ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS’ CONCEPTIONS OF RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION AND SOCIA LLY JUST EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

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DISSE RTATION
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Organization and Leadership in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

With the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, Response to Intervention (RtI) has become the latest educational reform that promises to transform schools. Through the lens of social justice, this phenomenological study explored if and how principals’ conceptions of RtI inform the use of socially just practices in their schools. By interviewing 10 elementary school principals in Illinois, the research explored the following research questions: (a) What are principals’ understandings of RtI? (b) What educational practices do principals believe promote social justice? and (c) How does RtI promote or inhibit socially just educational practices? This qualitative study informs the literature about how educational leaders view RtI as a federal policy and reform initiative, and if and how their understandings help them use RtI to create socially just practices.

Respondents demonstrated a common understanding of the technical aspects of RtI. The technical aspects focused primarily on Tier II and Tier III interventions. Two principals in the study viewed RtI with a broader theoretical framework that focused on improving classroom instruction for all students. Principal participants demonstrated a wide range of understanding about equity and social justice. Principals described a variety of positive aspects of RtI, which included flexibility, the ability to intervene early, and the aspects of accountability for student learning. Possible obstacles to successful RtI implementation included the difficulties of change and the confusion about the purpose of RtI. Themes of inclusive structures, student achievement, democratic structures, advocacy, parent engagement, and school climate were all documented as aspects of socially just educational practices; however, each of these themes were not universally understood by all respondents.
Recommendations include the need for state education agencies and school district leaders to promote issues of social justice and equity when implementing reforms. Educational leadership programs must prepare principals and superintendents to move beyond technical aspects of reforms in order to emphasize the theoretical foundations of the initiatives. This study points to the need for further research about grounding RtI and other reforms in social justice and equity. Educational leaders need to be able to support principals and teachers to apply notions of social justice and equity to their practice.
This paper is dedicated to my family, whose support and encouragement provided motivation and perseverance to complete this work. My wife, Meg, and my children, David and Rebecca tolerated many nights and weekends of my absence for courses, research and writing. I cannot express how much I appreciate your love and encouragement. I also dedicate this work to my father, who imparted to me the importance of social justice long before I knew what I wanted to be. Dad, your wisdom and love are never far from my heart.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank each member of my committee. Without their encouragement, support, and advice, this project would not have been possible. Carolyn Shields, you provided support and grounding during the formative stages of this research and gave me the self-confidence to succeed. Lisa Monda-Amaya, I cannot thank you enough for your encouragement, time, and feedback throughout the last several months. Your guidance helped me finish. Donald Hackmann, thank you for being my constant advisor during this degree. Your willingness to support me throughout the past 6 years has meant a great deal. Linda Sloat, I have had enjoyed the fact that you have been a part of both my professional growth and education career since before I was an administrator. Thank you all, for your belief in me.

While there are many fellow doctoral students who became friends during the past few years, two of them, Andrew Barrett and Trevor Nadrozny, need a special thank you for their constant encouragement and thought provoking conversations. Gentlemen, I respect and admire you both, and I look forward to years of collaboration.

I also need to acknowledge and thank my colleagues and friends in Urbana School District #116. During the writing of this work, many people supported me by making sure that I had ability and confidence to step away from my duties to write and research. Thank you to each and every one of you. There are too many people to mention individually; however, I do need to thank my friend, mentor, and guide, Dr. Preston Williams, Jr. Preston, your leadership, advice, and friendship has been immeasurable. Thank you for insisting that I pursue this degree, and your confidence in me. Thank you.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Educational reform initiatives often fail to achieve their stated purpose. Although many school reform efforts are well researched, student-centered, and promote learning, equity, and social justice, the implementation takes on a life of its own and does not always deliver the results promised by the research or the theory. The most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), is a good example of how a policy that was designed to close achievement gaps has been implemented in a manner that over-emphasizes standardized testing and financially punishes schools that do not meet annual testing targets (Ravitch, 2010). Response to Intervention (RtI) is another initiative, promoted in federal legislation, which promises to transform schools and decrease the number of students identified as needing special education services (Batsche et al., 2006). Will RtI succeed at improving learning opportunities, or, like NCLB, will its implementation also depart from the conceptual purpose and research foundation?

The achievement gaps in the United States not only are shameful but they also are harmful (Darling-Hammond, 2010). One of the purposes of NCLB is to force schools to be more accountable with regard to the achievement of all students. NCLB requires states, districts, and schools to disaggregate state level assessment data in order to examine how specific “disadvantaged subgroups” are or are not succeeding (Mosquin & Chromy, 2004, p. 6). The four specific broad categories of students who were identified by NCLB were economically disadvantaged, major racial and ethnic groups, disabled, and limited English proficient students (NCLB, 2001). As Darling-Hammond (2010) argued, federal initiatives must be framed to encourage schools to improve successful practices for all students. NCLB has provided a stick to
school officials to look closely at gaps in order to provide more academic learning opportunities for students who are not meeting standards. States have adopted standards and standardized tests for assessing students. Schools and districts have disaggregated data and reported it to their state education agencies and to the public. The yearly testing cycle has become an opportunity for local news outlets to report on successes and failures of schools. Unfortunately, there are several major flaws with the current implementation. Each state has set its own content and skill standards and, until national standards and assessments are in place, there is little hope of understanding nation-wide gains made toward closing achievement gaps, using standardized tests (Mosquin & Chromy, 2004).

Educators must analyze what truly is essential for educating for democracy. We must ask, how do the assessments mandated by NCLB and implemented as part of RtI’s universal screeners provide opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know? In a democracy the answer to this question must be at the heart of the discussion. Unfortunately, the answer often inhibits democracy in education, because at the local level, NCLB and RtI have turned not only students and parents, but also teachers and administrators into pawns rather than participants. If, as Dewey (2001) wrote, the democratic road “places the greatest burden of responsibility upon the greatest number of human beings” (p. 175), then every teacher, principal, administrator, student, and parent has the responsibility to debate and discuss the implications of NCLB and RtI on our society and its schools.

How do we level the playing field to provide equal educational opportunities for all without lowering the standards to the lowest common denominator? Barber (2001) called for education to be a system in which the concepts of equality and excellence are “inextricably linked” (p. 16). Barber’s assertion that the term “comparable” does not mean identical is an
important lesson for educators who struggle with providing different educational opportunities because of different abilities of the students. Public school leaders struggle with the dichotomy between equity and accountability. Leadership that is steeped strictly in accountability goals and agendas will place great strain on democratic agendas (Mullen, 2008). There is evidence suggesting that political reforms that rely on high stakes assessments to measure success place too much emphasis on “the technical dimensions of the challenge” (Oakes & Rogers, 2006, p. 14). RtI focuses on specific instruction and intervention models, but as Oakes and Rogers (2006) argue, narrowly focused attempts at reform ignore the “cultural norms about race, merit, and schooling that underlie the status quo and, for so many people make specific equity reforms so difficult to accept” (p. 14). Educators need to reframe the debate of equality versus excellence into a focus of excellence for equity.

Background

The purpose of RtI is to provide high quality instruction by using assessment data to inform instructional and intervention decisions for all students (Batsche et al., 2006). Providing high quality instruction to all students is accomplished through universal assessment in reading and math in order to match students with appropriate instruction while continually monitoring student progress (Batsche et al., 2006). RtI involves a multi-tiered intervention system through which students progress only if they are not responding to instruction and/or interventions at the lowest level. In general, most students succeed in tier one, which involves high quality instruction in the regular classroom setting. When screening and diagnostic assessments indicate that students are struggling in tier one, a problem-solving team selects one or more additional
Interventions and creates a plan to monitor the student’s progress. Each tier represents a more intensive intervention. Most models call for either three or four tiers of intervention.

Response to Intervention gained prominence in educational practice and research with the re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004. The inclusion of RtI in federal educational legislation has focused the educational and research communities on the concept of using student data to drive instruction and help all students succeed. The new guidelines encouraged states to move away from a system of identifying students as learning disabled due to an IQ-achievement discrepancy and toward a system of Response to Intervention (Compton et al., 2008; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Response to Intervention represents one of the clearest, and yet most subtle, policy shifts in the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), and it has the potential to transform our understandings and definitions of “special education.” IDEA specifically required changes in the definition and identification of students with specific learning disabilities. The changes included a shift away from the traditional definition based on a “discrepancy” between intellectual ability and academic achievement toward a definition based on a student’s response to intervention. Specifically, the legislation required the move away from a discrepancy model of identifying specific learning disabilities, and it permitted the use of RtI and other forms of identification:

A State must adopt, consistent with 34 CFR 300.309, criteria for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability as defined in 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10). In addition, the criteria adopted by the State:

- Must not require the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10);

- Must permit the use of a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention; [emphasis added] and
• May permit the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10). (IDEA, 2004)

In response, each state created policies and procedures for enacting the new federal regulations. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) created regulatory procedures for implementing RtI in June 2007 (ISBE, 2008). The ISBE rules (Illinois 226.130 Rules) required each local district submit an RtI plan to the State Board of Education by January 1, 2009, and to begin implementation no later than the 2010-2011 school year.

**Problem Statement**

The purpose of education in the United States often is condensed down into broad themes relating to civics and patriotism (Merry, 2009). In the age of high-stakes assessments and research-based interventions, education itself is being condensed down into the essential component parts or skills that can be quantifiably scientifically research-based. In her critique of NCLB, Meier (2004) stated, “we eliminated all the natural ways in which families and citizens were engaged in their schools” (p. 67). She called for changes that allowed schools to be “governed in ways that honor the same intellectual and social skills we expect our children to master. . . . At every point along the way we must connect the dots between our practice and democracy” (p. 78). Teaching, learning, and leadership are all difficult when the culture of education has become so focused on the results of one test given once per year. Education becomes difficult when the culture is so entrenched, that when one utters the words “catching students before they fail,” teachers and principals hear, “prepare them for the test.” Giroux (1995) urged teachers to respond to these the accountability pressures by making and effort to:

affirm and critically interrogate the knowledge and experiences that students bring with them to the classroom . . . to offer students the opportunity to engage in a deeper
understanding of the importance of democratic culture while developing classroom relations that prioritize the importance of cooperation, sharing, and social justice. (p. 298)

Furman and Shields (2005) described a model for educational leadership that is “grounded in the moral purposes of democratic community and social justice . . . a socially just pedagogy that is both created and sustained in the context and process of deep democracy” (pp. 128-129). The concept of transformative leadership explained “how leadership impacts the environment for pedagogy and learning” (p. 129). Researching the interaction between socially just pedagogy and academic achievement as measured by a standardized test is not as easy to document. Educational leaders who promote socially just pedagogy potentially could transform communities (Furman & Shields). This type of leadership is not contradictory to the goals of RtI, but finding the “resonances and overlaps” requires educational leaders who have bridged the gulf between democracy and accountability. Mullen (2008) defined democratically accountable leadership as the “dual capacity necessary for leaders to understand accountability and democracy as overarching frameworks” (p. 139). Given the context of high-stakes testing, educational leaders are required to balance these two seemingly contradictory concepts.

RtI straddles the fence between special education and regular education. If implemented with fidelity, RtI has the potential to reduce the number of students identified and referred to special education (Bastche et al., 2006). Within the RtI framework, students who struggle are provided with interventions and monitored for progress prior to making a referral to special education. These interventions and the students’ responses to the interventions are evaluated before special education referrals are made. Under the traditional special education referral process, a student’s intelligence (measured by an IQ test) is compared to academic achievement (usually measured by classroom performance), and a student could be labeled as special education without any interventions or accommodations prior to the label. However, if educators
have inconsistent or unclear conceptions of how RtI should be implemented, and they do not shift their worldview of student learning and achievement, then RtI will not succeed as a reform initiative. Like No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), the underlying premises of IDEA and RtI are complex and sometimes contradictory. The policies allow for data-based decision making and high-stakes testing in an effort to achieve measurable outcomes for students. As with any policy, state education agencies, administrators, and teachers interpret and implement it through their own lenses.

In order for our society to thrive, educators in our schools must teach students how to think critically, make choices, and most importantly have conversations and discussions about important issues. Students need to have equal access to opportunities and educational experiences in order for these critical conversations to develop. However, in the current context of high-stakes testing, that almost exclusively emphasizes reading and math, there often seems to be little room for democratic education, liberty, or social justice (Mullen, 2008; Shields, 2010). In the state of Illinois, during the 2009-2010 school year, 15% of students were labeled special education (Scull & Winkler, 2011). Considering that many of these students were put in remedial classes or pulled out of regular education settings to receive extra support, the system is creating barriers to democracy, because these students often are separated, if not physically, educationally from the rich discussions and experiential learning. Struggling learners get extra help, often at the expense of electives and courses that are culturally or individually relevant to them. NCLB and RtI were based on the premise that all students can learn; however, the implementation of these policies creates more and more dissonance for school leaders, who must balance leadership for democracy with leadership for accountability.
The specific problem that drives the purpose of this study can be explicitly stated as: The theoretical framework for Response to Intervention is not clearly defined for educational leaders, and therefore the perceptions of the purposes of RtI vary widely among principals. The lack of clear conceptions about RtI weakens its chance of succeeding as a reform initiative that has the potential of providing opportunities to students who have been traditionally labeled as “at-risk” or “special education.”

**Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore whether elementary principals’ conceptions of Response to Intervention influence socially just practices in their schools. Principals’ lived experiences of implementing federal mandates, like RtI, as well as promoting socially just educational practices help us understand how building leaders balance these two sometimes-contradictory pressures. The research context for this study was elementary schools in economically and demographically diverse communities in Illinois. For the purposes of this study, elementary schools were defined as having at least grades Kindergarten through Fourth, and at most grades pre-Kindergarten through Sixth. The state of Illinois recently mandated that all schools develop RtI plans but did not specify a template, structure, or specific program that needed to be adopted. Diverse schools and communities provide a context in which principals must face issues of and equity (Riehl, 2000). The research focused on principals in public schools, because school level leadership is key to implementation of any new initiative or reform (see Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). I wanted to understand how principals’ understandings of RtI influenced its implementation and the use of socially just educational practices in their schools. The specific research questions were:
1. What are principals’ understandings of RtI?

2. What educational practices do principals believe promote social justice?

3. How does RtI promote or inhibit socially just educational practices?

**Personal Interest**

My interest in RtI dates back to my experiences as an eighth grade U.S. History teacher. I became frustrated by what I perceived as a failed system that allowed both special and regular education students to reach eighth grade with huge deficits in reading skills and strategies. I was confused about why some students who could not read were labeled “special education,” while others with the same abilities were not. The special education service delivery model that did not appear to help students “get better” frustrated me. The over-representation of African American students in special education, which was not any higher in my school than across the state or nation, contributed to my dissonance. In my quest to understand how best to teach reading to special education students and struggling readers, I found that I was drawn more and more to reading comprehension and early reading acquisition research (Pressley, 2002). The research was not new, but as I moved into administration and could look at issues from a district level, I did not see a lot of the research being translated into systems change or classroom practice. I also became aware that policy, rather than research, drives much of the reform efforts in education.

These experiences have led me to view the underlying concepts of NCLB and RtI through the lenses of social justice and democratic education theories. If implemented through a social justice lens, these federal policies can lead toward more equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for students of all races, classes, and abilities. However, implementation of these policies at the state and local levels usually results in practices that run
contrary to social justice, equity, and opportunity. The concepts underlying RtI are well researched; however, educators’ perceptions of RtI vary widely, and I wanted to deconstruct educational leaders’ understandings of RtI and examine if and how these understandings inform socially just practices and systems in elementary schools. Therefore, the intersections among research, policy, and the ways in which educational leaders understand and implement those policies are critical to understanding how democratic and socially just practices are connected to educational reform.

Definitions

In order to provide clarity and consistency for this paper, I provide the following working definitions.

**Response to intervention.** Response to Intervention is a model that “integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems,” which is the definition used by the National Center on Response to Intervention (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

**Multi-tiered intervention system.** Multi-tiered intervention refers to a system of supports that increase in intensity “in direct proportion to [students] individual needs” (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 22). This model often is represented graphically as a triangle or pyramid, with the bottom of the pyramid representing the core instruction that every child receives every day, and each successive tier representing an additional layer of supports and interventions based on student needs.
**Differentiation or differentiated instruction.** A major component of effective classroom instruction, differentiation, is often discussed in multi-tiered systems as part of the core instructional delivery system. Tomlinson (2000) states:

Differentiation consists of the efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom. Whenever a teacher reaches out to an individual or small group to vary his or her teaching in order to create the best learning experience possible, that teacher is differentiating instruction. (p. 2)

**Intervention.** Intervention is typically used to describe instruction that is supplemental to the regular classroom instruction. Although the research and legislation calls it “Response to Intervention,” I prefer combining the terms instruction and intervention. Fisher and Frey (2010) state that “appropriate instruction and intervention must acknowledge, celebrate, and support learning differences” (p. 21). Teachers must modify their instruction, or create interventions, in order to ensure that “each child be able to acquire the targeted information, gain fluency of understanding, generalize beyond the information, and transfer and adapt information and skills to new learning problems and situations” (p. 21). In a sense, I view all instruction as interventions, and all interventions as extensions of instruction.

**Socially just educational practices.** There is a great deal of research about socially just education, and synthesizing it is part of my literature review. Socially just educational practices generally can be defined as practices that promote democratic, collaborative communities; remove structures that marginalize students; and promote inclusive learning environments (Furman & Shields, 2005; McKenzie et al., 2007; Riehl, 2000; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Theoharis, 2010).
Overview

The term Response to Intervention as a specific model with a unique set principles and features is still relatively new to the literature. Because there are disagreements about what RtI implementation should look like, there is substantial literature from the past 5 years that attempts to set parameters and definitions for researchers and practitioners. Jenkins, Hudson, and Johnson (2007) called RtI research “embryonic” (p. 582). There are still disagreements about the type and extensiveness of universal screening for reading difficulties, the number of tiers of intervention, and the method of choosing those interventions. The following principles are the most universal in the current research: universal screening, multi-tiered interventions, data-based decision making, and evidence-based interventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Glover & DiPerna, 2007). As RtI research shapes practice, and the practice shapes research, several of these specific differences may be resolved or may create more confusion among practitioners. Until that happens, researchers need to be cognizant of the influence that state and local educational policies and practices have on implementation.

Researchers recently have started to explore the relationship between the use of RtI and the improvement of core classroom instruction (Vellutino, Scanlon, & Small, 2006). The real potential benefit of RtI is the improvement of instruction for all students and the focus on data to improve curricular and instructional decisions. Unfortunately, the tension between research and practice is exacerbated when special education law names RtI as a new allowable framework determining eligibility of students with learning disabilities. This inclusion of RtI as special education policy makes it difficult for practitioners and researchers to view RtI as a means of improving instruction for all students, but rather as a special education initiative. It is important
to understand how educational leaders view RtI and how those views promote or inhibit the implementation of practices that promote high expectations and achievement for all students.

In order to fully understand the relationship between RtI and socially just educational practices, it was necessary to review the literature and examine relationships between socially just practices and the underlying goals and research of RtI. The literature review synthesized concepts of both RtI and socially just practices into a model that could help explain how principals understand RtI and RtI’s ability to support or inhibit their efforts at promoting socially just educational practices in their schools. In order to assess the adequacy of the model, I interviewed elementary principals who worked in demographically diverse schools to participate in a phenomenological study to explore whether principals’ conceptions of Response to Intervention influence socially just practices in their schools. One important aspect of social justice is the need to distinguish between the concepts of equality and equity. Equality commonly refers to treating everyone the same, and equity refers to making accommodations suitable to individual’s abilities, learning styles, and contextual conditions especially where there has been a history of discrimination or disadvantage (Samoff, 1996). This focus on the differentiation between equality and equity required the identification of schools with diverse student populations to ensure the relationships between RtI and social justice could be adequately examined. Schools with diverse populations provide a context for exploring principals’ conceptions of issues of equity and social justice, because the students in ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse schools traditionally have been marginalized by society. By conducting interviews with principals from diverse schools, I gained a better understanding of their perceptions of RtI, socially just practices, and the interplay between these two concepts in the context of working with students who have traditionally been marginalized.
Limitations

This qualitative study interviewed 10 principals across diverse communities in Illinois. The design and methodology of the research procedures created several limitations that should be clearly understood before reading the findings and conclusions. Participants in this study were volunteers. They did not receive compensation or notoriety for participating; however, the very fact that I struggled to obtain 10 participants for a low-risk, small time commitment, and anonymous study does raise question, why did these principals volunteer for this study? The answer to this question was not explored during this study, but the concept of voluntary participation does exist with the data reported. An additional limitation of the qualitative design was that principals’ interviews amounted to self-reporting of their practice. Principals may have used that self-reporting to portray themselves, their practices, and their schools in an overly positive light. Despite the fact that principals and schools are referred to by pseudonyms, one could argue that the opportunity to talk about personal and collective successes may have also been a motivation for volunteering for this study.

Qualitative data collected in this study also is limited by perception and interpretation. The participants are reporting on their conceptions of RtI and socially just practices, and I am interpreting their reported perceptions. I have taken steps to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); however, even with member checking procedures in place, participants reporting of their perceptions and lived experiences was not checked by teachers, staff, students or parents of their buildings. Merriam (2009) stated that qualitative studies are limited “by the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator” (p. 52). I interpreted the data with my own perceptions and perspectives of RtI and socially just practices. I
have positioned myself and my perspectives for the purposes of this study and readers should be reminded of my perspectives as well as the perspectives of the participants.

Finally, I must acknowledge the limitation of the size of the study. There were only 10 participants representing nine elementary schools in the state of Illinois. The sample size was small in comparison to the number of elementary schools in Illinois or the United States. This limitation makes it difficult to generalize findings or results; however, the data gathered provided a rich and complex understanding of the issues that would not have been possible without interviewing principals individually.

