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Michael John Orosco¹ and Janette Klingner²

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how a response-to-intervention (RTI) model was implemented with a large percentage of Latino English language learners who were having reading difficulties in an urban elementary school at the primary level (K–2). The authors sought to describe school personnel's perceptions of RTI, what the model looked like in their school, and the challenges they faced. The authors focused on how teachers' understandings, beliefs, judgments, professional development, and training affected the RTI decision-making process by investigating classroom-based literacy instruction and problem-solving meetings. This study contributes to the literature by presenting a qualitative, in-depth description of how teachers implemented an RTI model for English language learners. These themes were intertwined and functioned as a negative cycle that created a deficits-based RTI literacy model.

Keywords

English language learners (ELLs), at risk, prevention, intervention, reading

Let us present a scenario that is quite too common for English language learners in public education (see Note 1). Pedro is an English language learner who has not yet developed the prereading skills needed to be successful in the first-grade classroom. He continues to attend school, listens to his teachers and fellow students read, and tries to do his homework. Yet when he is given a grade-level reading assessment, it shows that he is behind his peers. Pedro's teachers believe that his struggles are attributable to a lack of English proficiency and send him on to the second grade, and yet he continues to struggle. He moves on to the third grade before school personnel begin to finally look at his reading difficulties more closely, and his teacher refers him to the school's prereferral team. Pedro's teacher tries the strategies the team recommends, but he still struggles. After this extra assistance seems to have little effect, the team decides to refer him for a special education evaluation to determine whether there seems to be a discrepancy between his IQ and his achievement. A psychologist tests Pedro and finds that he is below average in both academic achievement and ability, with his achievement even lower than his IQ. The team decides that Pedro has a learning disability (LD). Pedro's tragedy is that because public education "waited for him to fail" before placing him in special education, the best years for teaching him to read may have

passed. Perhaps if Pedro's school had provided him with early intervention, as through a response-to-intervention (RTI) model, he would have received the support he needed.

Students such as Pedro are increasingly common in schools across the United States. By 2002, 43% of the nation's teachers had at least one English language learner in their classrooms (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2003). Approximately 20% of people older than 5 speak a language other than English at home, and it is estimated that by the year 2030, approximately 40% of the school population will speak English as a second language (USDOE, 2003). Although the majority of English language learners (77%) speak Spanish as their first language (Zehler et al., 2003), English language learners are a heterogeneous population in terms of ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic background, immigration status, and generation in the United States (August & Hakuta, 1997).

¹University of California at Riverside, Riverside, CA

²University of Colorado at Boulder, Boulder, CO

Corresponding Author:

Michael John Orosco, University of California at Riverside, 900 University, 1207 Sproul Hall, Riverside, CA 92521
Email: michael.orosco@ucr.edu

English language learners achieve at lower levels (particularly in literacy) than their non-English language learner peers; they also are retained more often and drop out of school in greater numbers (Zehler et al., 2003). Data on English language learners with special education needs suggest that the majority have LD, with reading difficulties as the core problem (56%); the second most prevalent category among the English language learners in special education is speech and language impairment (24%) (USDOE, 2003).

RTI

RTI potentially provides a way to support English language learners when they first show signs of struggling with reading. In their report on the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education, Donovan and Cross (2002) recommended moving from a discrepancy model for identifying students with LD to an RTI model as a way to ameliorate some of the causes of disproportionality. This recommendation was consistent with similar suggestions by the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) and the USDOE LD Summit (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002) to do away with an IQ-achievement discrepancy identification model and instead consider the extent to which students respond to valid instruction when determining whether they may have LD (also, see Stuebing et al., 2002; Vellutino, Scanlon, & Lyon, 2000). As a result, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA; 2004) includes RTI as an early intervening service model and an alternative to LD identification.

In generic terms, RTI can be described as a multitiered approach. Students are provided with evidence-based instruction by their classroom teacher (Tier 1). Their progress is monitored. Those who do not respond to instruction get something more from their teacher or someone else (Tier 2). Again, their progress is monitored, and those who still do not respond to instruction qualify for further intervention support, a special education evaluation, or special education (Tier 3). As students move through the tiers, the intensity of the interventions they receive increases. All students are screened in kindergarten, and their progress is assessed regularly so that those students who do not seem to be making adequate progress can be provided with interventions right away, before they have a chance to fall further behind. Thus, RTI is considered to be a prevention and intervention model (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

RTI can solve many problems that the IQ-achievement discrepancy model could not. First, it can assist struggling readers more rapidly in the general education classroom.

Second, it provides individualized instruction to students who have performed poorly because of inadequate instruction, thus separating these students from those who may have true disabilities. Third, by distinguishing between students with LD and those who have received poor instruction, it potentially can lead to a reduction in inappropriate special education referrals and enrollments. Finally, it is not contingent on the student's IQ, and the student does not have to be labeled LD to receive support.

Although there appears to be much promise in RTI, many of the details of RTI implementation still need to be worked out. Some experts are concerned about the feasibility of RTI (Gersten & Dimino, 2006; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005). Administrators are perplexed about how best to implement RTI in practical, effective ways (Wiener & Soodak, 2008). IDEIA was passed before enough was known about how to put RTI into practice. Researchers had investigated the effectiveness of RTI interventions but generally with research teams rather than school personnel providing the instruction. Almost no RTI research had been conducted with English language learners. Therefore, when the new law passed, little guidance was provided to states, districts, and schools about how to implement the new model. Even now, as researchers, professional organizations, and education agencies offer guidelines for how to set up RTI and use it to provide early intervening services and identify students with LD, some school personnel have the sense that these guidelines do not adequately take into account the many challenges they face. These challenges can affect any school but may especially be of concern in schools with culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student populations.

One challenge is that many educators are inadequately prepared to work with English language learners (Education Week, 2009; Menken & Antunez, 2001). Many lack the understanding of the second-language acquisition process and how to distinguish between language acquisition and LD. Also, they may be unfamiliar with effective instructional and assessment practices for English language learners (Au, 2005; Baca & Cervantes, 2004).

Another challenge is that RTI requires a paradigm shift (Murawski & Hughes, 2009). School personnel are accustomed to referring children to special education and looking for within-child deficits rather than examining the instructional context and other factors that can affect students' learning (Harry & Klingner, 2006). There is still too little focus on the learning environment when implementing RTI. Researchers Xu and Drame (2008) note that this inattention to context is particularly problematic in culturally and linguistically diverse schools.

Additionally, some of the assumptions underlying RTI are flawed, especially with culturally and linguistically diverse students (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). The idea of

“evidence-based” intervention in RTI tends to be applied with a “one-size-fits-all” mentality without consideration of issues of population and ecological validity when generalizing findings. For example, the National Reading Panel (2000) stated in its preface that it “did not address issues relevant to second language learning” (p. 3). Yet the recommendations in the panel’s report became the basis for Reading First and are widely touted as applying to all students.

Similarly, whether intentional or not, some recommendations for how to teach reading to English language learners seem to emphasize the commonalities between learning to read in one’s first and a second language and downplay important differences (e.g., Gersten et al., 2007), giving practitioners the impression that they can use the same assessments and instructional approaches with their English language learners as with their English-only students. Yet there are significant differences between learning to read in a second language that savvy teachers take into account when supporting English language learners (August & Shanahan, 2006; Cummins, 2007). For instance, phonological awareness in English can present special challenges to English language learners, because some phonemes may not be present in students’ native language and, therefore, may be difficult to distinguish auditorily from similar sounds. Also, sound placement in words differs across languages, making it harder to manipulate the sounds in words because the order of the sounds is unfamiliar. Thus, teachers should not conclude that their English language learners are struggling because of a deficit in phonological awareness when they face these obstacles. Similarly, some letters may look the same but have different sounds, such as Spanish and English vowels. Thus, although the process of learning to read in English is facilitated when students are already literate in their first language, unfamiliar phonemes and graphemes make decoding and spelling difficult. In addition, some researchers suggest that expected benchmarks and rates of progress might not be the same for English language learners as for English-only students (Linan-Thompson, Cirino, & Vaughn, 2007).

