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# High School Teachers' Perceptions of Data Driven Decision Making within a Response to Intervention Framework

Benikia Kressler

*University of Miami*, [taylobe@gmail.com](mailto:taylobe@gmail.com)

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DATA DRIVEN DECISION  
MAKING WITHIN A RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION FRAMEWORK

By

Benikia Kressler

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Benikia Kressler

Approved:

---

Wendy Cavendish, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of  
Teaching and Learning

---

Joshua Diem, PhD.  
Clinical Assistant Professor  
Teaching and Learning

---

Batya Elbaum, Ph.D.  
Professor of Teaching and Learning

---

Jomills Braddock, Ph.D.  
Professor of Sociology

---

Elizabeth G. Harry, Ph.D.  
Professor of Teaching and  
Learning

---

M. Brian Blake, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

KRESSLER, BENIKIA  
High School Teachers' Perception of Data  
Driven Decision Making within a Response  
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A general education initiative supported by IDEA (2004), Response to Intervention (RtI) holds promise for improving the academic achievement of at-risk students through evidence-based instruction and data driven decision making (DDDM). However, most of the research on RtI has been conducted within elementary settings. Thus, this study examined high school teachers' perceptions of DDDM for improving academic performance of at-risk high school youth within an RtI framework. Using qualitative methods consisting of interviews and field observations of six high school teachers implementing RtI in two Title 1 high schools, constant comparison methods of data were conducted. From this data, three themes emerged. These three themes indicated that 1) teachers needed training, support, and facilitated understanding of RtI; 2) accountability policies influenced students that were targeted for RtI support and 3) teachers perceived that culturally and linguistically diverse students should adapt their behavior for academic success. Implications for future RtI implementation and practice are discussed.

## Dedication

This is of course dedicated to you mom, aka Ms. Yvonne Taylor, the strongest woman I know. Without your threats, nosiness, unwavering support and love I would not be here today. Making ends meet on government assistance and raising two hard-headed kids wasn't easy but you did it and did it well. You provided safety and comfort in an environment that has taken others under. For that, I am forever grateful. Thank you.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Since the desegregation of schools in 1954, the achievement gap has been a major concern for policy makers, researchers and educational stakeholders throughout the country. Specifically, the discrepancy within educational achievement between White students on one end and culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students on the other has been persistent and troubling. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that CLD students, particularly Black and Hispanic students, are maintaining scores 27 to 22 points lower than average scores of White students (NCES, 2012). In addition, NAEP data suggests that from grades 4 to 8, the achievement gap widens between these groups (NCES, 2009; NCES, 2011) . Further, data from the America College Test (ACT) research and policy center indicates that the achievement gap widens from grade 8 to 12 in core content areas (English, reading, math and science) (ACT, 2011). These gaps in academic achievement have long term detrimental effects in comparison to White students as Black and Hispanic students are more likely to drop out of high school and experience under and/or unemployment (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, Kewal-Ramani, & NCES 2011; NEA, 2013).

The issue of the achievement gap is not confined to typically developing students in general education classrooms. Students of color with disabilities also experience poor academic achievement in comparison to their White peers (Wagner et al., 2006). For example, a report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study- 2 indicated that academic achievement in the area of reading, math and science for Black and Hispanic students with disabilities were significantly lower than White students (Wagner et al.,

2006). Additionally, research shows that Hispanic students with disabilities graduate at lower rates than both Black and White students with disabilities (Wagner et al., 2005). On the other hand, Black students with disabilities are more likely to experience poor post school outcomes such as unemployment, decreased chances of post-secondary education and a higher probability of incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Wagner et al., 2005). Altogether, both Black and Hispanic students are more likely to experience academic problems and poor post school outcomes than White students and this is compounded with the issues arising from a disability label (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Orfield et al., 2004; Wald & Losen, 2003). Reducing the achievement gap could create an environment in which CLD students are more likely to avoid these negative outcomes thus increasing their post-secondary opportunities.

To address the inequality of academic outcomes of low income students, who are disproportionately minority, the federal government implemented the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. This act was a large scale education reform funding initiative targeting inequality in resource distribution between poor and middle class students by providing funds under the provision of Title 1. The law stated that financial assistance was to be provided “to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means (including preschool programs) which contributed to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children” (United States Department of Education, 1965; PL 89-10, p. 27). Although the legislation provided funding to increase student access to general education instruction and materials, there was no meaningful mechanism in place to ensure this vulnerable

population was receiving quality instruction that translated into tangible academic gains (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). Thus, there was a policy shift from direct funding to accountability and testing for funding (United States Department of Education, 2004). This shift was manifested in the reauthorization of ESEA (1965), i.e. the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

No Child Left Behind (2001) imposes federal regulations stipulating that schools and teachers be held accountable for student academic outcomes on yearly standardized tests (United States Department of Education, 2011). NCLB (2001) also attempts to address additional issues such as non-standardized use of instructional practices and subjective instructional decision making by mandating the use of evidence-based practices and data informed instructional decision making about student instruction and behavior. These practices must also be used for students from specific subgroups, such as English language learners, student from low socioeconomic homes, students of color and students with disabilities.

Complementing NCLB (2001), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) also requires schools to show evidence of established goals for the academic performance of children with disabilities including English language learners. Understanding that these particular groups have a history of receiving inequitable educational opportunities, policy makers and other stakeholders held district personnel, school administrators and teachers accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students in the continued effort to bridge the achievement gap.

### **Response to Intervention**

In an effort to respond to the historical structural inequalities within schools suffered by minority students and students with disabilities, federal legislation supports Response to Intervention (RtI). IDEA (2004) supplement schools' efforts to use RtI, a process that determines if students respond to a scientific, evidence-based intervention, as part of the evaluation process for Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) identification (RtI Action Network, 2014). Supporters of RtI believe that minority students with and without disabilities many experience poor academic outcomes due to uneven or limited access to quality instruction. Response to Intervention is an educational tool that can be used to provide quality instruction to all students before referrals to special education.

Although RtI can be used to evaluate students' needs for special education services, it begins in the general education setting to ensure that all students receive quality evidence-based instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Within RtI classrooms, highly qualified teachers provide universal screening and quality instruction to all students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; RtI Action Network, 2014). By providing quality instruction in the general classroom, research suggests that RtI may reduce the disproportionate number of CLD students referred to special education in addition to those identified for SLD (Bollman, Silberglitt, & Gibbons, 2007; Callender, 2007; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Hughes & Douglas, 2014; Klingner, Sorrells, & Barrera, 2007).

Until 2004, the only legally supported means of identifying students with SLD was the IQ-Achievement discrepancy method (the process of using statistically significant differences between achievement and IQ tests for SLD labeling) (Zirkel, 2014). Researchers argued that use of the IQ-Achievement discrepancy method should be reconsidered for several reasons. These reasons included: the inconclusive evidence of

differences between low academic achievers and students with SLD (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007); the link between IQ tests and overrepresentation of CLD students in special education (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Donovan & Cross, 2002); and the dramatic increase of students labeled as SLD (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Sleeter, 1986). IDEA's (2004) introduction of RtI as an alternative for the instruction and identification of students for SLD underscored the discontent many policy makers and other educational stakeholders had with the IQ-discrepancy method.

In general terms, RtI is an educational service delivery model in which instruction is provided through multi-tiers of differing intensities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Different models of RtI employ varying numbers of instructional tiers; however, the three tier model is the most common (Shapiro, 2013). The first tier (or primary instruction) of the model takes place within the general education classroom and consists of evidenced-based universal instruction for all students. Evidence of best practices of RtI indicates that at least 80% of students benefit from this universal core program (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Those that do not respond to tier I instruction are placed in tier II (secondary intervention) which provides small group evidence-based intensive instruction. Students that are non-responsive to tier II instruction are then placed in tier III (tertiary intervention) the most structured and individualized level. At this level, evaluations for SLD are conducted in conjunction with continued evidence-based instruction. If students placed in either tier II or III make gains they are then returned to tier I or II respectively. Depending on the RtI model used within a given state, tier III could be "placement in special education" or more intensive intervention in which the student may be referred

for testing for special education if he/she does not demonstrate adequate response (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Shapiro, 2013).

In addition to the tiered interventions, RtI has several other important components. These include universal screening, progress monitoring, and data driven decision making (DDDM) (Fuchs, 2007; Shapiro, 2013). Universal screening and progress monitoring are important factors that provide data or information about both school and student achievement (Marsh, Pane & Hamilton, 2006). The use of the data, such as standardized curriculum-based measures, to drive decision making for the purpose of changing or modifying instruction has great potential for increasing at-risk student achievement (Carlson, Borman, & Robinson, 2011; May & Robinson, 2007). For this reason, researchers and policy makers advocate for the use of RtI within K-12 systems as a possible and promising tool to increase at-risk student achievement and bridge the achievement gap (Carlson, Borman, & Robinson, 2011; May & Robinson, 2007, IDEA, 2004).

**Response to Intervention in high schools.** RtI is a K-12 initiative, yet research has mainly focused on early elementary settings with researcher-led implementation (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2004; Jenkins, Schiller, Blackorby, Thayer, & Tilly, 2013). Only a few studies have been conducted in middle schools and were again researcher-led reading interventions (Faggella-Luby & Wardwell, 2011; Vaughn et al., 2011). All of the secondary research on RtI currently available has been researcher-led. Thus there is a gap in the research related to RtI implemented in high schools (Fisher & Frey, 2013). Because RtI was originally intended to address reading difficulties at the early elementary level (Sansosti, Goss, & Noltemeyer, 2011; Sansosti, Noltemeyer, & Goss, 2010) the lack of



research within high schools is not surprising. However, as IDEA (2004) has opened the door for RtI implementation within the K-12 system, there is a growing interest within the research community as to whether it can be successfully implemented within high schools and whether it can assist in reducing the achievement gap given the growth of the gap between 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades (Bender & Shores, 2007; D. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; NCES, 2012; Sansosti et al., 2010). Thus, the aim of this study is to examine teacher perceptions of data driven decision making (DDDM) in an RtI framework within high school settings.

### **A Framework for DDDM within RtI**

Placement and instructional decisions within and between the tiers of an RtI framework, as described above, relies upon the effective use of DDDM. DDDM is the systematic collection and analysis of various types of data to guide instructional decision making for the purpose of improving the academic outcomes of students and the success of schools (Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006; Sansosti et al., 2010). An important component within the framework of RtI, DDDM has promise for improving student outcomes because teachers engage in systemic use of various forms of data such as valid assessments, student information and progress monitoring to make informed decisions. Using these forms of data to make appropriate instructional decisions has been shown to improve the academic achievement of students at-risk for school failure (Marsh et al., 2006).

Use of standardized assessments and progress monitoring of data to make instructional and placement decisions provides several benefits for teachers, administrators and district personnel. First, it satisfies federal accountability

requirements from NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) because it falls under evidence-based practices for instruction. Second, over-identification of CLD students for special education services may be reduced with the proper engagement of DDDM within the RtI framework (Carlson et al., 2011; Deno, Fuchs, Marston, & Shin, 2001; Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005; Wayman, 2005; Wayman, Cho, Jimerson, & Spikes, 2012). Finally, teachers can make meaningful and informed instructional decisions using assessments such as curriculum based assessments for progress monitoring; research has shown increases in the academic achievement of students' at-risk of academic failure (Rinaldi, Averill, & Stuart, 2011). Research supports meaningful engagement of DDDM within an RtI framework. Mandinach, Honey, Light, and Bunner (2008) provided a comprehensive framework that illustrates a technique in which to use DDDM (see Figure 1).

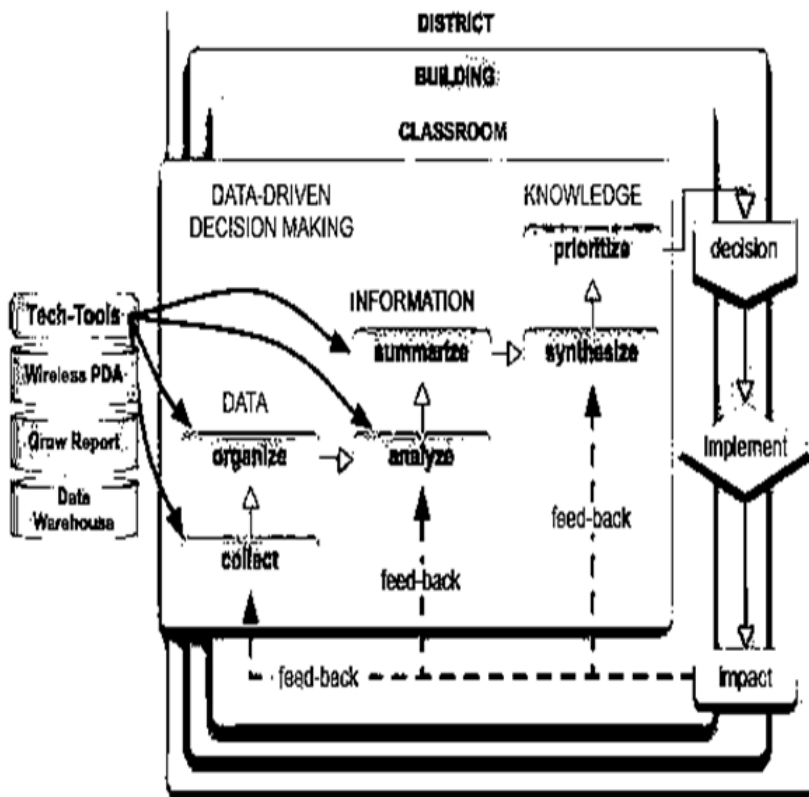


Figure 1: Framework of data-driven decision making by Mandinach, Honey, Light, & Brunner (2008). Visual Representation of data use for instructional decision making.

Mandinach's et al. (2008) framework is based on principles of systems thinking which posits that humans live in a web of inter-dependence. Mandinach and colleague's (2008) framework illustrates this concept as it incorporates the use of multiple types of data from different origins that can be used for DDDM. Further, the framework indicates that the organized data is transformed into *information*. Information, in terms of this framework, means that the data is given meaning and is then connected to the specific context of interest. All the information is then synthesized and prioritized to become *knowledge*. Knowledge is used to inform different types of decisions. Of particular interest is how knowledge is used to make instructional decisions, how those decisions are implemented and the evaluation (monitoring) of its impact. DDDM is a recursive process in which decisions need to be periodically re-evaluated in order to monitor progress and make nuanced decisions (Mandinach, Honey, Light, & Brunner, 2008). The combination of knowledge gained by assessments and other school data in conjunction with teacher instructional decision making within an RtI framework could provide the quality instructional environment struggling students need for academic achievement.

### **Data Driven Decision Making and Classroom Teachers**

The potential of DDDM within an RtI framework to support the academic achievement of CLD students is largely dependent on the successful implementation by teachers. To date, research on teachers' experiences with DDDM within RtI has focused on technical aspects such as perceived facilitators and barriers to their use of data (Darling-Hammond, 2009); interventions to increase teachers' use of data (Ingram, Louis, & Schroeder, 2004; Lachat & Smith, 2005), technology (Marsh, 2012; Turner &

Coburn, 2012; Huffman & Kalnin, 2003; Kyu, 2012; Pool, Carter, & Johnson, 2013) and teacher's use of curriculum based measures for on-going assessment for instructional decision making (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Crooks, 1988; Huffman & Kalnin, 2003; Kyu, 2012; Pool et al., 2013). These studies do not provide information on how teachers perceive and understand progress monitoring and DDDM within RtI in relation to the academic achievement of at-risk CLD students.

In addition, negligible data is available regarding the use of DDDM within an RtI framework in high school settings. Given that the achievement gap between CLD and White students widens in high school (ACT, 2012; NCES, 2009); research in this specific setting is needed. Teachers play an important role in student success, thus their perceptions of school reform efforts such as RtI should be examined. The purpose of this study therefore is to examine high school teachers' perceptions of progress monitoring for DDDM within RtI and perceptions of using that data to make instructional decisions for CLD students at-risk for academic failure.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

There is reason to believe that classroom teachers' use of DDDM within an RtI framework could help improve the academic outcomes of at-risk CLD students (Barton, 2006). Because of the historical structural inequalities found within schools, federal legislation supports RtI as a means to help provide quality instruction to all students. Within the RtI framework, DDDM involves the use of various types of data including standardized assessments for progress monitoring to make instructional decisions for students. Research from the fields of general and special education suggest that using standardized assessments and progress monitoring for instructional decision making can increase academic outcomes of at-risk students (Carlson et al., 2011). In order for at-risk students to have a chance to improve academically within the RtI framework, classroom teachers should have a strong understanding of how to use standardized assessments and progress monitoring for DDDM. Hence, there are several objectives for this chapter. The first is to review relevant and current empirical research in both general and special education settings of RtI implementation in secondary settings, with specific attention on high schools. Next, the chapter outlines the research on teacher perceptions of the RtI framework including their use of progress monitoring for DDDM. Then the chapter aims to provide an overview of DDDM in general and then examine recent research on the use of assessment data for progress monitoring including the use of technology for interpretation and analysis of data for DDDM. Finally, the chapter turns to the literature outlining teacher perception of accountability policy.

#### **RtI within Secondary Settings**

Empirical studies conducted at the elementary level indicate that RtI has potential as a tool for closing the achievement gap (Black & Wiliam, 1998). However, the research on this potential in secondary settings is scarce. As secondary students are developmentally different from elementary students and the academic demands of their curriculum are more intensive (Deshler, 2009), research in these settings is needed. The few empirical studies that were available focused on researcher-led reading interventions conducted in middle school settings (Hooper et al.; 2013; Vaughn et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2011; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012; Vaughn et al., 2010; Vaughn, Denton, & Fletcher, 2010). There are fewer studies conducted at the high school setting (Faggella-Luby & Wardwell, 2011; Fisher & Frey, 2013). Despite the scarcity of studies, the potential of RTI at the high school level is evident in the limited literature.