**Delimitations**

There were two main areas of delimitation in the current methodology. First, this study was a phenomenological qualitative study that examined principals’ conceptions about the topics of RtI and socially just educational practices. This study examined the school leaders understandings of RtI and the framework or lens through which they view the policy. Therefore, this study did not evaluate RtI or attempt to determine if RtI implementation is having its desired effects on students. This study did not examine student outcome data. Second, there were specific criteria applied to the recruitment of participants. The pool of participants came from Illinois’ school districts. Each state has created its own statewide implementation plan, and very few are alike. Illinois has provided little guidance to districts or principals about what RtI implementation should look like, so there was wide variety among respondents’ experiences. The pool of possible participants was further delimited by concentrating on elementary schools. That decision was driven by the fact that the majority of research concerning RtI has been conducted at the elementary level. Finally, By focusing on building leaders in diverse settings, I hoped to
reach a group of leaders who had a similar cross section of student demographics, which I defined as at least 40% of the students in the school are students of color and at least 40% of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch.

**Significance**

This study is significant because, over the past decade, educational reform has emphasized high-stakes accountability policies at both the federal and state levels. The accountability measures originally were designed to close achievement gaps for traditionally marginalized students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). There was a strong belief that the implementation of new policies had the potential to bring new opportunities for all students especially those who had already been labeled “at risk” or “disadvantaged.” Nevertheless, Oakes and Rogers (2006) found that unless the basis for reforms was changed, and a specific focus on equity was added, there was little chance new technical reforms would bring about more equitable school practices. This study is therefore, important in that it attempts to explore the intersection of technical reforms and socially just educational practices by understanding how principals’ understand and implement both equity and RtI in their schools. It is important for educational leaders to recognize the pressures of accountability reform measures and how to frame reform efforts and initiatives in ways that promote rather than inhibit social just educational practices. There is little published research about principals’ perspectives on the use of RtI as an initiative to promote school-wide change, equity, or student achievement (Monaghan, 2011; Ninni, 2010; West, 2012). This research will begin to lay the foundation bridging the gap between accountability policies and socially just educational practices.
Summary

This chapter presented the background and purpose of the proposed study of elementary principals’ conceptions of RtI and socially just educational practices. The purpose was to explore whether elementary principals’ conceptions of Response to Intervention influence socially just practices in their schools. Chapter Two provides a literature review related to RtI and socially just educational practices, and it also contains a proposed socially just framework for Response to Intervention. Chapter Three details the design, methodology, participant selection, interview questions, and data analysis for this phenomenological study. Chapter Four examines the findings from the principal interviews, and Chapter Five addresses the implications, recommendations and conclusions.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Two major education reform initiatives were introduced and passed as federal legislation in the first few years of the 21st century. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was designed to close the achievement gaps among racial and ethnic groups; however, the implementation of this legislation has created an educational system overly focused on a single standardized test (NCLB, 2001). The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 2004 included the concept of Response to Intervention (RtI), which was designed to promote successful academic achievement for all students through universal screenings and research-based interventions (IDEA, 2004). Unfortunately, there are several major flaws with these efforts to reform education through legislation. RtI policy implementation is in danger of following the same path. In order to truly reform educational systems, society must reexamine the purpose of schools and education for democracy. Educators must ask, how do the assessments mandated by NCLB or implemented as part of RtI’s universal screeners provide opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is often at odds with the wider purposes of public schools in a democracy.

The implementation of NCLB and RtI has focused more on the teaching and learning of discrete skills and facts and less on critical thinking and analysis (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In essence, the implementation has removed the dialogue about the purpose of schooling. In a democracy, the purpose of schooling must be at the heart of the discussion (Dewey, 2001). At the local level, federal initiatives, like NCLB and RtI, have turned not only students and parents but also teachers and administrators into pawns rather than participants. If, as Dewey (2001) wrote, the democratic road “places the greatest burden of responsibility upon the greatest number
of human beings” (p. 175), then every teacher, principal, administrator, student, and parent has the responsibility to debate and discuss the implications of federal accountability policies on our society and its schools.

The stated purpose of RtI is to provide high quality instruction by using assessment data to inform instructional and intervention decisions for all students (Batsche et al., 2006). This purpose was accomplished through administering universal screening assessments in order to quickly determine which students may need additional support or different instructional interventions (Deno, 1985). The core concepts of RtI have appeared in the literature for decades, but the inclusion of RtI language in the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 brought the concept into the daily vocabulary of almost every public school educator in the United States. The new guidelines encouraged states to move away from a system of identifying students as learning disabled due to an IQ-achievement discrepancy and toward a system of Response to Intervention (Vellutino et al., 2000). Even though the legislation specifically stated that states “may” use RtI to identify students with specific learning disabilities, many state education agencies began requiring the use of RtI as a key determining factor in special education eligibility (Batsche et al., 2006; IDEA, 2004). Response to Intervention represents one of the clearest, and yet most subtle, policy shifts in the reauthorization of IDEA and it has the potential to transform our understandings and definitions of “special education.”

RtI straddles the fence between special education and regular education. If implemented with fidelity, RtI has the potential to reduce the number of students identified and referred to special education (Batsche et al., 2006). However, if educators have inconsistent or unclear conceptions of how RtI should be implemented, and they do not shift their worldview of student
learning and achievement, then RtI will not transform schools or learning, but rather will be absorbed into the current structures of schooling.

In this literature review, I will begin with a short review of the purposes of schooling in a democracy, examine the underlying constructs of Response to Intervention, examine its current implementation, synthesize research on socially just educational practices, and present a model through which we might come to a more socially just concept of RtI. Like NCLB, the underlying premises of IDEA and RtI are complex and sometimes contradictory. The policies mandate data-based decision making and high stakes testing in an effort to achieve equitable outcomes for students. As with any policy, educators’ conceptions are shaped by many factors. In order to understand if and how RtI can be viewed as a model for promoting socially just practices, it is necessary to examine the evidence regarding those practices and how they fit into the research of RtI.

**Democratic Education and Social Justice**

Public schools in American society are designed to create and recreate our democratic society (Kaye, 1995). Dewey (2001) argued that schools are the most logical place for societal reforms to take place, because schools are interactive, experiential laboratories in which all students come together to make meaning of the world and society. That being said, it is important to clearly define democratic education. Postman (2001) cautioned against ever using the term “democracy is . . .” because the words that followed usually turned to patriotism rather than to democracy. In American society, schools must fulfill their promise of being the great equalizers, of opening doors and providing opportunities for all students to not only realize their potential, but also become active participants in the dialogue to improve society (Postman). In
Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paolo Freire (1970) described schooling as a narrative that was shared by the active teacher to the passive student. Freire rejected this narrative as oppressive and advocated for students to become active participants in schooling, in reform, and in transformation of society. Westheimer and Kahne (2002) argued that schooling for democracy must move beyond participation and also include the normative concept of social justice, in which the deeper societal issues of inequity, marginalization, and racism are not just studied as topics but also are explored to find root causes and solutions.

The term social justice has been defined many ways. These definitions almost always include the concepts of questioning and opposing the physical and intellectual structures that “perpetuate social inequalities and marginalization due to race, class, gender, and other markers of otherness” (Marshall & Olivia, 2006, p. 27). One purpose of education is to remove barriers that marginalize individuals and promote an equitable and just society (Shields, 2004). One of the key roles of education is to transform society. My definition of social justice is also informed a great deal by Paulo Freire and William Foster. Freire (1970) characterized the tension between teacher and student as the same tension between oppressor and oppressed. One of the keys to liberation is “critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action” (Freire, 1970, p. 65). The oppressed must be active participants in their own liberation, because if they are not, then they will only be “objects which must be saved from a burning building” (p. 65). While Freire does not use the term “social justice,” his analysis of the reflective revolution provides a new understanding of democratic education as liberation and freedom. His work extends Dewey’s (2001) statement that “the cause of democratic freedom is the cause of the fullest possible realization of human potentialities” (p. 175). Education for social justice helps society realize the greatest possible human potentials.
In addition to viewing students as oppressed, scholars have used the term *oppression* to describe the relationship between educational administrators and teachers. Foster (1986) referred to this oppression as the Taylorization of instruction, in reference to Frederick Winslow Taylor’s *Principles of Scientific Management* (1916). By relying too heavily on overly prescribed ideas of instructional “best practice” Foster (1986) argued that teachers have become “deskilled” (p. 191). Foster argued, “a critical educational administration tries to liberate teacher and administrators from the preconceptions that lock them into socially unproductive relationships” (p. 192). The concept of democratic education as liberation and social justice forms a groundwork for the definitions of social justice leadership that I applied to the model for understanding principals’ conceptions of Response to Intervention and socially just educational practices. One of my goals was to construct a framework that narrows these broad views of social justice into socially just educational practices that educational leaders can describe from their own experiences.

If the role of schools is to transform society, then what is the role of educational leaders? Educational leaders must be the advocates of teaching liberty (Glickman, 1998). Leaders must move beyond the traditional and neoclassical concepts of manager and confront issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, poverty, and marginalization through the lens of social justice. Burns (1978) described the shift from transactional leadership to transforming leadership as one of moving from viewing leadership as an exchange of ideas to leadership as building capacity within the organization. Specifically, Burns described transactional leadership as an exchange between people in which the people are aware of the process of the bargaining, but there is nothing that binds them together as “leader and follower” (p. 20). He contrasted transactional leadership with transforming leadership, in which the common purpose of the leader and followers formed a bond that elevated both parties on a moral level. Applied to a school setting,
principals who are transforming in nature lead teachers toward a common purpose or mission. Principals and teachers are united by the common goal or mission of the school “that represents the collective or pooled interests of leaders and followers” (p. 426). Bass (1997) further refined the transactional and transformational dichotomy by explaining that the difference between the two is more of a continuum based on organizational and cultural contexts.

In an empirical review of research on transformational leadership, Leithwood (1994) expanded on the term transforming, using the concept of transformational leadership by defining main characteristics of transformational leaders in school settings. The list of characteristics included the following: developing a shared vision, building consensus, setting high expectations, providing individualized support and intellectual stimulation, and modeling good professional practice (Leithwood). Transformational leadership was important from an organizational standpoint, but it failed to address the purpose of schooling to transform society. Shields (2004, 2010) incorporated the normative practices of social justice theory into leadership in her definition of transformative leadership. According to Shields (2010), transformative leadership “begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others” (p. 559). Transformative leadership expands the scope of educational leadership beyond the walls of the school and beyond the traditional domain of the school to challenge issues of inequity, injustice, and marginalization throughout society. The concept of transformative leadership calls on educational leaders to become social revolutionaries as we create an “aristocracy of everyone” (Barber, 2001, p. 11).
Socially Just Practices

In order to develop a framework for understanding principals’ conceptions of RtI and how it does or does not support socially just educational practices, it is necessary to examine the literature describing leadership practices that are socially just. I examined several main areas of literature to synthesize a set of socially just practices. The first of these areas revolves around the concept of deficit thinking (Skrla & Scheurich, 2003; Valencia, 1997). Deficit thinking describes the mindset that “students who fail do so because of internal deficiencies . . . or shortcoming socially linked to the youngster—such as familial deficits and dysfunctions” (Valencia, 1997, p. xi). The second area of literature focuses on inclusive practices. The term inclusive often focuses on literature about special education (Artiles et al., 2007; Baglieri et al., 2010). Riehl (2000) viewed inclusive schools broadly to include concepts about race, socioeconomic status, and cultural differences. The third area of research focuses on advocacy, and the final topic identifies practices of democratic leadership, social justice leadership and transformative leadership (Furman & Shields, 2005; Mullen, 2008; Riehl, 2000; Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2010). The final area of research focuses on engaging and empowering parents in the school and learning process (Auerbach, 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2007). These four theories are closely linked in my mind around issues of democratic dialogue and challenging injustices both within educational settings and in the larger society (Shields, 2010). My purpose is to distill practices of educational leaders that can be viewed as socially just.

There have been many reasons given for the achievement gaps in the United States, but regardless of the complexity of the causes, educators and policy makers tend to rely on conceptions of society that Valencia described as deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997). The language that has exploded since the focus of NCLB on closing these achievement gaps continues to place
the reasons for the gap on the students and their parents. The term “at-risk” predates NCLB and RtI, but it has seen resurgence in the age of high stakes accountability testing. Valencia and Solorzano (1997) document that the construct of at-risk represents a major component of deficit thinking that is not only pejorative but also “fails to acknowledge the strengths, competencies and promise of low-income children and parents” (p. 197).

Educators tend to gravitate toward deficit thinking explanations “to justify their own lack of success with children of color in their classrooms” (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003, p. 16). Deficit thinking also can become part of the socio-historical context, which institutionalizes and pathologizes whole segments of the population (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2004). Special education labels can be viewed as one form of institutionalized pathologies that separate and marginalize students who are different. In their summary of classroom practices that raise the expectations for all students, Scheurich and Skrla (2003) categorized four broad concepts of strategies that reduce the stereotypes associated with deficit thinking: high expectations and respect, culturally responsive teaching, loving and caring in the classroom, democratic collaborative teaching environments, and continual development of content expertise. By addressing issues of deficit thinking and reframing the discussion about classroom practice in terms of equity and excellence for all students, we can begin to address closing achievement gaps from a strengths-based perspective.

**Inclusive Practices**

In the research, the term *inclusive* often is used interchangeably with the word *inclusion* (Artiles et al., 2007; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). Baglieri et al. (2010) documented the historical use of the term *inclusive education* and its relationship and divergence
from special education. Many scholars have used the word inclusive or inclusion to refer to “placing students with disabilities in a normal classroom setting” (Baglieri et al., p. 2126). Ballard (1999) broadened the meaning to expand beyond the lexicon of special education. The definition that Ballard (1999) applied to inclusive education was based on concepts of social justice and equity that went beyond students with special needs “to increasing participation . . . for all those experiencing disadvantage” (p. 2). Ryan (2006) called for a form of inclusive leadership, a term he used to include many kinds of difference including race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and intellectual and physical needs. Zion and Blanchett (2010) called for a reconceptualization of *inclusion* around the ideas of critical race theory and equity. These larger, broader conceptualizations of the term *inclusive* are important to the current discussion, because as we move from theory into practice, it is important to define the term using the language of social justice and equity, not the language of special education.

Artiles, Harris-Murri, and Rostenberg (2006) called for moving from a traditional social justice discourse to a transformative model of discourse about inclusive education. The difference between the two models of social justice discourse about inclusive education was that transformative inclusive education used a critical lens to critique marginalization and transform school cultures in ways that “embrace participatory strategies in which distribution of resources, access, and social cohesion constitutes the foundation of democratic egalitarian alternatives” (Artiles et al., p. 267). Despite calls for broader definitions of the term *inclusive*, the majority of empirical research about inclusive schools comes from special education research. Barnett and Monda-Amaya (1998) surveyed 65 principals from public schools in Illinois about their understandings of inclusion. Their results demonstrated that principals did not have a clear or common definition of the term *inclusion* (Barnett & Monda-Amaya). Practitioners’ continued
inability to define the concept of *inclusive* may be due to the fact that despite normative and theoretical work using critical and social justice definitions, researchers have continued to use it interchangeably with *inclusion* of special education students. Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) conducted a case study of an elementary principal who was leading a successful inclusive school. They defined *inclusive school* as “including students with disabilities in general education classrooms and improving student academic outcomes for low-achieving students” (Hoppey & McLeskey, p. 246). They provided a loose framework that described an effective leader in an inclusive school as one who cared about staff, protected teachers from external accountability stress, and promoted professional growth.

Riehl (2000) summarized the normative and empirical literature about creating inclusive schools for diverse students. Riehl’s definition of inclusive schools was informed by multicultural and critical race literature rather than special education literature. She summarized the key dimensions of inclusive administrative practice, which included concepts of culturally responsive teaching, creating a caring environment, setting high expectations for students and teachers, removing structures that prevented access to instruction (detracking), and taking an advocacy approach to leadership (Riehl, 2000). Of the literature she reviewed, only three published empirical studies were cited (Deering, 1996; Dillard, 1995; Keyes et al., 1999). All three studies were case studies that provide insight but need additional empirical evidence. Empirical evidence about inclusive schools as defined by Riehl (2000) and Artiles et al. (2006) continues to be absent in the literature with a few exceptions (Ryan, 2006; Theoharis, 2010). Although the latter explored leadership for social justice, not inclusive schools.

**Advocacy.** Using notions of social justice, equity, and diversity in her work, Riehl (2000) argued that of all of the ways administrators can promote inclusive practices within schools, “the
strategies of advocacy and critique probably go farthest” (p. 65). Principals must continually advocate for students and challenge structures that isolate groups. The issues of advocacy were echoed in Dillard’s (1995) grounded case study of an African American female principal. Dillard identified three main tenets of effective school leaders based on her analysis of the principal and literature surrounding effective principals. The first of these tenets is that the actions of principals are “grounded in subjective interpretations and understandings arising from personal biographies” (p. 558). The second tenet is that “concern, care, and advocacy” (p. 556) by the principal for individual students is critical. The subject of Dillard’s study exemplified advocacy when she stated, “If it’s not good for kids, it is not good for Rosefield [High School, where she was principal]” (p. 556). Finally, the third tenet of effective leadership is transformative political work. Here, Dillard uses Bennis’ (1986) definition of transformative as the ability to shift people’s understandings of their world, which is similar to Shields’ (2004, 2010) idea that transformative leadership goes beyond the walls of the schoolhouse to tackle issues of social justice in the broader community and her identification of advocacy as one of the tenets of transformative leadership.

**Democratic discourse.** Principals must create the climate and culture that promotes democratic and socially just practices to grow and thrive. One of the ways to foster a culture of social justice is to create inclusive environments. Riehl (2000) identified three broad categories of tasks that create an inclusive environment: “fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive practices within schools, and building connections between schools and communities” (p. 59). She argued that one of the key strategies that principals can employ to accomplish these tasks is “democratic discourse within the school community” (p. 61), but she cautioned that democratic discourse is not always synonymous with social justice and
recommended that principals must be careful to insert issues of justice and equality into the dialogue.

Discourse theory and dialogue have many important roles to play in discussions of social justice and Response to Intervention. Burbules (2001) described the changing nature of our understandings of discourse in school settings as “discourse theory says that every word we utter draws its meanings from the social practices of which it is a part” (p. 1110). The very fact that RtI is tied to IDEA influences the way in which teachers and principals view the concept and implementation. The collaborative dialogues that take place, when educators are looking at student data and making instructional decisions are bound to the language, words, and contexts in which they exist. Democratic discourse must also be measured by the actions that accompany the discourse. To implement reform, both the conversation and the activity need to change (Sidorkin, 2005).

Democratic discourse and socially just practices are integrally linked (Furman & Shields, 2005). The relationship between social justice, learning, democratic community, and student learning are important to understand for school leaders, because the concepts are interdependent. Furman and Shields’ (2005) model of how educational leaders focus on this interdependence helps inform the discussion of how social justice leaders must use democratic dialogue in order to support meaningful and relevant learning. Their model describes five dimensions of leadership that foster the interdependence including: ethical and moral, communal, contextual, process, transformative, and pedagogical dimensions. Furman and Shields (2005) stated, “leadership is not simply the purview of those in formal positions, but results from the deliberate and thoughtful intervention of all members of a community dedicated to the moral purposes of education” (p. 131). Leadership must not just focus on one aspect or frame of democratic
leadership, one aspect of social justice, or one aspect of learning, but instead use democracy and
dialogue to understand the social and cultural contexts of justice in order to improve learning.
This model for understanding the relationships among learning, social justice, and democratic
education helps inform the creation of a model for understanding how principals understand the
relationship between RtI and socially just educational practices.

In order to clarify Furman and Shields’ (2005) model for integrating learning, social
justice, and democratic community, Wasonga (2009) conducted focus group interviews with 32
principals to understand their conceptions of “social justice, democratic community, and school
improvement” (p. 204). Her findings yielded leadership practices that fit into four categories:
shared decision-making, advocacy, dispositions and relationships, and social control with a
purpose. The shared decision-making and disposition and relationship practices align closely
with concepts of democratic communities and collaboration. Principals gave examples of their
core beliefs and how they share those beliefs with teachers, students, and parents. Social control
with a purpose speaks to the moral and ethical aspect of leadership, and advocacy is the practice
by which principals put students individual and collective welfare at the forefront of decisions
and discussions. Principals “posited that social justice is enhanced only when decision making is
a shared process throughout the school” (p. 218), thus providing evidence for the model that
social justice and democratic community are completely interdependent. As Furman and Shields
(2005) stated, “social justice is not possible without deep democracy, neither is deep democracy
possible without social justice” (p. 126).

In a commentary in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, a group of scholars prepared
guidelines for preparing social justice leaders (McKenzie et al., 2008). Their recommendations
had four major components: critical consciousness, engagement with teaching and learning,
proactive systems of support and inclusive structures, and induction. Freire’s notion of critical consciousness is necessary for leaders in order to “come to grips, in substantive ways, with their own personal positions” on race, class, gender, religion, language, and other attributes (McKenzie et al., p. 122). The authors also called for social justice leaders to know how to identify and challenge reactive systems of support for students. The reactive systems, they stated, “tend to spawn segregated programs which in turn perpetuate a caste system among students, teachers, and families and disempower teachers, students and parents” (pp. 126-127). Leaders must be able to recognize and challenge these obstacles to inclusive structures in order to challenge not just teachers’ thinking about student achievement but also parent and community notions about inclusiveness and heterogeneous classrooms. For example, “placing students in heterogeneous learning environments, without exception is the lodestar of all decisions about school structure and support systems” (McKenzie et al., p. 128). One of the critiques of the implementation of RtI is that it encourages pullout structures, however; I view the tenets of RtI as supporting proactive and inclusive options for student success.