Unless we are able to help practitioners think about and address these issues, as with previous eligibility criteria, those implementing RTI may presume that if a child does not make adequate progress, he or she must have an internal deficit of some kind (or the child comes from a deficit background and that his or her underachievement cannot be helped). The goal of this study is to understand more clearly the perceptions of practitioners using RTI for the first time in a school with a high proportion of Latino English language learners, how they are implementing RTI, and the challenges they face as they put RTI into practice.

Theoretical Framework

We grounded this study in a social constructivist framework (Vygotsky, 1978) that was guided by three conceptual assumptions with English language learners. First, teachers should use instructional and assessment practices that have been validated with similar populations (e.g., Newman & Cole, 2004). Second, teachers who work in culturally and linguistically diverse settings should be knowledgeable about teaching English language learner pedagogy (e.g., Au, 2005). Third, a sociocultural perspective is important for helping educators understand the ways culture and language affect learning (e.g., Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

The first assumption concerns our belief that a one-size-fits-all approach to RTI cannot be sufficient for meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. In other words, for teachers to make sure they are providing English language learners with a high-quality, evidence-based education, the assessment and instructional practices they use must have been validated with similar students and in similar contexts (Bracht & Glass, 1968; Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Assessment procedures and instructional methods found to be effective with mainstream, English-only students are not necessarily effective with English language learners. When generic approaches are applied, the possibility is heightened that there will be misunderstandings about the reasons for students’ lack of response to interventions.

The second assumption relates to teacher knowledge. For practitioners to properly assess and implement interventions for English language learners, they must have acquired some expertise in how to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Generic teacher education and in-service professional development programs do not provide a sufficient level of preparation. Teachers need to understand how learning to read in English as a second or additional language is similar to and different from learning to read in one’s first language (August & Shanahan, 2006; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2008).

Teachers who work with English language learners also should be knowledgeable about the second-language acquisition process. Teachers need to understand that when their English language learners’ comprehension and production of English are limited, this does not mean they have a cognitive deficit. Rather, they are in the process of acquiring a new linguistic discourse. Historically, educators have tended to treat language acquisition variance as indicative of cognitive deficits and to blame students’ poor performance on their lack of English proficiency (Cummins, 2000; Oller, 1991). Similarly, they have misunderstood students’ hesitancy to be a sign of limited motivation. Baca and Cervantes (2004) believe that incomplete

understandings of the language acquisition process result in teachers' evaluating their English language learners negatively, sometimes leading to misjudgments that they have an LD.

A sociocultural approach provides the basis for the third assumption. Sociocultural theory views learning and development as culturally, historically, and socially mediated processes (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Learning and development occur within a larger ecological context and are influenced by various interacting factors. These factors include individual predispositions, family histories, cultural tools, and practices. Rogoff (1995, 2003) points out that the analysis of sociocultural phenomena incorporates three interrelated levels: the individual, the interpersonal, and the community. Cognition cannot exist solely in the biological development of a student but is part of a larger context or environment. From the Vygotskian perspective, there is a relationship between human mental functioning and the activities of everyday life. As humans begin to participate within a culture (e.g., family, community), the use of tools (resources) and artifacts (i.e., language) affect their cognitive development. Culture is structured by human activity and conceptually framed by the properties of the social and material world (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

When applied to the implementation of an RTI model, sociocultural theory suggests that educators should become familiar with the beliefs, values, and cultural and linguistic practices of their diverse students so that they can support their learning in positive ways. It is important for teachers to appreciate the assets students bring with them to school (August & Hakuta, 1997; Baca & Cervantes, 2004). These insights allow teachers to connect with and build on students' cultural and linguistic knowledge and to have high expectations for student learning. Without this understanding, teachers are more likely to view their students from a deficit perspective (e.g., as having an LD) or to view cultural differences as cultural disadvantages (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Rueda, Gallego, & Moll, 2000).

Ideally, teachers help provide the interface between emerging school literacy concepts and the students' literacy concepts learned at home and in the community (Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Reading instruction should involve the weaving of new school concepts with those of everyday life. Examples of this are when teachers question students to determine their prior knowledge in a particular content area or when they use objects with which students are familiar when teaching new letter sounds (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986).

In conclusion, in the descriptive case study described in this article, this framework provided a lens that helped us understand the decisions teachers made when implementing RTI with English language learners and the challenges they faced. It served to underlie our interpretations of our

findings. Next we describe the research studies that have been conducted on RTI with English language learners.

Literature Review

In the past few years, the body of research on the use of RTI with English language learners has grown substantially. Yet almost all of these studies focus on specific reading interventions for English language learners, not how to implement an RTI model more broadly. In general, RTI studies are finding positive literacy outcomes for English language learners at risk for reading problems. In some of these studies, researchers have provided students with interventions in their native language, and in other studies, instruction has been in English.

Calhoon and her associates (Calhoon, Al Otaiba, Cihak, King, & Avalos, 2007; Calhoon, Al Otaiba, Greenberg, King, & Avalos, 2006) as well as McMaster, Kung, Han, and Cao (2008) found that peer-assisted learning strategies were effective as a first-tier instructional approach in bilingual and Title 1 classrooms. Gerber and his team of researchers (Gerber et al., 2004; Leafstedt, Richards, & Gerber, 2004) concluded that small-group interventions in phonological awareness in Spanish could be quite effective for K-1 English language learners. Haager and Windmueller (2001) and Kamps et al. (2007) successfully implemented second-tier interventions in English for English language learners.

Two sets of researchers investigated the effectiveness of Read Naturally with English language learners: De La Colina, Parker, Hasbrouck, and Lara-Alecio (2001) using Spanish text and Denton, Anthony, Parker, and Hasbrouck (2004) with English text. De La Colina et al. found that Read Naturally improved the fluency and, to a lesser extent, the comprehension of first- and second-grade English language learners considered low achieving and at risk. Denton et al. found statistically significant differences but only minimal effect sizes favoring Read Naturally compared to a control condition on word identification, word attack, and passage comprehension measures.

Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, and their colleagues investigated the effectiveness of Spanish and English interventions for English language learners considered at risk for reading difficulties in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade (Linan-Thompson, Bryant, Dickson, & Kouzekanani, 2005; Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Hickman-Davis, & Kouzekanani, 2003; Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater, & Cirino, 2006; Vaughn, Cirino, et al., 2006; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, et al., 2006; Vaughn, Mathes, et al., 2006). Findings indicated that English language learners at risk for reading disabilities who were provided explicit, systematic, and intensive interventions made substantial gains in

comparison with those in the control group. These gains were evident in either Spanish or English.