For example, the research of Vaughn and colleagues (2010 (a), 2010 (b), 2011, 2012) focused on a multi-year study examining reading interventions within an RtI framework for 6<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school students. These interventions were researcher led. The investigators provided professional development and training for teachers in tier I settings. In addition, they monitored and funded teachers to implement fluency, comprehension and vocabulary interventions 50 minutes a day over the course of one academic year within tier II and tier III settings (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012). With a sample of 1,867 middle school students with and without a disability, of which 1,083 were struggling readers, these researchers examined four major issues over the course of 3 years. These issues included: 1) the effect of primary and secondary intervention on middle school students (Vaughn, Cirino, Wanzek, et al., 2010); 2) the relative effect of group size on the reading progress of middle school students (Vaughn, Wanzek, Wexler,

et al., 2010); 3) the effect of individualized and standardized interventions on middle school students (Vaughn et al., 2011) and 4) the effect of intensive reading intervention for 8<sup>th</sup> graders with “persistently inadequate responses to intervention” (Vaughn et al., 2012). The first issue examined the effect of a researcher-led tier II intervention for 6<sup>th</sup> grade students in comparison to a teacher-led tier II intervention. They found a small positive effect ( $d = 0.16$ ) for the researcher-led intervention, while there was only a negligible effect for the teacher-led intervention. They also found that the researcher-led group scored significantly higher on word attack, spelling and the state accountability measure (Vaughn, Cirino, Wanzek, et al., 2010).

The second study showed that group size had little effect on reading progress; however, they did find that there was a higher percentage of students in the large-group treatment that passed the state-level reading assessment (Vaughn, Wanzek, Wexler, et al., 2010). The third study indicated that students placed in individualized interventions did not outperform those in standardized interventions (Vaughn et al., 2011). The most recent study supported findings from reading interventions that indicated that older struggling readers need more intensive and longer interventions, though the study did not explain if these students would benefit more from standardized or individualized interventions (Vaughn et al., 2012). However, even with intensive daily interventions, “8<sup>th</sup> graders with severe reading disabilities did not improve their reading performance relative to their average age peers but they did not lose any further ground” (Vaughn et al., 2012, p. 522). Thus, Vaughn and colleagues’ (2012) study found that very little difference, or change, was made with the use of their RtI intervention. They posited that this lack of difference could be because an intervention plan done 50 minutes a day for an academic year is not

enough for significant findings. Additionally, they found that the size of the group receiving the interventions (which ranged from 3-5 and 10-15) did not have a significant effect on outcomes.

Vaughn and colleagues have added a tremendous amount of knowledge to the field by quantitatively examining the effects of middle school reading interventions within an RtI framework (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012; Vaughn et al., 2011; Vaughn, Cirino et al., 2010; Vaughn, Wanzek, et al., 2010). From this work, future studies can plan for the challenges that accompany measuring change in performance within an RtI framework at the secondary level. In addition, future research has the advantage of knowing that researcher-led interventions are more effective than those led by teachers. However, these studies only provide information regarding reading interventions for middle school students. And although the research serves as a comparison of the outcomes of researcher-led interventions with that of teacher-led interventions, it does not provide any guidance for schools that do not have the resource of a university researcher for assistance. Additionally, the studies do not include information concerning teacher perceptions of their implementation of RtI, nor does it speak to the unique challenges of providing interventions within a high school setting where teachers must face issues of graduation and dropout rates (Barton, 2006).

A study by Faggella-Luby and Wardwell (2011) also examined the effects of reading interventions for at-risk middle school students (grades 5-6). Specifically, the researchers examined the effects of a story structure intervention, typical practice by reading specialists and sustained silent reading within a tier II setting on student outcomes. The story structure intervention was provided by 1<sup>st</sup> year teachers in a masters'



program at from a university. There were five teacher participants in the study and 86 fifth and sixth grade at-risk students. Students were randomly assigned into the three reading intervention conditions. The typical practice intervention was given by veteran teachers at the middle school (12 to 29 years of experience). Using a posttest only design, they found that “behaviors that were associated with successful reading, such as their story structure and “typical practice” instruction conditions were needed in order to impact comprehension as well as continued practice (i.e. silent sustained reading)” (Faggella-Luby & Wardwell, 2011, p. 44). They also found mixed results, specifically with their group of 5<sup>th</sup> graders. Their data indicated that 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the sustained silent reading group performed better or equal to the story structure intervention group. However, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the “typical practice” group performed poorly on their outcome measures (cloze, strategy use test and a standardized reading comprehension test) in comparison to both groups. Researchers posited that the “typical practice” instruction limited teachers’ use of specific reading strategies and may have accounted for a portion of the poor outcomes. This study reaffirms the importance of explicit instruction and sustained reading opportunities for students at-risk for reading failure. Similar to the research by Vaughn and colleagues (2010 (a), 2011, 2012), this study does provide important empirical data on the outcomes of middle school students receiving interventions within an RtI framework.

As states are implementing RtI across the K-12 setting, having a solid empirical research base on the implementation of RtI across all secondary settings, including high schools is paramount. One of the few studies that examined the implementation of an RtI model in high school was conducted by Fisher and Frey (2013). These investigators

examined the implementation of an RtI model in a small urban high school. The school had a diverse population of 444 students. Using a qualitative case study method, these researchers interviewed 23 teachers, collected field notes and student outcome data (grades, attendances etc.). They found that over the course of two years the school improved in terms of fidelity of RtI implementation and student achievement. From year one to year two core instruction had improved and student GPA increased.

However, Fisher and Frey (2013) also stated that improvement was still needed and found four major themes that emerged from their research. First they discovered that the whole school had to be involved for successful implementation. The focus was no longer on individual teachers doing the best they could to help students but having a school-wide effort in place in which all school personnel participated. In conjunction with whole school involvement, they found that meaningful and flexible professional development greatly influenced the success of RtI implementation at a school-wide level. Second, they noted that assessments and progress monitoring were critical for operating RtI in the high school setting. They found that a lack of assessment data resulted in an inability to provide meaningful intervention to individual students. Third, they discovered that having personnel assigned to coordinating intervention efforts provided the momentum teachers needed to stay focused on student achievement. The fourth theme concerned scheduling intervention efforts to supplement core instruction. This last theme relates to when and how to provide interventions at tier II and III. Participants found through trial and error that having students in class for tier II intervention worked better than having a resource room or pulling them out of class. For tier III, participants found that having small group tutoring sessions during lunch or after school fit best within the

school schedule. Overall, after a period of two years of providing professional development and coaching on RtI they found that RtI can be successfully implemented in high schools and that student achievement can improve (Fisher & Frey, 2013). The authors also found from student outcome data that there was subgroup improvement over the course of the implementation. Black, Hispanic and low-income students with and without disabilities demonstrated improvement on language arts and math assessments; “The achievement gap narrowed over the 2 years despite the fact that White students performed better over that same time” (Fisher & Frey, 2013, p. 46).

This study has important implications. With consistent professional development and coaching over time, RtI can make positive changes within high schools for the increase in both teacher knowledge and student achievement. The researchers acknowledged the importance of readily available assessments and progress monitoring for instructional decision making. They also provide valuable information regarding when and where to offer tier II and tier III interventions within high schools. Although they mentioned the frustration of school personnel when assessment data was not readily available, they did not examine how this affected DDDM and overall classroom instruction within an RtI framework. In addition this high school population was relatively small; consequently, it is not possible to compare its findings to large urban schools or schools that typically do not have university sponsored support for implementation.

Fisher and Frey’s (2013) research did not include teacher perspective of RtI at the high school level. However, a study by Sanger, Friedli, Bruncken, Snow and Ritzman (2012) provided information on secondary teacher perspectives of RtI to fill this gap in

the literature. There were a total of 18 educators from six middle schools and four high schools in this study. These educators consisted of six classroom teachers, seven speech language pathologists, four school psychologists and one paraprofessional. These investigators used a mixed-methods design to understand educators' reactions before and after an implementation of an RtI model. The methodology consisted of focus groups, observations, interviews and survey questions. Sanger and colleagues suggested the importance of four emerging themes: 1) challenges and concerns 2) support for the model 3) implementation considerations and 4) experts in special education and communication disorders. Most of the reactions fell within the challenges and concerns theme. Educators were concerned about the power struggle between general and special education teachers regarding who was in charge of the "RtI classrooms". There were also concerns about using a three tier model geared for elementary settings in secondary settings. In addition, there was a theme of support for the model. Educators noted that using resources normally allocated for special education purposes within the general education settings provided greater flexibility (Sanger et al., 2012). Within the theme concerning implementation considerations, participants recognized the importance of discussing screening, progress monitoring, instruction and identification for instructional decision making was better than relying on their personal impressions. Lastly, they found that because of the complex nature of interventions for individual students, it is very important to have the expertise of inter-disciplinary RtI teams. Like the Fisher and Frey (2013) study, this investigation provided important information from a high school perspective. In addition, these studies provided meaningful information about educators' understanding and reactions to the implementation of an RtI model.

### **Teacher Perceptions of DDDM within RtI**

As stated above, there was limited research examining teacher perceptions of being accountable for student outcomes within an RtI framework, however there is budding research regarding teachers' perceptions of DDDM within an RtI framework.

Currently, there is little data that provides empirical information on teachers' perceptions of DDDM within an RtI framework. Further, there is limited research examining high school teachers' perception of the RtI framework and their perceptions of its impact on student outcomes. However, this information is critical because teachers play an important role in the implementation of policy mandates. It is important to know their thoughts, perceptions and beliefs regarding critical components of RtI because their perceptions may help identify supports needed (i.e. augmenting professional development, providing additional personnel etc.) to increase the success of an RtI framework and DDDM within high schools. It should be noted that the limited research available on teacher perceptions of RtI was conducted with elementary teachers using the same research team (Rinaldi and colleagues, 2010-2012). This research team conducted a three-year longitudinal study with eight self-selected participants in one elementary school. The elementary school site for this study was a pilot school in which school personnel, not the district, had control over budgeting, staffing, curriculum and scheduling. In addition teachers received support from researchers from a collaborating university. The study by Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor and Cardarelli (2010) examined the perceptions of elementary teachers of the RtI change process after the first year of implementation (Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010; Rinaldi et al., 2011). Using consensual qualitative research analysis (a combination of comprehensive process

analysis, grounded theory analysis and interviews) as their methodology, they found mixed results on teacher perceptions of RtI. Teachers were positive about the reform effort and the use of data to inform instruction; however, they struggled with knowing when to refer English language learners to special education, lack of time allotted for communication and collaboration as well as adjusting how to use data for slower learners.

Rinaldi, Averill, and Stuart (2011) found that teacher perceptions of RtI changed over time. The study was the same university-school collaboration; however, it examined the results over three years of implementation. Using focus groups to collect data and grounded theory techniques to analyze it, the researchers were able compare teacher perceptions on four categories (the improvement of delivery of core instruction, the use of data and collaboration in teaching practices, the decrease in special education referral rate and the shift in school culture regarding ELLs) over the years. From year one to year three, researchers found that teachers demonstrated improvement in the delivery of core instruction; referred students to special education less; viewed RtI as more effective when coupled with increased time for collaboration and problem solving; and that teachers were putting students first (Rinaldi et al., 2011).

The results of the study were mostly positive but there were some challenges. Teachers were worried that the school culture would change because of several reasons: 1) if the principal were to be moved to another school 2) because of the high turnover in teachers within their school and 3) because of the demographic changes within the student population. Specifically, over the three years of the study there was an increase in the number of ELLs enrolled in the school. Overall, both this study and the study by Greenfield et al. (2010) provide useful knowledge concerning elementary teachers'

perceptions of the implementation of an RtI framework within their school. They also provide rigorous qualitative data concerning the perceptions of eight teachers from the first year to the third year of implementation. However, these studies were conducted in an atmosphere of tremendous support from the school principal, teachers and outside university staff. It is not possible to transfer these results to a school that does not have such support. Furthermore, the study does not provide information specifically on how teachers use data to make instructional decisions within their classrooms or how teachers' perspective of the RtI framework relates to their perspective of student achievement.

In an examination of teacher perspectives of RtI from a different lens, Stuart, Rinaldi and Higgins-Averill (2011) investigated teachers' perspectives as being agents of change within the RtI framework. Looking at RtI from a social justice framework, these researchers stated that their goal was to give voice to K-5 elementary teachers who just completed the first year of RtI. These researchers used the same data (focus group interviews, individual interviews, questionnaires and observational field notes) as Greenfield et al (2010) and Rinaldi et al (2011) studies but used data from year two and a constant comparative method for data analysis. Studying the change from the first year of implementation to the second year of implementation, these researchers found that the educators' perceptions of RtI changed. The study indicates that the participants had clearer goals for themselves and how they could collaborate to develop and deliver instruction within an RtI framework (Stuart et al., 2011). Further, their perceptions of themselves and their planning abilities greatly influenced their views on student achievement. Overall, Stuart and colleagues (2011) found that there was an overall satisfaction with the special education referral process, an enhanced sense of efficacy

with progress monitoring, increased satisfaction with collaborating and a sense that they could be agents of change. Stuart et al. (2011) posit that because of the systematic process of RtI and the individualized instruction given to students, once teachers got used to the new RtI framework (and with the help of supportive administrators and professional workshops) teachers were more secure of where their students were academically. This gave them a sense of autonomy and personal efficacy within their school environment and supports the notion that they are agents of change. This study provides a unique perspective on teacher perceptions of RtI. Although the study drew from the same data source as the Greenfield et al. (2010) and Rinaldi et al. (2011) studies (and so has the same limitations), it sheds light on teachers' feeling of self-empowerment and autonomy within an environment of education reform. Given continuous support and guidance, there is hope that the RtI framework can be a tool embraced by teachers, and in turn, positively affect their DDDM for instruction.

Unlike the research mentioned above, Swanson, Solis, Ciullo and McKenna's (2012) examined the perceptions and instructional practices of 17 special education teachers in a school that was not receiving university support. This two year study focused on elementary special education teachers (grades 3-5) who worked in a school district that had an RtI framework in place for five years prior to the study. Swanson and colleagues (2012) divided the findings from the special education teachers' perceptions of RtI in two broad categories: benefits of RtI and challenges of RtI. The perceived benefits of RtI included components such as early intervention, benefits of small groups, meeting student needs, collaboration with other staff members, reduced stigma of special education, and enjoyment of teaching tier II groups. Challenges included increased



paperwork, schedule changes, need for additional staff, increased number of student school-wide assessments, and increased number of meetings. This study adds to the literature by examining special education teachers' perspectives on RtI within a non-research manipulated setting, using focus groups and observational methodology. However, this study does not examine two key components of RtI. These include how teachers use data gathered within the RtI framework to make instructional decisions and the use of progress monitoring in classrooms. In addition, the study, like the ones before it, illustrates the lack of research on teacher perspectives on components of RtI within a high school setting.

A study by Cavendish, Harry, Menda, Espinosa & Mahotiere (under review) provides research findings that illuminate teacher perceptions of RtI. The study took place in Florida and examined the State's RtI implementation initiative. The researchers conducted the study within two schools, an elementary school and a K-8. Their study had a total of 30 participants that consisted of three district administrators, five school psychologists, five school administrators, four reading coaches, three RtI interventionists, two school counselors and eight teachers. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and observations. Cavendish et al. (under review) used grounded theory methodology for data analysis. Their analysis resulted in three key themes tied to Fullan, Cuttress and Kilcher's (2005) system change framework. The three key themes that emerged were 1) personnel preparation for RtI, 2) school personnel assumptions about students' abilities, and 3) external pressures: district decisions and state mandates. The findings included data from observations of DDDM meetings as well as educators' perceptions of RtI. Regarding DDDM, they found that administrators had difficulty

explaining how to read data for progress monitoring (i.e. the meaning of rate or slope of progress) thus constraining the use of DDDM. They also found that due to the specific time frame the state mandated for RtI to be implemented, the district's limited professional development resources were strained and could not provide all the resources required for the reform change. The introduction of a new assessment instrument created an atmosphere of confusion for many of the educators who were to use the results for DDDM (Cavendish et al., under review). The results of this study underscore the challenges of implementing an RtI framework in schools without sufficient support and resources. Unlike the research by Greenfield et al. (2010); Rinaldi et al. (2011) and Stuart et al. (2012), this study was not conducted in schools that had external university support. The study highlights the need for proper support and resources and provides important information regarding district-led RtI implementation within elementary settings. Additionally, teacher perspectives are highlighted regarding using assessments for progress monitoring. The study also provides an insight into DDDM team meetings, which may provide a means for improving other aspects of the RtI initiative, such as instructional delivery and increased student achievement.

### **Assessment and Progress Monitoring for DDDM within RtI Frameworks**

Fisher and Frey's (2013) study supports the assertion of the importance of DDDM, specifically the role of assessment for progress monitoring on student achievement. These two components provide the relevant information needed for proper DDDM within an RtI Framework. In order for proper DDDM to transpire, assessment tools for meaningful progress monitoring should be identified, available and utilized. Therefore, it is important to know what assessments have utility for DDDM.

Research indicates that standardized curriculum based measurements (CBMs) (a type of formative assessment) are used most by teachers for assessment and progress monitoring of student growth (Fisher & Frey, 2013). The RtI and reading literature establishes strong evidence to support the validity of standardized CBMs for instructional decision making within schools (Marsh et al., 2006) and its role in increasing student achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Huffman & Kalnin, 2003; Kyu, 2012; Pool et al., 2013; P. Stecker et al., 2005; Stecker, Lembke, & Foegen, 2008). In a literature review of 250 studies, Black and Wiliam (1998) found that formative assessments (such as standardized CBMs) are useful for raising academic standards and, when used appropriately for instructional decision making, can improve the achievement of at-risk students. The researchers pointed out that many of the studies they examined arrived to the conclusion that the use of formative assessment for progress monitoring “improves the academic outcomes of low achievers more than other students thus reducing the range of achievement while raising achievement overall” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 140).

In another literature review, Stecker, Fuchs and Fuchs (2005) examined the efficacy of standardized CBMs in reading and math on achievement for students with and without disabilities. They found that the use of standardized CBMs for progress monitoring can increase overall student achievement, but with caveats. CBMs used for measuring successful outcomes for students with disabilities were reported to rely heavily on systematic data-based decision rules, progress monitoring and continuous feedback to students. Stecker et al. (2005) described systematic data-based decision rules as a progress monitoring condition in which teachers measured oral reading twice weekly, compared the slope of progress for every 7-10 data points against the goal line and made

instructional modifications when necessary (p. 801). They found that students in the general education population performed better when standardized CBM used for progress monitoring were coupled with peer-assisted learning strategies (Stecker et al., 2008). Thus, this study suggests that the use of standardized CBMs for progress monitoring within a structured framework that provides continuous feedback to students can offer the foundation needed to increase student academic growth.

The literature reviews above suggest that standardized CBMs are useful forms of assessments that support student academic achievement. However, Wayman, Wallace, Wiley, Ticha and Espin (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of standardized CBMs for reading assessments (CBM-R) specifically examining the technical validity of oral/fluency CBM-R for progress monitoring. They found that CBM-R can benefit student achievement but that it was important to avoid the one size fits all mentality that is commonly found with the use of oral CBM-R use. These researchers suggests that in place of using oral CBM-R indiscriminately, research should provide more evidence of the validity of alternative CBM-Rs, specifically word identification and Maze, for progress monitoring of younger and older student reading achievement.