Through interviews with six public school principals who were identified as social justice oriented principals, Theoharis (2010) uncovered four injustices that his principal participants indicated that they attempt to disrupt. The principals in the study “advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions” (Theoharris, p. 333). The four unjust practices that the principals identified included structures that marginalize students, practices that deprofessionalize the teaching staff, structures that marginalize low income families and families of color, and low student achievement. Again, the theme of inclusive structures is one of the main elements that principals identify as a means to working for social justice. Theoharris (2010)
asked the principals to name specific strategies that they used to disrupt these four injustices. For the first three injustices, principals were able to point to very specific actions that helped promote social justice. The principals in Theoharis’ research stated that low student achievement was disrupted by effectively fighting the first three injustices. In addition to the concept of inclusive structures, Theoharis’ (2010) discussion focused on “equity-focused professional development” (p. 366). He described this professional development as focused on issues of social justice that created norms that were democratic and empowering for the teachers. The issue of teacher empowerment is important in an age of high stakes accountability. Teachers and administrators have criticized both NCLB and RtI for replacing the art of teaching with scientifically-based best practices (Orzel, 2012).

**Inclusive family engagement.** Removing barriers that marginalize parents was one of the four areas that Theoharis (2010) noted as being important to the principals in his study. Auerbach (2009) conducted a critical case study of four principals committed to family engagement, who worked in diverse elementary schools in Los Angeles, CA. Although each of the principals’ approaches to engaging and involving parents and families was different from one another, Auerbach (2009) did find similarities in the principals’ rationale and beliefs about family engagement. One of the strengths of all of the principals’ parent engagement initiatives was that “the activities were not grounded in purely school-based agendas but rather in broader community-based agendas that empowered families . . . in line with their concerns about social justice and educational equity” (Auerbach, p. 25). Parent engagement and empowerment are closely tied to both student success and concepts of socially just educational practices (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Epstein, 2005). However, definitions, descriptions, and research about *parent engagement* are confounded by type (positive or negative), focus
(naturally occurring or school based), and child disposition (Pomerantz et al., 2007). The variety and specificity of parent engagement research prevented a comprehensive review here, but the qualitative studies by Auerbach (2009) and Theoharis (2007, 2010) suggested that there is a connection between family engagement and socially just educational practices.

**Response to Intervention**

The purpose of RtI is to provide high quality instruction by using assessment data to inform instructional and intervention decisions for all students. Data informed instruction is accomplished through universal assessment in order to match students with appropriate instruction and continually monitoring student progress (Batsche et al., 2006). Because of its inclusion in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, RtI has been confused as a special education initiative. In the Illinois RtI State Plan, administrators are reminded, “it is important to note that RtI within a three-tier intervention model is also a part of special education eligibility decision-making required by 34 CFR 300.309 and 23 IAC 226.130” (ISBE, 2008). However, many statewide implementation plans, like Illinois, clearly describe RtI as a regular education initiative (ISBE, 2008). Therefore, RtI straddles the fence between special education and regular education. If implemented with fidelity, RtI has the potential to reduce the number of students identified and referred to special education. However, if educators have inconsistent or unclear conceptions of how RtI should be implemented, and they do not shift their worldview of student learning and achievement, then RtI will not change the culture of learning and teaching.

RtI involves a multi-tiered intervention system through which students progress only if they are not responding to instruction and/or interventions at the lowest level (Batsche et al., 2006; Fisher & Frey, 2010; Taylor, 2008). Students are screened using a district- or school-
selected assessment at regular intervals to determine effectiveness of instruction and identify students who are struggling (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2008). In general, most students succeed in tier one, which involves high quality instruction in the regular classroom setting. When screening and diagnostic assessments indicate that students are struggling in tier one, a problem-solving team creates a plan to provide the content and instruction in different ways or with additional supports and monitor the students’ progress (Bastchse et al., 2006). Each tier represents a more intensive intervention.

Nationally, RtI implementation was still in relative infancy at the beginning of the current study. A comprehensive study of state level implementation reported that all but three states (Alaska, New Jersey, and South Carolina) were implementing or planning to implement RtI as state initiatives (Berkeley et al., 2009). The same study indicated that there was variation across states in regard to purpose, model, and degree to which RtI would be used to identify students for special education services. Of the implementing states, all but two (Georgia and North Carolina) were using the three-tiered model (Berkeley et al., 2009). Most states were using a combination of the discrepancy model and RtI to identify students for special education services; however, Delaware and Georgia were exclusively using RtI, and Connecticut, New York, Rhode Island, and Illinois had “timetables by when the discrepancy model would be phased out” and replaced with RtI (Berkeley et al., 2009, p. 91).

The Illinois State Board of Education’s Response to Intervention Plan describes three essential components: (a) a three tier system of supports, (b) a problem-solving method for decision making, and (b) a data system that informs instruction (ISBE, 2008). The Illinois plan clearly states that RtI “is a general education initiative” that supports the delivery of “high quality instruction” to “all students” (p. 1). The Illinois State plan is similar to other states, and is
aligned with research (Batsche et al., 2006). This plan also uses the term “at-risk” to identify students who require additional supports, and it requires that “documentation of the RtI process shall be a part of the evaluation process for students when a specific learning disability (SLD) is suspected” (ISBE, 2008, p. 4). The problem-solving method described by the Illinois State plan is also couched in pathologizing language of deficits. The method is to “define the problem by determining the discrepancy between what is expected and what is occurring . . . determine why the discrepancy is occurring” (p. 2). The way the plan is written, using the term problem to describe the students’ learning, assumes that students will be not be meeting expectations and that all students will require some level of intervention. The Illinois plan exemplifies the problems with implementation and the contradictions that educators must confront. On the one hand, RtI is a regular education initiative supporting all students; on the other hand, it incorporates the language of deficit thinking by stressing interventions, problems, and problem solving rather than instruction. The plan also describes a required process for the new identification criteria for special education.

Large-scale studies that evaluate implementation, student outcomes and efficacy of RtI have yet to be conducted; however, there have been small qualitative empirical studies that examine one aspect of RtI or one setting (Martinez & Young, 2011; Swanson et al., 2012; White, Polly, & Audette, 2012). Martinez and Young (2011) conducted an online survey of 99 educators in Texas. The survey collected primarily data about the mechanics of how RtI was implemented in the schools. Topics included RtI referrals, documentation, data collection, interventions, follow up, and decision-making processes. The questions also included seven statements about RtI, and asked the educator to indicate their agreement with the statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Martinez & Young, 2011). The two prompts that had the most consistency
large responses were “RtI benefits students” (75% agreed or strongly agreed) and “Educators learn a lot about their students through RtI” (67% agreed or strongly agreed). The prompt “Parent involvement enhances the RtI process” had 55% of participants marking agree or strongly agree. The Martinez and Young study was only descriptive in nature, and did not include any statistical tests of significance or explore correlations in the responses.

Through a qualitative case analysis of an elementary school, White et al. (2012) interviewed 15 teachers, support staff, and administrators to explore educators’ perceptions and opinions about recent RtI implementation. The purpose of the study was to “delineate critical features of an elementary school’s implementation of a RtI model and the contextual influences . . . according to the perspectives of the participants” (White et al., p. 76). The unstructured interviews yielded data that indicated that teachers were frustrated by the changes with RtI (increased paperwork and assessments) and yet hopeful (potential for improving student achievement). White et al. also found that principal leadership played a key role in the implementation. Participants noted in the interviews that the principal “communicated a deep belief in RtI” and that “RtI was good for children” (p. 85). The principal also empowered teachers to take leadership roles while maintaining a “constant presence and force” in the problem-solving process” (p. 85). These findings reinforce the importance and significance of gaining a deeper understanding of principals’ conceptions about RtI.

The relationship between special education and RtI led Swanson et al. (2012) to conduct a multi-year mixed methods study that explored special education teachers’ perceptions about RtI. The setting was a ethnically and economically diverse elementary school that had been implementing RtI for at least 3 years. A total of 12 special education teachers participated in both years of the study that consisted of interviews, focus groups, and observation measures. The
participants reported that the biggest benefits of the RtI model were early intervention that was more responsive to student needs, more time to collaborate with regular education teachers, and using assessment data to inform instruction both for regular classroom settings and in intervention groups (Swanson et al., 2012). The observational data from the study indicated that 42% of the intervention time was spent on comprehension instruction, 22% on word study or phonics, and 11% on vocabulary activities. Special education teachers in the study also reported increased responsibilities for supporting students who had not been identified for special education services, participating in problem solving teams, and data collection. RtI implementation created new roles and responsibilities for special education staff that contributed to the blurring of lines between RtI and special education.

**Critiques of RtI.** Because Response to Intervention has been codified via its inclusion in the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), it often is associated with the field of special education. Federal legislation encourages the use of RtI as one possible method for identifying students as specific learning disabled. However, many states adopted RtI as a replacement to previous identification criterion, and thus shifted RtI from a method of improving core instruction for all students through differentiation to a new method for identifying students for special education. Critics point out RtI was never intended to be a sole criterion for identifying students with specific learning disabilities (Kavale, Holdnack, & Mostert, 2005). Additionally, because the majority of RtI research focuses on literacy, the working definition of specific learning disability becomes focused on reading and not on other cognitive features (Kavale et al., 2005).

The over-reliance on the phrase, “scientific, researched-based” (ISBE, 2008, p. 1) is also problematic, because there has been little work to incorporate sociocultural or linguistic background of students, teachers’ potential biases, organizational structures, or societal factors
into the discussion of problem solving or choosing appropriate instruction and interventions (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenburg, 2006). RtI research and implementation plans have been criticized for ignoring concepts of culturally responsive instruction, assessments, and interventions (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Richards, Brown and Forde (2007) defined *culturally responsive* pedagogy as the institutional, personal, and instructional practices that support and validate students’ cultural identities and promote equity. In relation to RtI, Klingner and Edwards (2006) asked, “What should the first tier look like for culturally diverse students? . . . How can we make sure that the instruction is in fact responsive to children’s needs?” (p. 108). Harris-Murri et al. (2006) pointed out that one of the biggest challenges to moving toward a culturally responsive Tier I curriculum is the pressure from NCLB and RtI to standardize the curriculum. They argued that a standardized curriculum “serves to continue the disenfranchisement of cultural and linguistic minority students, as well as students of low economic status” (Harris-Murri et al., p. 785).

In a qualitative case study about the RtI implementation in a K-5 elementary school with 35% Spanish speaking Latino students, Orosco and Klingner (2010) found that teachers and administrators implemented “an RtI model in isolation without also considering the cultural contexts in which they and their students functioned” (p. 283). The researchers conducted interviews and observations, and analyzed assessment and instructional documents. Orosco and Klingner (2010) concluded that the lack of cultural understanding in the RtI implementation was responsible for inadequate teacher preparation and misalignment in instruction and assessment. The lack of planning and awareness of cultural contexts may do nothing more than replicate the disparities and deficit models that account for an over-representation of students of color in special education (Artiles et al., 2010; Finch, 2012; Proctor, Graves, & Esch, 2012).
Reviewing the research reinforces the dichotomy between RtI as a method of special education identification and as a shift in the way we view struggling students. Vaughn and Fuchs (2006) pointed out that, with the inclusion of RtI as a possible identification method in IDEA, the research about RtI seemed to split into two competing strands:

Batche and other RtI proponents seem primarily concerned with RtI as a prevention mechanism, and this is where the bulk of the RtI evidence resides. By contrast, Kavale and fellow opponents seem to focus their attention on how RtI will affect the integrity of the LD classification, and this is where much less research has been conducted. (p. 60)

These two different strands of research exacerbate the problems already present in the implementation of RtI. Education leaders are faced with the dichotomy of viewing RtI as a system to enhance the instruction for all students versus RtI as a criterion for identifying students for special education. Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) criticized both sides of the debate over the purpose of RtI by stating that the research evidence for using RtI either as a new classification for specific learning disabilities or as a means of improving instruction for all students has yet to be published. One danger in the lack of clarity about the purpose and meaning of RtI is that the reform could be seen as little more than a change in vocabulary.

Special education terminology is fraught with negative connotations. The act of labeling a student “learning disabled” or “at-risk” reinforces the mindset that the problems that the child is experiencing are because the child needs to be “fixed” (Harry & Klingner, 2007). Harry and Klingner (2007) pointed out that the over-representation of African American students in special education has led to a double deficit lens, through which teachers were more likely to view poor students of color as having learning disabilities simply because of the difference in culture or socioeconomic class. Special education labels exemplify the problems that Valencia and Solorzano (1997) outlined regarding deficit thinking. The label “tends to overlook any strengths or promise of a student so-labeled, while drawing attention to the presumed short-comings of the
individual” (p. 196). The term intervention in RtI suggests that something about a child needs to be fixed. The concept of labeling students, whether under special education policy or RtI practice, continues to blame the student for lack of success. Because “intervention is keyed to individual children . . . the focus becomes those children and not the environment” (Christensen & Dorn, 1997, p. 187).

**RtI and Social Justice**

As stated earlier, I view Response to Intervention as an initiative that supports social justice ideals. The concept behind RtI is to provide all students with high quality instruction, supported by collaborative professionals who use a variety of assessment data to make instructional decisions for students in a regular classroom setting (Fisher & Frey, 2010). RtI should promote heterogeneous classrooms and democratic decision making in schools. However, the implementation of RtI has not always lived up to those ideals. Unfortunately, RtI “is increasingly associated in practice with a new identification system for students with LD and BD” (Artiles et al., 2010, p. 251). Because RtI has been codified in IDEA, and despite the efforts of state education agencies to instill the idea that RtI is a “regular education initiative,” there is still a strong emphasis in both practice and research for using RtI as a process to identify students with specific learning disabilities (ISBE, 2008; Kavale et al., 2005).

Artiles et al. (2010) critiqued RtI’s implementation and provided recommendations for “theoretical and methodological shifts” (p. 255) in order to reinforce RtI as an initiative that supports socially just practices. It is important to understand both RtI’s social justice promise as well as its social justice critiques. Theoretically, the RtI model provides high quality instruction to all students, and additional supports to students who are not progressing as fast as expected
toward learning targets. This concept is supported by Rawl’s (1971) theory of just distribution of resources, because unequal distribution of resources helps equalize opportunities. The RtI model also supports the idea that there will be a “reduction in the disproportionate representation of diverse learners in special education due to low instructional quality” (Artiles et al., p. 252).

Artiles et al. (2010) identified three key areas in which the implementation of RtI may fall short of the ideals of social justice. First is the concept of assessment and progress monitoring. Because progress monitoring is conducted on an individual student level, these measures “do not necessarily document whether classroom learning environments are enabling beyond the parameters of standard intervention protocols” (p. 254). Second, RtI does not specifically address cultural competencies of the learning environment, curriculum, or instruction, and therefore, may fail to address the needs of students whose “cultural repertoires may position them at odds with the assumptions” of the classroom environment and curriculum (p. 254). Finally, because RtI progress monitoring looks solely at student abilities, the students’ cultural and contextual identities often are ignored. Therefore, some students’ strengths may be overlooked because they are not measured on assessments that look at discrete skills.

In order to reposition RtI to support justice and educational reform, Artiles et al. (2010) proposed that RtI implementation focus on several aspects that are not yet addressed in the literature. First is a focus on Young’s (1990) conception of social justice as the “elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression” (as cited in Artiles et al., p. 255). Second, RtI must address cultural concerns both in the areas of curriculum and instruction and in “the construction of school success” (Artiles et al., p. 255). It is important that these critiques and proposals are explored when developing a model for understanding principals’ conceptions of RtI.
A Socially Just Model of RtI

The strategies, explicated in Theoharis (2010), helped provide direction to creating a model for understanding how principals’ conceptions of RtI may or may not promote social justice strategies. The model will combine my understandings of RtI, the critiques of RtI, and the strategies that have been identified to disrupt injustice. Before this model can be completed, we need a clear definition of RtI and a summary of the critiques of RtI. As I will explain in the next section, one of the main components of RtI is problem-solving teams of teachers, parents, and administrators. If these teams are doing nothing more than picking a pre-approved, packaged, intervention from a shelf, then the power of discourse is lost, and RtI becomes nothing more than a new way to marginalize not just students, but parents and teachers as well.

Response to Intervention is visually represented with triangles that are divided into the three tiers of instructional intervention. Often the triangle is split down the center to represent both the academic and behavioral aspects of RtI.

![Diagram of Academic and Behavioral Systems](image)

*Figure 1. Academic and behavioral sides of response to intervention (ISBE, 2008).*

Although this triangle is used across the United States in RtI implementation, it fails to capture the core aspects of RtI’s research base. At the base of the triangle is the concept that RtI
provides high quality instruction to all children in the regular classroom. However, the triangle representation suggests that “at-risk” children will be pulled out for “targeted” interventions, when much of the research about RtI would advocate for regular classroom teachers to differentiate instruction, classroom environment, and learning in order to provide students with opportunities to access the regular curriculum in the regular classroom (Fisher & Frey, 2010).

In order to re-visualize the RtI triangles, I suggest adding educational and leadership practices that have been identified with social justice. Table 1 summarizes the socially just practices outlined in the literature. The social just practices and tenets that relate to RtI can be summarized into four broad categories: (a) shared decision making (which includes empowering staff and democratic dialogue), (b) creating inclusive structures and supports (which includes taking a capacity rather than a deficit approach), (c) focus on student learning, and (d) advocacy (which includes moral and ethical dimensions). Those practices that are most aligned with the concepts of RtI have been highlighted in the right-hand column.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Socially just practices or tenets</th>
<th>Aligned with RtI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dillard (1995)</td>
<td>• Personal biographies</td>
<td>• Advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Concern, care, and advocacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transformative political work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riehl (2000)</td>
<td>• Fostering new meanings about diversity</td>
<td>• Promoting inclusive practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Promoting inclusive practices within schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Building connections between schools and communities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheurich &amp; Skrla (2003)</td>
<td>• High expectations and respect</td>
<td>• High expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Culturally responsive teaching</td>
<td>• Democratic collaborative teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Loving and caring in the classroom</td>
<td>environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Democratic collaborative teaching environments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Continual development of content expertise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Socially just practices or tenets</th>
<th>Aligned with RtI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Furman and Shields (2005)</td>
<td>• Ethical and moral</td>
<td>• Ethical and Moral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Democratic communities</td>
<td>• Democratic communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Contextual</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Processual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transformative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Pedagogical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenzie et al. (2007)</td>
<td>• Critical consciousness</td>
<td>• Engagement with teaching and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Engagement with teaching and learning</td>
<td>learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Proactive systems of support and inclusive structures</td>
<td>• Systems of support and inclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Induction for S.J. leaders</td>
<td>structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasonga (2009)</td>
<td>• Shared decision making</td>
<td>• Shared decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advocacy</td>
<td>• Advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Dispositions and relationships</td>
<td>• Social control with purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Social control with purpose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoharis (2010)</td>
<td>• Removing structures that marginalize</td>
<td>• Removing structures that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Empowering teaching staff</td>
<td>marginalize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Welcoming school climate</td>
<td>• Empowering teaching staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student achievement</td>
<td>• Student achievement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For RtI to fulfill its promise as a reform that will enhance and support socially just practices, educational leaders must view it as such. The central tenets of RtI are high quality core instruction, which supports the idea of a focus on student learning; teams of teachers looking at data to make decisions, which supports the idea of shared decision making; reducing the labeling of students as special education, which supports the idea of breaking down structures that marginalize students; and focusing on what is best for the student, which supports the socially just practice of advocacy (Bastche et al., 2006).

In order to understand how principals’ conceptions of RtI may reflect socially just practices, it is necessary to create a model that can be tested. The literature points to specific practices and principles of social justice leaders. Several of these practices and principles relate to a socially just conception of RtI. Figure 2 reimagines the RtI triangles to incorporate the principles of socially just practices.
This model was used to guide the semi-structured interviews with principals and frame questions and conversations about their conceptions of RtI. The model also served as a means of analyzing the principals responses about issues related to RtI and socially just practices in their schools. Collecting evidence related to this model prompted discussion about if the current implementation of RtI can fulfill the hope of reducing marginalization and providing more opportunities for authentic student learning. Unfortunately, the implementation of RtI has focused on discrete skills and new criteria of identifying students for special education services. In order to reframe RtI with a social justice lens, the theoretical and methodological changes advocated by Artiles et al. (2010) are only the beginning of the changes that need to happen.

Response to Intervention has created a new hope for reducing the over-representation of African American and low socioeconomic students in special education (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006). Many of the principles of RtI reflect dimensions of social justice. For example, RtI focuses on providing a high quality education for all students, requiring decisions to be made
based on a variety of student assessments, fostering collaborative decision making, and providing equitable resources and opportunities for all students (Artiles et al., 2010). In general, the implementation of RtI has focused on a very narrow definition of student achievement and uses language that indicates that those writing implementation plans have not transcended deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997). However, it is not too late to reframe RtI in the socially just practices that it may support. The literature in social justice and socially just practices inform a model for reframing RtI that needs to be explored. Four major themes from social justice could play a role in the reframing of RtI: (a) shared decision making (which includes empowering staff and democratic dialogue), (b) creating inclusive structures and supports, (c) focus on student learning, and (d) advocacy (which includes moral and ethical dimensions).

In order to gather evidence about this model and the possibility of a socially just reframing of RtI, it will be necessary to understand how principals view the relationship between these socially just practices and the implementation of RtI. If principals who identify themselves as social justice leaders view RtI as an initiative that supports social justice practices, it is important to understand how they came to have this understanding in order to understand how to shift the methods and language of RtI implementation to expand its social justice views. On the other hand, it is also important to find out if principals see the implementation of RtI as a hindrance to socially just practices. In order to explore these issues and seek evidence for a socially just model of RtI, we must have a deeper and broader understanding of principals’ conceptions of both socially just educational practices and the implementation and principles of RtI.
Summary

Response to Intervention was brought to the attention of educators in the United States with the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). The literature, both normative and empirical, indicated that confusion and controversy exist about the purpose of RtI as either a reform initiative to provide improved instruction for all students (Bastche et al., 2006) or a new method of identifying students as having specific learning disabilities (Kavale et al., 2005).