Although researchers have found that intensive, well-constructed interventions can help improve English language learners' reading, there still are gaps in our knowledge base. In many cases, it was the research team providing the interventions rather than school personnel. Thus, we still do not know enough about what RTI actually looks like when implemented by practitioners in schools with a high proportion of English language learners, because the differences between researcher-controlled studies and the world of practice are considerable, especially in high-need urban schools. When interpreting the success of a model, it is important to consider not only effect sizes but also the conditions under which those who implemented the model were operating (Herman et al., 2000). The RTI literature is mainly composed of quantitative studies that pay little attention to students' differences, teachers' instructional behaviors, or classroom and school contexts. Much needed are qualitative, descriptive studies that help us understand how school personnel make sense of RTI and incorporate it into their daily routines. Only by understanding the challenges faced by those implementing RTI can we move forward in our efforts to design effective, feasible models.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to determine how one urban elementary school with a high percentage of English language learners implemented RTI at the primary level (K–2). We sought to describe school personnel's perceptions of RTI, what the model looked like, and the challenges they faced. We focused on understanding literacy instruction across the three tiers of the RTI model as well as what happened in problem-solving meetings. This study contributes to the literature by presenting a qualitative, in-depth description of one school's RTI implementation. This research was guided by the following question and subquestions:

1. How did school personnel implement an RTI model for Latino English language learners who were having reading difficulties?
 - a. What were the features of the RTI model?
 - b. What reading interventions were teachers using for Latino English language learners who were having reading difficulties, and what did this instruction look like?
 - c. To what extent did instruction appear to be appropriate for meeting students' cultural and linguistic needs?
 - d. What kinds of assessment data were collected?

- e. By whom and with what data were intervention decisions being made?
2. How did school personnel understandings, beliefs, judgments, professional development, and training affect program implementation with Latino English language learners?

Method

Strategy of Inquiry

The strategy of inquiry for this study was a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2003). The case study approach occurs in a naturalistic setting in behaviors and actions that are void of any type of control and manipulation by the researcher. Within this paradigm, case studies can be a valuable descriptive tool that can provide an in-depth understanding about complex models, such as RTI. Furthermore, the case study approach allows researchers for responsive design modification when they come across interesting circumstances that deviated from the original plan (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson 2005; Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002).

Setting

Mi Piquito de Oro (MPO) is part of a large, Midwestern, mountain urban school district called La Esperanza School District (LESD). LESD had 10,780 students, of whom 35% were Latino English language learners. According to National Assessment of Educational Progress (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007) data, only 8% of LESD Latino English language learners were reading at a proficient or above-proficient level. The term *Latino English language learner* is used because the student population had been identified as coming from Latin America (e.g., Mexican, Mexican American). Pseudonyms are used for all people, places, and programs referenced in this article.

MPO's population consisted of 290 students, of whom 14% were White, 1% were African American or Asian, and 85% were Latino. Eighty percent of these Latino students were considered English language learners, as defined by the state's English language proficiency test. Only 11% of MPO's Latino English language learners were reading at a basic proficient level. Almost all MPO students qualified for a free or reduced-price lunch (98.9%). MPO functioned as an English as a Second Language (ESL) immersion program that provided pull-out and in-class ESL services, with the exception of one bilingual first- and second-grade classroom.

The District's Approach to RTI

District personnel selected MPO to be an implementation site because (a) it had a strong administration, (b) school personnel were willing to implement RTI, (c) the school's previous state report card had a rating of "low" and "declining," and (d) 39% of the school's Latino English language learners were in special education. RTI was being developed as an integral component of the district's partnership agreement with its state educational agency to address the district's growing population of Latino English language learners and low reading achievement. The district would provide 4.5 days per year of RTI trainings to MPO during the 3-year implementation phase. This study was conducted during the 2nd year of RTI trainings.

The school district had developed a set of RTI core principles that was instilled into school RTI leadership teams and staff during RTI trainings. These were the following:

1. All children can learn.
2. We can effectively teach all children.
3. It is important to intervene early by . . .
 - using a multitier model.
 - using a problem-solving method to guide decision making.
 - using research-based interventions and instruction, both academic and behavioral.
 - monitoring student progress to inform instruction.
 - using data to guide decisions.
 - using assessment to screen to determine specific diagnostic needs, and to monitor progress.

The problem-solving method of RTI. LESD believed that the problem-solving method would be the most suitable for MPO because this model allowed for a collaborative team process and interdisciplinary approach that included three tiers of instruction, data-driven decision making, parent-school partnerships, progress monitoring, focused assessment, flexible service delivery, and prescriptive, research-based interventions.

The district RTI team had developed a four-step problem-solving procedure within each tier for its schools. At the first step, a collaborative approach would be taken in developing a learner profile that discussed academic strengths and weaknesses. The second step would be to analyze the problem. The problem would be considered in the context of the desired outcomes; possible researched-based interventions would be proposed (e.g., guided by Reading First policy). The general education teacher would then apply an intervention, collect data, and then analyze these data with team members and update this to the learner

profile. Step 3 would be to develop a student plan that included quantifiers for desired outcomes, including clear designations for the rate of progress and desired outcomes. Specifications about duration, frequency, and intensity of the intervention and progress monitoring would be determined. Finally, Step 4 would involve evaluating the student's response to intervention to make a decision on whether to continue this intervention or stop the intervention and try something different. The learner profile would need to be updated after every intervention was applied during this three-tier process.

The district RTI framework for MPO followed a three-tier team approach:

Tier 1 (Universal): Universal level. The universal level was to be provided in general education using ongoing universal screening, progress monitoring, and assessments to design instruction. For example, Tier 1 literacy instruction would be provided in 90-min blocks that covered instructional reading components (e.g., phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency).

Tier 2 (Specific): Targeted level. Specific prevention or remedial interventions would be provided for students identified as at risk or who fail to make adequate progress in general education after receiving all of the universal instruction.

Tier 3 (Intensive): Intensive level. Individualized, evidence-based interventions would be provided to students with intensive needs and who had an insufficient response to interventions in the first two tiers. The interventions provided would be of an increased intensity and duration and, if necessary, include placement in special education.

Tiers 2 and 3 literacy instruction would be provided in small groups and be segmented between 15 and 30 min per session depending on the content and skills the student(s) needed.

The RTI team. MPO's RTI team consisted of four school personnel (i.e., school psychologist, literacy specialist, ESL and special education teachers) trained as RTI facilitators. They were trained and supported through school district coaching by the RTI district coordinator. These school facilitators would be the program developers and implementers at the school level. They would also bring any concerns or questions back to the district level. The facilitators' roles would be to take referrals, gather data and information from the referring teacher, schedule monthly RTI team meetings and follow-up meetings, work with administration in identifying and gaining the participation of RTI team members (e.g., school staff and parents), and provide reports to the building administrators and the district RTI coordinator on a monthly basis.

Participants

MPO had 43 total staff members, including one principal and 21 K–5 teachers. Eight school professionals (six teachers, one principal, and one school psychologist) participated in the study. Of the teachers, one was a special education teacher, one was a reading specialist, and four were classroom teachers. Seven of the eight participants had been with the school and district at least 9 years, with only the school psychologist having had fewer than 8 years of experience with this school and district. These participants all had graduate degrees in their respective fields (i.e., administration [Mrs. A], elementary education [Mrs. K and Mrs. F], literacy [Mrs. L], special education [Mrs. S], ESL [Mrs. E], bilingual education [Mrs. B], and school psychology [Mrs. P]). All of the eight participants were White women who were between 30 and 60 years of age during the time that this study was conducted. All of these participants had begun their professional careers as educators.

Data Collection

During a 5-month period, the first author collected multiple sources of data (e.g., interviews, observations, assessment and instructional documents) to document implementation of RTI and to help explain participants' perceptions.