The research on CBM-R provides a cautionary but overall supportive take on CBM-R as a tool that provides valid and reliable information on student academic outcomes. Because CBM-Rs are relatively quick to administer and are supported by research, districts and schools are already using them as assessment data within their RtI models for universal screening, base line testing, and progress monitoring (Ardoin, Christ, Morena, Cormier, & Klingbeil, 2013).

Studies by researchers such as Griffiths, VanDerHeyden, Skokut and Lillies (2009) support the grade appropriate use of oral CBM-R for progress monitoring within an RtI framework. In their study, Griffiths et al. (2009) qualitatively examined 27 fourth grade students to determine if a selected standard reading passage could be used to evaluate progress over time. They found that in comparison to using equated reading passages, using a single passage for progress monitoring worked just as well. Griffith et al. (2007) posits that using the same reading passage (in place of finding a reading passage that is equal in length, level and difficulty every time progress monitoring took place) was more efficient and just as effective. Their results did not find any instances of inflated performance due to multiple exposures to the same passage. This study provides interesting information concerning a single CBM for progress monitoring, but most importantly it demonstrates the importance of progress monitoring of student outcomes to help inform instructional decisions. There were some limitations to this study. The fact that the study only had 27 participants limits the ability for generalization. In addition, this study like many others examining CBM use and progress monitoring is focused within the elementary setting. Limited research on progress monitoring for DDDM is available within the high school setting. Nevertheless, it is one of the few studies that empirically examine progress monitoring for DDDM within an RtI framework.

As progress monitoring is an important aspect of DDDM within an RtI framework, it is important to have readily available technology to display results. The method in which assessment for progress monitoring is presented, interpreted and used within an RtI framework requires more than hard copies of assessment results. The current era of technology use and an abundance of information demand quick

interpretation and analysis. Thus it is important to have an efficient interface for finding, manipulating and analyzing various types of data all in one place for proper DDDM (Mandinach et al., 2008). The current research on technology and DDDM has many indications. First, the research indicates that technology can allow for easy access to needed information. Second, technology use helps teachers' instructional practices. Lastly, the research on technology suggests that technology use can create barriers to data use for instructional purposes (Lachat & Smith, 2005).

To illustrate the first point mentioned above, a qualitative study examining the role of data warehouses (large databases for reporting and data analysis) found that using this form of technology allowed for easier access to needed data. Long, Rivas, Light and Mandinach (2008) interviewed district, school and education instructional staff and examined a large urban school district's use of a data warehouse for decision making purposes. These researchers observed how multiple forms of data (i.e. grades, student attendance, student demographics and assessment scores) were used at the district, school and classroom level (Miami Dade County Public Schools, 2013; Long, Rivas, Light, & Mandinach, 2008). Of particular interest they found that at the school level, principals used data outputs for conversations starters (with teachers and parents) and presentations, identifying student needs and as a means of encouraging teachers to use data for instruction. At the classroom level, teachers used data to differentiate instruction (particularly their writing assignments), to examine student assessments, to identify the academic level of students who enter during the middle of the school year, and to share student data with parents. Overall the participants in the study credited the data

warehouse for helping them become more efficient in interpreting student data for decision making.

To illustrate the second point concerning technology helping instructional practices, a large scale mixed methods study by (Long et al., 2008) examined the use of Grow Reports (an interface used by the state of New York to organize raw data into information that is aligned with New York State standards) by teachers and administrators in school-based settings. Brunner and colleagues (2005) found that teachers and administrators used these reports to help with their decision making. In particular, they found that the reports helped teachers' instructional practices in four ways 1) meeting the needs of diverse learners, 2) supporting conversations with parents, 3) shaping teachers' professional development by having them reflect on their own practice and 4) encouraging self-directed learning by giving interpreted data to students (Brunner et al., 2005). They found that administrators (which included principals and superintendents) use of data from the Grow Reports fell into four categories, 1) identifying needs and targeting resources, 2) planning, 3) supporting conversations with teachers and parents and lastly, 4) shaping professional development for teachers.

Both the Long et al. (2008) and Brunner et al. (2005) studies indicate that using technology can provide an efficient environment for quick and effective DDDM. As school-based personnel are working with multiple students, the technology used for interpreting data is crucial for meaningful decision making. Understanding the importance of data use for educational decision making, Lachat and Smith (2005) examined issues that promoted or hindered data use by teachers. Lachat and Smith (2005) conducted a case study of five urban high schools over the course of four years.

Their research found several factors that influenced the use of data for decision making among administrators and teachers. These factors included: 1) the importance of timely and accurate data, 2) the need for having the capacity to disaggregate the data, 3) the ability to collaborate and use data organized around a set of questions and 4) the leadership structures enhance and increase data use (Brunner et al., 2005). Furthermore, the investigators stated that two of the five high schools in their study had high-functioning data teams because their teams consisted of both administrators and teachers. The data teams increased communication among school staff about the trends and outcomes demonstrated from the data. Consequently, the data teams were able to overcome staff perceptions of inaccuracies within the data because they were members of the faculty/school based teams.

As mentioned briefly above, the study indicated that teachers needed sufficient time for collaborative inquiry that focused on clear questions so that they could improve their data use and interpretation skills to help support student achievement (Lachat & Smith, 2005). The fact that schools analyzed in this study were at-risk and located within high poverty school districts demonstrates that data use can be implemented well within these environments. However, this study examined schools that were provided a data coach by the researchers. The reality of school reform policy implementation is that most schools do not have the luxury of a full time highly trained coach from a university supporting their data use and interpretation efforts. This reality also speaks to the complexity of implementing a school reform policy within a high school setting.

### **Teacher Perceptions of Accountability**



Increasing teacher use of on-going progress monitoring data to make informed instructional decisions and increase student performance are major goals of an RtI model. However, these goals are also linked to standards based accountability through federal mandates such as NCLB and competitive grants like the Race to the Top. These standards based accountability policies vary by state but typically include the use of high stake tests that assess student progress on specific state standards. The outcomes of these tests are used to assess school and teacher performance ratings. Depending on the test outcomes, schools and teachers are rewarded or penalized.

There's a great deal of opinion regarding the merits of accountability policies. Proponents of these policies argue that accountability provides objective information for school-based decision making and reduces the influence of teacher bias (Lachat & Smith, 2005); that accountability has made positive changes for minority and poor students by signaling out these typically low performing groups for extra support through the use of disaggregated data (Coleman et al., 1997; Muller & Schiller, 2000; Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000); and that accountability policies has been shown to further educational equity with the help of strong leadership (Fuller & Johnson, 2001). On the other hand, opponents of accountability policies believe they increase inequality because low-performing students are singled out and thus marginalized by teachers (Clotfelter & Ladd, 1996; Koschoreck, 2001; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000). Others believe they narrow the curriculum thus reducing creative instruction and critical thinking (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Jacob, 2005) and as currently implemented, it is not believed to produce the desired outcomes of increased student academic performance (Berryhill, Linney, & Fromewick, 2009; Valli & Buese, 2007).

Research has also included teachers in the conversation regarding perceptions of accountability mandates. As teachers are responsible for instructing students and are recipients of consequences of test outcomes, it is important to know teachers perceptions of these imposed mandates. Most of the literature regarding teacher perception of accountability mandates centers on their thoughts of high-stake tests (Assaf, 2006; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Flores & Clark, 2003; Jones & Egley, 2004; Moon, Brighton, Jarvis, & Hall, 2007). Tests are considered high stakes when they are linked to rewards or penalties such as grade promotion/retention, graduation/detainment, teacher performance ratings and “good/bad” school grades. Consequently, when discussing accountability policies much of the focus is on high-stake tests. One such study by Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (2000) examined elementary and middle school teachers’ perceptions of high stakes testing. Using qualitative methods, they found that teachers perceived tests as disempowering. Specifically, teachers commented that high stake tests decreased their decision making about best practices for their students. The study also found that although teachers had negative comments about testing, they were not arguing for the abolition of testing or standards. Teachers believe that standards and tests have merit when aligned to appropriate outcomes.

The sentiment that accountability measures were valid and necessary was also found in Flores and Clark’s (2003) exploration of teachers’ perceptions of high-stakes tests in Texas. Using observational journals and e-journals from 58 pre-service and in-service teachers, the researchers found that teachers were not against accountability, that they found it to be valid, but teachers were against the overemphasis on test results.

Teachers in the study believed that the focus on tests created an unbalanced curriculum that led to potentially inappropriate instructional decisions. In addition, the study found that teachers were having second thoughts about pursuing or remaining within the teaching profession. This study's findings were echoed in a 2004 study by Jones and Egley.

Jones and Egley (2004) used survey data to quantitatively examine teacher perceptions of high-stakes tests. They found 10 themes from their survey data. The themes could be broadly divided in to two sections: negative and positive perceptions of testing. Most of the findings indicated that teachers had a negative perception of testing. These findings included negative comments regarding: the accuracy of the tests (comparing students regardless of SES, abilities or poor test takers); the effect of the tests on curriculum (such as narrowing the curriculum); the effects on teaching and learning (test takes time from learning and stifles creativity); the effects on student and teacher motivation (reported too much pressure on students and teachers, neither enjoyed school, teachers wanting to leave the profession); and the emphasis on test scores. However, similar to the Flores and Clark (2003) study there were some teachers surveyed who believed that testing and being accountable had a valid purpose. Teachers in the Jones and Egley (2004) study also found: that tests hold teachers, parents and/or students accountable; the teaching curriculum included higher expectations for teachers; that they believed there was a positive effect regarding student learning more and causing teachers to rethink teaching practices; and that tests caused higher expectations or motivations for teachers and students. The last theme indicated that teachers felt that accountability was good or necessary but with conditions or limitations.

Many of the themes that developed in Jones and Egley's (2004) study were also highlighted in Vernaza's (2012) study of Title 1 elementary teachers' perceptions of high stakes accountability in Florida. In particular, Vernaza's (2012) study highlighted that teachers' were not against accountability but they too added to the belief that accountability was legitimate but with conditions. For example, teachers stated that accountability should be contingent upon other factors such as student ability, behavior and mastery of previous grade level or parent involvement and home environment. Teachers in the study believed that they should be held accountable particularly for teaching standards. In these two studies, teachers voiced their opinion regarding the use of one test to determine student, teacher and school outcomes. This study differed as it focused on teachers working in Title 1 schools.

Research examining teacher perceptions of accountability, particularly with regards to high stakes testing, revealed that teachers were not against accountability or testing measures, but were struggling with pressures *caused* by these policy reforms. Teachers felt that they had to narrow the curriculum in order to meet state standards which eliminated creative and critical thinking. Teachers also expressed feeling pressure and discontentment such that they were contemplating leaving the profession. These studies examining teacher perceptions of high stakes testing brings the importance of teacher perspectives to the literature regarding this issue.

The above mentioned research does not directly address the potential or issues of accountability with regards to DDDM within the RtI framework. A study by Jacobs, Gregory and Hoppey (2009) attempted to shed light on this topic. The study aimed to understand the "qualitatively different ways that current teachers use data to inform their

instruction” (Vernaza, 2012). The researchers employed the qualitative method of phenomenology to explore how nine elementary teachers used data to inform instructional decision making. They found six themes that influenced how teachers used data. These findings were that data use: 1) required ongoing attention to multiple sources; 2) focused teachers’ attention on students’ needs; 3) created a sense of urgency and served as a catalyst for action; 4) led to change in professional practice; 5) required a sophisticated professional knowledge and lastly, 6) required a culture of support. The authors posited that the use of data has become more prominent because of the high stake nature of standardized tests. They note that the introduction of RtI called teachers to use data not only for “student needs but also curricular and instructional differentiation” (Jacobs, Gregory, Hoppey, & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009, p. 52).

This study provided meaningful information on how teachers use data within the current accountability environment as it outlined how teachers used data and to what degree the participants felt capable to engage in sophisticated data use. The study does not however, make an explicit connection between the uses of data for accountability purposes within an RtI framework. It only hinted that teachers will have to use data to make decisions within an RtI framework. Thus, it provided little detail on how teachers used data with regards to RtI within the climate of accountability.

The studies outlined in this section illustrated how teachers perceived high stakes tests as accountability tools. The studies indicated that although most teachers were not opposed to the notion of accountability or the need for testing, they did not like the pressures to teach the test and narrow the curriculum that was associated with these mandates. In addition, teachers believed that other factors should be taken into

consideration when evaluating teachers using these tools, such as student background and previous education. These studies provided important information regarding research of teacher perceptions of being accountable for student outcomes. However, there is scant research regarding teacher perceptions of RtI within the realm of accountability pressures.

The studies in this section provided results that illustrate the benefits and challenges for implementing the RtI framework from educators' perspectives; however there are still areas left unexamined. First, very few of the studies are conducted within a high school setting. Thus, the benefits and challenges that high school teachers experience are not fully evident within the current literature. Second, there are still unanswered questions concerning teacher perceptions of their use of DDDM for classroom instruction. The study by Cavendish et al. (under-review) provides preliminary information based on researcher observations of DDDM meetings; however it does not provide detailed information from teachers on their engagement of data for instructional decision making nor how they believe this use of data may influence student outcomes. Studies indicate that teachers are not opposed to being accountable but that other factors such as student background (SES, home environment, ability and behavior) should be taken into consideration. In addition there is limited research regarding DDDM within the accountability environment.

Many states have moved forward with implementing RTI within the K-12 system. How high school teachers perceive their DDDM within an RtI framework and how this perception relates to their expectations of student outcomes is not yet indicated through research. Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to examine the perceptions

of high school teachers on components of RtI (progress monitoring and DDDM) and 2) to examine their perceptions of the model's potential for improving academic achievement of CLD students at-risk for failure.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Method**

The aim of this study was to comprehensively explore two topics: (1) perceptions of high school teachers on components of RtI (progress monitoring and DDDM) and 2) their perceptions of the model for the academic achievement of CLD students at-risk for failure. Because this study utilized observations and interviews as a means of gathering data on teacher perceptions, I employed a qualitative approach for data analysis.

Qualitative research is defined as “a type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 10-11). This method provided a way of getting at “intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes and emotions” that numbers can obstruct or generalize in a manner that is inappropriate for the research questions of interest (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). Using a qualitative approach to research design provides rich data on a topic that has a limited research base.

### **Setting**

This study took place in a large culturally and linguistically diverse urban school district in the state of Florida. The school district had a student population of 347,997 that were 62% Latino, 27% Black, 9% White and 2% other (FLDOE, 2012). The high school students in the district had a passing rate of 37% in reading and 73% in math on the state’s standardized assessment. The two high schools selected, West High School and Lawrence Academy (pseudonyms), from this district had relatively comparable demographics to the district (see Table 1). The schools had higher percentages of



Hispanic students and slightly higher scores on the state standardized assessment in reading and math. Both schools received Title 1 funds. West High School and Lawrence Academy were chosen for this study because they were the only high schools that self-selected to have district support for RtI implementation.

**West High School.** This school employs 125 instructional staff members and four administrators (FLODE, 2012). There were 2,341 students served in grades 9-12. According to the School Improvement Plan (SIP) of 2009-2010, the demographic breakdown of students was as follows: 84% Hispanic, 6% White, 8% Black and 2% other. Fifty-nine percent of students receive free or reduced lunch, 20% of students were English language learners and 11% were identified as students with disabilities (FLDOE, 2012) (see Table 1).

**Lawrence Academy.** According to the 2012-2013 SIP, Lawrence Academy employs 168 full time instructional staff members and six administrators. This school serves 3,223 students in grades 9-12. The demographic breakdown of students was as follows: 92% Hispanic, 5% White, 2% Black and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander. Sixty-nine percent of students qualified for free/reduced lunch (FLDOE, 2012).

Table 1.  
*School Demographics*

	<b>West High School</b>	<b>Lawrence Academy</b>	<b>District</b>
Teaching Staff #	125	166	20,322
Administrators #	4	6	963
Student Population#	2,341	3,400	347,997
%Free/Reduce Lunch	75	69	72
% Hispanic	84	94	62
% Black	8	1	27
% Passing Reading	42	48	37
% Passing Math	73	79	73

Note: Percentage taken from school district reports spanning 2009-2013 academic years

**District RtI model.** The school district adopted the Florida's Response to Intervention/Multi-tiered System of Supports (RtI/MTSS) model during the 2008-2009 school year. The district RtI plan was outlined in the problem solving/RtI (PS/RtI) manual. The PS/RtI model consisted of three tiers that progressively provided increasingly intensive intervention and progress monitoring based on student needs. The model required school leadership teams to engage in a four step problem solving process to determine student needs. This four step process consists of: Problem Identification, Problem Analysis, Plan Implementation and Program Evaluation (Florida Department of Education, 2012).

According to the school district, the outlined process above was supposed to meet the goals of:

Ensuring that ALL students receive rich learning experiences every year, in every setting, with every teacher, not merely in some years in some settings with some teachers. [Thus], the model not only looks at the learner, but also analyzes and manipulates the learning environment, the curriculum being taught and the instruction being delivered.

(Miami Dade County Public Schools, 2013)

## **Participants**

Participants were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). According to Gall et al. (2007), purposeful sampling allows researchers to select ‘cases’ that are more likely to be “information rich” regarding the purpose of a particular study. In the case of this study, purposeful sampling included selecting high school teachers that were part of the RtI process within schools that elected to receive district support. This selection process provided needed insider data to understand high school teacher experiences within the RtI framework.

Participants were selected based on the schools’ assistant principals’ statement that the ESOL (West High School) and math (Lawrence Academy) departments were selected for RtI efforts during the 2013-2014 school year. These statements were made during the RtI leadership team meetings. During the initial meeting I identified teachers that were involved in RtI. I recruited teachers that attended the meetings and asked about others that were involved but not in attendance. It was during the first meeting at Lawrence Academy that I learned that the math department was targeted to for RtI and that only one teacher was involved with the process. As this was unexpected, I also recruited the math department chair as she would be able to provide insight into notions of data use and provide information on RtI for her department.

Both schools in the study only targeted one department for RtI remediation. As stated earlier, West High School targeted RtI efforts within the ESOL department and Lawrence Academy targeted their efforts within the math department, in particular geometry and algebra 1. Thus, ESOL and math instructors were the participants of this study. There were a total of six participants. Four were from West High School and two

from Lawrence Academy. Three of the four teachers at West High School were ESOL teachers. The other was a special education math teacher placed in charge of the RtI process. There were five females and one male in this study. All but two teachers self-identified as Cuban. The other teachers self-identified as French or Colombian. All the teachers were career educators with years teaching spanning 10 to 42. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality (see Table 2).