In order to frame RtI in a socially just construct, the literature review examined the purpose of democratic education. Westheimer and Kahne (2002) argued that the purpose of school must transcend traditional notions of civic participation and include issues of social justice, equity, and inclusion. Principals and other educational leaders must apply notions of transformative leadership or social justice leadership into their practice in order to help end societal racism and discrimination (Shields, 2010). Educators also must be aware of the deficit thinking and language that Valencia (1997) argued discriminates against students and families of color and low income.

Specific socially just educational practices were summarized through a review of empirical research. Although the majority of the research has been qualitative and small scale in nature, it has provided insight into the day-to-day practices of socially just leaders. Riehl (2000) argued that schools should promote inclusive structures and use democratic discourse to bring issues of social justice and equity to the forefront of discussions. Dillard’s (1995) grounded case study highlighted the importance of advocacy for individual students. Wasonga (2009) and Furman and Shields (2005) found that shared decision making, advocacy, dispositions, and relationships combined to enhance socially just schools through democratic discourse and shared
decision making. Theoharis (2010) interviewed socially-just principals to determine which injustices were most important for them to disrupt. He reported that marginalization of students, deprofessionalizing staff, disengaged families and community, and low student achievement were the areas that principals reported needed the most effort to combat.

RtI has been criticized for not accounting for racial, cultural, and economic differences (Artiles et al., 2010; Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Researchers called for an emphasis on a culturally responsive RtI both in research and in practice (Finch, 2012; Harris-Murri et al., 2006; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007). Artiles et al. (2010) argued that framing RtI in only technical terms would “ultimately exacerbate the possibilities of reproducing past inequities” (p 256).

Finally, the literature and empirical research was synthesized into a model for a socially-just RtI, which included key concepts and components of social justice research and literature. The socially-just RtI model included a focus on student achievement, advocacy, creating inclusive structures, and shared decision making. This model was used to create the semi-structured interviews for this study.
Chapter Three

Methodology

This phenomenological study explores principals’ conceptions of Response to Intervention and how those understandings relate to the promotion or inhibition of socially just educational practices in their schools. In 2008, the Illinois State Board of Education mandated that all schools develop RtI plans, and provided the basic foundation to guide the implementation and practice of RtI in schools and districts. ISBE’s rationale for mandating RtI plans was broad and open ended:

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) believes that increased student learning requires the consistent practice of providing high quality instruction matched to student needs. Response to Intervention (RtI) is a general education initiative, which requires collaborative efforts from all district staff, general educators, special educators and bilingual/ELL staff. In a quality educational environment student academic and behavioral needs must be identified and monitored continuously with documented student performance data used to make instructional decisions. (ISBE, 2008, p. 1)

Although this rationale laid a foundation, ISBE did not offer specific templates, structures, or programs to be adopted, leaving principals and district administrators a great deal of discretion and latitude in how they interpreted and implemented RtI. Without a clear philosophical statement of purpose, principals facilitate the implementation of RtI in their schools with widely varying conceptions about RtI, its purpose, and the intended outcomes. This study examines principals’ conceptions of RtI, specifically, how they understand the RtI initiative and how it may support or inhibit their attempts to promote socially just educational practices in their schools. The specific research questions are:

1. What are principals’ understandings of RtI?
2. What are principals’ understandings of socially just educational practices?
3. What are the relationships that the principals identify between their understandings of RtI and the promotion of social justice?
Overview of Methodology

This qualitative study was designed to explore the conceptions that principals have about RtI and how those conceptions promote or inhibit socially justice practices in their schools. The goal of this study was to determine what principals understood and were able to describe about the relationships between RtI and socially just educational practices. Although participants were not asked to describe a specific event, for example their RtI implementation plan, the goal was to have principals describe their lived experiences and understandings about RtI. In essence, a phenomenological approach “brings to light” principals’ understandings of RtI and socially just practices (Moustakas, 1994). As Groenwald (2004) stated, “the operative word in phenomenological research is ‘describe’” (p. 5). Specifically, I wanted to understand the phenomenon of the relationship between RtI and socially just educational practices from the “perspectives of the people involved” (Welman & Kruger as cited in Groenwald, 2004, p. 5).

Phenomenology is also the pursuit of “pure consciousness” (Duarte, 2000, p. 180). According to Duarte, Freire approached phenomenology as a “co-intentional experience” (p. 180). That is, in order to understand one’s own lived experiences, one must engage in dialogue with others. Husserl described the process of phenomenology as one of intentionally becoming conscious of something (Duarte, p. 181). One goal of this study was to encourage principals to become aware of their own understandings about RtI and how those understandings either promoted or inhibited socially just practices in their schools. Adding Freire’s notion of critical consciousness and dialogue to phenomenology, Duarte deconstructed phenomenology to be “understood as thinking together with others” (p. 185). This combination of critical consciousness and phenomenology informed the methodology and procedures of this study. In order to “think together” with others, interviews with the principals about their understandings of
RtI and social justice created a dialogue between investigator and participant. Through this dialogue, I hoped to increase the understandings of both myself and the participants.

**Ethical Considerations**

The research design conformed to the accepted standards for ethical research, beneficence, respect, and justice, as outlined by *The Belmont Report* (Sieber, 1992). The purpose and research questions of this study involved minimal risk to participants and maximized positive outcomes. By gaining a greater understanding of principals’ conceptions of RtI and its relationship with socially just educational practices, this study helped fill gaps in the literature about both topics. This study informed the field by providing researchers and school leaders with understandings of how their practices and conceptions may or may not support equity and social justice concerns in the schools. Although at first, I asked questions about the two concepts separately to ensure I did not shape principals’ responses, ultimately, the participants were led to a full understanding of the purpose of the study. The purpose of the study did not cause any of the subjects to put themselves in personal or professional risk. Participant identities were kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms, and their schools and districts were only identified by pseudonyms. All participants were treated with respect and had full understanding that their participation in the research was completely voluntary.

I have a vested interest in the topic of RtI and social justice because I am currently the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction in a small urban school district in Central Illinois. The district serves students from early childhood through high school from a socioeconomically, ethnically, and linguistically diverse community. As Assistant Superintendent, I supervise principals, program directors, and grant coordinators, who are
directly responsible for creating implementation and professional development plans for RtI and other initiatives related to curriculum, assessment, and instruction. The district started implementing RtI with grades K-2 in 2004 and has slowly expanded the implementation system wide. As RtI implementation has scaled up, I have struggled with competing notions of RtI in the literature, in professional development, in my personal practice, and in the beliefs of my colleagues. While I am supportive of our implementation, I continually struggle to push against the momentum that suggests that RtI is just a new method of identifying students for special education or a process of selecting highly prescriptive packaged interventions as a form of remediation based on minimal assessment of student strengths.

**Site and Participant Selection**

The research context for this study was public elementary schools in Illinois with ethnically and socioeconomically diverse student populations. Participants were elementary principals throughout Illinois. With the recent mandate that all schools develop RtI plans (ISBE, 2008), an assumption was made that every principal in Illinois would be familiar with RtI. The Illinois State Board of Education required that all schools and districts incorporate their RtI plan into school and district improvement plans by January 1, 2009, for implementation by the 2010-2011 school year (ISBE, 2008).

Because the research focuses on issues of socially just educational practices, the pool of principals from which to recruit included those who worked in elementary schools that are identified as racially and economically diverse. I delimited the subjects to the elementary level, because much of the research about RtI focuses on early literacy skills (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 1990). Diverse schools
tend to have students who have been marginalized due to race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Principals who work in such schools have to address issues of equity and achievement every day, and therefore may provide the best insight into the relationship between RtI and socially just educational practices. The specific criterion for participant selection in this study was any public elementary school principal in Illinois working in a school in which at least 40% of the students received free and reduced lunch, and at least 40% of the students were not White. The criterion was chosen based on the desire to obtain participants who were educational leaders in diverse settings. Principals who work in diverse schools are more likely to face issues of equity and social justice, which are themes for exploration in the analysis of results. Information regarding school demographics and state assessment data was readily available on the Illinois Interactive Report Card (IIRC) website (http://iirc.niu.edu). The University of Illinois Bureau of Educational Research advised that I delimit my recruiting to also exclude the county in which my district is located, because, as a district office administrator, my position could potentially be seen as either a positive or negative factor relating to participation for local principals. Therefore, I began my search for possible participants using the criteria outlined above, and I started my recruitment of principals in a 150-mile radius of the University of Illinois.

Using the search criteria outlined above, there were 69 schools identified by IIRC. Using IIRC and web searches, I compiled a list of principals, email addresses, and school addresses. I composed an email and letter of introduction and recruitment to each of the identified possible participants, explaining that I was conducting a qualitative study about principals’ conceptions of RtI in diverse elementary schools in Illinois (Appendix A). The email and letter also contained a statement of informed consent, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board and Bureau of Educational Research at the University of Illinois, and which I explained would need
to be signed each time we met for an interview. In March 2012, I send the recruitment email and letter and began the process of following up with phone calls. The recruitment effort excluded Chicago Public Schools because the additional reviews and approvals would have delayed the data collection. I also sent my list of potential participants to two fellow graduate students and two professors and asked them to send a letter of introduction and support for my project to any principals on the list who they knew personally.

By April of 2012, commitments were secured from nine elementary principals from the original pool. One principal agreed to participate, only if her assistant principal, who was responsible for RtI in the building, was allowed to join the interview. Therefore, there were a total of 10 participants from nine schools representing eight school districts, spanning an area of approximately 25,000 square miles in the Northern half of Illinois. The sample of schools was slightly more diverse than the state average (Table 2). The target was to have to have principals representing schools with no more than 60% White students and no less than 40% of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch (FRL). The range of proportion of White students was from 10.3% (Lewis Elementary) to 59.7% (Dewey Elementary), with an average of 45.46%. This average was slightly less than the state average for elementary schools, which is 51.4% White. The percentage of students who qualified for free and reduced lunch ranged 41.9% (Addams Elementary) to 78% (Lewis Elementary), with an average of 54.92%, which was about seven percentage points higher than the Illinois State average (48%). One outlier school was Lewis Elementary, which was 69.1% Latino/Latina students and 37.4% of the student population was listed as Limited English Proficient (LEP; Illinois Interactive Report Card, 2011). Overall, this sample achieved the goal of recruiting principals to interview whose schools served diverse student populations.
Table 2

*School Demographics from the 2011 Illinois Interactive Report Card*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants(^a)</th>
<th>School(^a)</th>
<th>% White</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>% Hispanic</th>
<th>% MultiRacial</th>
<th>% FRL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane Smith</td>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>43.4</td>
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<td>Michael Olson</td>
<td>Jackson</td>
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<td>0.5</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth Williams</td>
<td>Addams</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30.7</td>
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<td>41.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mary Davis</td>
<td>Lewis</td>
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<td>11.6</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connie Johnson</td>
<td>Dewey</td>
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<td>25.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
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<td>Emma Jones</td>
<td>Wellstone</td>
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<td>21.9</td>
<td>11.8</td>
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<td>Mason Douglass</td>
<td>Marshall</td>
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<td>30</td>
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<td>Sophia Harris</td>
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<td>Olivia Miller</td>
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<td>18.3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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</table>

\(^a\)Pseudonyms were used in place of each participant and school name.

According to the 2010 United States Census Data, the participating principals schools were in communities that range from villages to cities. Addams Elementary School was situated in the smallest of the communities in the sample, with a population of 13,638, but that community is part of a contiguous group of communities on the North side of the Chicago metropolitan area. Three of the schools, Addams, Lewis, and Jackson, were located in communities within the Chicago metropolitan area. Two schools, Perkins and Carson, were in the East Central region of Illinois. Two schools, Wellstone and Marshall, were located in Central Illinois. Dewey Elementary School was located in northwest Illinois, and Barton Elementary was in the St. Louis Metro-East area. Based on the size and demographics of the communities, each of these schools served a diverse small urban population.
On the 2011 Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) the participating schools ranged from 71.2% to 90.6% of their students meeting or exceeding standards (see Table 3). The average for the participating schools was 80.66% of students meeting or exceeding, which was slightly below the state average of 82%. Three of the nine schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by the Illinois State Board of Education and No Child Left Behind. That percentage, 33% of participating schools making AYP, compared with a statewide percentage of 34.3% of schools making AYP (ISBE, 2013). It should be noted that this overall percentage is the number reported on the Illinois School Report Card and the Illinois Interactive Report Card site and provides only a broad snapshot of student success on the ISAT. The schools represented by principals in the current study were representative of the overall demographic of the Illinois school population. Although the schools were chosen based on purely demographic criteria, they also were very representative of the state of Illinois as measured by the state’s standardized testing system.

Table 3

Student Characteristics based on Illinois Interactive Report Card 2011 Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grades served</th>
<th>% Mobility</th>
<th>% LEP</th>
<th>% IEP</th>
<th>% Overall meets or exceeds on ISAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>K-6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>81.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addams</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>77.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dewey</td>
<td>PK-4</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>84.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellstone</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>90.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>72.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perkins</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>87.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>71.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 3 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grades served</th>
<th>% Mobility</th>
<th>% LEP</th>
<th>% IEP</th>
<th>% Overall meets or exceeds on ISAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barton</td>
<td>PK-4</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>83.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Average</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.76</td>
<td>11.91</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>80.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Average</td>
<td></td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Once participants confirmed their willingness to participate in two separate interviews, these interviews were scheduled at times and places convenient for the principal and conducive to data collection. All principals chose to be interviewed in their school offices before, during, or after school. Prior to each interview, I explained the informed consent, shared information about voluntary participation, and assured anonymity of their identity and school information. Each principal signed a statement of informed consent prior to each interview. I conducted two interviews with each subject. All interviews were recorded with a digital recording device, and the audio files were transcribed for later analysis.

Interviewing provided a method of understanding “the meanings” that people “attach to what goes on in the world” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). Interviewing is the most appropriate method for collecting data for this study, because the purpose was to understand principals’ conceptions of RtI. In order to elicit principals’ conceptions about RtI, I attempted to engage in purposeful conversations (Dexter, 1970). Using a semi-structured interview guide, I focused the interviews on specific open-ended questions related to my research questions (Appendix B). The semi-structured nature of the interview left room for me to respond to the participants’ comments by asking follow-up questions or changing the order of the questions (Merriam, 2009).
Approximately one month after the initial interviews were conducted, a second 45 to 60 minute interview was scheduled with each participant to explore certain issues further. Between the two interviews, audio recordings of the initial interviews were transcribed and analysis of data was begun through preliminary coding and grouping of responses. This preliminary analysis of the data assisted in constructing my questions and process for the second individual interviews. The second interview was also used to clarify and check information from the first interviews as part of a member checking process (Merriam, 2009).

**What are principals’ conceptions of RtI?** To address the first research question, I conducted a round of initial interviews with each participant. The first research question was, what are principals’ understandings of RtI? The purpose of the first set of interviews was to determine each principal’s conceptions about RtI—how they understood RtI both in theory and in practice. Basically, the first interview served as a baseline to determine not only how comfortable the principals were in talking about RtI in their buildings, but also whether they were able to articulate a clear purpose. The initial interview also provided valuable qualitative data to guide the second interview into the second and third research questions. The questions for the first interview included:

- Tell me about your school
- Talk about how RtI has been implemented in your school?
- What do you understand the purpose of RtI to be?
- What do you see as the biggest positives about RtI?
- Are there any negative aspects of RtI?
- How well does RtI accomplish its purpose? Are there any shortcomings?
What are principals’ understandings of socially just educational practices? The second research question was addressed in both the initial and follow-up interviews. To address the second research question, I constructed a set of questions to ask during the initial interview. The second research question was, what are principals’ understandings of socially just educational practices? This question bridges the gap between RtI and other practices in their building that they see as increasing equity and promoting positive outcomes for all students. Because I wanted to explore the understandings of the principals, I avoided using terms like equity and social justice during the initial interview. Instead, I framed my interview questions around student success, inclusion, and helping marginalized students succeed. What I hoped to learn during the interview was how principals viewed their school and their practices in relation to the themes of my model: inclusive structures, democratic practices (i.e. shared decision making), focus on student achievement, and other practices that help reduce the marginalization of students. The specific interview questions I designed to explore this second research question are:

- Tell me about how decisions are made in your building
- What practices in your building do you think contribute to the success of your students?
- How do you ensure that traditionally marginalized groups of students are supported and challenged?

The use of the semi-structured interview format provided guidance and organization to the interviews. The initial interview took between 45 and 65 minutes per principal. Some principals shared a great deal without additional prompting, while others required a number of follow-up questions. It was clear that some principals felt more comfortable than others in sharing information about their understandings of RtI, about issues of inclusion and equity, and about democratic structures in their schools.
What are the relationships between RtI and the promotion of social justice? In an effort to approach the final research question about the relationship between RtI and the promotion of social justice, I transcribed and coded the initial interviews around broad themes and categories. Each principal was contacted to set up a second interview and was told that the purpose of the second interview was to follow up on the discussion during the first interview. The purpose of the second interview was to build on the conversations from the first interview, focusing on principals’ responses that related to socially just educational practices. At the start of the second interview, each principal was presented with a list of words or phrases that arose during the coding of the first round of interviews. All principals had the same list, and they were told that the list was generated from the initial interviews with all 10 participants (Appendix C). Participants were asked to look over the list of words and prompted with the following questions:

- When you think about RtI, do you see anything missing from this list?
- Is there anything on this list that surprises you?
- Do any of these words or themes spark further thoughts that we might not have touched on last time?

The semi-structured interview guide for the second interview also was based primarily on data that were collected during the first interview. Specifically, the third research question was, what are the relationships that the principals identify between their understandings of RtI and the promotion of social justice? In addition to having participants respond to the list of words and phrases above, I also asked several general questions of all principals in an attempt to focus the conversation on the third research question:

- I want to ask some specific things about relationships among some of these themes.
- Does RtI ever marginalize students?
- Could you define the word inclusive?
• Does RtI promote or inhibit that definition of inclusive?
• What do you see as the relationship between RtI and shared decision making?
• What do you see as the relationship between RtI and social justice?

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and the data were examined for patterns, topics, phrases, or words. From an initial review of the data, I developed a coding system based on the categories identified in the literature as well as any new categories that arose (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 173). From the model developed in the literature review in the previous chapter, I expected to have categories that included focus on student learning, advocacy, creating inclusive structures, and shared decision making (Figure 2). However, I also viewed the data analysis inductively and created other categories based on the participants’ responses (Merriam, 2009). I used Merriam’s (2009) criteria to construct categories “responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive of all the data, mutually exclusive, and conceptually congruent” (p. 186). I utilized dedoose.com, the online coding tool, to code the data (Dedoose, 2012). The Dedoose tool allowed me to create codes, construct categories, and develop themes that met Merriam’s definition of category construction.

Moustakas (1994) provides a step by step outline for analyzing phenomenological data using a “modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method,” referring to three separate studies conducted in the 1970s (p. 121). This method consisted of transcribing all interview and focus group data, listing non-repetitive statements and organizing them into themes, relating the rest of the data to those themes, and synthesizing the themes into “a textural-structural description of the meanings” of the themes (p. 122). This method of analysis fit the framework for analyzing the
interviews, because I wanted to be able to describe the essence of what principals understood about RtI and socially just educational practices.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

As with any qualitative study, this study had to meet the criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is necessary to determine if a naturalistic study is trustworthy in the sense of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. It also is important to examine the criteria of fairness under the concept of authenticity. In order to increase credibility, two interviews were conducted in order to provide built-in member checking throughout the data collection process (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). I also met with an individual who acted as a peer debriefer to check my categorization and analysis of the interview data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the next chapter, to enhance transferability, I provide “thick descriptive data” to allow readers to understand the context and content of the participants’ remarks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 19).

The criteria of authenticity are composed of fairness, and four categories of authentication: ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated “fairness may be defined as a balanced view that presents all constructions and the values that undergird them” (p. 20). I have already taken the first step toward the fairness criteria by describing myself and as an educator and leader interested in themes of social justice and how those themes are practiced in schools. Fairness was also reached by returning any conflicts in the data to the participants in the form of a negotiation (Lincoln & Guba, p. 21). The second interview provided opportunities for discussion about the data from the initial interview and as I will discuss later, several of the participants had questions about themes
and terms. The second interview provided an opportunity to engage in dialogue between the investigator and participant in order to increase the fairness and authenticity of the research.

One goal of conducting this qualitative study through interviews was to increase dialogue about principals’ conceptions of RtI and uncover understandings about socially just educational practices. The goal of ontological authentication is to “raise consciousness . . . so that a person or persons (not to exclude the evaluator) can achieve a more sophisticated and enriched construction” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 22) of understanding the relationship between socially just educational practices and RtI. By sharing the initial categorization with all participants, I asked the participants to engage in a process through which they are examining the responses of other participants. This procedure helped participants understand each others’ values that shape their own conceptions. This understanding of how others’ values shape conceptions and understandings of the world fits with Lincoln and Guba’s definition of educative authentication.

**Summary**

This chapter outlined the research design and methodology for this phenomenological study of elementary principals’ conceptions of RtI and socially just educational practices. Participants were recruited from elementary schools in Illinois that had a diverse student population. The 10 participants represented nine schools and eight districts from across the state. Each participant was interviewed twice, and each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed for coding and analysis purposes. I used Dedoose.com as a tool to assist in the organization of codes and themes.

This study is significant because, over the past decade, educational reform has been highlighted by high-stakes accountability policies at both the federal and state levels. The
implementation of these policies has the potential to bring new opportunities for all students or bring new methods of marginalization to students who have already been labeled “at risk” or “special education.” Response to intervention was just one of several educational reform policies that promoted inclusion and high achievement for all students, but was implemented in ways that may actually perpetuate structures that marginalize students. It is important for educational leaders to understand how RtI may promote rather than inhibit social just educational practices. This research begins to shed light on the gap between accountability policies and socially just educational practices.
Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore principals’ conceptions of Response to Intervention and socially just educational practices. The existing problem was that the translation of RtI from research, through policy, and into practice did not always reflect the theoretical framework upon which RtI was based and often did not translate into more equity or inclusion for students with specific needs. Principals’ conceptions of RtI may be based on a variety of internal and external factors. Conceptions may be shaped by the manner in which their district has implemented RtI, the principal’s own academic or teaching background, the professional development or training he or she has received, or even practices that seemed easiest to implement based on their unique settings and contexts. When reform initiatives are studied, often, they are examined either in terms of implementation and outcomes or from a policy perspective without regard for underlying goals or ideologies.