Observations. The first author observed 10 RTI team meetings after school (twice per month for approximately 90 min each session) and 48 observations of classroom reading instruction (three times per week for approximately 2 hr each session). The purpose of these observations was to describe classroom reading instruction for Latino English language learners and how the assessment process functioned for English language learners who were being recommended for further intervention support.

The first author kept thick, descriptive field notes to document how the RTI model was being implemented, what reading interventions were being used and with whom, and how English language learners' cultural and linguistic differences were being accounted for in the RTI process. Through descriptive notes, the researcher recorded the physical RTI environment and RTI engagement activities. Using analytical notes, the researcher recorded impressions and questions or issues that needed further investigating (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

Interviews. The first author conducted three 30- to 45-min interviews per participant to understand how school personnel and administrators interpreted RTI. This interview protocol was guided by a set of predetermined questions that were modified during the interview to fit each individual or to probe deeper into specific topics (Seidman, 2006). Questions prompted participants to describe their past experiences prior to implementing RTI, current experiences

with RTI, and thoughts about what was occurring (Seidman, 2006). These interviews established the context of the participants' experiences, allowed them to reconstruct the details of their RTI activities, and encouraged them to reflect on the meaning their experiences held for them. Exploring the past helped participants to clarify their thinking about where they were with RTI and to establish the conditions for reflecting on what they believed about RTI. By asking participants to reconstruct details of their RTI experiences, they were selecting events from their past and describing them as putting experience into language as a meaning-making process.

Artifacts and documents. The first author collected documents related to the RTI process, such as literacy curricula, assessments (e.g., Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills [DIBELS]), teacher observation forms, school demographics, and staff development documents. Document analysis of classroom materials, literacy lesson plans, and student work provided the physical evidence to support this study. A specific focus was put on the analysis of RTI documents (e.g., teacher referral forms and intervention recommendations) to see if they coincided with what the teachers documented in interviews. Other physical documents (e.g., lesson plans, literacy curriculum, student portfolios) that applied to the RTI were also reviewed.

Data Analysis

The first author conducted initial data analysis, and the second author reviewed and checked for accuracy all coded data that followed Strauss and Corbin's (1998) inductive analysis process. Both authors met on a regular basis (twice monthly) to discuss codes and themes as data analysis progressed. Field notes were analyzed line by line and as a whole by examining the types of activities and interactional patterns within the RTI experience. Each code was developed in consideration of the study's research questions guided by the theory and literature and then was operationalized with a clear definition of what data could and would not fit into a particular code (Harry, Klingner, & Sturges, 2005). As codes were revised, all previously reviewed data were then recoded to reflect any modifications that were made.

The preliminary step included chunking the data from initial interviews and observations and open coding, which identified 15 codes. As this study progressed, data codes went through multiple iterations that were continuously refined and modified as necessary. Preliminary codes with minimal data were collapsed or deleted, and others were created when there were sufficient data to support a new code. For example, two codes that were developed and then collapsed because further evidence collected did not support them were *disorientation in*

testing and disorientation in instruction. These *disorientation* codes became *discrepancy in assessment* and *substandard reading instruction*. For example, when the school psychologist reported a student's IQ scores and a discrepancy between IQ and achievement, this was coded as *discrepancy assessment*. In another example, when teachers provided poor reading instruction for Latino English language learners, a discrete code emerged called *substandard reading instruction*. As additional data were collected, inductive analysis continued and the initial codes were iteratively refined to eight codes, which reflected emerging patterns of convergence and divergence (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Next, discrete codes were grouped into conceptual categories that reflect commonalities among codes. This is called "axial coding," reflecting the concept of clustering the open codes to specific "axes" or points of intersection. Axial coding in this study consisted of specifying a category in terms of the conditions that give rise to it; the context (its specific set of properties) in which it is embedded; the action and/or interaction by which it is handled, managed, or carried out; and the consequences of those strategies. For example, the *discrepancy assessment* code was clustered into a category called *challenging assessment factors*, and the *substandard reading instruction* code was categorized into *challenging instructional factors*. At this stage, the properties were identified inter-pretively through the lens of the researcher (Harry et al., 2005).

The final step was "selective coding," meaning that at this point, we handled various code clusters in a selective fashion, deciding their relation to each other and what stories they told (Harry et al., 2005). This is known as "thematic" building. For example, the *challenging assessment factors* and *challenging instructional factors* categories became the themes Misalignment in Assessment and Misalignment in Instruction. As interrelations between themes became apparent, a coherent story began to emerge. For example, for the themes Misalignment in Assessment and Misalignment in Instruction, the causal conditions were nonculturally responsive and inappropriate assessment and instructional practices, the actions were challenging assessment and instructional practices, and the consequences or phenomena were that Latino English language learners were not learning, thus being "referred into RTI," and not being assessed in a manner consistent with RTI, thus being placed into special education.

Coding and management of these data were facilitated by the use of ATLAS.ti.5.2 (Muhr, 2004), a computer program used with qualitative research. Atlas.ti.5.2 allowed us to input the majority of the data (transcripts, field notes, and observations) into a word processor and then upload it into the program and continuously code it through the study.

Permanent products, such as artifacts and documents, were maintained separately, then coded by hand, and then reincorporated into the computer program that generated the coding reports.

Reliability and Validity

This study followed several strategies (engagement, observation, participant debriefing, member checking, thick description) to improve on the reliability and validity of the study (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Wolcott, 2001). Triangulation of qualitative data sources was consistently compared and cross-checked with information derived at different times and by different means. As described earlier, this study was informed by multiple forms of data that presented a multiplicity of personal perspectives (interviews), objective observations, and review of permanent products, artifacts, records, and field notes. The benefit of this triangulation was that it insured the accuracy and credibility of this study's data. All these strategies were incorporated in this study and served as guiding principles throughout this study. It was through this synthesis and analysis of these varied research strategies that the themes and conclusions of the study evolved.

Limitations

Qualitative research at times imposes limitations associated with access to participants. Because of a time constraint, there was not full and complete access to participants and their classrooms. This partially collected data made it completely impossible to capture the full RTI experience at this school. Although the descriptive and interpretive work gave this study strength, it also prevented it from being free from bias, because all observations and analyses are filtered through one's worldview, values, and perspectives (Wolcott, 2001). By acknowledging this throughout the duration of this project, an attempt was made to remain disinterested in the actual conduct and outcomes of the research so that, as much as possible, personal interests would not become a source of bias when conducting of the study or interpreting data.

Findings

The findings include the following four themes: Misalignment in Instruction and Assessment, Negative Schooling Culture, Inadequate Teacher Preparation, and Limited Resources. These themes were intertwined and functioned to create a deficits-based RTI model. The big picture that resulted from this study was that everything that was developed, implemented, and practiced by the majority of participants was based on a deficits-based approach.

Description of MPO

MPO and its school district sit north and east of two budding postindustrial cities. There are no illusions here. MPO is considered the basement of its school district. By carrying no illusions, the school and its community preserve a kind of weary dignity, a toughness that comes from its new working-class immigrant population. As one drives into the community, one can begin to see the deteriorating and poorly maintained pre-1960s housing. There are fences to be mended, houses to be painted, and roofs to be shingled. Dogs run loose. Broken cars stand on homemade auto lifts made of cement blocks and plywood. Driving up to the school, one can begin to see that the brick building is starting to decay; there is no lawn, just brown patches of grass, and the parking lot has potholes. The playground equipment does not resemble the modern ecological playscapes that newer schools in the district have; MPO's playground is made of steel beams and rocks. When asked why the school had not gotten a new playground, the custodian replied, "Why? So they can break it?" Physically, the school and the classrooms show their 45 years of age. The walls in the classroom are starting to crack, the plumbing makes noise, the air conditioning and heating ventilation system rattles as children try to read, the rugs give off a smell like wet puppies, and the rooms are too small for all of MPO's student inhabitants. The principal commented, "This school is long overdue for a remake."