Table 2.  
*Teacher Description*

<b>School</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Subject Area</b>	<b>Years Teaching</b>
Lawrence Academy	Ms. Lopez	Female	Cuban	Math	10
	Ms. Rodriguez	Female	Cuban	Math Coach	32
West High School	Ms. Flores	Female	French	ESOL 2 & 3	38
	Ms. Ramirez	Female	Colombian	ESOL 3 & 4	24
	Mr. Rodrigo	Male	Cuban	ESOL 1 & 2	42
	Ms. Solano	Female	Cuban	ESE Math	18

## **Procedures**

**Data sources.** Because this study was drawn from a larger study on RtI implementation that took place over three years (Cavendish & Harry, 2010-2013), the study required an IRB amendment. After the IRB amendment for was approved, permission was obtained from the schools' principals to interview targeted teachers in addition to observing RtI meetings and department meetings. Data collection was completed using traditional qualitative methods that included semi-structured interviews and taking detailed field notes during meeting observations (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Patton, 2002). Participants were interviewed twice during this study; once to get their perceptions of RtI and a second time for follow-up and general clarifications. The second interview was also used to follow up on any new information regarding RtI support or

implementation within their schools. In the end there were a total of 12 interviews, one math class tier II intervention observation, two department meetings, and three RtI meeting observations (see Table 3 for data sources).

Table 3.  
*Data Sources*

	<b>West High School</b>	<b>Lawrence Academy</b>	<b>Total Materials</b>
Interviews	8	4	12
Tier II Observations	0	1	1
RtI Meetings	1	2	3
Department Meetings	0	2	2
RtI Meeting Minutes	1	0	1

Note: Each participant was interviewed twice

**Observations.** Observations took place during RtI meetings, department meetings or during implementation of the math tier II intervention. RTI meeting observations were conducted as they were scheduled by the schools. Consequently they took place either before or after the interviews. These meetings lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours and all were audio recorded except the behavior RtI (RtI-B) meeting that took place at West High School. The two RtI meetings that I observed at Lawrence Academy included one or two district representatives, an assistant principal, an ESE teacher and the RtI lead math teacher. At times the student services chair (counselor) would become part of the group by asking and answering questions on issues of behavior as the meeting took place within her office. Interestingly, during these two meetings, both academic and behavioral RtI interventions were discussed. During these meetings I sat at the table as only an observer and took field notes.

In addition to observing the RtI meetings at Lawrence Academy, I also observed two math department meetings and their tier II intervention, which took place in the lead

RtI teacher's classroom on Saturday mornings. I was invited to attend the department meetings and RtI meetings. The department meetings provided information regarding how data was used by the math teachers. It was here that I was able to consent the math department chair for my study. The department meetings were observed and field notes were taken. These meetings were not audio recorded.

Further, I observed the lead math teacher provide instruction during the Saturday Math Academy. The Saturday math academy was the designated space for targeted students to receive the tier II remediation discussed during the RtI meetings. I observed this setting and took field notes for two hours. This observation was not audio recorded.

At West High School I observed an RTI-B meeting. The RtI-B meeting included the lead RtI teacher (an exceptional student education (ESE) math teacher), the ESE program specialist and an autism spectrum disorder teacher in charge of career prep and social/leisure skills. During this meeting I was an active participant. The lead RtI teacher asked for opinions regarding RtI terminology as she and the others developed an RTI-B plan for student services personnel. Members of the meeting also asked for my opinion regarding who to involve with RtI-B framework and subsequent meetings. This meeting was not audio recorded, however detailed field notes were taken immediately after the meeting.

It is important to note that West High School only held one RtI meeting regarding academics. This meeting wasn't planned in advance thus I was not able to attend. I did however receive the minutes of the meeting as well as an in depth verbal description of the meeting only 10 minutes after it ended (see Table 3).

**Interviews.** Once all participants completed consent forms, they were interviewed twice over the duration of the study. Interviews were scheduled as soon in the semester as possible (after IRB approval) and then again after an RtI meeting (if possible). If there was not another RtI meeting before the end of data collection then I interviewed the participant during the last week of data collection. Data was collected over the span of three months.

All 12 interviews were conducted individually and within the 6 teachers' natural setting (Patton, 2002). In the case of my participants, these interviews were conducted in their classrooms before or after school or during their lunch breaks. Each interview lasted for an average of 35 minutes and all but one participant was audio recorded. The department chair at Lawrence Academy stated that she preferred not to be recorded for both interviews.

The first round of interview questions was focused on two topics of interest. These included: 1) teacher use of data for decision-making within an RtI framework, and 2) their perceptions of RtI as a tool to improve student performance (see Appendix A for interview protocol). The semi-structured interview questions helped start and guide the interview, but also allowed participants to bring up new points as well as space for me to follow up on those leads. The second interview utilized an open ended interview format but with a focus on teacher perceptions of events that transpired during a previous RtI meeting and/or participants were asked to clarify responses from the first interview.

**Data Analysis.** Interviews and RtI meetings that were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The observations' field notes and interview transcripts from both schools were coded and stored within a qualitative software program called

Nvivo (QSR International, 2013). Grounded theory analysis techniques were used to code and categorize the data within this program. Grounded theory analysis was used to develop themes to make meaning of and find patterns within the interviews and observational field notes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The constant comparison method (CCM), an important component of a grounded theory analysis, was used consistently throughout the coding process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). CCM “is the process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories” (Creswell, 2013, p. 86). CCM helps provide standardization and rigor for the analysis of qualitative data.

Using Charmaz’s (2006) coding process, my analysis consisted of four phases of coding: initial coding, focus coding, conceptual categories and finally emerging themes. Initial coding was the first step in the coding process. This was done by providing active property names or codes for each incident within the documents, thus coding incident by incident (Charmaz, 2006). This process allows for quick coding that contains sections with meaningful and active material from the document. After coding each participant’s interview and the three observations, I had 240 initial codes. Next, those initial codes were grouped into focus codes. According to Charmaz (2006), “Focus coding is using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data” (p. 57). This intermediary coding phase allowed me to pare down the large number of initial codes created from all my documents into a smaller and manageable set of codes. By the end of the focus coding phase, I had a manageable set of 34 focus codes. After focus coding, I re-examined my data and regrouped it in an iterative process to develop and find conceptual categories. Conceptual categories contain meaningful and fully integrated



data which helped to find the emerging themes within my study. Peer debriefing (detailed in next section) was used during this stage of coding to support the fidelity of the findings. At the end of the conceptual category coding process, I was left with eight categories. The final step was creating emerging themes. During this process, the categories were taken and used to develop three themes that correlated the categories by describing their relationships. This end result was supported through narrative quotes taken from participants that express the specific category and theme.

As mentioned earlier, throughout all stages of coding I used the constant comparison method which helped to ensure the categories I found were rooted in the data and thus meaningful and relevant to my participants. In addition I wrote entries regarding my thought and analytical processes (memos) as I moved from concrete codes (focus coding) to more abstract categories (conceptual categories and themes). Using this methodology provided the rigor and structure needed to produce results consistent with the perceptions of the participants in the study.

### **Quality Indicators of Qualitative Research**

This section is provided to highlight the efforts taken to ensure the current study adhered to quality indicators of qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided the most respected (and cited) criteria of rigor within qualitative studies in their seminal text “Naturalistic Inquiry”. In the text, the authors suggested four techniques to support rigor within a qualitative study. These criteria include: credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability. Below are brief descriptions of each technique and how they were applied to this study.

**Credibility and confirmability.** Ensuring that the interpretations made within the study were “credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities” and credible to readers of qualitative studies includes providing evidence for credibility and confirmability (QSR International, 2013). Credibility can be done using four techniques of enhancing activities that increases the likelihood that credible findings will be produced: 1) Peer debriefing; 2) Negative case analysis; 3) Referential adequacy and 4) Member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Identified within the realm of “activities that create the likelihood of credible findings” were prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation. I engaged in as many applicable suggested activities listed for solidifying credibility considering the time constraint and scope of the study. However, prolonged engagement was a limitation of this study as the data collection phase was only three months. During my time in the field, I engaged in multiple opportunities to observe participants within their natural setting (persistent observation) as well as conducting interviews, observations and gathering school documents for data triangulation.

The first means listed of ascertaining credibility was through peer debriefing. As the title suggests, peer debriefing involves showing one’s data to a colleague to share ideas or interpretations. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), peer debriefing keeps the researcher “honest” by exposing her to searching questions (p. 308). I engaged in peer debriefing with my adviser and two colleagues. My adviser read and separately coded four interview transcripts. We met, discussed and compared codes up to the focus coding level. I also gave two transcripts (the same ones given to my adviser) to two colleagues to compare and discuss coding done at the conceptual category level. These colleagues and I

separately read and coded the same transcripts; we then met to discuss ideas regarding the meaning of the interviews and codes as well as possible interpretations. This process not only offered credibility to my study but also provided a fresh perspective on my data.

The next form of credibility listed was negative case analysis. Negative case analysis occurs during coding/analysis and involves the researcher examining the data for information that doesn't fit previous assumptions. During the coding process, I attempted to keep my interpretations close to the data thus using negative cases as a means to augment previously conceived categories that were confronted with differing data. Usually the differing data was presented through conferencing or debriefing with a peer or professor as they brought in a new perspective on the findings. For example, during a debriefing meeting with a colleague, I found that I left out an example of a teacher stating his beliefs of culture in a different manner than other teachers in the study. She reminded me that using that teacher's account is needed as a counter to what others were stating. Thus the negative case analysis was used in conjunction with peer debriefing.

The list of credibility criteria continues with referential adequacy. Referential adequacy concerns the accuracy of the data and the researcher's ability to verify the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To meet this criterion, I audio recorded as many of the interviews and observations as I could. Given the variety of situations and personalities encountered with any qualitative research, it was not possible for all participants to be audio recorded. However, all interviews and observations were transcribed and/or have been detailed in field notes.

The last technique used to support credibility within qualitative research is member checking. Member checking is defined as testing data, analytic categories,

interpretations and/or conclusions with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I engaged in member checking by verifying interview transcriptions with 50% (3) of my participants either in person or over email.

Triangulation was also used for the second form of rigor assurance, confirmability. Confirmability relates to the extent to which a study has objectivity. Triangulation of data provides a sense of objectivity because it can provide converging information from multiple sources. Using interviews, observations and school documents allowed me to check and compare the information I received from different angles.

**Transferability and dependability.** The last two ways of getting a relevant and rigorous qualitative research study is by providing a means of transferability and dependability. These were closely linked criteria as they both relate to the degree in which the findings can be replicated. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), in order for outsiders to reach the conclusion that one's study could be replicable in the qualitative tradition, one must provide thick and rich description. True replication of qualitative research is arguably impossible, however providing detailed and rich descriptions of participants' experiences could provide a vehicle for others to judge whether or not the study is applicable in other situations (transferable) and will return the same results (dependable) (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, I provided evidence of transferability and dependability through the use of rich and thick description of participant experiences by using meaningful quotes and detailed accounts of my observations.

Although I used many of the suggested quality indicators, the data may have been influenced by the imposed framework of the study. Below, I present information

regarding the possible influences of the imposed DDDM framework on teacher responses.

**The DDDM within RtI framework.** The DDDM within RtI framework guided or was imposed on this study, thus affecting the types of questions asked and answers received. This framework was imposed through the interview questions because there was an inherent assumption in the study that teachers knew the structure of RTI because of the availability of the district model manual and because the schools were part of a larger RtI study. Thus the questions were specifically geared at understanding DDDM and progress monitoring by high school teachers. The questions were informed by the section of Mandinach et al.'s (2006) framework (explained in the Introduction) concerning teacher knowledge of data to make decisions in addition to the feedback/response loop that resulted. Because the goal of the study was to get at teachers' perceptions of the specific components (progress monitoring and data based decision making) needed within the framework and their perceptions of these components regarding the academic improvement of at-risk students, teachers were directly asked about these concepts. Hence, the questions regarding these issues were explicit. For example, during an interview with a teacher at West High School, I asked explicitly "How do you progress monitor your students?" This question makes the assumption that she does in fact progress monitor her students. Although she had to take a moment and think about the answer, she was able to give a cohesive response regarding her in-class progress monitoring. This exemplifies a substantial number of questions asked (see Appendix A). There was an assumption that teachers were engaging in progress monitoring and DDDM as outlined by the district. As the next chapter will

detail, all teachers were in fact progress monitoring and using data to make instructional decisions. However teachers were not fully trained in the language of RtI nor were they fully aware of the RtI model as outlined by the district. Teachers were answering based on their knowledge and their school's model of RtI. This presented a mismatch with my original questions because many teachers were unsure of RtI which hindered conversation specific to RtI components with the larger goal of academically supporting at-risk students.

The fact that teachers' (who were purposively selected because of their RtI involvement) responses were not informed by the district model and previous training created a bit of a quandary. I found myself explaining the components of RtI to a couple of them (upon their request), allowing them to locate what they did on a daily basis within that framework. As teachers were not fully trained and experienced with the RtI model as outlined by the district, the DDDM within the RtI model framework could have created a situation in which teachers were answering in a manner to satisfy assumptions made within it. Although the framework may have limited or affected participant responses, the participants provided information that they believed to be true and relevant to them. And, the emerging themes developed from the interviews and observations represent what mattered to these teachers within the context of DDDM within RtI.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

This study began with the purpose of gaining understanding of high school teachers' perceptions of components of RtI, specifically progress monitoring and DDDM, and their perceptions of DDDM's role or usefulness in the academic achievement of students at-risk for school failure. As I gained entry into the schools and collected data, it became evident that in order to sensibly interpret the information I received, it was important to understand the influence of its context. Therefore, this chapter begins with an introduction of the context in which a specific model of RtI was implemented at both high schools. Next, I explain the importance of imposed DDDM within the RtI framework and its interaction with the RtI models actually implemented within the schools. The DDDM within an RtI framework and the RtI models within the schools shaped the questions asked and the responses received within this study. Then, the chapter turns its focus on three themes that emerged from the data. This section also includes details on the developed conceptual categories (Shenton, 2004) and supporting quotes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as they shaped and gave meaning to the themes. Lastly, the chapter ends with a concluding summary of the findings.

#### **The RtI Model within the High Schools**

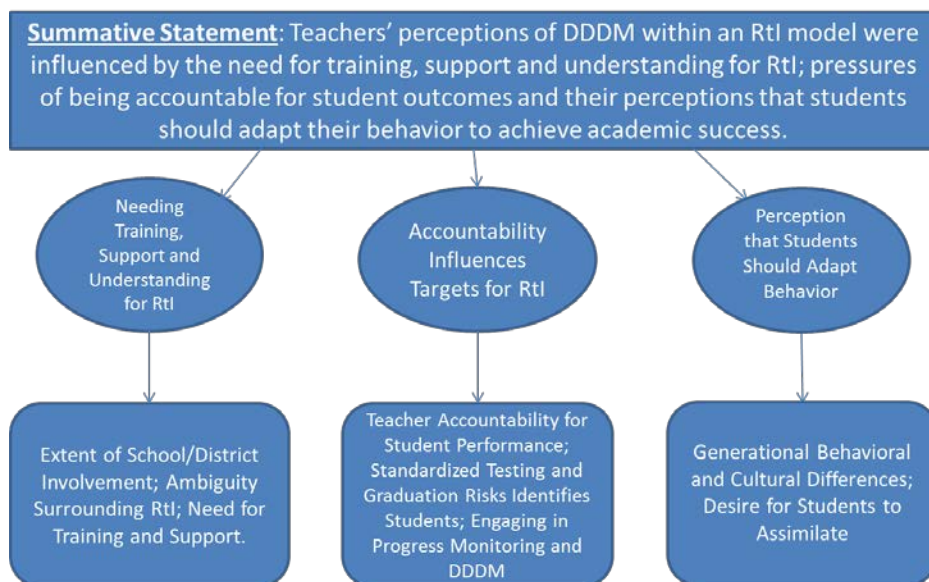
Before getting into the findings of this study, it is important to summarize how RtI was defined by the schools and how this definition impacted teachers charged with implementation. As discussed in chapter 1, RtI is a multi-tiered instructional delivery model of increasingly intense educational supports or interventions. Within these tiers teachers engage in universal screening, progress monitoring and provide evidence-based

instruction that should meet the needs of most students. This model is multidimensional and takes place outside of the special education setting. The schools in this study each provided a different variation of this model to their students. As will be presented below, schools implemented a departmentalized tier II focused model that had a marked effect on teacher perceptions of DDDM within an RtI framework.

Each school targeted a different department to focus their RtI efforts. West High School targeted the ESOL department and Lawrence Academy targeted the math department. However, both schools implemented a similar RtI model and selected students for tier II intervention for the same reason. They both used district level standardized tests, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), the interim assessments and/or the Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading (FAIR) as their universal screening measure(s). Their evaluations of progress monitoring data took place during RtI department meetings or ‘data chats’ with their respective AP (which is discussed later under theme 2) and they identified a single intervention at the tier II level. In addition, both schools identified students that were at-risk for graduation failure as targets for tier II intervention. As the RtI model within these two different schools and departments were similar, it could suggest that the high school context lends itself to a more focused, centralized and one-dimensional form of RtI. This belief is posited because both schools *focused* on one targeted group (students at-risk of failing to graduate), *centralized* their RtI efforts within one department, and used a single or *one-dimensional* tier II intervention. The effect of this model on teacher perceptions of DDDM within an RtI framework is outlined later within the emerging themes.



The interview and observation data related to high school teachers' perceptions of DDDM within RtI resulted in emerging themes that underscored the mechanisms that influence teachers' perceptions on this topic. The following sections describe the three themes that emerged from this study: 1) Needing training, support and understanding for RtI, 2) Accountability influences targets for RtI and 3) Perceptions that students should adapt their behavior for academic success. These themes are illustrated in Figure 2. It explains the hierarchy of codes that were created to develop the themes. The figure also shows how the emerging themes were embedded within the DDDM in RtI framework and supported by conceptual categories and teacher quotes. This figure provides a visual representation of how the themes emerged in addition to how the framework shaped the summative statement. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to create an overarching theme or theory, the summative statement provided a thread which connected the emerging themes, thus creating a cohesive meaning behind the data that relates to the purpose of the research. The summative statement developed for this study states: Teachers' perceptions of DDDM within an RtI model were influenced by the need for training, support and understanding for RtI; pressures of being accountable for student outcomes and their perceptions that students should adapt their behavior to achieve academic success. To provide support for the statement above and its underlying themes, I have included a detailed description of the conceptual categories developed from the data, as well as supporting teacher quotations.