My focus on elementary-level principals was due to my own experience and research into Response to Intervention. For the past 7 years, I have worked closely with elementary principals, teachers, and program coordinators in my district and I have seen how educators' perceptions about broader issues of equity and social justice influence their understandings of RtI. Despite having been exposed to similar professional development, readings, and discussions, educational leaders can have very different conceptions about the purpose and implementation of RtI. The focus on elementary-level RtI also was the result of the manner in which RtI is implemented in many states, districts, and schools. Initial research in RtI revolved around early literacy skills and interventions. The majority of schools and districts in Illinois approached RtI implementation by focusing on early literacy approach first.
To understand principals’ approaches to social justice, I chose to select elementary school principals who worked in culturally and economically diverse schools, which by the very nature of their context and student population, are often faced with inequitable practices and outcomes on a daily basis. These principals address equity and opportunities regarding access to instruction, academic supports, behavior interventions, and possibly extra curricular activities. I purposefully did not seek out principals who shared a specific worldview so as not to limit data on the diversity of conceptions about RtI among educational leaders who work in similar demographic contexts.

Participants

Before examining the findings from the interviews, it is important to introduce the participants and their schools. For the purposes of this research, the names of the principals, schools, and communities have been changed to provide anonymity for participants. The background is meant to provide a point of reference for each principal and explain the context in which these principals work. The information gathered about the principals and schools was taken from the Illinois Interactive Report Card website (http://iirc.niu.edu), the 2011 Illinois State Board of Education School Report Cards (ISBE), as well as the interviews from the principals themselves. Participating principals were recruited from schools that were no more than 60% White and no less than 40% Free and Reduced Lunch, as defined by the Illinois requirements for the National School Lunch Program (Table 2).

For the most part, the immediate communities, surrounding the schools was similar. Most schools were situated in residential neighborhoods; however, Barton School was a brand new building built outside of the town in an area surrounded by corn and soybean fields. The schools
were all elementary schools, but there was some variation in terms of grade levels served. The majority of the buildings were Kindergarten - Grade 5; however, two of the buildings were PreK-4 buildings and one was a K-6 school.

Participants represented a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. I interviewed seven females and three males. One participant was African American and the others were White. Nine administrators were principals, and one was the assistant principal responsible for RtI implementation. Five principals had been special education teachers or administrators prior to becoming elementary principals.

Table 4

*Characteristics of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Years in present job</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane Smith</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Olson</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth Williams</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>EdD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Davis</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie Johnson</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Jones</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason Douglass</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia Harris</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Becker</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia Miller</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>EdD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The principals reported how long they had been serving in as principal in their current building with an average of 5.7 years (range from 1-15 years). This average is slightly higher than most averages reported for building principal tenure in the state of Illinois. One study conducted in Illinois reported the average tenure of building principals at 4.4 years (Brown & White, 2010)
and another study reported an average of 4.88 years (Klass, 2011). Two participants were new to their building during the 2011-2012 school year. Two of the 10 had earned doctoral degrees; the rest had at least one masters degree, and several had multiple degrees.

**Jane Smith and Michael Olson, Jackson Elementary School.** Ms. Smith (principal) was in the middle of her second year at Jackson Elementary, a K-6 building. Prior to working at Jackson, she had been the Director of Special Education for her district. Mr. Olson was finishing his first year as assistant principal at Jackson. Ms. Smith agreed to participate only if Mr. Olson could also participate in the interviews. This position was Mr. Olson's first administrative assignment, and he had been an upper elementary teacher prior to seeking an administrative role. Mr. Olson's perspective as a new administrator and parent of a student with special needs provided insight into some of his views; however, he deferred to Ms. Smith on most of the questions, especially during the first interview.

While her building had been implementing RtI for the past 3 years, she stated that this year (2011-2012) was the first year that it had “been done systematically.” The building had started with using AIMSweb (and online assessment and data management program) in 2009 to screen all students three times per year, and then began providing interventions to students who did not meet benchmarks. During the first year of implementation (2009) interventions were provided at the K-2 level, and in 2010, they were expanded to include grades 3-6. The principal leads data days, during which classroom teachers talk about data and students who need intervention. The school requires a 90-minute block of reading instruction in every classroom. Reading interventions were provided to students through a small-group pull-out model, during which Title I teachers or other specialists worked with small groups of students 30 minutes a day.
**Beth Williams, Addams Elementary.** Dr. Beth Williams had been at Addams Elementary for 11 years. She was part of a team who opened Addams as a restructured school during her second year as principal; therefore, she was responsible for hiring all of her staff. She took a great deal of ownership in all aspects of the school and learning community. Prior to becoming a principal, she had been a physical education teacher. At the time of the interviews, she had recently completed her doctorate in educational leadership.

RtI implementation has been happening for 3 years in her district, but Dr. Williams did not always follow the district model. She described the multi-tiered approach that she built at Addams prior to the district implementing RtI. In an effort to adopt the district model, she moved away from her collaborative model for a while, and she considered that to have been a mistake. “We’ve been returning to more of a collaborative model, because for those 2 years, we got away from it,” referring to the 2 years she worked with her staff to adopt the district's RtI plan. The model she described in her building was based around grade level collaboration and in-class or push-in supports. Classroom teachers collaborated with each other and with specialists to provide in-class supports and/or co-teaching to support students who were not meeting benchmarks. Dr. Williams contrasted her model with the rest of the district by stating that the other schools used a structured pull-out model for interventions that did not honor teacher data or collaboration. Her superintendent had given her the flexibility to diverge from the district model, in part, because, “even though we're not a big test prep school,” Addams continued to do well on the Illinois Standards Achievement Testing (ISAT).

**Mary Davis, Lewis Elementary.** Ms. Davis has been principal of Lewis Elementary School for 15 years. She was the most experienced administrator and educator I interviewed for this study. Prior to becoming a principal, she was a special education teacher. Her special
education background was clearly grounded in a desire to help all students succeed in school.

She described her school by saying:

We are both regular education and bilingual education and we also have a number of students who are English as a second language other than Spanish. So I have about 50 kids from multiple languages from around the world. We are about 80% poverty at this point.

She admitted that she did not always see eye-to-eye with the district office, but it seemed clear that her district administrators respected her.

Her building was an early adopter of RtI in her district, as they have been implementing and learning about the process for 5 years. The staff in her building had been trained by an outside consultant who focused on using assessment data to inform instructions and interventions. The district had approved an RtI model in which an intervention block of time was incorporated into the school day. Every student in the building participated in intervention time. Some students were in small group interventions during that time and some students were in larger self-selected enrichment groups if they had met benchmarks. The time varied based on grade level, “Kindergarten through second is 30 minutes per day and fourth and fifth is 40 minutes per day because as kids get older it takes more time to catch them up.”

**Connie Johnson, Dewey School.** Ms. Johnson had been principal of Dewey for 4 years. She was one of the first principals to respond to my initial request for participants. She initially declined, because, as she stated, “I might skew your data.” Ms. Johnson had a background in special education administration. She was involved in the Illinois State Board of Education's state-wide roll-out of RtI and served as a state-wide trainer and coach for districts in the early stages of implementation. Ms. Johnson stated that she had been hired to help her district with RtI implementation. Two years ago, the district opened a magnet elementary school, and the student population of Dewey became more diverse as some students chose to attend the magnet. Dewey
housed one of the district's elementary special education programs for students with disabilities receiving services for more than 65% of their day. Dewey is a Pre-Kindergarten through 4th grade building.

Ms. Johnson described her building as a leader in the district in terms of RtI implementation. She said, “we do everything here first . . . then everybody watches to see what happens.” Dewey Elementary had been implementing RtI using reading assessments and interventions for the past two school years and was in the process of planning to implement RtI for math next school year (2012-2013). Her building has a universal intervention block of 30 minutes every day called FLEX time. The students are placed in groups based on assessments and those groups are reconfigured every six weeks based on the data. During this FLEX time, “special educators work with general education students . . . so that they can actually see what the general student is working on and what they can achieve so that they’ve got some frame of reference.”

**Emma Jones, Wellstone Elementary.** Ms. Jones has been principal of Wellstone Elementary, a K-5 building, for 5 years. She indicated that it would be her last year, because she had taken a principalship in a neighboring district that was larger and provided greater opportunity for advancement.

The school was in its fifth year of RtI implementation, but the first 2 years focused only on grades K-2; therefore, the building has been implementing RtI K-5 for 3 years. All students were screened with the DIBELS three times a year, and the school psychologist, who was also the data coach, organized the students into intervention groups. Intervention groups usually met 30 minutes per day, and students’ progress was monitored on a regular basis. According to Ms. Jones, “the best way to serve our RtI students is using Title I teachers.”
**Mason Douglass, Marshall Elementary.** Mr. Douglass has been principal of Marshall Elementary School for 4 years. He enjoyed talking and providing anecdotes about the work he and staff have done with students. He described his school as a professional learning community and he described his leadership as a “constant dialogue between administrator and the staff.”

RtI had been implemented for the past two school years. Mr. Douglass played a central role in the implementation plan and process. In referring to staffing, Mr. Douglass stated, “I schedule the teachers into a 30 minute intervention block that is different for each grade level.” Students were placed into the intervention classes based on their ability, and the classes changed every six to eight weeks. Every staff member in the building had a group, and community volunteers from a local church led some additional groups. Students who did not need reading interventions had reading enrichment groups, in which the students might pick a novel or book to read. Students who required more support were placed into small groups that met at other times during the day. Title I or special education teachers usually led these intervention groups.

**Sophia Harris, Perkins Elementary.** Ms. Harris has been the principal of Perkins Magnet School for 7 years. Before she was a principal, she had been a school social worker. She was very committed to the reading and math magnet concept and talked frequently about the strict parent participation contract that requires parents to spend a set number of hours volunteering or participating in school activities. The math and reading magnet concept consisted of students having a double period of math and a double period of reading every day. The school also taught Spanish to all students K-5. Because it was a magnet school, with a strict parent contract, Ms. Harris reported that she had very low mobility, and at 8.1% mobility Perkins did have the second lowest mobility of the sample.
In describing RtI, Ms. Harris stated that they had been implementing RtI across the building for 4 years. She stated that one of the most important pieces of RtI implementation was the problem-solving meeting. Every student was assessed three times per year using the DIBELS, but in problem-solving meetings, teachers were required to bring classroom assessment data as well to help determine which students needed additional help and which interventions might be most effective. Students who were targeted for interventions were pulled out of class to a centralized reading resource room that Ms. Harris called “the hub.” Ms. Harris had converted the learning disabilities resource room to the hub, which she described as “a reading support center . . . students are seen coming and going all day long.” The hub was staffed with Title I teachers who used a variety of intervention strategies based on students’ needs.

**Jacob Becker, Carson Elementary.** Mr. Becker was in his first year as principal of Carson Elementary. His background was as a high school teacher, coach, and administrator. He readily admitted that he was not an expert at elementary education, but stated that he had a strong team who taught him and on whom he relied. Initially Mr. Becker was one of the most hesitant of the participants, but after the first round of interviews he was the first to schedule the second interview and mentioned at the end of the process that he was impressed with how the questions made him think about his practice, his beliefs, and RtI.

Carson Elementary had started implementing RtI 2 years prior to his arrival as principal. The students were assessed three times per year using the DIBELS, and then a problem-solving team would meet to organize students into ability level groups. Every student had a 60 minute “flex” schedule based on ability. Thirty minutes of the flex time was focused on reading interventions and enrichment and 30 minutes was focused on math. Every adult in the building, including non-certified teaching assistants, was responsible for a group of students in order to
keep the number of students in a group as small as possible. Students who required additional support would be pulled out of class to work individually or in small groups with a “reading improvement (RIP) aide or an instructional teaching assistant.” Mr. Becker stated that he was very lucky this year, because his RIP aide was a certified teacher, who had experience working with students with special needs.

**Olivia Miller, Barton Elementary.** Dr. Miller has been principal of Barton for 7 years, and was very excited about her new building, which opened mid-year, just before the first round of interviews. Her district served pre-K through grade eight students and built a new building due to structural problems at her previous school. Now, the two elementary schools were housed on the same campus and shared some resources, but they still functioned as two separate schools. Barton was a Pre-K through 4 building and was connected to Barton Intermediate, which served students in grades 5 through 8. Before becoming a principal, Dr. Miller was a special education administrator in a cooperative special education district. Dr. Miller’s dissertation focused on teachers’ perceptions of students and RtI. As she spoke about RtI, she often referred to her own dissertation data, information she had learned from her own research, and how she applied what she learned to her practice as a principal.

Barton had been implementing RtI for 4 years, and Dr. Miller stated that after 2 years, the building hired a reading specialist who was also the RtI coordinator, who “really helped us turn the corner with our implementation.” Students are “assessed three times per year using AIMSweb, and that is how we determine our Tiers.” Teachers are encouraged to differentiate instruction through small group instruction in their classrooms, but there is also a centralized “reading room,” where students who did not meet benchmark could get extra support from the reading specialist or Title I teacher. Dr. Miller stated that the reading room was divided up into
four skill areas, and that each area focused on a different skill each week, which allowed any teacher to work with students or find materials for a specific reading skill that they might be teaching in the regular classroom. She stated that RtI implementation in the reading room, with its small group centers, also helped teachers understand how to set up centers in their classrooms in improve instruction for all students.

**Describing Response to Intervention**

Response to Intervention is described in the research as a multi-tiered system of supports (Figure 1). Students progress to higher tiers only if they are not responding to regular classroom instruction. The Illinois State Board of Education’s Response to Intervention Plan described three essential components: (a) a three tier system of supports, (b) a problem solving method for decision making, and (c) a data system that informs instruction (ISBE, 2008). The Illinois plan clearly stated that RtI “is a general education initiative” that supports the delivery of “high quality instruction” to “all students” (p. 1). The Illinois State Plan is similar to other states and was aligned with research (Batsche et al., 2006).

Theoretically, most students succeed in tier one, which requires high quality instruction in the regular classroom setting. RtI proponents support the idea that all students should be screened early in order to provide supports as soon as possible without waiting for students to fail or for problem solving teams to conduct more extensive evaluation of student progress. The concept of screening students early originated in literature describing the importance of using “curriculum-based measurement” to make instructional decisions, monitor student progress and evaluate performance (Deno, 1985; Fuchs & Deno, 1991).
Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton (2012) stated “the greatest RtI-inspired change in service delivery is schools’ routine reliance on universal screening to identify students at risk for reaching or math problems” (p. 265). Universal screening gained prominence in schools’ implementation of RtI through implementation guides distributed by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (Bastche et al., 2005). Bastche et al. (2005) advocated that, “during the course of instruction, the school uses universal screenings in essential academic areas to identify each student’s level of proficiency (usually three times per year)” (p. 23). This universal screening takes place in most elementary schools every fall, winter, and spring for all students in grades Kindergarten through 5th or 6th grade. When screening and diagnostic assessments indicate that students are struggling in tier one, a problem solving team creates a plan to provide the content and instruction in different ways or with additional supports and monitor the students’ progress. Each tier represents a more intensive intervention.

In general, participants defined RtI using much of the technical language in the literature. All principals talked about universal screening and multiple tiers of interventions. A few of the principals also used broader philosophical concepts to define RtI. Principal Johnson and Principal Miller were the two participants who most notably defined the purpose of RtI through nonexamples. Ms. Johnson began her answer by stating that RtI “is not a silver bullet.” She went on to describe RtI as representing a fundamental “mind-shift” in the way she and her teachers help students succeed; they referred to RtI as a “framework” and a “roadmap.” Similarly, Ms. Miller stated, “I don’t think it is a program; I think it is a mind-set.” Dr. Williams also described RtI as a “fundamental shift” away from older models of looking at students, instruction, and teachers.
The shifts described by almost every principal were definitely part of the process by which principals were distinguishing between special education programs and RtI. Mr. Douglass talked about how prior to RtI, educators were “too quick . . . [moving] toward special ed labeling,” but now teachers had more tools to use prior to the identification process. Principal Jones was the most direct in her response to the purpose of RtI as being significantly different from special education. She stated that the primary purpose of RtI was to “keep students from being eligible for special education, but help [rather] helping students be successful, and I think that is the main goal.” At some point in the interview, every participant referred to RtI as a regular education initiative. However, the fact that special education was such a central theme as they described their conceptions of the purpose of RtI showed clearly that it was difficult for many educational leaders to separate RtI from special education.

**Principals’ conception of purpose.** The question of principals’ conceptions about the purpose of RtI was central to the study. It provided the basis for many of the follow-up questions, and as anticipated, responses to this question shaped much of the direction of the interviews. Data pertaining to this question fell into four primary themes: accountability, student achievement, equity and social justice, and special education eligibility. Although the question about the purpose of the RtI was phrased in the same to way to all participants, almost half of the principals partially answered the question by offering concepts that were not directly linked to a purpose, but rather to technical aspects of implementation

Principal participants in this study had a wide range of understandings about the purpose of RtI. Some reported that the main purpose was to decrease the number of students identified for special education or to “catch students before they fail.” Other principals talked about the
purpose in terms of transforming their teachers’ instruction or changing systems at their schools.

You need a more traditional quote here as well to show the range. Dr. Williams stated,

as I understood [the goal is] that we strengthen Tier One . . . that we were going to really look at instructional practices and consistency, fidelity, high quality instructional practices at Tier One . . . that’s what we did do, to look at what are we deficient in as a system and how can we provide that to kids.

This range of response is presented in Table 5 to show clearly the principals’ descriptions of RtI.

Table 5

Purpose of Response to Intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Social justice</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
<th>“Catch before they fail”</th>
<th>Changing classroom instruction</th>
<th>Student achievement</th>
<th>Reduce special education</th>
<th>Fundamental shift/change in mindset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olson</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Williams</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
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<tr>
<td>Douglass</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Becker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miller</td>
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<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As evident in Table 5, almost every principal in the study stated that one of the main purposes of RtI was to enhance student achievement, but as the table indicates, beyond that common purpose, the principals’ conceptions of RtI varied. Many principals talked about “catching students before they failed.” What is interesting is that the principals who talked about one of the purposes of RtI being accountability also talked about the purpose of changing classroom instruction and making fundamental shifts or changes in mindset. Four principals specifically mentioned that one purpose of RtI was to reduce the number of students identified
for special education, and of those four, three also mentioned accountability as an important purpose. These overlaps are important to note, because they point to the fact that, while principals’ conceptions vary, there are general themes that are reflected in the data. A secondary theme was related to issues of socially just educational practices and leadership. Two of the principals explicitly talked about promoting social justice as a purpose of RtI. These two principals also shared the conception that RtI promoted changing classroom instruction, accountability, and changing mind-sets.

Almost all principals discussed improved student achievement as one of the purposes of RtI. For the majority of the participants this came in the form of emphasizing that RtI was not a “one size fits all approach” but involves a three-tier system of support (Figure 1). Five principals re-articulated the fact that the purpose of RtI was to provide a system that offered supports for students not reaching established benchmarks. Four of those principals relayed a purpose of providing supports prior to a student “failing.” This concept of “catching students before they fail,” as stated by Ms. Smith and Mr. Jacob, was prevalent in the discussion of purpose. Dr. Miller stated, “the true purpose of RtI is to take data on students . . . give that data to general education teachers and then let that data shape how general education teachers teach in their classrooms.” The focus on student achievement was intertwined with the concepts of distinguishing between general and special education and concepts of accountability.

Another broad theme related to accountability. Three principals specifically used the term, but general concepts of accountability were described by seven of the 10 participants. Mary Davis was the most direct in her response: “It’s accountability; it’s making sure that everyone is getting the instruction they need.” She went on to say that “it’s also wrong to call someone ‘special ed’” because of poor teaching. The notion that accountability in RtI means shifting the
responsibility for success and failure from the student to the teacher was echoed in several participant comments. Dr. Williams stated, “I believe RtI was meant to shift the burden to adult educators, and what we’re going to [do to] teach differently.” She added, “if I see that my kids are struggling . . . I need to look at the way I am instructing and change the way that I instruct.” The discussion of accountability is related closely to the concept of deficit thinking: The more principals talked about the purpose of RtI as accountability, the more they shifted blame away from student ability and toward problems with instruction, materials, or mind-set of the educators. As Mary Davis said, “suddenly, we stopped identifying ‘special ed’ kids; we started identifying special teachers.” Ms. Davis was indicating her belief that the explanation for students failing was most often the case of teachers failing to engage and reach students.

In general, every principal had a clear understanding of a purpose for RtI, but there were varying levels of depth to those understandings. The first-year elementary administrator gave one of the most basic answers, while the principal who had been working at the same elementary school for more than 10 years provided a rich and passionate description of her understanding of the purpose of RtI. The principals’ conceptions of the purpose of RtI also seemed related directly to their broader world-view. Two principals, Ms. Davis, and Dr. Williams, specifically talked about the purpose of RtI as promoting social justice. Mary Davis stated that RtI:

is a kind of social-justice thing. Everyone should be moving, everyone should be learning, we’re a school. . . . Kids are entitled to a free and appropriate public education. It’s the only thing that’s going to equalize for someone who comes in from an area of poverty.

She went on to say that some kids come to school with everything that they need, but her students don’t, and it was her “responsibility to make sure that the focus should not be on what is wrong with students or families,” but rather what she can do as principal to ensure that she has leveled the playing field for the students who come through her building. Dr. Williams shared
the same worldview, and stated that the focus for her building has been “to move all teachers away from a deficit-thinking model about students,” and rather focus on instructional practices in order to provide opportunities for all students. Two other principals, Mr. Douglass and Ms. Johnson, articulated the purpose of RtI was improving instruction for all students, but they did not elaborate in ways that indicated that they had the same social-justice orientation as Dr. Williams or Ms. Davis.