Misalignment in Assessment and Instruction

MPO's RTI process appeared to be a fragmented model that resulted in part from misalignment in assessment and instruction. Teachers applied generic RTI procedures of assessment (progress monitoring) and evidence-based reading principles (Reading First) that for the most part failed to facilitate student learning and development. In other words, their assessment and instructional practices were misaligned or not appropriate for meeting the needs of their English language learners because they did not incorporate a sophisticated knowledge of the language acquisition process and Latino English language learner pedagogy. Several of the participants erroneously seemed to assume that their instruction was objectively aligned with assessment, which provided data-driven evidence that these children were struggling with reading. The quality or appropriateness of assessment and instruction was never questioned for this population, as evidence showed that these teachers used mainstream assessment and instructional values and standards that had little relevance to English language learners' home culture and language. Eventually, this misalignment resulted in teachers recommending many students for further RTI support and special education.

Tier 1 instruction. Teachers were faced with the enormous responsibility of understanding, respecting, and addressing Latino English language learners' cultures and linguistic characteristics while creating learning environments that challenged and supported them academically. However, the majority of participants did not seek to do this proactively through assessment and instruction. The following excerpts from field notes provide evidence of how instruction in the RTI model was misaligned.

This first example is from a guided reading lesson in a kindergarten class less than halfway through the year with students that Mrs. K referred to as "my high group." This observation focuses on what the teacher called fluency building. Mrs. K sought out RTI support several times for struggling English language learner readers. Eventually, as classroom behavior got out of hand, she would seek further Tier 2 intervention reading support, because as Mrs. K put it, "I am worried that these kids cannot learn how to read." She added, "I am trying my best." In her frustration, she also commented, "Why can't these kids just learn to speak English?"

Mrs. K asks students to stand up. Mrs. K, "Let's do the alphabet rap song." Mrs. K raps and makes motions with her hands to symbolize the sound-letter correspondence. Mrs. K, "A-Alley, B-Bubba, C-Cutina, D-Dedee, E-Ellie, F-Francie, G-Gummy, H-Honey, I-Iguana, J-Jerry, K-Kale, L-Lizzy, M-Missy, N-Nigel, O-Ollie, P-Peewee, Q-Queenie, R-Robbie, S-Sammie, T-Timmie, U-Unicorn, V-Vinny, W-Willie, X-Xavier, Y-Yancy, Z-Zeek." Students are trying to mimic Mrs. K; however, they are falling behind. Students are not understanding this—Mrs. K is going too fast. Mrs. K, "Let's try it one more time." More and more students are falling behind to the point where the majority of the class are just looking around and bumping into each other like bumper cars. Students cannot keep up with the rap song and hand motions. Mrs. K, "S is for Sammie snake (making a slithering motion). . . T is for Timmie Tyranasaurus [*sic*] Rex (making a roaring sound). . . U is for Unicorn (motioning to her head with her hand that she had a horn). . . V is for Vinny Vampire (motioning with her hands to her mouth that she had vampire fangs. . . W is Willie Weasel. . ."

Mrs. K seemed to assume that her students had background knowledge about the animals in the song and were familiar with the names used. But in fact, the song was quite abstract for her English language learners. Thus, the song did not have the intended effect of helping students make connections that might help them learn the alphabet. Yet this did not occur to Mrs. K.

Another Tier 1 excerpt is from a first-grade classroom. Mrs. F was frustrated because her students did not know their sight words in English. This type of instruction was quite typical for this teacher.

Mrs. F seated at the head. Mrs. F, "Yesterday, how many of you knew your sight words? One student (s) speaks out, "One?"; another, "Three?" Mrs. F, "You are right. Three students were able to tell me their sight words. We need to practice these words; we are really behind. Every one of you should know these sight words by now. You need to practice these at home. Don't you practice these at home?" Mrs. F showing frustration in her face and voice, "Only those 3 students will be able to pull from the treasure chest." Mrs. F begins sight words practice by holding up index cards while saying-*Big, My, See, Like, I, At, This, And, Up, Have, Too*. S. repeat sight words as Mrs. F holds up index cards. This is a repetitive process. Mrs. F holds up the word "Big" without saying anything. One s. says the word "Big." She holds up another. "See." The same s. says the word again. She holds up the word "see" and again the same s. answers. Pause. Another says "see." Mrs. F goes through this process with all the words, and says, "Okay guys, you need to practice these at home, you are not paying attention, and you should have known these words by now."

Mrs. F and many of the other participants believed that they were implementing research-based practices and never seemed to question the quality of their instruction; rather, they indicated that students' failures were a result of their not being English proficient or sufficiently prepared. Mrs. F commented, "I find that these students tend to not understand what I say during instruction. It seems like they are not listening." This comment about "not listening" was quite dominant throughout conversations with other teachers, also. Teachers believed that English language learners were not "ready to learn" because of their lack of linguistic capital and their limited English language development. This was a strong indication of how these teachers did not understand the language acquisition process (e.g., anxiety, poor attention) and the instructional methods that these students required. Teachers seemed to assume the children were deficient rather than their instruction.

There was one exception to this pattern. The bilingual first-grade teacher was able to displace the myth that these learners were deficient. She was able to provide direct and explicit native-language instruction that was socially and linguistically meaningful by connecting it to students' cultural and linguistic experiences by allowing them to

contextualize bilingual instruction through their native language. She was able to work quite well with the skills these children brought to school. The following is an excerpt from a guided reading group with a small group of Latino English language learners (see Appendix for English translation).

Mrs. B, "Hoy vamos a leer un libro que se llama *Tom es Valiente*. ¿Que piensan sobre la palabra valiente?" Mrs. B pauses then realizes that S. do not recognize the word. Mrs. B, "Esta bien. ¿Alguna vez han tenido miedo de algo?" S., "Si." Mrs. B, "Alguien puede levantar la mano, para decirme a que le tienen miedo." Several S. volunteer, "Yo tengo miedo a los perros. No me gustan." Mrs. B, "No es nada malo con tener miedo a los perros. A mí no me gustan los gatos. ¿Quien más tienen miedo de algo?" Another s., "Yo tengo miedo en la noche cuando me duermo." Mrs. B, "Ha tienes miedo de la oscuridad. Oscuridad es otra palabra para la noche." Mrs. B., "Saben que todos tenemos miedo de algo. Ahora la palabra valiente (pointing to title page) significa no tener miedo de nada." T., "Ahora vamos a leer *Tom es valiente*." Mrs. B directs one s. to read. S., "*Tom fue a la tienda con su Mamá*." (The page next to this passage has a picture of Tom walking to the store.) Another s. reads, "*¡Tom! ¡Tom! ¡Fíjate por donde caminas! ¡Fíjate por donde caminas!*" (The picture shows Tom crossing the street almost being run over by a motorcyclist). Mrs. B pauses. . . says, "¡Se recuerdan como deben leer cuando miren el punto de exclamación en un párrafo!" S., "Tenemos que. . . leer con. . . e. . . mo. . . ción." She asks the s. to re-read the passage with emphasis; the s. does. Mrs. B, "Muy bien." Another s. replies, "Yo me recuerdo una vez cuando tuve que cruzar una carretera y me dio tanto miedo." Mrs. B., "Pero, la cruzastes! Que valiente!" [Connection made to student's prior knowledge and today's vocabulary concept.] . . . Another s. reads the next page, "*Tom se fue a casa. 'Mirá mama, estoy sangrando.'*" "*¡Oh, Tom!*" *dijo la Mamá*." (Picture of Tom running home, mom is waiting on the door steps with open arms. He had cut his knee.) Mrs. B, "¿Que significa la palabra sangrando?" Several S. raise their hands. One says, "Es cuando te cortas con algo picoso y te sale sangre." Mrs. B smiles, "¿Te cortas con algo afilado?" The student looks perplexed. Mrs. B, "La palabra afilado es mas propia para decir que picoso. Por ejemplo, el chile es picoso."

