progress within an intervention as well as progress in the application of the intervention. We can see where students are benchmarked against where they should be at this time of the school year. Assessment MUST guide intervention and instructional decisions and MUST be directly reflective of the instruction.

In follow-up conversations, Kayla reflected that despite the BES focus on assessment, she felt like "the gut check [he or she should be making more growth] is used much more often with our ELL population when they are not responding to instruction." In RTI at BES, assessment is the core of placement decisions. Placement decisions included improving the quality of Tier I instruction in the general education classroom; student grouping in collaboratively taught Tier II instruction; the amount of ESOL small-group instruction a student receives; intensive, small-group Tier III intervention with a member of the RTI team; and evaluation for special education services. Understanding student progress with accurate assessment is necessary to ensure that student placement provides the most effective type and degree of services for each student.

Assertion 3: Staff collaboration varies in terms of structure and communication between general education teachers, RTI teachers, and ESOL teachers. While some of the BES staff has collaboration structured into their schedule, such as general education teachers and their ESOL or intervention partners, there is no weekly structure for all stakeholders to meet and discuss student progress. Communication and collaboration between the ESOL and RTI teachers is not structured through weekly PLC meetings, as it is between other teaching partners. This was evident in an exchange between two RTI teachers in their weekly PLC meeting:

> How are you collaborating with the ESOL teacher? [Kayla asks Maria during the RTI PLC]. I catch her when I can and talk to her. We met recently and talked in detail about what she is doing and what I am doing to match sure they mesh. At BES, there must be more collaboration between ESOL and intervention [Maria responds to Kayla].

If ESOL services are to be considered in the RTI framework, communication and collaboration may need to be more formalized. Staff dynamics between the RTI team and other key entities in a school may play a role in how effective RTI services are to achieving their goal. Interactions between the grade-level team, the RTI team, and the ESOL teachers appear to influence the SBIT process. One group that was outside of the RTI collaboration framework at BES, it is interesting to note, was the special education team. I observed the RTI teachers leading the intervention team through a protocol designed to share and reflect on student progress in the RTI system—a protocol relevant to the services special education teachers would hypothetically be delivering to students after they are evaluated. Incorporating special education teachers and ESOL into the RTI framework for collaboration may help to clarify who provides services, and exactly what that looks like, for ELLs.

Discussion

RTI at BES is a complex framework that affects numerous students and staff members. The intersection of language acquisition and learning complicates the assessment and data-driven intervention that is the core of RTI at BES. ELLs in the RTI framework receive a variety of services that range from general education classroom instruction, to scripted small-group intervention, and to an ESOL collaborative co-teaching model. The terms *intervention, instruction,* and *services* are used interchangeably at times, depending on the staff member. General education teachers seem to be the least clear on what constitutes services beyond the Tier I they already provide, and the staff is indecisive on how ESOL instruction fits into the tiered model, as evidenced by the varying answers given by interviewees. BES as a school is highly focused on improving educational outcomes for all learners, including ELLs. School-based professional learning communities and professional development sessions are data driven and focused on improving Tier I instruction through collaboration among teachers. Because many adults can be directly involved in one student's education, collaboration and communication are essential to ensuring that students are receiving appropriate and complementary services from all of their teachers.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. Perhaps the most significant of these is the absence of student and parent/guardian perspectives. I was unable to include ELLs' perceptions of their experiences for several reasons, the primary one being the age of students I observed. In addition, there were limited opportunities to observe school faculty and parent/guardian interactions. Due to the nature of this critical relationship, family involvement in the RTI process should be further explored. Other limitations include my proximity to the context and my personal biases and beliefs as a special education teacher. While I diligently sought to record detailed observation notes and plan unbiased interview questions, I acknowledge that I cannot fully remove my personal beliefs from data analysis. I also was not able to interview and observe every ESOL teacher and collaborative pairing at the school site; the majority of observations occurred within kindergarten and a second-grade

classroom and professional settings. Further exploration in upper elementary, middle, and high school settings is important to determine how services and collaboration shift as students gain more experience with English language instruction.

Future Directions

For ELLs, decisions made throughout the RTI framework can have significant implications on their educational trajectory. Findings from BES' RTI practices suggest the need for several improvements to ensure students are receiving appropriate intervention and assessment. The following three recommendations to improve identification and intervention procedures at BES may also be applicable to similar school contexts: providing instruction and assessment that takes into account students' native language, incorporating culturally responsive practices into all tiers of instruction, and ensuring strong collaboration between all key stakeholders involved in the RTI process.