**Principals' description of implementation.** The key themes that were represented in the data from the interviews included screening, tiers of intervention services, problem solving and collaboration, and special education eligibility. The principals demonstrated a common understanding of many of the technical aspects of RtI; however, there was also a wide range of descriptions about the tiers of support services and how these services were provided to students. The range of implementation was best exemplified in the scheduling of support services to students. The principals reported everything from 30-minute pull-out time, in which a teacher worked with one to five students outside of the classroom, to building-wide intervention times where every teacher in the school works with a group of students, to exclusively push-in support where support specialists co-teach and support teaching and learning in the regular classroom.

All of the principals described a similar process of universal screening, through which all students were assessed using a screener that identified key components of early literacy. The other components of RtI were not as universally consistent, especially in terms of how interventions were provided (Table 6).
Table 6

Components of RtI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal/School</th>
<th>Screening</th>
<th>Tier I focus/ Differentiation</th>
<th>School-wide intervention block</th>
<th>Centralized intervention room</th>
<th>Pull-out interventions</th>
<th>Push-in interventions</th>
<th>Emphasized collaboration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smith/Jackson</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Williams/Adams</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis/Lewis</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson/Dewey</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones/Wellstone</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Douglass/Marshall</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harris/Perkins</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Becker/Carson</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miller/Barton</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The school-wide intervention block refers to schools that have a block of time in their schedule during which every student either receives support or enrichment. The two principals who identified social justice as a purpose of RtI also were two of three who identified push-in models of support for classrooms and students. Push-in models, as they were explained by the principals, involved reading specialists, support teachers, or sometimes other classroom teachers working in the classroom with students in a co-teaching role or with small groups at centers in the classroom. The push-in model is usually discussed in contrast to the pull-out model in which students are taken out of the classroom individually or in small groups to work with a reading specialist or support teacher. The push-in model helps reduce structures and schedules that
marginalize students. The principals in the study who talked about push-in models were also among the ones who emphasized collaboration among teachers as part of their RtI structure. The collaboration was a key piece to making push-in models work, because the teachers needed time to plan and reflect in order make push-in or co-teaching models of instruction successful.

**Screening.** Each principal reported that their building screened all children three times per year (fall, winter, and spring) using a tool designed to measure literacy skills. The first screening cycle usually took place during the first two weeks of school, and the third cycle usually took place during the last month of the school year. Although the schools used different screeners, there were some commonalities. Of the nine schools, five used the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), three buildings used Achievement Improvement Monitoring System (AIMSweb), and one building used the Illinois Snapshot of Early Literacy (ISEL). All screeners measure similar literacy skills, including phonemic awareness, letter-sound recognition, word recognition, and reading fluency. Administration of each screening assessment takes between five and 10 minutes per student.

Emma Jones described the screening process used at her school. This process was very similar to that described by most principals:

We call it the DIBELS squad. The DIBELS squad basically sets up a day where we are going to do all first grade . . . they just pull the students out and do them so that is done three times a year . . . we all know all students are not good test takers . . . a student might have guessed well or a student may have done very poorly but doesn’t really need the support so we always use the teachers input to determine if we want to put that student in a group or not.

The principals also talked about other assessments that they used to help determine student placement in a given tier. Some principals echoed Ms. Jones’ reliance on non-standard measures, while a few seemed to rely heavily on the screening data. Principal Douglas described the
DIBELS as a pre-assessment, but then indicated that it was used to divide kids into four specific categories:

We pre-assess students with using DIBELS as well as MAP assessments and we have the . . . red students, who are at-risk students, and then we have our students that are yellow, which is the below . . . and then we have our greens and blues, which are meets and exceeds.

The color references to students seemed to correlate to the RtI tiers/levels of service or the visual representations of student achievement and expectations that have been used in most writings about multi-tiered systems of support.

**Tiers of intervention.** What does RtI look like in these elementary schools? How are the students' days and schedules affected? The answers to these questions varied widely and relate to the ways in which the principals thought about social justice in their schools. Although there were some common themes, there were also stark contrasts in the way principals described what RtI looked like in their buildings. Common themes revolved around supporting students with staff and resources based on the multi-tiered model represented in the visual triangles (Figure 1). The contrasts were the way principals approached how the use of resources and how they spoke about these resources and supports. The principals in this study spoke about the tiers in varying ways, but they all were able to describe the way they targeted interventions to meet the needs of students.

When asked what RtI looked like in their buildings, the majority of the principals immediately began discussing Tier 2 or 3 interventions (Table 6). Four of the 10 principals immediately talked about intervention times built into the day, which are times when students leave the general education classroom and work on specific skills with reading specialists or classroom teachers in smaller groups. The actual implementation varied widely based on a number of factors. However, the most common description was that small groups of students
would get pulled out of classroom instruction, physical education, or recess, to receive small-group instruction for about 30 minutes three to five times per week. At Jackson Elementary, Ms. Smith said that teachers schedule the pull-out so that students getting intervention time were not missing the same subject every day: “One day, they might miss social studies, science the next day, math the next day. It is really up to the teacher.” Emma Jones at Wellstone Elementary said that she created schedules in which specialists pulled groups of 3-5 students for 20 minutes per day. She avoided pulling students from their reading block so that they received a “double dose” of instruction. Two buildings, Perkins and Barton, both utilized a central reading room or “reading hub,” which was a classroom space devoted to intervention groups. The students who needed support went to the hub, and reading specialists would work with them in small groups throughout the day. Ms. Miller, from Barton, said that at any given time, one might see four different groups of students working in the reading room.

Four buildings utilized a building-wide schedule for interventions, which means that every student was involved in a smaller group for part of the school day (Table 6). Mason Douglas at Marshal scheduled 30 minutes per grade level, per day during which teachers regroup students based on need. He also has volunteers from the local churches come during this time to help make the groups of students smaller. Jacob Becker at Carson Elementary scheduled 60 minutes of building-wide intervention time, during which every adult in the building works with small groups. Thirty minutes is devoted to math and thirty minutes is devoted to literacy. Mary Davis at Lewis Elementary stated that “the school board approved additional intervention time,” during which every student worked in smaller groups on specific skills or projects. This building-wide intervention time allows all of the students in the building to receive between 30
and 45 minutes of “intervention” time per day and avoids students being singled out or stigmatized:

I’m very lucky because I’m a Title I school . . . I have resources to have staff. I have a cadre of really well-trained paraprofessionals that flood grade levels during their time, so I alternate their intervention time . . . I put my most needy boys and girls with my most seasoned, strong teachers, and then my para-pros kind of fill in with the middle of the road and then I also have certain people who are trained in gifted education who do extensions with the kids who have [content] already.

In fact, every school in the study qualifies for Title I funding, and all of them use Title I funded reading teachers to help implement RtI. The advantage that several principals talked about with RtI was that they could use Title I and special education teachers to provide “universal intervention” time. This universal intervention time was also in place at Dewey School. At Dewey, they called it FLEX time and it was 30 minutes every day. Principal Connie Johnson echoed some of the advantages of having every student in the building working in smaller groups during a specific time when she stated, “even students that need to be enriched . . . have a block of time . . . we have a K-1 section and a 2 through 4 section and they’ll cross grade levels depending upon need.” The building-wide intervention time meant that some students were getting 30 minutes of extra reading support every day while those who did not need supports, participated in 30 minutes of literacy-focused enrichment activities. Students engaged in enrichment activities were grouped based on interest and reading level to participate in book studies or literature circles emphasizing comprehension and analysis rather than literacy skills. The FLEX time at Dewey has also allowed Principal Johnson to do some creative grouping that targets specific students: “Last semester one of our intervention groups . . . [targeted] African American boys.” According to Ms. Johnson, an African American male teacher taught the group, and they let the students pick the books they read. She reported that the students’ assessments did not show marked improvement, so they only did this for one semester.
She credited their RtI time with the flexibility to allow the building to try new groupings in an effort to support all students.

One principal, Beth Williams, from Addams Elementary, described her RtI model very differently from the other principals: “We still call it RtI, but we have shifted it because it [pull out interventions] was really creating a disjointed approach to educating kids.” She describes her model as a “collaborative push-in model,” noting that differences between her building and other schools, both in her district and elsewhere, are a major shift in perspective. She states that her building is committed to “attempting to shift what I believe RtI was meant to be, to shift the burden to adult educators and what we’re going to teach differently, so the kids would succeed.” As such, students are not pulled out of classrooms, but instead, they use the assessment data to “look at which classrooms need coverage and then we create everybody’s schedule off of that.” Specialists are pushed into classrooms to co-teach and provide supports. Dr. Williams states that this model provides more support and less marginalization of students and hence, a more socially just approach. The focus of her building is Tier 1, because she believes that is where the emphasis needs to be in order to “teach differently.” She critiques the way many schools are implementing RtI as a narrowing of curriculum and “glorified test-prep.”

**Promises and Pitfalls of Response to Intervention**

All but one of the principals described Response to Intervention as a positive reform initiative in their schools. Several factors were cited as positive, the most common being that RtI supports “catching students before they fail.” Over half of the participants gave some version of that response. Principals described the RtI process as introducing “speed and flexibility” into the decision-making progress when students were struggling with reading. Ms. Jones summarized it
best when she stated that “under the old process, you had to start the 60-day timeframe to see if a student was eligible for Special Education [services];” however, with RtI, “a school is able to provide interventions immediately to those students.” Michael Olson stated:

   We can identify at once that this could be a possible area [of concern], and we have the resources in the building to go and work with the child, as opposed to this long process that culminates in this report and then hopefully they will get the [special education] services they need.

The ability to intervene early when students were struggling with reading was an important premise of RtI in the literature that principals described as one of the biggest positives to implementing RtI. They contrasted the RtI process of intervening early with the special education referral and eligibility process, which took considerably longer. The contrasts to the “old” special education referral and identification process were not the only positives. Six principals specifically mentioned that the number of students identified for special education services had decreased after implementing RtI, and one indicated that after a few years of implementation the number of “Tier III” students had decreased as well.

   The flexibility of the RtI process and implementation also was cited by at least two principals for providing time, support, and enrichment for students who are “more accelerated learners” because, in certain buildings, RtI time was used to provide enrichment and acceleration as well as intervention and supports. Dr. Davis described how RtI promoted more differentiated instruction in the regular education classroom: “The positive thing is how our general education teachers now look at instruction.” Mason Douglas also described a similar benefit as students “now have personalized [learning] targets.” Four of the schools represented in this study implemented a school-wide intervention block (Table 6), which allowed for not only additional supports for students who were struggling but also enrichment experiences for students who had mastered the material or reached benchmarks.
Data informed decision-making also was mentioned by several principals as a benefit of implementing RtI. Principal Johnson attributed the focus on learning and instruction to the fact that “teachers are using data more; they are able to read and interpret data better.” She went on to summarize the power of the RtI process as it relates to instructional change at her school by stating, “we are trying to figure out all the time, why aren’t they getting it. Instead of blaming it on them [the student], we’re looking at us, and I think that is huge.” Using data to determine what changes needed to be made in curriculum and instruction was stressed by three of the principals. The shift away from blaming students for deficits to analyzing the core instruction and teaching practices of the general education teachers was discussed at length by Dr. Williams, Ms. Johnson, and Dr. Davis.

Eight of the 10 participating principals had negative things to say about RtI. The majority stated that the concept of change itself was a negative factor for teachers and systems. The change was not just described as altering the way things were done but also the way things were perceived by teachers. Although the results of the change were not always described as negative, the process and difficulty of changing systems and ideas was negative. The negative aspects of RtI were reported as complaints from teachers about working conditions, schedules, or “the way things are done.” Principals noted that teachers were concerned about RtI being “more work” or about “finding the time to do all the interventions.” These sentiments were mostly mitigated by statements from the principals like, “after a couple of years, they see the power in it and buy-in is very strong.” Ms. Miller stated that “the growing pains [are] changing the way teachers think about how to teach in their classrooms.” For the most part, all of the negative comments related to systems or mind-set changes tempered in the understanding that all change is difficult.
Dr. Williams spoke about the negative issues associated with RtI more than the other participants. Her negatives were directly connected with the “way we were told to [do] RtI” as opposed to the way she described RtI implementation in her building. She stated that the emphasis on assessment and benchmarks led to a narrowing of the curriculum and that there was a “real test orientation” that she did not like. She asserted that the over-emphasis on assessment and data created a culture of teaching very discreet skills, like fluency or word recognition, out of context. That focus on “specific knowledge that often is not contextualized and isn’t reflective of experience” was a problem for Dr. Williams and her staff. She did not want her school to be seen as an environment emphasizing test preparation. She felt the way RtI was being implemented was encouraging a “test-prep” mentality to the detriment of teaching and learning. She stated that “a lot of RtI detaches and sterilizes and makes learning impersonal, so it goes counter to what I would seeing it being.” Dr. Williams was very concerned about the pressure to focus only on reading and math at the elementary level. The narrowing of curriculum was also magnified in Dr. Williams' mind, because the benchmark assessments focused teachers on discrete reading skills like phonemic awareness or reading fluency, which pressured teachers to focus their instruction on these discrete skills rather than higher order comprehension and critical thinking skills.

Therefore, a strong negative factor for Dr. Williams was the conflict between her conceptions of what RtI should be and the way she saw RtI implemented in other schools. Mary Davis echoed some of the overly prescriptive concerns related to RtI implementation: “We stopped thinking, and became prescriptive, and that a horrible danger when we, as adults, stop thinking.”

The other two negatives, described by three of the principals related to the proposed model for examining RtI from a social justice perspective. Jacob Becker talked about the stigma that RtI groups might place on kids: “Everybody sees them and knows why they’re going in
there [to a reading group], and I think that puts a label or stigma on them,” in the eyes of their peers. Mr. Becker was the only principal who mentioned this concept of stigma or labeling as it related to RtI implementation. Most other principals saw RtI implementation as removing labels and stigmas for students. However, the manner in which RtI was described in many of the buildings would tend to reinforce the idea that some students may feel marginalized or stigmatized by being assigned to a certain intervention, especially those that require removal from the general education setting. Six of the principals described some type of pull-out program for part, if not all, of their RtI implementation. The structure of pull-out interventions would, on face value, reinforce the stigma that Mr. Becker described. When asked in follow-up, only Dr. Williams and Ms. Davis agreed with Mr. Becker’s assessment that RtI might place a stigma on students. The other principals stated that RtI had reduced marginalization and stigmatization.

Six principals had very specific issues that can only be described as the tension between special education and RtI. As previously mentioned, RtI was included in the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 as a possible process for identifying special education students. However, the majority of state education agencies implemented RtI by specifically calling it a regular education initiative. Nevertheless, schools, districts, and principals remained confused about where RtI fits into larger theoretical frameworks about equity and social justice. Each of the six principals who talked about the tension mentioned the fact that it was confusing for educators. Beth Williams stated, “people see it [RtI] as almost like a semantic argument or another hurdle they have to overcome to get a kid in special education.” Jacob Becker said, “when RtI initially came, everybody thought it was a special ed initiative.” Sophia Harris viewed the confusion as a positive for students when she said that RtI was “a way to serve children without putting that label on them.” Olivia Miller said that “[I] had actually heard about RtI through the special
education system,” but she didn’t think that “RtI is about special education, but I think that it incorporates special education.” Mary Davis acknowledged the tension, but stated:

I think it’s the biggest mistake we can make, seeing [RtI] as a more extensive gateway into special education. It’s just good instruction; it is what every child should be entitled to. It’s not a gateway in. It is not a means of qualifying. That is the constant battle that I have.

The mindset of teachers was also mentioned frequently when discussing the tensions between RtI and special education. Principals reported that teachers were used to testing and labeling students as special education, but RtI was changing that paradigm by asking teachers to provide and document interventions, to change their instruction, and to monitor student progress.

The tension between RtI and special education was exacerbated with regard to resources and funding streams. Most of the principals talked about using Title I funds, Title I teachers, and reading grants to pay for RtI implementation and processes. Special education federal block grants paid for special education teachers and programs. The implementation of RtI has blurred the lines. Sophia Harris talked about the fact that under her RtI model, her learning disabilities teacher is seeing children with whom she never would have worked prior to RtI, because the children are not labeled special education. She saw that as a positive change as a result of RtI, because “everybody has equal access to services” regardless of the special education label. The flexibility of RtI was mentioned several times as a positive aspect by principals; however, at least four principals also saw RtI as double-edged sword when it came to special education resources.

Mary Davis described the tension very clearly:

When we really locked [RtI] in, suddenly we stopped identifying special ed kids; it's really diagnosing what’s wrong with our instruction. Once you don’t identify [students for special education], then people say, “well, then you don’t need more special ed teachers.” I’m losing half a [learning behavioral specialist] person for next year because my numbers have gone down.
Three principals, Beth Williams, Olivia Miller, and Sophia Harris, also talked about losing special education staff members due to the reduction in special education referrals that they attributed to RtI. Beth Williams took a slightly more cynical view of the RtI-special education tension. She worried that:

Special ed was created to provide equitable access and rights to kids with disabilities. Where otherwise we didn’t have to serve or we didn’t have to guarantee them some rights. We don’t want to spend the money on special ed so we RtI them to death because [then] we don’t have to hire a special ed teacher to help certain kids.

The tension and frustration principals had with the relationship or their understanding of the relationship between RtI and special education is complex. Part of the issue was clearly defined in terms of allocation of human and fiscal resources. However, as Dr. Williams’ comments demonstrated, the tension between RtI and special education also existed in the perceived purpose and lived experience of the two programs. RtI and special education initiatives both had an underlying goal of increasing equity for certain students; however, as principals described the implementation of RtI, the gap between the equitable goal and the inequitable practices was apparent to at least a few of the principals I interviewed.

Dr. Williams described a final negative aspect in her conception of how RtI was being implemented elsewhere, not necessarily at her building. She stated that RtI implementation could lead to a sense of teacher isolation and a reduction in dialogue and collaboration. RtI has “frustrated a lot of teachers, because they have no idea what the pull-out person is doing, and the pull-out person has no idea what the teacher is doing.” She called RtI “antithetical to community building.” The lack of collaboration and communication was only mentioned by one other principal, Ms. Harris, who described a frustrated teacher who did not know where one of his students was for the majority of the school day, and did not feel that he (the teacher) could assess the student’s progress because he was not aware of what the student was doing in RtI
interventions. The fact that two of the 10 principals noted decreases in teacher collaboration and communication is significant, because a lack of teacher collaboration would most likely result in increased in student marginalization and a decline in inclusive, socially just practices.

**Socially Just Educational Practices**

Socially just educational practices promote democratic, collaborative communities; remove structures that marginalize students; and promote inclusive learning environments (Furman & Shields, 2005; McKenzie et al., 2007; Riehl, 2000; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Theoharis, 2010). In questioning principals about social justice, the concept was not defined but left open for examining interpretations. The interview protocol addressed perspectives about collaboration, inclusive structures, marginalization, and other practices that promoted student success. During the initial interview cycle, two principals raised the issue of social justice before being asked a question about the concept. Mary Davis specifically mentioned social justice as a main purpose of RtI, and Beth Williams identified herself as having a “social justice mindset.” For the remaining eight participants the topic of social justice and socially just educational practices had to be discussed and defined during the second round of interviews. Two principals, Mason Douglass and Connie Johnson, defined it social justice and equity in terms that indicated a level of awareness about the concept and how it related to their own contexts. Three principals discussed social justice only in narrow terms of over-representation of students of color in special education. The remaining two principals related it solely to the concept of LGBTQ students being bullied and one of them saw it as a civil rights issue that affected the larger society more than the schools. This wide range of understanding about the concept of social justice made the questions about these issues harder to interpret. However, the participants
represented a wide range of knowledge and beliefs, which provided for a better understanding of how RtI is conceived by a variety of principals, not just those who share a particular perspective.

Of the three principals who, by their responses, seemed to have an understanding of social justice and equity, there was a continuum of the depth of their description and elaboration about social justice and its relationship to RtI. Dr. Beth Williams stated that “RtI really should be about ensuring equitable access to positive outcomes.” She went on to complain that the way RtI had been implemented in most places lost the focus and potential of social justice: “We’ve taken concepts that have potential for a lot of social justice with kids and we have just found a way to redefine them to fit the old ways of thinking.” She referred to the fact that teachers should be “culturally responsive” and focus on “culturally relevant materials” that engage all students. One of her biggest complaints about RtI implementation in her district, and in most other schools, was that it stifled collaboration and narrowed the curriculum base down to a very discrete set of skills. Dr. Williams was also very aware of the concept of social privilege and its role in reinforcing the status quo in schools. She talked at length about the challenge of attracting teachers of color and working to introduce her White teachers to viewpoints that are “oriented to equity.” Despite her frustration with RtI implementation in general, she did say that “if it’s implemented according to [a social justice] philosophy . . . I think the intent is strong.”

Mary Davis also talked about using RtI to “fight for those who don’t have a strong voice.” She sees her principal role as an advocate for her students to push against societal inequities. She lamented that schools like hers, “don’t attract the highest quality teacher or high quality principals, and that is just ethically wrong.” She talked about her principalship as a means of ensuring that students had teachers who shared her perspectives and her passion to provide opportunities. She related several stories about conversations she had with parents and students
about achievement, opportunity, and success. She refused to allow students to be “beat down” because their parents do not have computers or poster board for projects. She stated several times that in a society that values a free and public education, educators cannot be allowed to marginalize or see only deficits in students. She stated that when she hires new teachers, she looks for people who would “like to be in the Peace Corps . . . that is how I hire. This is our mission; this is our ministry; don’t use words like that in public school, but that is what we do.”

Mason Douglass also talked about the relationship between his school’s demographics and his view that he must help to “level the playing field” for his students and families. “The inequities that world and country has created out there” are mirrored at his school. He discussed the importance of challenging his teachers to set high expectations for all students. He used the phase “surface work” several times to refer to teaching that did not go far enough to address issues of inequity, explaining that one must “Carry a shovel and dig.”