MPO's sole bilingual teacher (Mrs. B) provided the highest-quality instructional support, which included clear,

direct, and explicit reading instruction and strategies that allowed for student contextualization, engagement and motivation, individual differences, and oral language development. Her bilingual instruction allowed for students to respond spontaneously, because this instruction bridged background knowledge and new knowledge.

Tier 2 instruction. The following excerpt from a lesson on oral blending and sight words is an example of how Tier 2 reading intervention support was conducted. The students receiving Tier 2 interventions were recommended for support by some of the participants in this study. The literacy teacher (Mrs. L) felt that the greatest challenge to the RTI process was “figuring out how to get ESLs [ESL students] to read; their motivation to read is not there.” Observations suggested, however, that students were motivated to learn to read, but that instruction was not appropriate for their needs and not motivating.

Mrs. L, “I am going to stretch a word and then I would like for you to put it together and say the word.” Mrs. L, “*Treehou. . . .se*. What’s the word?” S. are quiet with no reply. Mrs. L, “*Treehou.se*.” S. are hesitant. One s. finally figures this out and says “tree. . .hou. . .z.” Mrs. L, “Good. Now I am going to say some more words and I would like you to say them.” Mrs. L, “*superma. . . .n*.” Same student. “*supermanz*.” Mrs. L, “Good.” Next word, *Sailboat. . .t* (emphasizing the *t* sound).” Mrs. L calls on a different s., who pauses and finally says it with hesitation, “*Sa. . .il. . .boa. . .t*.” The student sounded perplexed, and pronounced the *Sail* part like the Spanish word *salir*. Mrs. L, “Next word. *Astornau. . . .t*.” Another student hesitates and finally tries the word, “*Astro. . . .nau. . .t*.” The student pronounces the word *astro* as in Spanish . . . Mrs. L, “Let’s work on our sight words.” Mrs. L writes sight words on her dry erase board: *have, many, some*. Mrs. L reads the words and has S. repeat them. Some S. read the words without much difficulty; others do not say anything. Mrs. L, “Okay, now can you guys use these words in a sentence? Who would like to try?” No takers. T., “Someone?” Mrs. L looks at a s. across from her and says, “Pick a word and try.” The s. is hesitant. Mrs. L, “How about if I help you? Can you say this, *I have some snow*.” Mrs. L, “Repeat (Spanglish).” The s. seems to get the gist, “*I hab. . . so. . .mo. . . s. . .no*.” Mrs. L, “Good. How about someone else? How about the word *many*?” S. hesitate. Mrs. L, “Okay. Here is an example. *I have many friends*. Can you say this?” Same s., “*I. . .hab. . .ma. . .ni friend. . .z*.” Mrs. L, “Good. Next word. *Some*.” Mrs. L looks at another s. Same process. Mrs. L makes up a sentence, “*I have*

some toys.” Same s. repeats . . . The teacher takes them back to class.

Tier 2 instructional data indicate that reading activities were misaligned for English language learners and their levels of language development. Instruction focused more on passive production (e.g., repetition, rote memorization) instead of on active production. Although for some classrooms, this may have been a “good teaching fit,” instructional principles of “soundness” are culturally dependent and different for Latino English language learners. Students did not receive enough support in phonological awareness. In the phonological awareness activity, they had difficulty saying quickly the words she stretched, yet she accepted their responses and moved on rather than providing additional assistance. Furthermore, evidence indicates that there was L1 (native language) and L2 (ESL) transference that the teacher did not understand. It did not seem as though students were receiving an adequate opportunity to learn. Mrs. L made comments such as “These kids should be self-correcting by now. I cannot figure out why they are not catching their mistakes.” In time, several English language learners who were falling farther behind would be placed into the school’s Tier 3 program, which was special education.

Tier 3 instruction. The following excerpt comes from the special education teacher (Mrs. S), who provided Tier 3 intervention support to Latino English language learners with LD.

Mrs. S., “Boys and girls, we need to read our story, *Polar Bears*. We need to listen to see what color they are, where they live or what they eat.” Mrs. S. directs students (S) to look at the title page, asks what they think the book is about. No response. Mrs. S, “Are polar bears nice?” No response. Mrs. S begins to read: “*Polar Bears live in the Arctic at the North Pole. The polar bear is a marine mammal . . . Polar bears are carnivores . . .*” As Mrs. S is reading S. are beginning to check out; one s. is playing with the drawstring in his hooded sweater. Another two are whispering to each other. Mrs. S continues: “The white fur is important camouflage for the bears as they hunt their prey on the ice . . .” Mrs. S: “Okay let’s talk about the story now. So what do they smell?” No reply. Mrs. S, “Anyone?” One s., “People.” Mrs. S, “Good.” Mrs. S, “Do polar bears live here in Colorado?” S., “Yes.” Mrs. S, “Good. They could if they lived at the zoo.” Only one s. is responding, with one word answers.

Mrs. S let me know, “I do LD instruction by the book.” Although the kids seemed to be well behaved for the most

part during observations, they did not seem engaged or motivated. When she asked them questions, they rarely knew the answers or said a word. The teacher assumed that students struggled because they had LD rather than questioned whether instruction was appropriate. She did not seem to consider that issues such as auditory processing difficulties and poor memory retrieval may have been attributable to second language acquisition and school acculturation more than to LD.

Misalignment in Assessment

I tend to push very hard during the prereferral process not to find any deficits in these kids. We first sit down and look at their strengths, and this is something I push the teachers to do over and over again. For example, we talk about how these kids are Spanish speakers and are being instructed in English, and how this English instruction and language acquisition process can cause learning challenges for them. After going through this process with them, if they feel that these students need to be assessed for a learning disability, then I assess them. (interview with Mrs. P, school psychologist)

Interview data indicate that participants were aware of cultural and linguistic challenges that might affect students' learning and understood that the prereferral process at the school prior to implementing RTI had been biased. However, other findings suggest that participants were confused about how to distinguish between learning challenges and LD and were quick to attribute students' struggles to internal deficits of some kind and/or a lack of support at home. As noted in the above quote, the school psychologist believed that the prereferral process eliminated any bias in referrals and that after going through this process, it was appropriate to conduct a formal assessment to determine whether students had disabilities. Because the psychologist played a key role in determining who qualified for special education, she promulgated an approach to assessment that was deficit based and misaligned with students' needs.