**Figure 2.** Emerging Themes and Supporting Codes  
Hierarchy of codes: Bottom tier = Conceptual Categories; Middle tier =

### **Theme 1: Needing Training, Support and Understanding of RtI**

The first theme focused on emerging issues around training, support and understanding for DDDM within an RtI framework. This theme described a ‘needs’ perspective that situated teachers’ experiences within their RtI framework. Hence, it highlights teachers’ suggested or stated needs for RtI efforts based on observation and interview data. This theme was supported by three conceptual categories: 1) extent of leadership involvement, 2) ambiguity surrounding RtI and 3) need for training and support.

**Extent of district/school involvement.** Observation and interview data indicated that the extent of district/school involvement and presence in the RtI process within each school was variable. This was exemplified by the fact that Lawrence Academy’s leadership team consisted of an assistant principal, a district representative and a lead teacher, while at West High School, there was only a lead teacher representing the RtI

leadership during the meetings at the time of the study. When I asked about the district and AP leadership that was present during the pilot study conducted the semester before, I was told that, “[the AP] had been [temporarily] transferred” and that “no district representative has come to the school” during the current school year. A temporary replacement was sent to the school to take the vacant AP’s responsibilities. When I asked the new AP about her role in the RtI process she stated that she was unfamiliar with RtI at the school. Later, Ms. Solano (the lead RtI teacher) confirmed that the temporary replacement AP would not become part of the RtI leadership team because she “would only be in the school for a few months.”

At Lawrence Academy, there was an AP involved in the RtI process and present at the meetings. His involvement in the RtI efforts consisted of being present (as the meetings would officially begin when he was there), supporting the intervention choice made by the math department, and advocating for support for the lead RtI teacher during RtI meetings. During the first RtI meeting, Ms. Lopez spoke about the success of the intervention the department had in place the year before, which consisted of her pulling students in danger of failing EOC exams out of their classes during the school day to receive extra math assistance. She explained:

*Since I was doing inclusion I would take one day out of my inclusion days and I would pull out all the algebra 1 students from all the other teachers each period and then I would go into a different room and go over the material they had done throughout the week so that it would be a review for the Fridays.*

She stated that 53% of students involved in this pullout effort passed the algebra I end of course (EOC) test. In addition to the pull out sessions, she also conducted a Saturday math academy, which was voluntary, for those that wanted extra math assistance. She stated that because of scheduling changes, she wasn’t able to continue the pull-out

sessions this year. The AP also noted the fact that she was no longer doing the pull out sessions but continuing the Saturday math academy during the academic year, *“She has a class so she can’t run that part [pullout] again. The only intervention she can run is the Saturday [math academy].”* Thus the sole tier II intervention for targeted students was the voluntary Saturday math academy provided by Ms. Lopez.

Later, I inquired about there only being one teacher involved with the tier II intervention. Ms. Lopez answered:

*Yeah because it requires more, it’s actually more work, there’s you know, work that you have to do on the side and that you have to take care of and um, you have to be willing to put in the time that goes along with it. So it was decided that it was best to do it on a volunteer basis rather than to be mandated to do so.*

Ms. Lopez also explained that although other teachers were not part of the structured RtI efforts at the school they were at liberty to decide what strategies to use in their classrooms to help struggling students. She stated that, *“Well they get their data, and then they decide what kind of strategies they are going to use in their classroom to implement according to the data”*. This statement sounded as if teachers were engaging in a form of tier I RtI in their classrooms. When I stated that teachers seemed to be engaging in RtI, she said, *“A lot of them, a lot of the teachers do RTI, um, if you tell them what RTI is some of them may not know what it is. And some of them may not just pure do it. Because we are very much at liberty to do as we want.”* Thus, teachers were not conscious of their RtI efforts. If they were engaging in tier I-like efforts teachers were not aware of it. It was clear that teachers were able to choose whether or not to engage in RtI efforts within their classrooms. Therefore, the AP was reliant on Ms. Lopez and what she could offer as a strategy for an RtI intervention as she was the only one to volunteer for the job.

Although the AP could not mandate all teachers' participation in the intervention, he did attempt to advocate for Ms. Lopez during the RtI meetings. During the last RtI meeting, the AP engaged in conversational tactics to discourage any additional work being placed on Ms. Lopez by the district representative. For example, at one point during the meeting, the district personnel suggested that Ms. Lopez use a progress monitoring program, which required extra training, to help keep track of the students receiving the intervention during the Saturday sessions. When the district personnel stated that she wasn't trying to give her more work, the AP quickly but calmly stated, *"Yes you are. That's what you are trying to do."* The district personnel then stated, *"It's up to you. It's your choice."* In addition, the AP opened up conversation for Ms. Lopez to ask for any support that she may need for RtI. When Ms. Lopez asked for administrative privileges on a pre-existing progress monitoring system (in order to progress monitor students across teachers), the district personnel stated that *"You're going to have to talk to somebody up there"* (meaning a person in a higher position than she). The AP stated in a joking manner, *"I thought that's who we were talking to."* The AP used what authority he could to ask for support for Ms. Lopez and her RtI efforts.

The district support at both schools also varied. As mentioned earlier, district support was not observed at West High School. When I asked teachers if they'd had any RtI meetings that included district personnel the answer was, *"There was no district person this year, not that I'm aware of."* In addition, most teachers did not seem overly concerned about receiving district support. One ESOL teacher, Mr. Rodrigo, volunteered his story of the district support personnel that visited his classroom the year before.

*And sometimes what happens with that [district support] also has to do with the person because last year there was a person here who, I don't know for what*

*reason, she used to come here and interfere. Even interfere with the classes, because if I was teaching something instead of just.....Ehhhh... if you see the teacher doing something, the teacher may have his personal approach to teaching THAT something. Which may be different from your personal approach. Different styles, different strategies. But this person, what she used to do was just come here and try to do it her way, you see. Which in my opinion is a lack of ethics. That's the way I saw it. And besides that, there is something else, if I see a teacher doing something his way, not the wrong way, because if the teacher is doing something wrong, well that's a different story; but if you are teaching something, maybe ...you are used to teaching that using a movie, ok, that's your style and this is my style, maybe as effective as yours in regards to the outcome. And but if I don't like what you are doing, even though it may be right, what you are doing is right, I can, in the end, tell you "Why don't you do it this way? I think it would be more interesting or more effective" or whatever, something. And not just stand there (he points to the side), and start and take the lesson and teach it for you.*

Ms. Solano at West High School, also had an unpleasant experience with the district. As lead RtI teacher without other RtI leadership around, she wanted the district to support her efforts to train general education teachers with regard to completing behavioral intervention plan forms so that the RtI-B process could be a bit smoother. She stated:

*So once, after the fourth shuffling of e-mails because I was always cc'd in another shuffle, I got shuffled to like 5 different people, we finally got audited here on our behavior tools instead of coming to give us support so that our behavior tools and data collection is accurate, we got audited. So, ask me if I'm going to ask for help again. Do you think that's conducive to me asking for help?*

Although this school requested district support for RtI implementation, the teachers that were implementing the intervention did not appreciate what the district offered in the previous year. Indeed, they were content not to have district personnel around.

In contrast, at Lawrence Academy there were two district representatives at the first meeting. They were accepted by the school leadership team. They asked questions to ensure that teachers progress monitored throughout the school's RtI model. For instance,

during the first RtI meeting they inquired about the progress monitoring of students involved in the pull-out sessions. They also asked about progress monitoring of the Saturday math academy. Despite this assistance, they stated that due to budget cuts their support would be reduced: “[We would] come in to help you look at your data, help with problem solving, pretty much what we used to do but not on a weekly basis. More on a needs based basis.” The AP stated that he appreciated “[the district] completing progress monitoring forms and time keeping for them”. He then asked if they were still supposed to continue with RtI at the same level without district support. The school counselor present stated, “Yes, we’re magicians!” District support was appreciated in the school but the reduction of support without an equal reduction of work for school personnel was not welcomed.

During this portion of the meeting, Ms. Lopez did not say anything. She listened quietly as others went back and forth. Later when I asked her about her understanding of district support she stated that she understands that the district comes by and see what they’ve done but she’s not really a part of the RtI meetings since she has a full teaching load.

*Basically it’s just the district coming in to see what we are doing and what is it that we’ve done, and that’s pretty much been the size of it. Um, I don’t think that they intervene too much, I really don’t get to know what they do for us because I’m not part of that especially since I am in the classroom the whole time.*

This statement speaks to the notion that she as a classroom teacher was disconnected from the direct support that the district was supposed to provide even though she was the only teacher involved with the intervention.

In sum, the conceptual category *extent of school/district involvement* indicated that teachers had varied but overall limited involvement from leadership with regards to

RtI implementation and support. West High School's experience with leadership involvement was viewed as unpleasant, suggesting that they would be reluctant to reach out for district support in the future. Meanwhile, personnel at Lawrence Academy had to prepare to continue RtI implementation with less district support.

**Ambiguity surrounding RtI.** The second conceptual category details the issue of teachers' ambiguity of the meaning of RtI. The data indicated that although teachers were supposed to be involved in RtI because their department was identified as a target for RtI, many teachers were unclear of the concept. When asked about their understanding of RtI some teachers stated that they didn't quite know what it was although they felt that they did engage in RtI strategies. For example Ms. Ramirez stated,

*I don't really like, I know that I do RTI, but like.... that word, "RTI", I don't use it, but I know that I use the strategies of RTI. It's just that I don't really like know what RTI is all about, but I'm sure that I do use some of the strategies that are there.*

Other teachers identified it as an intervention with some abstract goal, as Ms. Lopez explained, *"It's more like an intervention, um more than anything and the hope is to be able to get the kids into a better playing field."* Ms. Flores saw it as DDDM for individualized instruction, *"RTI is data collection and analyzing the data to follow up the student as like if they were unique and alone in the classroom... to get individualized teaching for them. That's what I understand what RTI is."* The overarching meaning and purpose of RtI as the district presents it was not expressed by the teachers in the study. Ms. Solano explained that if teachers understood RtI then they would 'buy in' to its purpose, however the lack of understanding keeps them from fully grasping the concept.

*Everybody has to understand it and you know, you can say everybody has to buy into it...Because of course if everybody thought and saw how well it worked they would all buy into it, of course that would be the case. But they don't because*



*they don't understand it. But if they understood what it meant, then they would you know, buy into it. It's just that they don't understand it.*

Although Ms. Solano believed that everyone needs to understand RtI to “buy-in” it, I did not get the impression that she bought into the concept as it pertains to the reduction of CLD students placed in special education. This impression was exemplified when she explained her idea of using the tier II intervention as a means for collecting data for referrals of ESOL students to special education. She stated:

*We will look at all 9th and 10th grades, and any 9th and 10th grader who did not increase an ESOL level and did not pass the FCAT in 10th grade, or 9th grade for that matter, will be um, looked at for possible referral [during their] 11th grade year. Why? Because that will give us enough time to test and see if they are eligible. Why? Because that means that they have already gone through the RTI process, we've already you know, implemented the strategies, and we don't want to wait, because what's happening is that they are not graduating.*

There was also ambiguity around RtI by leadership as was illustrated by the teachers put in charge of RtI at each school. Although RtI is supposed to be a general education initiative both schools placed a special education math teacher in charge of their RtI tier II efforts. When asked how she received the job of lead teacher of RtI over the ESOL department, Ms. Solano explained:

*Ok, I'll tell you how I got this job. That's a good question. I got to tell you how I got this job! I got this job because I was the department chair of special ed and as the department chair of special ed, I was trained in RtI. Because for some reason, which is maybe a backwards kind of thinking, when people say RtI, they think special ed. Which is like there, it's an oxymoron. It's the total opposite.*

Because of this misconception that RtI was a special education issue, school leadership had a special education teacher trained and placed in charge the RtI efforts. At Lawrence Academy, Ms. Lopez's background in exceptional student education (ESE) also explained her role as the RtI leader. She explained that, “...since I have worked with the ESE kids for so long and doing things with them, it was asked if I was willing to [take on

*the RtI efforts]*". Special educators are trained to provide intensive instruction to students in small groups, thus their expertise is valuable for RtI efforts. Despite this notion, there may be need for concern that general educators were not taking more active roles within the school's RtI model especially since RtI is a general education initiative.

The conceptual category *ambiguity surrounding RtI* highlighted the missing pieces of information teachers had regarding RtI. Despite district support and being involved in departments that were targeted for RtI efforts, many teachers involved lacked a clear understanding of the purpose of RtI. In addition, special educators had been placed in charge of the RtI efforts at both schools which indicate that there was some belief that RtI or at least the tier II effort should be handled by a special educator.

**Needing training and support.** Underlying much of the ambiguity around RtI was the expressed need for training and support by the teachers. Observations and informal conversations revealed that many teachers were still not trained at the time of the study, despite the fact that these schools requested RtI support and that they were in their second year of implementation. Ms. Solano commented that the ESOL teachers were still waiting for RtI training.

As one of those ESOL teachers waiting to be trained, Ms. Ramirez explained that she needed support with RtI practices. In particular she wanted support with using technology for data management. When asked about engaging in progress monitoring within the RtI model, she made it clear that she was uncomfortable with what she perceived as being a "data analyst". She explained that the district provided great ideas for teaching students but does not provide a manageable way to monitor their progress. She explained:

*Ok, give me the wonderful ideas, but yeah, teach me how to implement a program so that the results can come back on a spreadsheet, because I don't have time to use a spreadsheet to log all the data onto a spreadsheet, so how am I going to do that? You know, I'm not an analyst to do that and I'm not trained to do that... they need to supply teachers with some type of application or program so that if they are going to give us these...beautiful programs to implement or some type of lesson, oh wow, it's a beautiful lesson, ok, great, yeah beautiful lesson. Ok, so I'm going to grade it, yeah, so now I'm going to grade it, but now I want to see the data. Ok, so then put it on excel, well then show me how to do excel. Ok, so then if I don't know how to do excel, well then, where do I, who do I go to? Or, what program can I feed it through so I can see how the progress went?*

This teacher was uncomfortable because she was expected to use computer software to monitor her students and she was not trained to do so. There was also evidence indicating that teachers needed support in the form of human resources. Teachers expressed needing this support from other teachers, school leadership as well as from home. During an RtI meeting at Lawrence academy, the need for more teacher support was brought forth. The issue of Ms. Lopez being the only teacher involved in the RtI efforts was mentioned by a district representative. The conversation went as followed:

*The district personnel (DP) asked "And it's just you?"*

*Ms. Lopez smiles and said "Just Me".*

*The AP then jumps in and says "We only need the one, just one"*

*DP: "And you're teaching?"*

*Ms. Lopez: "Yes. I do teach."*

*AP: "That's the love that she has"*

*Ms. Lopez: "I do teach all day. Yeah, I have 6 classes."*

*The counselor (whose office we are in chimes in): "We wear many hats around here."*

It was evident that having one teacher in charge of the effort was not ideal. However due to the lack of manpower behind RtI at the school, teachers involved had to wear "many hats".

The need for human resources in the form of school leadership was mentioned by a teacher at West High School. Ms. Ramirez stated that she needed support with regard to keeping students on task during important standardized assessments, such as the FAIR.

*Because it's not fair for one teacher to control 20 students who are ESOL, who will not take anything seriously... So then they know, it's like what do you do? You know, and if it's an important exam, just like the FCAT and if it really is a validated or a valid test that really counts, then it has to be taken seriously. If you want it to be taken seriously, then the administration has to work with us. We need support. We need help. We need somebody to be with us.*

In this case, Ms. Ramirez was concerned about students not taking important standardized tests seriously. She found that she was having a difficult time controlling student behavior during tests that were not FCAT but still important for progress monitoring and decision making.

Ms. Lopez expressed a similar sentiment concerning student behavior. She found that her students did not like to be challenged academically and that attempting to do so was met with great resistance. She alluded that although parent support doesn't solve all problems, without it, problems were worse.

*...Kids don't like to be pushed. They just don't. So you have to be, you have to work around them, not the other way around. And for as much as you try to push, the more you push the less you get, and there's more of them than there is of me, so...If you don't get the support from home, then it's even worse.*

In conclusion, the category of *need for training and support* demonstrated that most teachers experienced challenges with engaging in DDDM within an RtI framework as outlined by the district due to lack of understanding and training for the RtI model. This category was significant because it provided information underscoring the fact that teachers located in schools that requested and (at some point) received RtI support from the school district did not have a clear understanding of the meaning or purpose of RtI.

This conceptual category also revealed that teachers needed training and wanted support by other teachers, school leadership and parents.

### **Theme 2: Accountability Influences Targets for Intervention**

The second theme in my findings was one of the most prevalent in the study and the most supported (openly discussed and observed) by participants. Teachers stated or alluded to the effects of accountability pressures throughout most of the interview and observation data. In particular accountability pressures emerged as it represents teachers' accounts of its influence on who was targeted for tier II intervention.

Accountability, in the state of Florida, involved schools submitting annual progress reports. These reports must include details regarding the status of each school on several progress indicators. These reports affect teacher pay and school grade. Graduation rates and student performance indicators on standardized tests, the FCAT in particular, were discussed repeatedly as being the focal point for teachers in this study. Teachers' perceptions of this notion of accountability was highlighted by three supporting conceptual categories: 1) teacher accountability for student performance, 2) standardized testing and graduation risks identifies students, and 3) engaging in progress monitoring and DDDM

**Teacher accountability for student performance.** In the current environment of federal and state accountability mandates, teachers felt the pressure to have their students perform adequately on district measures. This conceptual category illustrated this issue. Teachers were acutely aware that if students did not perform well on high stakes standardized tests the consequences would land squarely on their shoulders. As Ms. Flores at West High School stated, *"It affects us because of the Race to the Top. It affects*

*your grade as a teacher and your bonuses.*” This teacher was referring to the fact that in 2010 the state received Race to the Top funding (a competitive grant provided by the US Department of Education) (USDOE, 2014). In order to receive this funding, the state had to promise to improve education in four areas: standards and assessments; data systems; teacher evaluations and low performing schools (McNeil, 2014). Of particular interest to teachers was the focused steps the state had taken to “improve education” by linking teacher evaluations to student performance through a value-added system (US Department of Education, 2014). Teachers in this study exhibited signs of frustration because of this accountability system. For example, Ms. Rodriguez asked incredulously, *“How can teacher performance be measured by an equation no one understands?”* Interestingly, the concern with being responsible for student outcomes was focused in different directions depending on the teacher. Some teachers expressed concern that the policy did not focus on parents and students. Another concern was a perceived lack of administrative support for student behavior and how student behavior impacts student performance and lastly, a teacher expressed concern of the competitive nature that unintentionally developed due to accountability policies.