A summary of socially just practices that participating principals discussed is represented in Table 6. The dimensions of social justice noted in the table have been documented in the literature. Collaboration, for example, represents aspects of democratic dialogue. Advocacy for students and families was specifically mentioned by two principals as having a powerful positive effect on student learning. Many principals did mention parent and family involvement in their schools; however, their descriptions indicated a wide range of definitions and understandings about the importance of involving and engaging parents and families.

Inclusive structures refer to the ways principals provided supports to students (Table 7). Three principals specifically identified RtI as promoting inclusive structures; as they implemented RtI, they created models of push-in and co-teaching, which not only focused the instructional responsibility on the classroom teacher, but also removed the stigma of pull out
interventions for students. Inclusive structures were only mentioned in three of the schools, but they seemed to be an essential component for those three principals.

Table 7

*Socially Just Educational Practices*

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<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
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<th>Inclusive structures</th>
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The key themes that arose from interview questions about principals’ conceptions of socially just educational practices were the need for inclusive structures and collaboration, a focus on student achievement broadly defined, positive school climate, advocacy, and parent engagement. Principals discussed these concepts when answering specific questions about how they help all students be successful, how they ensure that they provide opportunities and supports for traditionally marginalized students, and what relationships they see between RtI and social justice.

**Inclusive structures.** As principals described how RtI was implemented in their schools, it became clear that half the participants thought very carefully about the importance of inclusive structures. Broadly they discussed structures in place that kept students in the general education setting; for example, push-in programs for struggling learners or school-wide intervention blocks.
in which every child in the building received some level of supportive intervention (including enrichment).

With an emphasis on tiers of support within the RtI framework, six principals described pullout models of intervention, which at face value create structures that are not inclusive. Two principals in the current study specifically mentioned that some students might feel marginalized or a sense of lower self-esteem because they were pulled out of regular instruction during “RtI time.” Mary Davis defined inclusion in terms of students’ access to curriculum, socialization, and being a part of the school. She stated that the whole point of RtI was to promote inclusive structures. Even principals who did not describe inclusive structures in relation to RtI seemed to understand that concepts of inclusion were important for student success. Jacob Becker defined inclusion in the context of “mainstreaming,” providing ways for all students who work together within the general school day as much as possible. He went on to say that the way RtI was implemented in his building did not always promote inclusion.

For the principals who did see RtI as promoting inclusive structures, the most common theme was the emphasis on what they called “push-in” models of intervention. This model enables reading or other specialists to work with the general education classroom either co-teaching or conducting small-group instruction in collaboration with the classroom teacher. Beth Williams noted that she could not support pull-out interventions as they create disconnected learning for the students. Connie Johnson stated that in her building all Tier I and Tier II instruction was provided in the general education setting by the classroom teacher, thus reducing reliance on pull-out models of intervention: “I think the more we can do within the four walls of the classroom, it is a good thing. Our reading teacher is doing all push-in, no pull out whatsoever, and that is really important.”
Jane Smith also talked about the shift from pullout models to push-in models. The teachers “can no longer get rid of kids . . . send them off somewhere and say, ‘fix them and return them to me when they are fixed.’” She described a shifting emphasis on making sure that teachers know what good instruction looks like. Similarly, Olivia Miller agreed that RtI has shifted the way teachers teach in their regular classrooms. She noted that there were not students pulled out of the classrooms, but rather the teachers who set up literacy centers in all of the classrooms in an effort to provide inclusive structures that met the needs of all students. Even Sophia Harris, who reported that 75% of the intervention time is done in a pullout reading room, stated that she would like to do more “co-teaching and push-in supports.” Mason Douglass summarized the importance of using RtI to promote inclusiveness stating, “segregation is not there, and I love that.”

**Democratic structures.** When coding information about democratic structures, two primary themes emerged: teacher empowerment and collaboration. Only four principals described to any extent collaborative structures in democratic terms. These were the same four whose perspectives were most closely aligned with principles of social justice: Beth Williams, Mary Davis, Mason Douglass, and Connie Johnson.

In describing collaborative structures, Beth Williams referenced both effective and ineffective collaborations, stating that she had seen both in action. Ineffective collaboration was “simply sitting around a room . . . looking at the data” and determining who was going to work with a student in a pullout program. She described the “better collaborative model” as one in which teachers had time to collaborate, and were given the “flexibility and latitude” to make decisions. She did say that type of model took extra work on her part as well as on the part of the teachers. She stated that teachers had to learn how to accept constructive criticism from peers
and respond to questions or get “shot down.” She also referred to the type of collaboration in her building as increasing accountability, because everyone was working hard “on similar goals in a similar direction.”

Connie Johnson also described the collaborative process as increasing accountability in her building. The focus, she says, centers around “those discussions about the data and what do the students need.” Mary Davis also described collaboration as focused on “what is best” for the kids, “the more people involved in that decision, who have knowledge basis that are different from each other, the better . . . [these] are complicated problems.” Mason Douglass said that when RtI was first implemented, “it seemed like the teachers were inundated with strategies, workshop opportunities, and professional development activities, but of all the things that minimized the angst was the age-old concept called collaboration.” He stated that as a result of the built-in collaboration time, his teachers felt more comfortable and confident with their instruction.

Mary Davis and Mason Douglass both talked about another common acronym, PLC, which stands for professional learning communities. The concept of professional learning communities became a common foundation for comprehensive school reform and sustained school improvement research (Marzano et al., 2005). The focus on student learning has been a primary reason for the interest in professional learning communities in the age of NCLB. The emphasis on “reflective dialogue” provides hope that professional learning communities can shift the infrastructure of schools toward a more democratic model. The key characteristics of professional learning communities have been defined in most of the literature as: Shared beliefs, values and vision; shared and supportive leadership; collective learning and its application; supportive conditions; and shared personal experience (Hord & Sommers, 2008).
Student achievement. Two main themes emerged from the data about student achievement: using data to inform practice and a focus on instruction. Principals talked about the importance of using student data to inform practices and make decisions about tiers of intervention and support. Connie Johnson reported that “we have three bid data meetings each year . . . [focusing] on how grade level teachers can improve their instruction . . . to make sure that the that 80% of the students are succeeding [with core instruction].” Mary Davis said that focusing on data “removes emotion from the discussion.” Mason Douglass also talked about the importance of using data to help monitor what is happening in the classrooms. Mr. Douglass stated that he works with his teachers “to establish goals based on the data, and then I know what I am looking for when I go into the classrooms.”

Advocacy. Advocacy related to principals’ willingness to go beyond the typical responsibilities and job descriptions in order to do what is in the best interest of students. Two principals discussed several aspects of their roles as leaders and about the importance of RtI. Mary Davis stated that one reason she advocates RtI in her building and her district, is because “social justice indicates that someone should be fighting for [students] . . . it is our responsibility to take care of those who don’t have as strong a voice.” That statement exemplifies the concept of advocacy both Davis and Douglass discuss. Mason Douglass talked about the “passion for education, the children, and the community” that starts with the building principal. He saw his role as not just leading by example and demonstrating a passion for learning and success, but also to “instill in this new generation of students and my staff” a goal of leveling the playing field as much as possible. Mr. Douglass described the importance of using his passion to garner support from local churches, which provided volunteers to read to students on a regular basis. Davis described having passionate discussions about students and student learning in her
building, “which is exciting, but sometimes . . . not easy or efficient.” She talked about how she expects her teachers to function like parents and “fight about what supposed to be happening for kids and families.” That sense of passion and advocacy for students was evident throughout her comments.

**Parent and family engagement.** Two main themes emerged from the data about parent engagement. The first of these themes related to mandated engagement, which referred to instances when principals talked about parent engagement in reference to fulfilling policy or procedural mandates. The second theme was authentic engagement, which referred to instances when principals gave examples of family engagement that was rationalized as being good for the student and family.

Five of the 10 participants specifically talked about parent and family engagement as a key factor in helping their students succeed at school. One of the schools, Perkins Magnet School, required parent involvement through the use of a contract. If parents do not log the requisite number of hours per year (26 hours), students are not permitted to re-enroll in the school the following year. Principal Sophia Harris talked at length about the importance of having parents involved in the school, but she did say that every year between five and 10 students are asked to leave because parents had not met the strict requirements. She did indicate that many of the opportunities for parents to earn their hours were in the form of evening parent nights, and some of those parent nights were specifically targeted toward educating parents in literacy skills that they could reinforce at home. Three other principals described similar parent nights that focused on reading and literacy skills. As Emma Jones stated, schools that receive Federal Title I funds are required to hold parent nights, and it is likely that all the schools conduct such nights, but only half of the principals mentioned parent engagement as a
meaningful part of student success. Jacob Becker stated that while they work hard at parent involvement, it is a challenge when many parents are working more than one job.

Dr. Johnson, at Dewey Elementary School, did not talk about Title I or policy mandates, but rather, she stated that parent engagement was a large part of their RtI implementation:

They [the parents] need to be on board because they bring a wealth of information to the table and if we don’t learn a little bit about how they are going to influence their children for the . . . 18 hours a day that we don’t have them, it is going to be hard to do any kind of problem solving without them.

Parents not only are educated in early literacy skills and concepts but also are invited to individual problem-solving meetings at least once a month. Dewey was the only school that talked about parent involvement in the RtI problem-solving process. Dr. Johnson referred to parents as partners in problem solving, and mentioned how important it was for parents and educators to work together to support each other and the children’s learning. She also stated that she and her teachers conducted home visits before the school year begins in order to make connections with the families.

**Culture and climate.** Another area that was mentioned as a factor in building success was school climate. For the most part, as principals talked about climate, they described school climate in relation to student behavior, but three principals also talked about staff morale and the importance of learning communities. Six principals specifically identified Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as an initiative that contributed to the academic success of their students.

PBIS consists of a multi-tiered system of support centered on social, emotional, and behavioral aspects of learning. Like RtI, PBIS often is described as a framework that defines three tiers of supports for students. A universal tier attends to the social, emotional, and behavioral education of all students in the school and classroom. The secondary tier consists of
interventions for students who struggle to meet the behavioral expectations and need additional supports and re-teaching. The tertiary tier is for students who need intensive social and emotional supports and interventions that often include supporting families with mental health services. The multi-tiered system of PBIS often is called the behavioral side of the RtI triangle. Four principals talked about how closely the two initiatives align. Sophia Harris, for example, stated that when explaining RtI to her staff, she would often refer to the PBIS triangles as a parallel system of providing instruction and interventions. Jane Smith said that she saw very little difference between RtI and PBIS and was looking forward to the time when the triangles could be merged. Emma Jones did the best job of explaining how PBIS contributed to the academic success of her students: “If you have a behavioral student, who is out of the classroom a lot, they are not learning, so we need to provide tools to ensure that they child can stay in the classroom, be successful, and want to be successful.” Connie Johnson also talked about the fact that the combination of RtI and PBIS changed the climate of the building by focusing on all types of students. “You have to look at the whole student,” she said.

Dr. Beth Williams described how she combines the concepts of learning communities and PBIS into community building for her whole school. She described weekly community meetings during which students lead the meetings and share or showcase something they have learned. “That has been a big piece of our success,” she explained. She talked about how providing opportunities for students to lead these meetings empowered and engaged them. This school-wide approach to promoting a student centered and even student led culture of learning went beyond anything the other principals described. Dr. Williams described the importance of making school fun.
Summary

The findings from this study indicate that each principal had a clear understanding about the purpose of RtI and described a variety of approaches to how RtI was implemented in his or her school; however, a wide range in principals’ understandings of the possible relationships between RtI and socially just educational practices was also found. There were several technical aspects that all principals described, including screening, tiers of support, and problem solving. Principals described a variety of positive aspects of RtI, which included flexibility, the ability to intervene early, and the aspects of accountability for student learning. Possible obstacles to successful RtI implementation included the difficulties of change and the confusion about the purpose of RtI. Some principals talked about using RtI as new criteria for defining special education eligibility.

Principals’ ideas and conceptions about socially just educational practices varied widely across the 10 participants. Themes of inclusive structures, student achievement, democratic structures, advocacy, parent engagement, and school climate were all documented as aspects of socially just educational practices; however, each of these themes were not universally understood by all respondents. In fact, only two principals demonstrated a clear understanding of socially just practices. Many respondents gave examples of practices that related to the socially just themes; however, the respondents did not talk about key aspects of social justice or equity when describing these practices.
Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore principals’ conceptions of both Response to Intervention and social justice in their schools and ultimately to understand whether they saw them as separate or integrated. Ten principals were recruited from across the state of Illinois as participants in the study. These participants were selected from culturally and socioeconomically diverse elementary schools. Each principal agreed to participate in two semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately an hour each. The specific research questions that guided the discussions were:

1. What are principals’ understandings of RtI?
2. What are principals’ understandings of socially just educational practices?
3. What are the relationships that the principals identify between their understandings of RtI and the promotion of social justice?

As with any qualitative study based on interviews, the data were rich and descriptive. The transcribed interviews were coded based on common phrases and categories; themes that emerged were reported in Chapter 4. The current chapter synthesizes the findings around the research questions. In this chapter implications of the data will be considered, conclusions drawn and recommendations made for further research and the preparation and professional development of administrators.

From the beginning of this study, I believed that I would find principals who saw RtI as a way of promoting socially just educational practices in their schools given that RtI has the potential to reduce the number of students referred and identified for special education (Bastche et al., 2006). Additionally, over time, RtI should also reduce the marginalization and stigmas often associated with students served through pull-out interventions. Finally, I hypothesized based
on the findings in the literature that by focusing on improving instruction, curriculum, and assessment for all students, schools implementing RtI would level the playing field for all students by using assessment data to improve accountability and instructional practices. Evidence indicates that in environments in which RtI is successfully implemented there is extensive dialogue and collaboration among all staff members and with parents (Martinez & Young, 2011). I realized from the outset that not every principal would hold that view, but was confident that I would find some levels of consistency among principals’ descriptions and a level of congruence with my own understandings. By not limiting participants to leaders who already had a social justice perspective, I also expected to find principals who did not see connections between RtI and socially just educational practices. Both assumptions were reflected in the themes that emerged from the findings.

In the following section, I summarize the findings of this study by discussing each of the major research questions in turn.

**Question 1: Principals Conceptions of RtI**

In general, principals shared a common understanding of basic technical aspects of implementation, although their conceptions of socially just educational practices varied widely. Some principals have strong theoretical and practical understanding of both concepts, while some principals have only a practical or technical understanding of the mechanics of RtI. The majority of the principals' conceptions of RtI were focused primarily on the technical aspects of implementation. All of the principals were able to clearly describe principles of screening all students in order to identify those who needed additional supports early on. The concept of universal screening is well documented in the literature as one of the key principles of RtI.
implementation (Bastche et al., 2009; Deno, 1985; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2008). Each principal used some form of literacy assessment to screen all students three times per year. The principals also appeared to have clear understandings of using the assessment data to provide support for students who were struggling. The majority of principals focused their discussion about interventions on Tier Two interventions (Bastche et al., 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2008), which included models such as pull-out interventions, school-wide intervention blocks, and push-in and/or co-teaching interventions. Only three principals talked about using assessment data to strengthen or improve their Tier One or core classroom instruction (Taylor, 2008).

Principals' descriptions of the purpose of RtI varied widely from a framework for using data to catch students before they fail, to a fundamental shift that results in reforming instruction and classroom practice. Nearly all principals described the purpose of RtI as promoting student achievement; however, there were subtle, but important differences in how principals talked about student achievement. Some described the achievement of individual students, while others focused on all students. Some equated it with scores on standardized tests while others focused more on what students learned. For example, Ms. Jones described the importance of monitoring the progress of the “students that are still red at the end of the year” referring to the students who scored at or near the bottom of the assessment. Principal Johnson saw the purpose more broadly: “making sure that we’re providing the best instruction to all students.”

The principals who focused on the narrow technical aspects of RtI implementation were also seemed to describe a very narrow purpose. Only two principals identified promoting social justice as a purpose for RtI, viewing its implementation as potentially transforming the entire school, rather than just achievement of specific students. Mary Davis and Beth Williams discussed using RtI to promote issues of equity, inclusion, and social justice in their schools and
communities. Ms. Davis stated that school was “the only equalizer” for students, and she used RtI to promote opportunity for all her students. Dr. Williams did not like to even use the term “intervention” describing it as “antithetical to community building.” These two principals viewed the potential of RtI as a foundation to transform teaching and learning for all students, rather than simply a means for catching students who were struggling. This understanding of a broader purpose of RtI did not replace their understanding of the technical aspects, but instead seemed to represent an over-arching theoretical focus. As Oakes and Rogers (2006) argued, the “technical knowledge is insufficient to bring about equitable education” (p. 31). All of the participants demonstrated a technical knowledge of RtI, but only a few placed RtI in a theoretical context that shifted the conversation to issues of equity and social justice.

**Question 2: Principals Conceptions of Socially Just Educational Practices**

The literature about social justice leadership focuses on a variety of perspectives and skills that principals use to disrupt injustice and promote equity (Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Key concepts about socially just educational practices from the literature included creating inclusive structures (Artiles et al., 2006; Riehl, 2000; Theoharis, 2007), advocacy (Dillard, 1995; Shields, 2010; Wasonga, 2009), and promoting democratic dialogue (Furman & Shields, 2005; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). In practice, applying these concepts to improve the learning experiences of all students could reduce marginalization (especially for those students who have experienced discrimination based on race, economic status, gender, or ability) and increase collaboration and empowerment of teachers and parents. In general, principals in the current study struggled with defining and understanding socially just educational practices. Most principals were not able to identify educational practices that they
viewed as socially just. In fact, two of the respondents talked about social justice only in terms of bully-prevention or protecting students who were viewed as different. For example, when Jacob Becker defined social justice, he stated, “first thing that came to mind is possibly the bullying aspect and things that might be inhibiting kids from . . . asking questions.” Many of the principals in this study did not demonstrate a foundational level of understanding about socially just educational practices or the importance of equity for students and groups who had been traditionally marginalized by schools and society. Respondents’ inability to articulate issues of social justice and equity may be due to the context of the interviews and questions or may be due to a true lack of understanding.

In fact, only two principals in this study were able to describe educational practices in their buildings that related to social justice. These principals, Mary Davis and Beth Williams, articulated a clear understanding that social justice involved removing barriers for all students to succeed not just in school, but also in life. They discussed leveling the playing field and providing opportunities to challenge and support students who were traditionally marginalized by society and schools. For example, Mary Davis stated that one of the reasons she supports RtI is, “kids are entitled to a free and appropriate public education. It's the only thing that’s going to equalize for someone who comes in from an area of poverty.” Ms. Davis echoed the belief of “leveling the playing field” by providing equitable access not only to academic outcomes, but also by providing “equity of opportunity” in broader societal contexts.

**Question 3: Relationships between of RtI and Socially Just Educational Practices**

The model for a socially just re-conception of RtI that was developed from the literature suggested that RtI could promote equity and social justice by creating inclusive structures,
promoting democratic dialogue, focusing on student achievement, and advocating for students who traditionally have been marginalized in schools. Principals' lack of understanding about socially just practices and equity demonstrated the importance of dissemination a model of a socially just RtI and of helping principals understand and implement it.

Beth Willi
ams said that an important way to promote social justice through RtI in her building was to “build back in the dialogue and open things up” For her, dialogue around RtI created space for conversations that empowered teachers to reflect on their responsibility to teach all students. In general, principals talked about engaging collaboration among teachers to improve instruction, facilitate accountability, and foster data informed discussions about curriculum, instruction, and student supports. Olivia Miller noted that her collaborative problem solving meetings both empowered and held teachers accountable, “once you are absolutely familiar with the data on that child, then you call your problem solving meeting and you bring this to the group, and you say, ‘Here is where I am at; what direction do we need to go in now.’”

This is consistent with the importance placed by Theoharis (2007) on documenting student achievement and accountability as important aspects of social justice leadership.

In the literature, social justice leaders engage in specific practices and principles (Furman & Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2010). Several of these practices and principles relate to a socially just conception of RtI (Figure 2). The model helped frame questions and conversations about principals’ conceptions of RtI. The participants’ responses to questions about the intersections between RtI and socially just educational practices demonstrated that these connections are not readily apparent to all principals. More importantly, collecting evidence related to this model helped to determine if the current implementation of RtI can fulfill the hope of reducing marginalization and providing more opportunities for authentic student learning. Unfortunately,
the dominant implementation of RtI has focused on discrete skills and new criteria for identifying students for special education services. Many of the conceptions about RtI reflected in the data collected in this study align with the focus on discrete skills and special education identification.

Two principals in this study became excellent examples of how RtI can be viewed through a lens of social justice. Mary Davis and Beth Williams each described at least three of the four major themes presented in the socially just conceptualization of RtI. They both spoke about the importance of shared decision making not only in the process of launching the implementation of RtI, but also in decision making, collaboration, and problem-solving meetings that were described as an essential component of RtI by the principals and by the literature (Batsche et al., 2006). Shared decision making not only empowers teachers but also creates a culture of dialogue and reflection to improve student learning. Almost all the principals interviewed in this study discussed a strong focus on student learning, which in some cases also empowers and includes parents. Although some focused on individual student learning, others focused on using student-learning data for broader issues of change and school improvement. The issue of inclusive structures and models of RtI was mentioned by several principals, but only two of the ten had developed full push-in models of co-teaching and supporting students and teachers in the regular classroom. Finally, two principals, spoke about the importance of advocacy and ethical leadership as driving forces in their roles as principals and in the implementation and purpose of RtI. The evidence collected in this qualitative study implies that there is need for further exploration of the concept of a socially just conception of RtI.
Tension between the Purpose and the Implementation

As noted in the literature (Bastche et al., 2006; Kavale et al., 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006) the purpose of RtI has evolved over the years. Initially the foundations for RtI were proposed as a means for identifying students who qualify for special education services under the label of learning disabilities (Kavale et al., 2005). Over time the purpose of RtI evolved to include concepts of data-driven decision making and focusing how all students respond to instruction (Bastche et al., 2006) being the foundations upon which current RtI practice is built. Use of response to intervention for identification purposes is now part of Illinois state and federal law. For some principals, the emphasis on special education practice remains the key. While one principal stated the purpose being to help determine which students were, “eligible for special ed,” another proposed: “let that data shape how general ed teachers teach in their classrooms. It is not about pulling kids out. It is not about . . . special education.”