Strong evidence of misalignment in assessment came from RTI meetings. The school was supposed to apply a district-approved problem-solving method that required the RTI team (a) to define the student's learning challenges, (b) to analyze these challenges through progress-monitoring data, (c) to use these data to develop an intervention plan, and (d) to evaluate the student's RTI in deciding to continue the intervention, increase intensity, or change the intervention. However, at every RTI meeting the first author attended, the school psychologist applied an IQ-achievement discrepancy formula to every student she assessed. A typical

- Grade 3
- At [REDACTED] since Fall 2005 (2nd Grade)
- Received ESL Newcomers Intervention in 05-06
- First Language is Spanish, Spanish spoken at home.
- Most recent ELL info-Non English Proficient (1's and 2's State English Language Assessment).
- Currently participating in Auditory Development Program=Intensive Intervention

District Reading Assessment

-0.9 Q1 2005-06
 .2 Q2 2005-06
 .5 Q4 2005-06
 .5 Q2 2006-07

District Writing Assessment

-0.3 Q1 2005-06
 .1 Q4 2005-06
 -0.1 Q2 2006-07

DIBELS (Composite)

Oral Reading Fluency<53 Severely Low

Universal Nonverbal 85-115 Average Range

Intelligence Test (UNIT)

Memory Quotient	79	Delayed
Reasoning Quotient	88	Low Average
Symbolic Quotient	82	Low
Nonsymbolic Quotient	85	Low Average
Full Scale	82	Low

Figure 1. Response-to-intervention meeting for Mira.

example of this was the case of Mira (see Figure 1), a third grader. During an RTI meeting, Mira was being referred for reading difficulties. During Mira's RTI evaluation (the school psychologist called it this), the team assessed her nonverbal IQ and reading achievement to determine whether there was a significant discrepancy between the two but neglected to discuss any cultural and linguistic learning challenges that may have stemmed from acquiring a new language (English) and acculturating toward a new culture. Mira had been in the United States for only approximately 2 years. Mira's achievement was deemed low enough by the RTI team for her to be placed in the third tier, which was the school's special education program (see Figure 1).

In addition, teachers were frustrated that they were required to give the DIBELS to all of their students yet did not feel as though the test yielded information that could help them plan instruction for their students. They were confused about how to use the data provided by the test.

The same third-grade teacher who had referred Mira also noted that 22 out of her 26 students were reading below grade level (20 of whom were English language learners), with low to very low oral reading fluency scores on the DIBELS. She asked the chairperson of the RTI problem-solving team, "Should I refer all these students?"

Teachers expressed confusion about aspects of the RTI process. Eventually, at one time or another, all the participants believed that the prereferral and RTI process were the same. They made comments to this effect throughout the study, such as "referring into RTI" or "placing into RTI." One participant noted, "Essentially we crossed out *prereferral* and wrote *RTI* over it without doing anything in between." Teachers had this misunderstanding even though they had received professional development in how the RTI process was supposed to be different from the prereferral process.

Negative School Culture

Many of these students come from homes where they are not read to. . . . They do not go to museums, libraries, or bookstores. Because of this, these kids are behind because they do not share a common background with middle-class kids. (interview with MPO teacher)

MPO's school leadership neglected to attend to a schoolwide characteristic that has festered at the heart of the deficit-based approach in public education. The principal did not address the role and importance of school personnel's perceptions about Latino English language learners, which formed the backdrop of its school culture. The predominate characteristic of this theme was that the majority of these teachers cast judgment on what was right or wrong, good or bad, on the basis of Anglo middle-class upbringings, cultural and linguistic norms, and professional development without ever fully trying to understand that Latino English language learners had a culture with its own particular traditions, values, and socialization processes. This negativity, in essence, meant that Latino English language learners would succeed only if and to the extent that their language and culture met White middle class norms.

Middle-class gap. According to the principal, MPO used to be a White, middle-class school, but within the past several years, its student demographics had shifted from "mainly White to mainly poor Latino English language learners." One teacher commented, "When I started here in the mid 1980s, it was a White, working middle-class community. Now this has changed. I am not used to teaching these types of kids." A second teacher shared, "All my children come from poor homes that have no resources

for educating these children. I do not think we have any middle-class kids left. This middle-class gap affects our CSAP [Colorado Student Assessment Program] scores." Another teacher said, "Our kids do not have exposure to bookstores, the public library, and their parents do not read to them. Without this, it is going to be hard for them to learn." A different teacher emphasized, "These students need to really get in there and read; if they do not read, they are not going to be able to compete and understand what upper-middle-class students know." The majority of the participants believed that without English language learners' receiving middle-class experiences, it was going to be difficult for public education to "enrich" their lives.

Limited parental involvement. The negative school culture hindered the school's ability to draw from other resources. The participants were unable to tap into local cultural and linguistic capital, such as community and family-based networks. Although these participants relied on the school's ESL services, this was negligible support that was infrequent and ineffective at meeting each teacher's extensive needs in the classroom. MPO did not have other support mechanisms in place that might have helped (e.g., social worker, community liaison, parent participation), and therefore, participants were unable to access students' community funds of knowledge in their RTI model development. The RTI team did not include one single family or community member. They did not try to bridge home-school cultural and linguistic differences to create a better context for student learning.

This negative school culture affected teachers' assessment and instructional values, expectations, and practices. Furthermore, this theme is critical to understanding how teachers' perspectives influenced the development of RTI in their school. The effects of this negative school culture on students were pervasive. Given the apparent magnitude of the impact of the school culture on the daily educational experiences of children, the relative disregard for this theme by the school leadership was striking. Undoing the impact of the negative school culture needed to be just as important and integral a part of the RTI process as any intervention or reading curriculum.

Inadequate Teacher Preparation

We really struggle in this area. The majority of my teachers have MAs in education; however, they have no ESL or differentiated instruction skills for this population. I do not think they have a sound grasp of what reading instruction is all about for this group. I think this is a result of you and us. Higher education is doing a miserable job of preparing teachers in understanding the fundamentals of reading development for English language learners, and my district is

doing nothing about this. Although by national guidelines, these practitioners are highly qualified, they are not high qualified to teach reading to Latino English language learners. (interview with school principal)

Despite the teachers' receiving some RTI professional development, evidence suggests that the participants had inadequate teacher preparation in addressing Latino English language learners' cultural and linguistic needs. This inadequate preparation posed a challenge that limited MPO's ability to develop its RTI model, because the majority of practitioners had not participated in sufficient professional development in how to assess and instruct its growing Latino English language learner population. The data indicate that assessment and instructional orientation varied from teacher to teacher, with the majority of these participants not having the instructional skills to modify current evidence-based reading practices (e.g., phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary development) from a culturally responsive perspective to accommodate students' language and literacy needs.

Limited Resources

Although the purpose of this study was not to specifically evaluate the RTI reading curriculum, but rather was to find out how participants implemented the RTI model, the curriculum was difficult to ignore, because some of the participants brought it up during conversations and interviews and it was observable in classrooms. The quality of the reading curriculum and the materials available to the participants at MPO were inadequate. While conducting classroom observations, the first researcher began to notice that the reading curriculum and materials these teachers were using were incomplete and outdated. For example, each classroom had an average of 32 books per library. The publication dates of these books ranged from the 1950s to the 1990s. Many of the books seemed to be at an inappropriate readability level, such as *The Wind in the Willows* in the kindergarten class. The school library had newer books; however, the librarian commented to me, "We do not allow the children to take these books home, because they might lose them. We cannot afford to replace them."