Ms. Lopez stated that policy initiatives only focused on teachers for student performance accountability. Specifically, she said that both students and parents should have some sort of responsibility within student accountability mandates. She stated, *“At no point...there hasn’t been any initiative of any kind of what is the student doing. What is the parent doing. Nowhere.”* She continues:

*Um, I guess probably because they cannot control what the student does or the parent does because the parent gets involved and says you can’t do that and vice versa. Um, but it’s kind of like the way I look at it is, I guess like a boss. That is being made responsible for somebody else, somebody else in another department*

*that they have no control over. How can you be looked at and rated and determine whether you are a good teacher, bad teacher or your students do well or not well based on what a student does on a piece of paper. Um, the student can decide not to do anything, that doesn't mean I didn't teach.*

Although she understood that the rights of parents would make it impossible to place any consequences on parents and students based on student performance, she expressed that student performance on tests should not decide whether or not she was a good teacher.

Another teacher perceived the issue as students not taking the tests or academic assignments seriously. Ms. Ramirez expressed that she perceived students as uncooperative during tests in which teachers were accountable. In particular, she stated that ESOL students didn't take the FAIR seriously. In the ESOL department, teachers must proctor the FAIR exam three times a year. ESOL students take the FAIR at the beginning middle and end of the academic year and their progress on those exams were evaluated and discussed within RtI and department meetings. She indicated that she couldn't effectively discipline students during these testing sessions. Interestingly, she indicated her feelings regarding student behavior when I asked her thoughts on student outcomes regarding the FAIR. Ms. Ramirez immediately answered the question as it related to teacher accountability.

*So, the thing is this. The thing is that teachers are, we're held accountable ok? And we cannot discipline students. You know we try to discipline students, then we get in trouble for disciplining students. So then we cannot do anything if your students act out, if students don't take the test seriously, and if a teacher starts disciplining a child or a student, then the student gets upset, goes to the office, complains and then the teacher gets in trouble because the teacher is disciplining the kid because the kid is acting out and it's the teacher's fault!*

Although I was attempting to get an answer regarding her perceptions of student performance on the FAIR, Ms. Ramirez answered that she was very much concerned that

teachers were accountable but student misbehavior created a difficult situation for teachers to get a valid and reliable outcome. She felt that teachers needed help dealing with students during exams. This teacher understood that the tests were tied directly to teacher ratings, hence she expressed that it was problematic to use them if students do not take them seriously.

Ms. Flores had a different account of the effect of student outcomes on teachers. She explained that in the ESOL department, it gets a bit competitive when a student does well. Once an ESOL student passes an exam, like the Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment (CELLA), that ‘good’ student would be taken from one class mid-year and placed with another teacher. She stated that it was problematic when “good” students were taken from your class and sent to a higher level class. When asked about how student performance on tests affected her as a teacher she stated that:

*It has a big, big, big impact on the teacher. So like what we were talking was you as a teacher, your good students are going to the next teacher, right? And you get the good from the other. But you’re really good students are gone and who is going to get the benefit of your work? The next teacher. So, the race to the top is opening a can of worms in that sense.*

Ms. Flores commented on an aspect of accountability that has not been mentioned before in this study: the possible competition between teachers over “good” students. She alluded to the issue of “good students” being taken and another teacher possibly reaping the benefits of the previous teachers’ hard work as “opening a can of worms”. This finding contradicts the spirit of RtI which preaches the virtue of teachers collaborating to improve educational outcomes for all students.

In summary, the category of *teacher accountability for student performance* indicated that teachers negatively viewed being solely responsible for student



performance, that they disliked the misbehavior of students during testing as it impacted student scores and that accountability pressures created competition among teachers. This category was significant to the participants in this study as it emerged naturally from the data. I did not ask any teachers about feelings or perceptions regarding being accountable for student performance. However, this issue was relevant to them. The following conceptual category describes how tests and another accountability criterion, graduation rates, influence teacher perceptions of student academic needs.

**Standardized tests and graduation risks identify students.** This category focused on teachers' notion of standardized tests and graduation risks as important tools to identify students for any RtI instruction. When asked about the students receiving RtI instruction, teachers, specifically those that were in leadership positions, generally stated that students were selected because of scores on high stakes standardized tests and graduation risks. Ms. Lopez exemplified this concept by explaining why a specific group of students were targeted at her school:

*Um, we just decided to target the Algebra I and the Geometry because Algebra I kids counts for graduation. If they don't pass a test they don't get to graduate and the Geometry kids is 30% of their grade. So it is very important that they, we don't want their grade to be affected by not getting that 30% where it needs to be.*

The idea of selecting specific students for tier II intervention instead of thinking of RtI being used for all students through tier I instruction was expressed at both schools. When teachers talked about students for RtI they were only referring to students chosen for targeted intervention. These students were chosen based on possible retention or failure on high stakes tests. Indeed, teachers were in agreement that students doing poorly on standardized tests were the only students in need of tier II intervention.

In addition, teachers stated that the goals for tier II intervention were to help the students that negatively affect the schools' grade or were at risk of not graduating. For example, when asked about students receiving RtI at the West High School, Ms. Solano stated:

*ESOLs levels 1 through 4 [are the population we are working with]. Why? Because they are the learners who are struggling most in our school by population...at least the ESE kids have a shelter or an umbrella to catch them if they don't pass FCAT or they don't meet graduation requirements on time. Because they are able to stay here additional years and they can waiver their FCAT if they don't pass it. But unfortunately, the ESOL kids don't have that window so that is who suffers the most because of their lack of success, in other words. So that's the effect, and they affect so many things. FCAT scores, retentions, graduation rates, they affect everything because if you don't pass the FCAT then they don't graduate. And so that not only affects our, their FCAT scores, they affect our retake scores and then they affect our graduation rate, so its, you know, its continuous whammy, whammy, whammy. We get hit with them three times in a row.*

In addition to targeting students because of accountability pressures, Ms. Solano stated that students were targeted because they lacked special protections; protections from being counted within the accountability system. These qualifications were similar to those at Lawrence Academy. The difference here was that ESE students were thought to have protections from testing requirements. Ms. Lopez explained a particular group she called "bubble kids" that were identified for RtI services. She explained that "bubble kids" were "the kids anywhere between the 38 to 41 percentile [scores] on the FCAT". During the first interview, I asked her why "bubble kids" were chosen for services and not the bottom 25% (the lowest group), that were discussed during the first RtI meeting. Ms. Lopez responded:

*Well they (the bottom 25%) actually are worked up throughout the classrooms, um, due to class size, the Algebra I's and the Geometries are kept at 25 so they are much smaller unless it's an inclusion class in which they can go up to 40. Because there are two teachers in the classroom. The lowest 25 usually um, end*

*up being kids that are also Level I kids in the FCAT so they are also being targeted through there, so the hope is that somewhere in between, they are caught. We want to be able to make, the reason we pick the bubbles rather than the lowest 25 was because the bubble kids have a better chance of not just passing, but making the most gains. The lowest 25 is more of, let's see how far we can get them, but not necessarily that they will actually pass the test... they usually end up being your ESE kids that they end up giving a waiver anyway. And your ESOL kids, which then they have the two year mark because they are ESOL and that kind of stuff, so they have other routes that they can take and, versus the bubble kids that don't have another route to go by.*

Ms. Lopez comments echoed Ms. Solano's with regards to targeting students that were perceived to be vulnerable due to lack of options from the penalties of failing the high-stake standardized test. She also pointed out that targeting "bubble kids" was a strategic move because they were capable of making more gains on these tests. More gains mean a better school grade and better teacher ratings. Her comment indicated that she was concerned about providing the school with the possibility of having the most gains on standardized tests but also passing the FCAT which meant that students would graduate.

In sum, teachers in leadership roles targeted students for RtI based on their scores on high stake standardized tests and graduation risks. Targeting students in this fashion indicated that teachers view RtI as a tier II intervention and not the overall instructional delivery service meant for all students as outlined within the district and state RtI manual. Teachers were clearly concerned about accountability issues as this affected the choices made for RtI efforts. Further, they were concerned about students' chances of graduating.

As Ms. Solano stated:

*... We don't want them to get to 12th grade and not pass, not graduate because they did all the requirements, they passed all of their classes, they did all their community service hours and they tested, tested, tested, tested and they don't get a diploma. That's terrible.*

**Engaging in progress monitoring and DDDM.** This important conceptual category focused on teachers' engagement and perceptions of progress monitoring (PM) and DDDM. Both PM and DDDM were linked in this category because they were spoken of interchangeably as they inform one another (i.e. PM provided the data to make decisions). Progress monitoring and DDDM was done throughout both schools at both the classroom and department/school levels. Teachers viewed progress monitoring and DDDM, for the most part, as beneficial when done within their classrooms for day to day purposes. Teachers expressed concern over the challenges of PM and DDDM when done at the department/school level as the data was used to judge teacher effectiveness and used for accountability purposes. Lastly, teachers found that using PM and DDDM meetings at the school level (through data chats) was an entry into explaining RtI.

***Classroom level PM and DDDM.*** In the classroom, teachers engaged in PM and DDDM rituals that were engrained in the teaching profession. In fact, one teacher stated that engaging in PM and DDDM wasn't anything new, "*Because this is not new, this is not new. Teachers have been doing that forever. What happen is that they make new names and new laws about it, but we have been doing that all of our career.*" When asked about their engagement of PM and DDDM, some teachers discussed using the strategies in their classrooms by either observing students' in-class responses or through anecdotal means. For example, when asked about PM and DDDM within their classrooms, both Ms. Ramirez and Ms. Lopez discussed engaging in PM and DDDM by using informal teacher observations. Ms. Ramirez explained her in-class method of PM and the resultant decisions made based on the information gathered:

*I progress monitor my students with written skills like um, let's say through their writing and then I assess their writing ability and that's how I monitor their*

*ability to respond and then by their writing ability, then I can tell how they are doing grammatically and then I ask them to orally respond and then by orally responding I can get an idea how their language skills are. And then by that, then I try to work with that, you know, little by little on the different either sounds or vowel sounds.*

Ms. Ramirez used informal observation techniques to monitor student progress and make quick instructional decisions based on the informal data. Ms. Lopez also provided an example of how she used informal observation for PM and DDDM:

*For example, we have them come to the board as a way to assess them because I know what they know and what they don't know. I don't necessarily give them a grade for it, but then I get to be able to gauge what they know and don't know and what pace I can take them at. Do I need to slow down? Do I need to repeat this again? Do I need to, what is it that I need to do? Um, I also assess them verbally and like I ask you know, what the answers are, how did you get them, where did it go, or if I'm reviewing a concept, it's like ok, you tell me what did you do, or I didn't understand what the kid says, I don't understand what I got wrong, so tell me what you did, I write it on the board, I write exactly as they do, do we, can somebody tell me what his mistake is, if there is somebody, can we follow through, or here's your mistake, oh, this is what you did and do the correction that way.*

I observed her engaging in this monitoring and decision making strategy during the Saturday math academy. It was a “quick and dirty” way to get an understanding of student knowledge and provide immediate feedback based on the observation data.

Although the district provided multiple ways of progress monitoring using computer-based software, when allowed the freedom to teach in a manner of their choosing, these teachers relied on more intuitive teaching methods.

However, some teachers embraced using technology within their classrooms. One teacher found using technology for PM had a positive effect on student motivation; however, she found more intuitive methods for DDDM useful for instructional purposes.

Ms. Flores' ESOL 2 and 3 classes were all based on the I-LIT program from Pearson.

This online program was made for struggling readers and was only available through the

iPAD. Through Title III funding, the school was able to supply a class set of iPads to the department. This program greatly impacted her opinion on progress monitoring. When asked her thoughts on the issue she replied:

*I find, I can make graphs and I can see their progress. Each child has a progress graph in the program. For example for I-LIT, each child does his progress graph, so when I call the child for a personal meeting, that happen every month or every two months, I say hey, look you were here, now you are here. Don't go down, you are doing very well. Or your reading, you don't read enough, so you are still in the red. You want to be green. So, the kids like to know where they are also. It helps them focus better, I guess.*

She found that students were motivated by having a visual representation of their progress and being able to prepare their own progress monitoring graphs. When Ms. Flores explained how she used student data to inform her instruction, she explained her method in a manner that illustrated her use of content knowledge and expertise rather than a program or technology.

*So what I do, like grammar is not well explained in the method I'm using, so what I do, I made some tests and I give them one a night. Analyze their results and I see if they were really successful. I don't spend time explaining. For example, they were not successful in putting sentences together, so I had like 15 minutes during my period that I put the exercise on the board and we correct and I explained why it had been bad, and they didn't know how to put the adjectives in order so, that was something also that I spent like 10, 15 minutes to explain to them what the is rule ... the simple rule for them to remember how to use the adjectives in a sentence when they have more than one.*

Mr. Rodrigo not only used technology for PM and DDDM but created his own website in order to provide students the skill he believed they needed but was not being addressed with district level programs and assessments: language development. He created a program (with his son) called 'ESOL Land'. He used this website to provide activities and assessments for his students. In addition he used it as a means of providing

extra language instruction based on data he received from CELLA reports. He explained that ESOL Land provided extra practice on skills that were tested on the CELLA.

*So if you tell me for example, this kid is now in ESOL 1 because of the way he performed when he took the CELLA and now after doing things through ESOL Land we can see that he has improved his language skills, so that information we could compare.*

His creation and use of ESOL Land indicated that he provided students with additional support and instruction based on standardized test outcomes thus using data to make an instructional decision.

***School/department level PM and DDDM.*** Progress monitoring and DDDM at the school/department level (i.e. using standardized tests to measure growth) was done on a fairly systematic and frequent basis. The tests used were the interim and FAIR assessments. These tests were monitored in order to project the likelihood of success on the high stakes assessment, the FCAT. The consistency of these PM and DDDM efforts were achieved through school wide ‘data chats’. The math chair explained that all math teachers were involved in PM and DDDM for their students, despite the fact that only Ms. Lopez was actively involved in the tier II intervention. All teachers were involved because they engaged in data chats with the AP in addition to monthly data chats within the department. From observations and interviews, I learned that a data chat was examining, explaining and discussing data results (from standardized school-wide assessments) to an administrator or within the department and making decisions regarding who to target for a tier II intervention. Teachers never stated that they used the data from these standardized assessments to change or re-evaluate their classroom instruction.

Although both schools engaged in data chats on both an administrative and department level, there were some differences. For instance, at Lawrence Academy each teacher met individually with the AP in charge of data twice a year. While at West High School only the department chairs of the “big four” (the Reading, Social Studies, Math and Science departments) met with the AP on a monthly basis.

Ms. Lopez described how data chats were handled at her school (in both department meetings and individually with an AP). She explained:

*Well, we start with knowing whether or not we met the goal of being the same as the district, and then we compare with other schools that are more or less in the same category as us. We do measure amongst each other. With teachers that have more or less the same mix of students. They just, it's kind of unfair to mix the honor kids with the regular kids and vice versa. So, we try to compare when it comes to the numbers based on who is teaching what.*

During a math department meeting, I observed the math chair providing an overview of their standardized test results and what it meant for all the teachers. They were comparing their current scores on the interim exams to the year before. The department chair stated that, “*The scores were disappointing*”. There was a noticeable tension in the room as teachers glanced nervously at each other. She went on to explain that during the data chat with the AP, she would not be with them as she was in the past. She said that she got “*too protective*” and had to “*let them defend themselves*”.

This meeting along with the interview suggests that there was a competitive nature to the data chats. Teachers’ scores were compared with each other and they had to “defend” themselves during the data chats with the AP. Standardized assessment data was also viewed as unreliable as teachers stated that data “*was a four letter word*”. Ms. Rodriquez stated that math teachers know better than most that test data can be “manipulated”.



Further, teachers were expected to show that they covered all of the benchmarks that were assessed on district standardized tests as part of their justification/argument during data chats. On top of ascertaining that all benchmarks were covered, teachers had to make decisions regarding extra support for students that were not making gains despite covering the benchmarks. According to Ms. Lopez, teachers decided as a department to support the Saturday math academy and tutoring in order to help struggling students.

*As the department, we are told this is how the department is doing and this is where you rank, you know, this is what we want to do....like the math academy so the teachers are pushing the math academy. We want the kids to come to tutoring, so we do offer tutoring Monday through Thursday.*

**Data chats as a means to understand RtI.** Information concerning data chats from West High School demonstrated that because of the school's history of data engagement, conducting most meetings as a data chat was seen as normative and positive. Ms. Solano explained:

*This particular, this school I've only been here for about 7, 8 years, so this particular school has always been very data driven. Because every, I want to say, I want to say for the past 5 years this school has been very data driven and its funny because that's when our scores have been highest. But, the only, in other words, we have always had data chats, they are doing it already.*

Because of this history, Ms. Solano explained that she used the familiarity of data chats to explain RtI to the ESOL teachers. She believed that it was a good way to get them to understand the components of RtI and their role in the process in a manner that was relevant and understandable to them. She explained:

*I told them listen I'm just going to explain to you about data from last year. It was like I conducted the meeting more like a data chat than anything else. And they were all like, "oh my gosh, yes our data from last year and how are we going to improve it and what are we doing differently, and what is she doing that I'm not doing" and it was great. But at the end of it, I said ok, so now we are going to try this this year to see if our data goes up. Oh, ok great. And when are we going to... and they were all involved and I said well this is RtI and they said What? I*

*go yes, this is what this is.*

The math chair at Lawrence Academy corroborated the sentiment that teachers understand data chats better than terms like progress monitoring or data driven decision making. Although other teachers in the math department did not view themselves as part of the RtI efforts, she stated all teachers have to use data. Consequently, she infused DDDM and PM in the discussions regarding their teaching, their notes and record-keeping for administrators and on necessary forms. She continued on to say that if she didn't do that she would have lost them; that the last [department] meeting did not work out because she didn't infuse data in with what they were already doing. Now they were all talking about data because it was part of their daily routine. She also remarked that the teachers in the department weren't "young chicks". They were "set in their ways" and "slow to change", thus infusing these components into what they were already doing was important.

These statements from teachers in leadership roles indicated the necessity of speaking about progress monitoring and other components of RtI in ways that teachers understood and could readily use. It seemed that personnel in leadership positions viewed their meetings as successful. They believed that making explicit connections between what teachers were already doing and what district and state mandated could lead to success.

Teachers in leadership roles did find that conducting their meetings as data chats was successful in getting teachers to make connections between their daily practices and components of RtI despite the tension of having to justify student test scores to administrators.