Beth Williams summarized the tension between focusing on the system versus focusing on individual students, “if you keep trying to fix the child, you don’t the fix the system that the child is in, it’s just another acronym we throw around for the next of couple of years but, I haven’t seen significant results using that approach.” Without a clear philosophical basis, and with competing purposes in the research, principals and other educational leaders are faced with the challenge of trying to implement RtI without proper guidance from either the research or the policy.

Discussion

Another way to think about these results is to visualize these data is on a series of continua. The answers that the principals gave demonstrated a wide range of understandings of
socially just practices and of approaches to implementing Tier Two and Tier Three interventions. The clearest continuum is one of implementation (Figure 3). On one end of the continuum are responses that focus on RtI in mechanical or technical terms (e.g. reduction in special education referrals), and on the other end are responses that focus on RtI in terms of equity (e.g. social justice) (Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Principals described the purpose of RtI across this continuum, and Figure 3 indicates where their responses fall on the continuum of technical reform to equity reform.

![Figure 3. Continuum of Implementation from Technical to Equity](image)

There did not seem to be a pattern related to experience or background on this continuum; however, the two principals who had served in their buildings the longest were closest to the equity focus end of the implementation continuum.

**Continuum of Inclusiveness**

Creating inclusive structures was a prominent dimension of the literature around socially just educational practices (Artiles et al., 2006; Hoppey & McLesky; 2013; Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2006; Theoharis, 2010). One way that RtI can provide the framework for inclusive structures is focusing on improving instruction for all students in the regular classroom (Fisher & Frey, 2010; Taylor, 2008). Principals in the current study demonstrated an understanding of the importance of using RtI to create inclusive structures, but they varied with regard to how they implemented
inclusive structures through RtI scheduling. Figure 4 illustrates the continuum of inclusive practices that principals described through their RtI implementation.

Figure 4. Continuum of Tier II/III interventions

Figure 4 represents an interesting continuum because some principals described several different models for serving students. For example, Mary Davis described a 30-minute block of universal intervention for all students, that was similar to the structure described by Principal Becker; however, Mr. Becker talked about using a pull-out model for additional supports. Figure 4 serves to illustrate that under the framework of RtI, principals have a great deal of latitude to implement practices that either promote or inhibit social justice.

Artiles et al. (2010) argued that the institutional structures that frame schools and learning must first address the “role of culture in both the learning process and construction of school success” (p. 255). The principles of RtI reflect dimensions of social justice and only a few principals have accepted that vision. For example, RtI focuses on providing a high quality education for all students, requiring decisions to be made based on a variety of student assessments, fostering collaborative decision making, and providing equitable resources and opportunities for all students. As described by the principals in this study, the implementation of RtI in most instances has focused on a very narrow definition of student achievement. The majority of respondents viewed student achievement as applying to individual students rather than raising student achievement for all students. This narrow view of student achievement uses
language that indicates that those writing implementation plans have not transcended deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997). Valencia argued that the label of “at-risk,” which is frequently used in RtI, is simply a new version of “culturally deprived” (p. 196). Comments made by one of the respondents seem to reinforce this idea. Jane Smith, in discussing intervention groups and special education self-contained classrooms stated, “we do have a high Spanish population [in self-contained classrooms], it’s not because we are identifying them, it’s just, that’s who qualified, they are coming from one area and they end up in those classrooms.” This comment overlooks the need to acknowledge the cultural capital (including second languages) that students bring to their learning environments and to find ways to offer support for English language learning (as an example) that does not label or classify them in special education terms. Identification measures that target one group are inherently socially unjust and fail to promote the inclusive framework advocated by Klingner and Edwards (2006).

One way to examine if and how principals’ conceptions of RtI promoted or inhibited socially just practices is to look for intersections between how principals described RtI and their broad concepts of social justice. Figure 5 provides a graphic representation of these intersections. Principals who viewed student achievement by focusing improving quality and access to good instruction at Tier I were more likely to discuss students in terms of strengths rather than deficits. Principals who approached student achievement by focusing on individual students, were more likely to use RtI to label and possibly marginalize students. Principals who created structures that encouraged inclusive practices (school-wide interventions or push-in models) were more likely to be concerned with issues of equity and social justice.
Figure 5. Intersection of Tier II/III and purpose of RtI

The axis that represents the method of providing intervention services, from pullout to push-in, represents an important aspect of socially just educational practices: promoting inclusive structures. Although the figure does not specifically represent principals’ views about social justice or socially just practices, it does provide insight into how principals view an important socially just practice of promoting inclusive structures and removing structures that exclude and marginalize students. Pull-out structures by their very nature promote exclusion: Students are removed from the regular classroom and their peers to work individually or in small groups. When those practices are implemented as the primary means for improving student achievement through RtI, students miss opportunities for interaction with their classmates and are removed from the core area of instruction. Furthermore, investigation around which student are continually receiving pullout services is further area for concern. Pull-out structures also lead to stigmatization and problems with self esteem, as discussed by two or three principals and by scholars such as Baglieri et al. (2011).

As noted in Chapter 4, three participants created structures in which every student had either intervention or enrichment blocks. This model seems for fall between the concepts of push-in and pull-out interventions; with every student in the school receiving interventions issues of exclusion and marginalization may reduced. However, there is considerable evidence that the
students who are most disadvantaged require enrichment and not simply remediation (Jensen, 2009); hence this practice may continue to perpetuate inequity rather than advance social justice.

The vertical axis of the chart represents principals’ conceptions of the purpose of RtI. In their answers to the specific question about the purpose, principals often talked about providing ways to prevent student failure. However, their answers showed marked difference in the focus of the change. Several principals talked about the importance of using RtI data simply as a way to support individual students, while others described the use of data to inform changes to curriculum and instruction in the general education classroom. This disparity represents a difference in what principals perceive to be the best use of their time and resources. Principals who focus predominately on individual student data often created structures and practices that focused a great deal on interventions for struggling students. Principals who focused on building and classroom data used the RtI process to discuss improving classroom instruction for all students. In the vernacular of the RtI tiers, this difference is described as a difference between focusing on Tiers I and II. The focus on Tier I is the focus on changing classroom instruction and the focus on Tier II is the focus on providing interventions and supports for students who are not succeeding in the general education classroom.

The concept of focusing on Tier I versus Tier II also can be related to the use of deficit thinking and deficit language that is often found in RtI. Principals who approach RtI from a social justice or equity lens talk about inclusion with less emphasis on “interventions” provided to students who are “struggling.” Principals who focused their time and attention on pullout interventions tended to use deficit language to describe students. For example, in talking about students who were most likely to be RtI pull-out groups, one principal stated, “I don’t like to blame it on the fact that they’re either African American or they’re Hispanic but I think . . .
there’s a cultural thing in the amount of importance that families place on recreational reading.”

Another principal stated that, “we have the students that we determine to be red students who are the at-risk students.” Unfortunately it appears that through the implementation of RtI in some schools, a whole new lexicon of deficit language has emerged. This deficit language was also reflected in the way some principals discussed how they viewed school-wide assessment data. Instead of describing deficits in students, principals who supported inclusive forms of RtI talked about deficits in instruction or a lack of opportunities for students. These principals also described RtI as a method of changing systems rather than changing students.

**Technical versus Theoretical Implementation**

Oakes and Rogers (2006) purport that the complexity of the technical reforms often mask the deeper social and political contexts and purposes of the reform movements. It is easy for most principals to address technical aspects reform. Unfortunately, when it comes to RtI implementation, centering solely on the technical aspects may limit the ability to examine needs and subsequently the provision of effective instruction for all students (Fuchs et al., 2012).

Principals fell into roughly three groups (Figure 6). The first group was primarily concerned with the nuts and bolts of implementation. Those principals talked about scheduling, training, and individual student results. The second group of principals talked about a propose of preventing students from failing or reducing the number of students referred to special education. These principals focused on student learning, but at an individual level. The third group of principals described RtI as a mind-shift and a reform that was felt school-wide. These principals discussed the importance of changing the way teachers and schools thought about students and school data and were more likely to talk about the purpose of RtI being related to social justice and equity for
all students. For purposes of this discussion, I am calling the first group of principals the “Implementers,” as they are primarily concerned with how RtI was implemented from a scheduling and logistical perspective. The second group of principals, I call the “Reformers” as they expressed interest in improving the supports for individual students. The final group, I refer to as “Transformers,” they view the changes that they were making in their schools to be related to issues of social justice that goes beyond the concept of improving education for individual students.

Figure 6. Continuum of principal participants

These categories are not rigid, but rather fluid and represent a continuum of ideas and approaches. Some principals who fall into the “Transformers” section of Figure 6 might be closer to “Reformers.” The only similarity among the “Transformers” is that two of them were ones who had the most longevity in their current building. Other factors, like a background in special education did not seem to play a role in where principals fell along the continuum. Although these categories are not rigid, the concept of such a continuum does lead to further questions. Why are some leaders more apt to see a reform like RtI as promoting socially just educational practices, while others do not even make the connection? This question cannot be answered with the data collected by this study, but one can speculate that the perspectives of each principal has shaped the way they understand and implement changes of all kinds, not just RtI. Therefore, principals who already are concerned with issues of equity and social justice are
more likely to shape their understandings, critiques, and implementation of all new initiatives or reforms through that lens. That does not imply that principals who do not share an equity or social justice perspective are incorrect in their understandings of RtI, but the differences lead to very different experiences for teachers, students, and families.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications for practice. As state and federal policy is translated into practice in districts, schools, and classrooms across the county, the intersection between theory, policy, and practice creates gaps that relate not only to implementation but also to equity and inclusion as well (Artiles et al., 2010; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Without a clear understanding of the importance of equity and social justice and how those concepts can be applied to school reforms, then no reform initiative is likely to make a difference for students who have been traditionally marginalized. Education about equity and social justice is a clear first step toward realizing the purposes of education that move beyond participation and are grounded in deeper issues of resisting inequity, marginalization, and racism (Theoharis, 2007; Westheimer & Kahne, 2002).

As reported by Berkely et al. (2009), RtI has been widely adopted across the United States; however, states and districts have not been consistent about providing guidance, structure, or a theoretical foundation for implementation. Evidence gathered in the current study indicates that the same inconsistency found by Berkely et al. (2009) was reported by principals in Illinois. Principals shared an understanding of basic components of RtI, but did not share an understanding of the theoretical foundation or of issues of social justice. The fact that many districts are within the first 5 years of RtI implementation suggests that practices have started to
take root. Now is the time to take a step back and ensure that the RtI is being implemented using a theoretical framework that emphasizes equity and social justice.

My specific recommendations for practice include:

- State education agencies must promote the theoretical foundations of reform initiatives, not just provide technical support for the initiative. This theoretical foundation should describe how to level the playing field for all students. Equity and social justice issues must be at the forefront of dialogue and debate at the state level in order to help districts and schools implement the reforms in a manner that is in the best interest of their students.

- Educational leadership programs should provide future principals and teacher leaders with common language and asset based view of students and families to move beyond being technical implementers. Only with a clear understanding of equity and social justice can educational leaders support changes and systems that improve learning and opportunities for all students. Educational leadership programs must provide educational leaders with the agency to challenge injustice and create positive dialogue around issues of equity.

- District administrators must take a leadership role in promoting equity and social justice. Educational leaders must do more than just provide technical leadership. Given the complexities of pressures that are placed on school leaders, it is important to provide these leaders with the understandings, common language, and passion for equity and social justice (Shields, 2011). Educators and educational leaders need to not only understand equity and social justice concepts, but they also need to understand how they can apply this knowledge in order to advocate for students, families, and communities.

Reflections and Recommendations for Future Research.

The current study examined principals’ conceptions of RtI and socially just educational practices. My methodology provided for opportunities for discussion and dialogue with the participants. The data collected during the interviews provided rich description about both RtI and socially just practices; however, upon reflection and analysis of the findings, there are several themes that I would want to explore in greater depth. For example, I would want to ask principals more about their background and their own educational experiences. Specifically, I would like to ask the participants about where and how their understandings of RtI, equity, and
socially just educational practices formed. Did they learn about RtI from trainings and workshops or through their own personal readings and research? How were issues of equity and social justice approached through professional development in their districts? I also should have asked about their understandings of the purpose of schooling. What do they see as the purpose of schooling? Do their beliefs about the purpose of schooling relate to their understandings of RtI or socially just educational practices? The answer to these questions would have provided even richer data and possibly more meaningful analysis.

As noted by others (Artiles et al., 2010; Fisher & Frey, 2010; Fuchs et al., 2012), RtI still resides in limbo between special education and general education reforms. Fuchs et al. (2012) presented ideas about next steps in the technical reforms to improve RtI implementation. The next steps outlined by Fuchs et al. (2012) included proposing a common purpose for RtI, which went beyond reducing the number of students placed in special education, but rather view prevention on a more global scale and use the RtI framework to prevent school “dropout, incarceration, and unemployment” (p. 270). Artiles et al. (2010) called for future research about RtI to go beyond technical aspects and include social and cultural contexts as well. Future research must bring the technical and the theoretical aspects of RtI closer together in order to avoid having RtI simply reproduce past practices with a new name (Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

The concept of student achievement was not explored fully, and the evidence collected in this study suggests the need for further investigation about principals’ conceptions of student achievement and the difference between individual student achievement and school-wide student achievement. Currently, there is little published research about principals’ perspectives on the use of RtI as an initiative to promote school-wide change (Monaghan, 2011; Ninni, 2010; West, 2012). There are also several intersections among these ideas that need further empirical
research. Further research should examine the relationship between collaboration and democratic
dialogue and empowerment. These topics were touched on in the current study but not explored
with sufficient depth to draw conclusions or deep understandings.

My specific recommendations for further research include:

• Further research needs to explore the issue of how principals develop theoretical
perspectives about equity and social justice. Such a research question is needed in order
to better understand not only how to prepare our educational leaders but also how and
why leaders develop the ability to apply equity and social justice to their leadership
practices. What role do education and leadership preparation programs play in the
development of a principal’s perspective and the creation of socially just educational
leaders? Are principals self-aware their perspectives and the effect those perspectives
have on their students, teachers, families and communities?

• Additional research is needed about principals’ perspectives about RtI’s ability to
promote equity and social justice. The current study raised several questions that were not
specifically addressed. Where do principals’ conceptions come from about reform
initiatives? How do principals promote issues equity and social justice with their
teachers, students and families?

• Further research is needed on the concept of a socially just model for RtI. Fuchs et al.
(2012) and Artiles et al. (2010) have both called for rethinking RtI with a broader
theoretical purpose. Empirical research needs to explore the contextual conditions that
allow educational leaders to implement reforms like RtI using concepts of equity and
social justice.

• Finally, further research is needed to explain why some principals are “Transformers”
and others are “Implementers.” What beliefs and perspectives do “Transformers” hold
that are different than other educational leaders? Where did these beliefs and perspectives
come from? How can we create more “Transformers” who are passionate about issues of
equity and social justice?

Conclusions

My reason for researching the intersection of principals’ conceptions of RtI and socially
just educational practices was that I believed RtI has the potential to reduce the number of
students identified for special education, promote inclusive structures in schools, increase
democratic dialogue, and, at the same time focus on improving student achievement and
enhancing student learning for all students. RtI promises to be an initiative that could focus attention on improving instruction for all students, not just provide supports or interventions for students who were “struggling.” Unfortunately, and perhaps surprisingly, principals' limited understandings of equity and social justice hindered their ability to understand how RtI could promote socially just educational practices. Unless there are significant changes in the way RtI is implemented at the state and federal level, the gap between the technical and the theoretical basis will remain. However, if researchers can rally behind some of the calls for change (Artiles et al., 2010; Fuchs et al., 2012), it may be possible to re-frame RtI in a manner that promotes socially just educational practices.

If principals continue to implement RtI (or any other reform) in technical ways only, the reforms are sterilized in much the same way that Beth Williams talked about RtI sterilizing curriculum and instruction. The data collected in the current study indicate that there are a few principals who view RtI as a reform that can promote socially just practices in their schools. The majority of principals lacked the understanding of social justice and equity to determine if RtI promotes socially just educational practices. The challenge for all educators and educational leaders is to determine how those principals came to those understandings and to learn to frame educational reforms in a manner that accounts for cultural responsiveness, equity, and social justice. Only when we eradicate practices that exclude and marginalize vulnerable children and youth, and when we focus on the underlying democratic purposes of schooling will reforms, such as RtI, be able to come closer to fulfilling their potential to improve education for all children.
References


Appendix A

Recruitment Letter and Informed Consent Statement

March 23, 2012

Dear «Principal»:

I originally wrote to you in November, but was unable to follow up at that time, therefore, I am resending my letter of introduction, and plea for your participation in a qualitative research study I am conducting. I am a doctoral student in Educational Policy, Organization, and Leadership at the University of Illinois. I am in the process of recruiting elementary principals to participate in a qualitative study about principals’ conceptions of Response to Intervention (RtI). I am writing to seek your participation in this research project.

The purpose of my study is to explore principals’ understandings of Response to Intervention (RtI) and educational practices in their schools. This qualitative study will help explain how principals view RtI as a federal policy and reform imitative, and it will seek to explain if and how they use RtI in their schools. There is very little research about principals’ understandings of RtI.

Specifically, I am seeking to interview elementary principals who work in diverse Illinois schools and communities. I obtained your name and preliminary information about your school through a search on the Illinois Interactive Report Card.

The time commitment for this study would be at most two interviews lasting no more than 45 minutes each, and, depending on proximity and interest, participation in a follow up focus group with the other interviewees. I am willing to set up the interviews at your convenience, and I will either travel to your school to conduct the interview, or if it is more convenient and technologically possible, I can conduct the interview via web technology (e.g. iChat or Skype). I know that your time is valuable, and unfortunately, I cannot offer much in the way of compensation, but I would be happy to provide coffee or a light meal as part of the interview.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and your name and the name of your school will not be used in the final paper. I have attached an informed consent statement that has been approved by the University of Illinois’ Internal Review Board (IRB) and the Bureau of Educational Research (BER).

I look forward to hearing from you, and I will follow up with an email or phone call in about a week to answer any questions you may have and, hopefully, to confirm your participation. If you have any questions in advance, please contact me. My email is dowendo@gmail.com, or you can reach me by phone at 217-202-5632.

Again, I appreciate your time and consideration.
Sincerely,

Donald Owen
Ed.D. Candidate, EPOL
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Participant Consent Form
Principals’ Conceptions of Response to Intervention

I am willing to participate in an interview and focus group for the Principals’ Conceptions of Response to Intervention research project. I understand that the interview and focus group interview will be audio recorded. I further understand that all references to my school and me will be only through the use of pseudonyms. I am a willing participant and understand that there will not be monetary or material compensation other than what is described in the recruitment letter.

Printed Name: _______________________________________________________________

Signature:__________________________________________________________

Date:_________________________________________________________________________
Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide—Initial Interview

• Tell me about your school

• Talk about how RtI has been implemented in your school?

• What do you understand the purpose of RtI to be?

• What do you see as the biggest positives about RtI?

• Are there any negative aspects of RtI?

• How well does RtI accomplish its purpose? Are there any shortcomings?

• Have you noticed if RtI has changed the representation of African Americans or low SES in SpEd?

• Tell me about how decisions are made in your building

• What practices in your building do you think contribute to the success of your students?

• How do you ensure that traditionally marginalized groups of students are supported and challenged?
Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Guide—Follow Up Interview

Thank you again for participating in my study.

In my first round of interviews, I heard a wide range of responses about people’s conceptions of RtI, and I want to follow up on a few of those ideas today.

First of all, here is a list of themes or phrases that came up in my first round of interviews.

Take a minute to look it over . . .

- Early intervention
- Catching kids before they fail
- Reaching benchmark or standards
- Student growth
- Special education
- Collaborative discussions about instruction (materials, methods, assessment)
- Team problem solving
- Data specialists
- Data focused
- Grouping by specific ability or skill level
- Targeted pullout interventions
- Literacy instruction/guided reading/literacy circles
- Co-teaching/push in support
- Evaluating/diagnosing instruction instead of kids
- Professional learning communities/PLCs
- Change (structures, use of time, mind-set)
- Leadership
- Social justice
- Student self esteem

When you think about RtI, do you see anything missing from this list?

Is there anything on this list that surprises you?

Do any of these words or themes spark further thoughts that we might not have touched on last time?

I want to ask some specific things about relationships among some of these themes.

Does RtI ever marginalize students?

Could you define the word inclusive?
Does RtI promote or inhibit that definition of inclusive?

What do you see as the relationship between RtI and shared decision making?

What do you see as the relationship between RtI and socially justice practices?
Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Approval

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Bureau of Educational Research
College of Education
38 Education Building
1310 South Sixth St.
Champaign, IL 61820

March 4, 2013
Don Owen
Education Policy, Organization and Leadership Department
338 College of Education
MC-708

Dear Don,

On behalf of the College of Education Human Subjects Committee, I have reviewed and approved your research project entitled “Elementary principals’ conceptions of Response to Intervention and socially just educational practices.” This project continues to meet the exemption criteria for federal regulation 46.101(b)1 for research involving the use of normal education topics in an educational setting where the identity of the participant is protected. It also meets the exemption criteria for federal regulation 46.101(b)2 for research involving the use of normal interviews where the identity of the participant is protected.

No changes may be made to your procedures without prior Committee review and approval. You are also required to promptly notify the Committee of any problems that arise during the course of the research. Your approved project number is 4774 and exempt projects are typically approved for three years with annual status reports requested. Please don’t hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Best regards,

Susan A. Fowler, Ph.D.
College of Education Human Subjects Review Committee