Assessment. While research indicates that assessment in the native language is beneficial for ELLs (Huang, 2011), current policy at BES supports English-only assessment of classroom instruction. García and Ortiz (2006) suggest that conversational and language assessments should guide intervention decisions, including goals, instruction, and determining progress. A variety of assessments should be used to understand student knowledge and skill in the curriculum, as opposed to overarching ability tests, and to incorporate native language as possible (Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson, & Kushner, 2006).

Having educators who also speak the students' native language administer assessments may provide invaluable information in eligibility meetings (Wilkinson et al., 2006; see pp. 138–139 for decision-making guidance for ELLs, including language dominance and proficiency information). RTI teams should consider developing clear protocols for their specific school sites to determine appropriate assessment measures (i.e., performance-based tasks in native language, pictorial visual prompts). Further research is needed to better align services to perform an appropriate assessment of ELLs' academic ability. Accurate assessment in native language and individualized interventions, which take into account language acquisition, learning, and cultural factors, may aid collaboration between all staff stakeholders in the RTI framework.

Culturally and linguistically responsive instruction. An increased focus on language acquisition trajectories and growth in native language should also be taken into account for ELLs at risk for disabilities (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, & Leos, 2005). Further research is needed to determine what these trajectories are, and how this growth aligns to standards-based instruction. An increased focus on culturally responsive (i.e., considering native language, building relationships with students and families) (Gay, 2010; Shealey, McHatton, & Wilson, 2011) and linguistically responsive (i.e., fostering social interaction between ELLs, planning for appropriate comprehensible input in instruction) (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008) practices in general and special education teacher training and professional development in particular are critical to ensuring that ELLs are receiving quality instructional support. For example, BES' RTI team developed a handbook for RTI at their school site. Incorporating this document in

school-wide professional development and weekly PLC meetings might help school staff better define services at each tier, as well as promote culturally responsive instruction. Increased and current knowledge on the available selection of interventions and instructional practices that take into account language acquisition and learning will provide more options for schools to tailor services individually for students (for a model of culturally responsive RTI, refer to Klingner & Edwards, 2006).

A key tenet of culturally responsive instruction is actively engaging with students' family members to make decisions and provide appropriate support. Taking a multifaceted approach to provide instruction for ELLs is well documented in the literature, particularly the importance of home-school involvement (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Kummerer, 2010), at each tier of the RTI model. It is critical to involve parents in all phases of decision-making for ELLs, and to ensure that cultural and linguistic nuances are completely understood (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006). For example, the majority of interactions I observed at BES between school faculty and family members occurred when students were moving to a more intensive tier of RTI. Family members should be consulted early in the RTI process, especially during Tier I instruction, to provide input on instruction for their child. Expanding the power of instructional decision-making to include parents and guardians may help make assessments and intervention more culturally responsive for ELLs.

Collaboration. Collaborative relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse families can positively influence teachers' planning and implementation of Tier I instruction (García & Ortiz, 2006). Improved outcomes in Tier I instruction may reduce the number of ELLs being referred to the RTI process. In addition to collaborating with family members, educators should also design instruction using evidence-based practices for ELLs, such as sheltered instruction (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006).

Strong collaboration and communication between educators providing instruction and making decisions in the RTI framework (i.e., general educators, special educators, interventionists, ESOL, teachers, and administrators) are critical to appropriate identification of ELLs with disabilities. A school culture that promotes shared responsibility among educators to educate all students is key to providing appropriate instruction and support for ELLs (García & Ortiz, 2006), and administrators should play an active role in facilitating this collaboration. Once such collaboration is established, it should extend beyond school-based personnel to the family members of diverse students; therefore, to support this, educators should implement systems to share information that are accessible to all involved.

Conclusion

Special education identification can both positively and negatively influence the quality of education and life opportunities for students. Understanding how one RTI team makes meaning of their interactions with students, parents, and staff can have implications for educational research, policy, and practice. It is crucial for schools to tailor their RTI practices to their school context and population to avoid disproportionate representation of ELLs. Appropriately providing early intervention and assessment for struggling ELLs, making accurate eligibility decisions, norming service

delivery and collaboration among school personnel, and incorporating cultural and family perspectives throughout the process are all critical to improving school outcomes for struggling ELLs. To truly do this for ELLs, our educational system must broaden the current scope of RTI so that it acknowledges and incorporates culture and language for individual students.

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