Although there was some success with regard to understanding components of RtI, there was a great deal of testing happening in these schools in the name of PM and DDDM. Mr. Rodrigo expressed his frustration and confusion with the abundance of standardized testing and the lack of room for actual instruction. He explained:

*I asked the department chair, what are we testing? If we haven't been able to teach anything because, like in September, October, it was testing, testing, testing testing – different kinds of tests – the kids were testing every day at the beginning of the year. That's why I asked him, what are we testing if we haven't had the chance to teach yet?*

He continued:

*That is crazy. That makes no sense to me. If you tell me, ok, when they took, give them this test now so that we can collect some data, initial data, and then be able to compare in the middle of the year and then at the end of the year how much they have progressed, ok. That's fine. But testing for a whole month... Fair, Interim assessment, and it's the same students. Eh..Level Set test for Teenbiz, 3 reading tests, 3 different reading tests to the same students.*

Mr. Rodrigo's comment illustrated a point that was not addressed in other teachers' accounts of engaging in PM and DDDM. Other teachers mentioned in passing that students were tested many times during the school year and because of it, teachers were bombarded with data. Mr. Rodrigo's question "what are we testing if we haven't had a chance to teach?" was worth considering given the purpose of PM and DDDM within an RtI model is to inform and engage in instructional practices that improves student outcomes.

In summary, the conceptual category *engaging in progress monitoring and DDDM* indicated that overall, teachers were positively engaging in PM and DDDM. Most of the positive comments were concerning progress monitoring and DDDM within their classrooms using assessments that were not used for direct monitoring for future achievement on the FCAT. Further, teachers engaged in school-wide PM regularly

because of data chats. Although teachers in leadership roles found data chats an understandable way to engage in RtI components at the school level, teachers felt that they needed to take a defensive stance when engaging in data chats with administrators. Concern was also expressed about the abundant testing with little opportunity to teach.

### **Theme 3: Teacher Perception that Students Should Adapt their Behavior in Order to Achieve Academic Success**

The last theme in my findings focused on teachers' general perceptions that student behavior needed to adapt to a particular standard in order to achieve academic success. Teachers expressed that students, specifically ESOL students, should change their behavior in order to achieve positive academic outcomes. Specifically, the data detailed that teachers believed that there was a meaningful difference between ideas of acceptable/proactive behaviors of the teachers' yesteryear and the behaviors students currently exhibit. The data that informed this theme stemmed from one question asked concerning teacher thoughts on student culture and its influence on their instruction. The data that emerged went into two related but distinct directions. These directions were highlighted through two conceptual categories: 1) Generational behaviors and cultural differences and 2) Desire for students to assimilate.

**Generational behaviors and cultural differences.** This conceptual category examined ideas that were coming from teachers throughout the study that centered on them seeing students as behaviorally different from themselves. This difference was viewed through a generational perspective, meaning that teachers seemed to be comparing the behavior of students today with their own behaviors when they were the students' age. This perceived difference was also viewed through a cultural lens because

many teachers explicitly discussed the behavior of Cuban students. Throughout the interviews and observations, I found that most of the students referenced were of Cuban descent. As Ms. Flores explained, *“I have two Arabic [students] and the rest are Cuban, Cuban or from [a] Hispanic country. But 75% are Cuban mostly.”* Ms. Solano supported this comment when she stated that, *“The majority of the ESOL kids are Cuban”*. Ms. Lopez stated, *“We do have a large population that come from Cuba, and we do have another population that come from South and Central America. It is a combination.”* Thus, when teachers discussed student differences most were referring to students from Latin countries, Cuba in particular.

As stated earlier, this category stemmed from teachers’ answers regarding their belief of the importance of knowing student culture for instructional practices. The teachers at West High School answered this question focused on Cuban student behavior as different from their own. For example, Ms. Solano answered:

*That’s important. I think it’s huge. Because I’m Cuban as well. The majority of the ESOL kids are Cuban. But when I came here it was, my parents were of the mentality in this country you have to work, you have to study, if not, you are nobody. But that’s not the mentality that I hear from the students or their parents. It’s a different kind of culture. Remember that, that, there is a whole new culture in Cuba and you know, every time I sit and talk to students and I you know, like glean a little bit more information from them, it’s a different culture. It’s similar, and there is still some of the old culture, but it’s a different culture now.*

Ms. Solano stated that the behavioral difference stemmed from the different culture of current students from Cuba. She alluded that the teachings/mentality that she received from her parents regarding working hard in the new country to be successful was not what current students were being told. In addition, the behavior was not only viewed as different but it was not highly regarded because it was not as industrious as it used to be.

Ms. Solano explained: *“Here the culture now is don’t worry about it, you have to be taken care of. And so it’s sad, but that’s the case”*.

Other teachers related the cultural differences of their students as being different than their own. Ms. Ramirez, who self-identified as a Colombian American, found her students’ culture to be distinctly different than her own. She stated, *“No, they are coming from Cuba, but it’s very different because I’m not Cuban. Our cultural differences are very different.”* Ms. Ramirez also believed that there was a generational difference between her and the students. She stated that her background promoted a more respectful disposition. She explained that, *“You were brought up to say thank you and may I, good morning, sir and madam; very polite. So, [little sigh here] it’s just very different when you are trying to teach kids that have not been taught to say good morning, may I, thank you.”* Ms. Flores, who was a White European immigrant, shared similar comments as Ms. Ramirez’s. When discussing her student behavior she stated, *“They talk to you like you were their friends. They have no respect. These [comments] are things that you know in your culture you would never dream of saying to an adult.”* These teachers were coming from the same school and teaching similar students. These teachers also came to similar conclusions that things were different regarding students’ current behavior and culture from the past.

One teacher had a different take on student differences. Ms. Lopez’s notions on generational differences centered on her thoughts on student priorities in the age of social media. Her answer concerning student culture and academic outcomes focused on youth culture and the outside influences of current popular culture (which she believes

dismissed the importance of home and school) and social media; not students' cultural backgrounds. She stated,

*But if you look at the news, listen to the news and you watch the different shows that are out there, that's the image that they portray. School is not a necessity; school is something that you do because you have to. School is a joke. Um, it's about partying, it's about drinking, it's about everything else other than taking anything seriously. There is not one single program out there that takes education seriously in any way, shape or form, just like there's not one single program out there that takes family as an important thing or support in any way as an important thing. So, if that's what they are getting everything from because the reality is that they usually don't listen to parents anyway, they listen to their friends and they listen to what is out there. If their biggest concern is how many tweets, how many followers they have on twitter, and how many people they are following on Instagram, than what is there to say that school has to be important... How do you compete when a kid comes and says 'Miss I finally got 3000 people follow me'? How do you compete with a kid that says 'Miss I finally got a 26 on Flapping bird'?*

Ms. Lopez didn't see student behavior differences as stemming from ethnic or cultural differences but from the influences of popular culture and social media on youth. This take on student differences refers to the larger societal factors that influence student engagement and behavior in school. There was also a sense of hopelessness on her part as she asked "how do you compete with 3000 followers?" Her comment on the notion of a student having 3000 followers suggests that she wonders how a teacher can make a difference in that child's world. These technologies were not available during the time of this teacher's youth, thus the situation was viewed through a generational lens as she does not see how one could use these advances in technology and social media in ways that can connect and engage students to school.

Finally, when I asked Mr. Rodrigo about his belief on student culture and its use for instruction he had a very different response. He did not answer in a manner that indicated that there was a generational difference. He self-identified as Cuban and he

believed that all students tend to relate well to him and his teaching. He did not believe it necessary to change the way he instructed his class to the different students within it. He said:

*I don't know. I never have any kind of problem with any student coming from Asia or the middle east or whatever, they all are the same to me. All of them are the same, so I demand from them the way I have to, demand discipline and being on task and all that and I also play with my kids. Play, you know, because I tell them some kind of joke or something funny, so as to you know, keep an environment that may be [fun]. And I've never had any kind of issue with any kid in that respect. All of them are the same thing to me. If I say eh, what about your hairdo today, what happened to that, you know, something like that, they all laugh. It doesn't matter and I don't mind I am not worried about whether this kid comes from Europe or from Asia or from South America. I don't care. They are all the same to me.*

This response was an outlier and was not representative of the category or theme but it was important to note that not all teachers viewed student culture and its possible effect on instruction in the same manner. Whereas most teachers saw student behavior through a cultural lens and as different from their own behavior, Mr. Rodrigo stated that he didn't see differences among the students and he treated them all the same. Although the teachers in this study identified components of culture (either ethnic or youth) that affected student behavior they did not see it as something to use within their classrooms as an instructional tool. They did not make the connection that a student's background and/or outside interests could be data used to make instructional decisions. This is meaningful because within the environment that stresses the use of data for accountability purposes, it was evident that student culture/background was not identified as possible data for instructional practices.

In sum, the conceptual category *generational behavioral and cultural differences* indicated that the majority of teachers viewed their students as behaving differently than



themselves and that this difference was viewed through a cultural lens. Further, teachers in the study did not engage in conversation regarding the use of student background as tools to inform their instruction. Most teachers viewed student behavioral and cultural differences as negative in ways that did not support student academic achievement.

**Desire for students to assimilate.** The category above detailed teachers' belief that student behavior was negatively different today and that those negative differences were generationally and culturally bounded. This category, which stemmed from the same question regarding culture and instruction, was different as it focused on teachers' ideas that students should adopt assimilating behaviors to increase academic outcomes. The teachers in this study had divergent ideas regarding what should be focused on for assimilation purposes. Some teachers focused on adopting the American curriculum, another on fully adopting the English language and yet another on becoming more "American" in general. In the end, they agreed that an assimilating type of behavior should be adopted to be successful in school.

For example, Ms. Lopez discussed that students assimilating their style of engagement in mathematics could help them in the future. She answered my question directly but also added her idea that students using American type of math formulation will help them in the long run.

*When they are trying to tell me, 'Miss is it ok to do it this way versus this one?' and it's like of course you can, type of thing. So as long as I can see mathematically sound work; it really doesn't matter what method you use because I know where it's coming from. I do explain to them that it's to their advantage to learn the way that we do it here [USA], because, especially if they are planning on staying. Because as they move on in math they are going to need, you know, to be able to follow along with what is being done, so you don't want to be caught like, ok, I never learned it that way and now I'm having a problem. So, it is encouraged that they try.*

She was more focused on details regarding learning how to do math in a manner that was common within the US because in the end it will be beneficial.

For teachers working with ESOL students, the focus was on learning English. Ms. Solano noticed that many of them were reluctant to speak English. She also alluded that their communities allowed them to live their lives without ever having to speak English. She finds this as being problematic in school where it was imperative to pass reading on the graduation exam. She explained:

*Those are the kids that you just cannot convince them to speak English. You cannot convince them. You know, they speak to their teachers in Spanish, they prefer to put their head down, they will not speak to their peers in English. You know, at home they speak Spanish. When they go to the grocery store they speak Spanish. And it's a problem, because it's not really necessary for them. And so you are ESOL for more than six years, and you know, there's no way you are going to pass the FCAT when you don't know how to speak English. Forget about read English, speak English, you know.*

Ms. Solano understood that speaking English was an important process in gaining academic success in school. Ms. Flores believed that students that don't adapt to their new surroundings will have poor academic outcomes. She explained:

*The ones that don't adapt, really are going to flunk FCAT, are going to flunk everything and they are going to be sent to Second Chance, that is a school where we give them an opportunity to at least have the high school diploma and pass the FCAT.*

She implied that these students would be sent to an alternative school that was a last resort before dropping out of school completely or only receiving a certificate of completion. Both these teachers have strong opinions regarding students' chances of success without learning English. Ms. Flores, in particular, had a strong belief that students should acclimate to American way of life. As an immigrant that came to the US

reluctantly many years ago, she believed that immigrant students would be happier if they embraced American culture.

*I want them to pass the FCAT. I want them to talk. I want them to feel comfortable here in the United States, to really feel that here it is a melting pot and they are part of it. So I want them to feel like one day they will feel like me, American. You know. Because now I feel like American, at the beginning I didn't want to come here. That was not my choice but I took up for my husband. I was reluctant to come here. But I think it's the best country so I want them to feel that.*

Most teachers spoke about the need for students to assimilate in order to achieve academic success. Ms. Lopez also expressed that a certain amount of assimilation was needed as well. However, as a non-ESOL teacher, when she spoke about the need for students to change their behavior for academic outcomes, it was not bounded by immigration status or language, but by what she perceived as a general lack of student interest in school. She stated that she believed that students needed to behave a certain way to be successful however she doesn't believe that students will change because of their lack of investment in school. As we continued talking she commented that students have very little chance of being academically successful today because kids don't see school as being a necessary step in their future.

*Sometimes it's frustrating. Especially when you give a test and they all like do horribly or they complain and whine, oh this is too long, or this is too hard, or this is too this, and it's like enough already. It's time, you know, you, like my 10th graders. I tell them you going to be juniors in a couple of months, the whining needs to stop, you are not little kids and my juniors is like, you are about to be seniors and you with this whining. I don't think so. You know, it's like a lot of you work. If you whine like this to your boss, your boss is going to fire you right? I would never do that to my boss, I said well this is exactly the same thing. It's not different. But they don't view school as a tool to get somewhere. They view school as I have to because they make me and what is the point. They don't see that they need this, that this is their next step before they can go on to the next one. They see it as more of they are making me do something that I don't want to do.*

She expressed that she was frustrated because she tried to get students to engage in the hard work necessary to do well academically, but they showed resistance because of a view point that school isn't a tool to get "somewhere". Ms. Lopez perceived the lack of engagement in academic work without "whining", as one would for their employer, demonstrated a general lack of interest in working hard in school. This notion of working hard to be successful could be viewed as a meritocratic belief, the hallmark of achieving the "American dream". Her comment indicated her belief that high school students were not kids anymore; therefore they should be ready to work hard to be successful as adults must. The statement also highlights the fact that she was discouraged not only because students were not working hard but also because they did not view school as a means to an end thus they would never engage in school work in a manner that would lead to academic success.

The conceptual category *desire for students to assimilate* indicated that teachers believed that ESOL students would benefit from assimilating to American culture/language because of perceived academic benefits. Many teachers stated this belief in a manner of true concern as they wanted their students to do the best they could in this country. However, the category also indicated that not all teachers felt that academic success was tied to ESOL student assimilation, one teacher expressed that her majority Latin American students were not prepared to be academically successful because of their lack of interest and investment in school. In the end, most teachers believed that students needed to change their behaviors, whether by assimilating to American culture, speaking English and working harder in class in order to experience academic success in their schools. Also worth noting was the lack of discussion around teacher influence on student

academic outcomes. Teachers in this study mentioned that student behavior hindered academic success but they did not mention ways that they could help change or ameliorate the issue.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

Data driven decision making within an RtI framework has promise of closing the achievement gap between CLD and White students in high school settings. Teachers are important as they are responsible for making data driven decisions for instructional and educational placement purposes within this framework. Despite the major role of teachers with these endeavors, their perceptions of DDDM and RtI for classroom instruction as well as for educational placement to support student academic outcomes are lacking. This study attempted to fill that knowledge gap by examining the perceptions of high school teachers on their thoughts of DDDM within an RtI framework. This study also aimed to understand high school teachers' perceptions of the framework as a meaningful tool for improving the academic achievement of at-risk CLD students. An analysis of the qualitative data revealed that teachers' perceptions of DDDM within RtI and its use for at-risk CLD students were influenced by three themes: 1) The need for training and support to facilitate understanding of RtI, 2) Accountability mandates influenced students targeted for RtI and 3) Students were perceived to need to adapt their behavior in order to achieve academic success. Additionally, teachers were engaging in data use; however, the promise of using DDDM within an RtI framework was focused on placement in a tier II intervention and not quality instruction for all students.

In this chapter, I describe how the three themes support or extend existing research. Then, I outline the limitations of the study. Next I examine the implications of the findings on practice and research. The study ends with final thoughts in the conclusion.

### **Need for Understanding and Training**

Based on the first theme outlined in the Findings chapter, teachers indicated that they needed understanding of and training for implementing RtI. This general need for understanding and training was also found in other studies examining school personnel reactions to RtI in secondary (Sanger et al. 2013; Sansosti et al., 2011) and across K-12 settings (Bineham, Shelby, Pazez & Yates, 2014). Teachers in the current study stated that although they felt that they were implementing RtI strategies, they did not quite understand its meaning or purpose. The data suggests that they did not understand the purpose and meaning of RtI in part because they had not received professional training. This finding was similar to Bineham et al.'s (2014) study examining K-12 school personnel perceptions of RtI. Reporting responses from both general and special educators across the nation, the researchers found that teachers, counselors, and leadership had a general misunderstanding or uncertainty about RtI which stemmed from a lack of training. Teachers were not aware of the overall purpose and meaning of RtI and so did not engage in the model in a manner that suggested the promise of RtI would be achieved. For example, teachers' understanding of the RtI model explicitly focused on the placement for intervention just as they did in the present study. In both investigations, the structure of RtI models in the schools neglected the multi-tiered and data informed instructional aspects of the model.

Limited funding for training may have also contributed to confusion about RtI. In particular, district support for RtI training was impacted by budget cuts across the state of Florida (Jordan, 2013). These cuts occurred at the same time RtI was mandated across the state of Florida for SLD referral (Jordan, 2013; Zirkel, 2014). The budget constraints

and resultant limited district support during the time of this study was also found in Cavendish et al.'s (under review) study. Cavendish et al. (under review) reported that budget constraints limited the amount of training teachers received for RtI. The school district lacked enough funding to build the capacity needed to back schools with adequate training and on-going support. Despite this lack of funding for capacity building, the district and schools needed to roll out RtI because it was mandated as the sole method of SLD identification. This lack of top-down support for such a complex policy initiative could have also contributed to volunteer nature of the RtI efforts at Lawrence Academy. Without proper support, administrators could not incentivize or create enough buy-in for teacher involvement in the process. As Ms. Lopez stated, "RtI is actually more work...work that you have to do on the side...you have to be willing to put in the time that goes along with it"

Further, some teachers were frustrated with using PM and DDDM because they were not properly trained to utilize the technology needed. Teachers were to use technology to generate data to demonstrate student in-class progress but did not feel that they had proper training on such technology. Although teachers in the study had access to programs provided by the district for data generation, some still did not feel adequately prepared to use technology on a day to day basis for instruction. This finding that teachers felt that they needed extra support with technology was similar to Datnow, Park and Kennedy-Lewis's (2012) study examining high school teachers use of data to inform instruction. They too found that some teachers faced barriers with technology despite the efforts of leadership to provide data support to them in a timely manner. The Datnow et al., (2012) study did not explicitly examine teachers' use of DDDM within an RtI



framework, but they did note that teachers' use of data was compromised because they did not understand how to use technology. The use of technology plays a major role in interpreting PM data to improve instruction. However, much of the technology used to generate data for accountability purposes are operated by the district and distributed and interpreted by school leadership (Hamilton et al., 2009). Consequently, when teachers need data for classroom instructional decision making engaging with the technology becomes a barrier. As one teacher in the current study stated "I'm not an analyst to do that and I'm not trained". This perception can compromise their ability to provide high quality instruction which in turn compromises the promise of RtI.

Overall the finding that teachers need training and understanding for RtI illustrates the limited reach of DDDM within an RtI framework without supports. The data suggests that teachers' engagement in DDDM within an RtI model is limited without adequate funding to support teacher training. Literature that examined positive outcomes of an RtI implementation within secondary settings indicated that teachers need on-going professional development and training (Fisher & Frey, 2013). In addition, adequate training and on-going professional development can provide the understanding teachers need to embrace a "paradigm shift" of meeting students' academic needs (Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Orosco, 2010). This "paradigm shift" in the RtI framework involves providing students high quality education within the general classroom by changing and adapting instruction before thinking of referring students to special education (Murawski & Hughes, 2009). The goal of DDDM within RtI is to provide all students with quality instruction to increase student academic outcomes as well as to reduce the number of

students referred to special education. Inadequate training and professional development, which resulted in improper implementation, undermined reaching these goals.

### **DDDM and Accountability Pressures**

Teachers' perceptions of DDDM within an RtI framework were greatly influenced by accountability pressures in addition to the limited training. Although teachers used PM and engaged in DDDM fairly regularly through data chats and RtI meetings, they were not comfortable using these tools within their classrooms. Teachers also indicated that they felt pressured using standardized assessment data tied to accountability requirements and expressed discomfort with being solely responsible for student outcomes. These findings are consistent with Vernaza's (2012) study examining the perceptions of elementary reading teachers in Title 1 schools of test based accountability mandates. Vernaza (2012) found that teachers believed that they should be accountable for student outcomes but that other variables should be taken into consideration when rating teacher effectiveness. These include student ability and background (SES, parental supports etc.). Studies by Assaf (2006) and Berryhill et al. (2009) also examined elementary teachers' perceptions of high stakes accountability. Similar to the current study, teachers felt pressured being solely accountable to student outcomes. Combined these studies and the current investigation paint a clear picture of the pressure teachers perceive from accountability standards (within an RtI framework) at both ends of the K-12 spectrum.

These accountability pressures had unintended consequences. DDDM within an RtI model is designed to provide quality instruction for all students as well as individualized instruction for at-risk students (Hamilton et al., 2009; Mandinach, 2012).

However, the use of DDDM for accountability purposes can provide an unintended incentive for teachers to select students based on how they affect school and teacher ratings on accountability measures (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Ehren & Hatch, 2013). In this study, the ESOL and “bubble kids” were selected because they were at-risk of failing the high stakes graduation exam, the FCAT. The schools’ choice to target students that may have the greatest effect on accountability reporting (i.e. “bubble kids”) was also demonstrated in a study by Booher-Jennings (2005). Investigating teachers’ participation in “educational triage” (a division of resources given to students, in this case, influenced by accountability pressures) within an elementary school in the southwest, Booher-Jennings (2005) found that teachers chose students for RtI services based on their impact on schools’ ratings. Despite the fact that teachers in the current study expressed concern for students at-risk of failing the FCAT, accountability pressures incentivized them to select students that could be taken off of the accountability list or could potentially provide significant increases on test scores. This selection of students for targeted instruction based on accountability mandates alters the goals of providing quality instruction and equal education for all students within the RtI framework.

The impact of accountability pressures was presented when a lead teacher expressed plans to refer ESOL students to special education after a year of tier II intervention because they didn’t want students failing to graduate. This teacher wanted to protect ESOL students from failing to graduate due to failing the FCAT. Placing them in special education would qualify them for an FCAT waiver; protecting them from FCAT failure. Although this teacher’s intention was good, this finding was a bit problematic because research has shown that improper placement of students in special education may

have detrimental effects on students' educational outcomes (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006; Shifrer, 2013). Related to these findings, Harry & Klingner (2006) also found that school personnel felt that placing at-risk students in special education was the only way to keep them from "falling between the cracks" (p.14). The researchers explained that education professionals viewed at-risk and low scoring students as "special education students who had not been identified" (p. 108). Harry and Klingner's (2006) study was not conducted within an RtI setting, however accountability requirements had similar effects on school personnel who ended up selecting students for special education to provide perceived protective services and lowering school scores. The current study extends this issue into teachers' use of DDDM within an RtI framework. It showed that accountability policies were implemented within the RtI framework in a manner that undermined the promise of increasing student outcomes and reducing CLD student referrals to special education.

Another problem with accountability arises from teachers' narrowly focused use of DDDM within the RtI framework. Teachers were more likely to use DDDM to consider referring students than to re-evaluate instruction and/or the tier II intervention. The findings did not suggest that teachers used data to re-evaluate or change their instruction. Teachers used DDDM to reteach in-class assignments or to make decisions regarding placement in a tier II intervention. It was not surprising that data wasn't being used to change instruction because teachers stated that they had to prepare students for standardized tests and thus they taught the benchmarks that were aligned with state standards. Research by Afflerback (2005) suggests that accountability systems create pressure to produce a singular outcome deemed acceptable on standardized tests, thus

encouraging an environment where teachers feel pressured to teach to the test and narrow the curriculum. Jones and Egley (2004) found that “testing narrows the curriculum by causing [teachers] to spend more time on subjects and topics tested” (p. 14). Similarly, teachers in the present study presented their experiences with using data within an RtI framework in ways that exemplified the manner in which accountability pressures may disproportionately narrow the curriculum in high poverty schools. Additionally, teachers in this study resented the pressures of teaching to the test. One teacher stated, “If I wanted to teach to the test I would have worked for Kaplan”. The findings suggest that accountability pressures negatively influenced teachers’ use of DDDM within an RtI framework for placement purposes as well as their use and perceptions of it for instructional purposes.

### **Perception that Students Should Adapt Behavior**

Teachers believed that student behavior needed to adapt in order to be academically successful. This sentiment, as viewed from a generational and cultural perspective, was manifested by teachers indicating that their current immigrant and Hispanic students’ behavior was pejoratively different than their own “socially acceptable” behaviors and that students should become more “Americanized”. The concept of students/youth as having significantly different or worse behavior than adults have been heard for decades (Bronfenbrenner, McClelland, Wethington, Moen, & Ceci, 1996; Lewin, 2012; Llamas, 2012). It is not surprising that teachers in this study had similar notions. However, what is different is the cultural lens from which some teachers viewed this difference when juxtaposed to perceptions of academic outcomes. Tyler, Boykin and Walton’s (2006) study of White teachers’ ratings of African American

students' motivation and achievement found similar outcomes. They found that teachers' notion of what constituted successful academic behaviors equated to conforming to mainstream American standards (i.e. working hard, exhibiting independent and competitive behaviors etc.). The authors ascribed this disconnect to cultural differences between teachers and students and suggested that future research examine students and teachers who are racially matched. However, the present study showed the same notion persisted even when they had a shared Hispanic, specifically Cuban background. Thus, irrespective of whether teachers and students had different or similar racial or ethnic backgrounds, teachers' value student behaviors that are mainstream or "American" and believe that exhibiting these types of behaviors will support student academic outcomes.

Although the teachers in this study may perceive that students should exhibit mainstream behaviors and become more "American" to gain academic success, recent immigrant parents may have different opinions. In a seminal study examining US-Mexican Youth in a US high school, Valenzuela (1999) provides evidence that counters the notion that assimilation is the key to academic success. Valenzuela (1999) found that rapid cultural assimilation had detrimental effects on students' academic outcomes. Immigrant students in her study that "rushed to claim an identity" became marginalized not only in terms of schooling but also in relation to their family's social identity (p. 93). A study by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) furthers Valenzuela's finding that students may be marginalized from their family's social identity by assimilating to American culture. Their study examining the lives of second generation immigrants found that most immigrant parents did not have a positive view of their children assimilating into American culture or the "Americanization" of their children. The notion of total

assimilation is not desirable because of the poor perceptions new immigrants have regarding the influences of American culture on their children (i.e. overly permissive, dangerous, disrespectful). Consequently, the friction that teachers experience with students regarding assimilation may be related to the differing beliefs families and teachers have about becoming “more American”.

The current study also suggests that these beliefs affect teacher expectations of student behavior. Teachers in the study indicated that if students changed they could experience success, yet they doubted that students were going to change. Teachers saw forces outside of school as much stronger than school influences. Consequently teachers’ expectations of student behaviors were impacted. As some teachers stated throughout the study, “These kids don’t take anything seriously” and “The goal is to get them to [a basic score of] ‘Limited’ not Proficient on the interim exam” which suggested that teachers did not expect students to perform at higher levels. Thus some teachers did not venture beyond the narrow curriculum required by the accountability system.

### **Summation of Themes**

These three major findings—needing training, support and understanding of RtI, accountability influencing targets for RtI and the perception that students needed to adapt their behavior—underscored the needs of teachers regarding DDDM within an RtI model for the promise and purpose of increasing at-risk CLD student achievement and closing the achievement gap. The findings represented information that was relevant and meaningful to high school teachers as they were faced with the issue of using DDDM within the RtI model for the purpose of increasing graduation outcome. They also illustrated the negative effect accountability pressures had on teachers’ perceptions of

data use, curriculum and student behavior. Because teachers in the study were under pressure to increase student academic outcomes on standardized tests, their comments focused on student behaviors that prevented them from succeeding on these tests. The notion that current student behaviors were negative and the desire for them to assimilate highlights how accountability pressures created an environment that focused teachers on negative student behaviors (what students' aren't doing to pass the test) instead of positive traits of their students which could be used as data to improve instruction and student outcomes. The teachers in the study had limited training in RtI and experienced accountability pressures that may have impacted the promise of DDDM and RtI to improve the outcomes of CLD students in high school.

Overall, these findings suggest that structural inequalities inherent within our education system continue to disproportionately affect historically disenfranchised individuals, such immigrant and minority students (Valenzuela, 1999; Valdes, 1996). Although RtI is viewed as a promising model to address historic structural inequalities due to limited access to quality instruction, it does not account for the lack of support teachers receive for implementing the protocol. It does not provide a mechanism for navigating the demoralizing and de-professionalizing deficit structure of the current accountability system; nor does it provide a guide on how to handle cultural differences so that student learning can flourish.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations that should be considered when interpreting this study. First, I could not satisfy Lincoln and Guba's (1985) quality indicator of prolonged engagement because of time constraints. Although I would have liked to have been in the



field long enough to saturate the data I was able to achieve the original goals of interviewing each participant twice and observing an RtI meeting at each school.

Another limitation of this study was the small sample size of the study. Although I attempted to recruit all teachers that were involved with the RtI efforts at both schools, only four out of twelve at West High School agreed to participate and only one teacher was identified as being a part of RtI efforts at Lawrence Academy. As mentioned earlier, I recruited the department chair at Lawrence Academy to supplement some of the information I received from the one math teacher. Consequently I wasn't able to get a full picture of all teachers' perceptions of DDDM within RtI which may have biased the findings to a small segment of the department.

Also, as a new researcher and former high school teacher, my position during data collection was not always consistent. At times I would go back and forth with participants from being a researcher to that of a fellow teacher. When teachers would discuss frustrations that they experienced with being accountable for student outcomes, I felt that I understood what they were talking about because of my experiences; hence there were emic/etic tensions (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Further, I was not making the "familiar strange" (Mannay, 2010). For example, throughout the analysis of the study, I realized that I took for granted many explanations and descriptions teachers gave because I thought that I understood them at the time. Thus this limitation in conjunction with the lack of prolonged engagement limited the amount of rich data collected.

### **Implications**

The promise of DDDM within an RtI framework is to improve instruction for all students to enhance student achievement. Major policy initiatives and a great deal of

research have commenced supporting the use of DDDM and RtI frameworks. The current study examined how teachers perceived these highly supported practices within the high school setting. The findings indicated that teachers were not adequately trained and under pressure to fulfill accountability requirement which may have diverted their focus from quality instruction for increased student outcomes. This section presents possible implications for practice and research based on this study's findings.

**Implications for practice.** Findings suggested that without professional training and on-going professional development DDDM within RtI will not make substantial changes in instruction and placement decisions. The manner in which schools and district personnel expect teachers to use data to make instructional decisions strongly impacts how teachers engage in DDDM. Consequently, it is important for teachers not only receive training but also to become collaborators with school and district personnel regarding the purpose and implementation of RtI within their schools. Additionally, these collaborations should support teacher use of DDDM for the purpose of changing their instruction if needed. Therefore, time should be provided for revising instruction based on the data. As teachers are important partners in the implementation of top-down policies such as RtI, it is important for district personnel and school administrators to provide the support and resources teachers need to be fully engaged within the process (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Teachers also need on-going professional training and support to understand the paradigm shift of moving from a deficit-based testing system towards a quality instruction focused practice associated with DDDM and RtI. To help facilitate this shift, in-service teachers should have expert-provided training and instructional coaching in

conjunction with a supportive administrative team (Fisher & Frey, 2013; Rinaldi, Averill, & Stuart, 2011). The research on promising and successful outcomes of RtI and DDDM implementation showed that university partnerships made a significant difference within elementary settings (Rinaldi et al., 2011; Stuart, Rinaldi, & Higgins-Averill, 2011).

Bringing these practices into the high school setting may also be beneficial. Bridging the research to practice divide can be supported by researchers providing training and coaching to teachers implementing equity-based policy initiatives. Further, there is growing support for researchers to take a more active role providing teacher training and coaching (Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, & Beckingham, 2004; Gersten, Vaughn, Deshler, & Schiller, 1997; Teemant, Wink, & Tyra, 2011). This focus on researcher support in schools doesn't negate the responsibilities of school and district personnel. These groups should provide on-going professional development that explicitly addresses the use and purpose of DDDM and RtI for equity of at-risk CLD students within their schools.

Furthermore, as teachers in the study did not see the strengths in student background and culture as meaningful tools for instruction, teachers should be trained to become culturally responsive instructors (Gay, 2000). It is recommended that teachers know their student's culture to better educate them (Kea & Utley, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition teachers should value student culture within the classroom and use it as a point of connection between where students are and where the curriculum is taking them (Howard & Terry, 2011). In other words, as all students are expected to understand and learn certain skills before they move on to the next level, it is recommended to use

student culture and background as leverage for bridging the gap between students' current knowledge and new knowledge (Gay, 2000; Howard & Terry, 2011).

**Implications for research.** Additional research is required to gain a better understanding of teacher engagement with top down policies, such as RtI, for improving at-risk CLD student outcomes within high schools. Future research should include a more diverse sample of teachers within and across a variety of high schools. In addition, including other school instructional personnel such as reading coaches, department chairs and school counselors would provide a rich and diverse view of how DDDM within an RtI framework operates within high schools.

Also, as teachers focused on student culture and behavior regarding achievement; future research could examine the effect of culturally responsive instruction (CRI) and social justice pedagogy training (after or in conjunction with teacher training on RtI) on teacher perceptions of student background and behavior within an RtI framework. Teachers that don't have explicit training in CRI or multicultural practices are more likely to continue with deficit perceptions of CLD student behavior which affect student outcomes (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). As this topic is nuanced and complex, the use of mixed methods should be more powerful for capturing this complexity than qualitative or quantitative methods alone. Mixed methods can provide generalizable information (i.e. use of scales and measures to gain information from a large number of participants) as well as more detailed information (i.e. interviews and observations with a few teachers for in-depth understanding of their use/understanding of CRI and social justice pedagogy), it may provide multidimensional data for a complex topic. Also,

research should expand to include high school student perspectives to the literature on instruction using DDDM and RtI framework.

### **Conclusion**

The study's findings indicated that high school teachers do not fully engage in DDDM for its intended purpose within the RtI framework of providing quality instruction for at-risk CLD students to help improve their academic outcomes. Additionally, accountability pressures leads to a narrow focus on standards and a neglect of aspects designed to improve instruction. Teachers perceived a lack of proper training and the pressure of accountability mandates as barriers to their use of DDDM within RtI. These findings point to the importance of high school teacher's involvement and collaboration when implementing top down policies, on-going training and coaching as well balancing accountability requirements.

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**Appendix A**  
**Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

#### RtI Implementation in High schools:

What are your thoughts on the implementation of RtI at your school?

**Probe:** describe the RtI framework that is being implemented in your school.

What do you see as the main goal for implementing RtI at your school?

**Probe:** Do you think that all teachers and administrators have the same goal regarding the RtI model implemented here? Why or why not?

#### Teacher Perception of general engagement in DDDM for Student Achievement:

Have you engaged in student data use for instructional decision making? What are your perceptions of the DDDM

If Yes, Next Question If not... Why not?

How do you perceive the general use of Data for instructional decision making affecting student academic outcomes? At-risk student outcomes?

**Probe:** Do you think that the DDDM process is having any effect on student academic outcomes? In what way?

#### Teacher Perceptions of personal use of RtI components: Assessment, Progress Monitoring for DDDM

Can you talk about the assessment(s) being used to measure student outcomes in your classroom/work since the implementation of RtI?

**Probe:** What assessments are currently being used?

**Probe:** Do you believe that the assessments are picking up on students' academic abilities?

Can you talk about progress monitoring and its impact on your classroom/work since the implementation of RtI?

**Probe:** What information does the progress monitoring give you?

How does the data generated from assessments and progress monitoring influence your instructional practices?

**Probe:** Does the information from assessments and progress monitoring change your instructional practices?

Can you talk about your instructional practices, specifically using data within the RtI framework, and its influence on student academic achievement?

**Probe:** What have you observed in student academic achievement since using data to change your instructional practices?

#### Teacher Perception of RtI and Closing the Achievement Gap

Proponents of RtI say that engagement in DDDM for informing instructional decision making has promise of increasing students' (specifically those at-risk) academic achievement. Has engagement with Data affected student academic outcomes thus far?

**Probe:** Have you noticed any changes in student academic outcomes since you started using student Data to inform your classroom instruction? If so, what changes have you noticed. If not, why do you believe there has been no change?

Do you believe that DDDM within an RtI framework work has promise of increasing the academic achievement of at-risk students? Why or why not?

**Probe:** Have you seen examples of students at-risk of failure doing better in a class because of the implementation of RtI at your school?