Although the school had adopted the curricula the district had recommended, which were Open Court as the core reading program, Reading First methods, and Kaleidoscope as a reading intervention program, the data show that these reading programs were inconsistently used throughout the school. The literacy teacher stated that this was "hit and miss" because "as teachers come and go, materials get lost and others get replaced." One teacher emphasized that they were using an outdated model of Open Court that was incomplete. The materials teachers used were heterogeneously mixed with other incomplete reading program

materials (e.g., Rigby PM Collection, Wright Group, La Estrellita, Wilson Reading Group, Zoo Phonics, teacher-made libraries). Teachers clearly were struggling to implement the RTI model in part because they did not have the adequate materials to support it. The lack of curriculum and materials exacerbated teachers' challenges when trying to instruct their Latino English language learners and seemed to add to their deficit perspective of students.

Discussion

This case study describes how an RTI model was implemented with Latino English language learners who were having reading difficulties in an urban elementary school setting at the primary level. We situated the study in a social constructivist framework with three conceptual assumptions: (a) validated, research-based practices; (b) English language learner pedagogical knowledge; and (c) sociocultural theory. In investigating the RTI model for these learners, we focused on how teachers' understandings, beliefs, judgments, and training affected RTI program implementation with Latino English language learners. Findings indicated that misalignment in assessment and instruction, a negative school culture, inadequate teacher preparation, and limited resources resulted in an RTI model that was not meeting students' needs.

The success of an RTI model is dependent on several factors (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, assessment and instructional methods, professional development opportunities, curriculum, and resources) that are practiced by the institution and teachers. Although recommended evidence-based practices (e.g., Reading First) had been empirically tested with English speaking students, few experimental studies had confirmed these approaches with English language learners (Cummins, 2007). Unfortunately, MPO's RTI model was an iniquitous process that provided insufficient support for English language learners because of ineffective practices. In other words, this model was not responsive to its students' language and literacy learning needs. As teachers applied inadequate instruction and were given weak professional development and resource support, they were implicitly qualifying students for further interventions based not on student qualifications but on instructional deficits.

The effective-practices literature indicates that teachers who provide a balance between basic and higher-order skills, direct and explicit instruction, oral language development, and student-based collaborative approaches integrated with phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, word recognition, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension skills instruction can significantly improve English language learner reading achievement (e.g., August & Hakuta, 1997; August & Shanahan, 2006; Linan-Thompson et al., 2006; Vaughn, Cirino, et al., 2006). Regrettably, only

a few teachers in this study provided effective practices that had been validated by English language learner research. For example, this study's sole bilingual teacher provided instruction that included clear, direct, and explicit reading strategies that allowed for student motivation, individual differences, and oral language development. In contrast, other participants failed to provide instructional pacing in phonological awareness and decoding that would have promoted English language learner engagement to improve their fluency and word identification (Leafstedt et al., 2004; Vaughn, Cirino, et al., 2006). Finally, few teachers provided effective vocabulary instruction, error correction, and fluency-building activities that have been found so critical to improving oral language and reading comprehension (Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, & Francis, 2006; Vaughn, Cirino, et al., 2006). Because of this, a pedagogical divide was created that diminished English language learners' response to instruction and interventions and led to inappropriate assessment and instruction based on inaccurate judgments and categorizations that eventually resulted in many being labeled with an LD (Ortiz & Yates, 2002).

Also, it is well documented that many public school teachers are not qualified or trained to address English language learners' academic needs (August & Shanahan, 2006; Education Week, 2009; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2008). In this study, it was quite evident that the majority of the participants had a limited working knowledge of English language learner pedagogy. Because these teachers had received inadequate preparation and professional development, they were learning to implement an RTI model with English language learners while on the job. Thus, they provided an educational context that did not meet these learners' cultural and linguistic needs. The fact that these teachers were still perceiving a language difference as an LD and disproportionately referring these students into special education was prevalent in the data. This mislabeling is a central cause of English language learner overrepresentation in special education (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higuera, 2005; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ortiz & Ramirez, 1989) and a major catalyst for moving into RTI.

Finally, the participants were unable to shift from subjective personal dispositions to advocacy-based thinking or, in other words, from focusing on figuring out what was wrong with individual English language learners to looking more broadly at the quality and appropriateness of instruction and assessment and determining how to support all students who needed it, regardless of label. This is a fundamental and critical premise of RTI. The evidence from this study suggests that teachers continued to develop an RTI model in isolation without also considering the cultural contexts in which they and their students functioned. Sociocultural theory may have given the participants a framework for understanding English language

learners' cultural and linguistic needs. This theory provides the premise that learning is enhanced when it occurs in contexts that are socially and linguistically meaningful and students' cultural experiences are centrally included in classroom curricula and activities (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). In the end, because MPO could not address the subjective issues that Latino English language learners had to encounter in everyday school life, the quality and quantity of RTI education did not seem to improve their opportunities to learn.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

Federal legislation (e.g., IDEIA, 2004) provides incentives for schools to reform their general and special education programs to help prevent culturally and linguistically diverse students' underachievement and inappropriate referral to special education but fails to provide specifics on how schools such as MPO can address these mitigating circumstances (Klingner et al., 2005; Wilkinson, Morrow, & Chou, 2008). Schools such as MPO need specific guidance on how to (a) coordinate curriculum and assessment considerations, (b) address teachers' developmental needs, (c) attend to school climate issues, and (d) orchestrate and respond to multiple (often contradictory) reforms (Adelman & Taylor, 2002) for its growing Latino English language learner population. Evidence from this case study indicates that research, practice, and policy may need to provide more for schools such as MPO in addressing Latino English language learners' academic needs in RTI models.

Policy. A major policy concern was that because Latino English language learners have different learning needs than mainstream learners, a one-size-fits-all policy approach to RTI might not work (Cummins, 2007; Klingner & Edwards, 2006). This approach misaligns and restricts the curriculum, creates inaccurate judgments and categorizations, and leads to inappropriate assessment and instructional methods that may "impair" English language learners (Ortiz & Yates, 2002). The evidence from this study suggests that the school's RTI policy was ineffective because participants were unable to translate this one-size-fits-all policy into everyday practices for their learners. Therefore, districts and schools must develop policies and provide standards that wrap around socioculturally guided assessment and instruction to avoid miseducating Latino English language learners.

Practice. Although the school district did provide four half-day trainings annually on progress monitoring and gap analysis (e.g., DIBELS training) with no emphasis on English language learner development, findings indicate that this was not enough. The implications from this study are clear that teachers need to be provided with research-based

practices that have been validated with Latino English language learners and taught how to use these practices through professional development. Also, exposure to sociocultural theory could help them acquire the conceptual understandings necessary to modify this instruction when needed. As Miramontes, Nadeau, and Commins (1997) noted, "Schools can make a positive and significant difference for students when educators account for the complex interaction of language, culture, and context, and decisions are made within a coherent theoretical framework" (p. 15).

First, teachers need to be given assessment and instructional practices that have been found to work well with Latino English language learners, including progress-monitoring tools to analyze the effects of instruction on Latino English language learners. Only interventions with empirical evidence of effectiveness with populations with the same or similar characteristics (e.g., culture and language) should be applied (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Without the use of evidence-based practices that have been validated with this population, it will be difficult to gauge whether the learning challenges experienced by this population are a result of poor instruction or an LD.

Next, teachers need to be provided with professional development that helps them not only understand RTI program components but also develop the expertise to teach their English language learners with greater success (Artiles et al., 2005; Au, Raphael, & Mooney, 2008; August & Shanahan, 2006; Baca, Bransford, Nelson, & Ortiz, 1994). These professional development programs need to assist teachers in (a) learning instructional approaches found to be effective with English language learners, (b) understanding the language acquisition process and how it affects learning to read in English as a second language, (c) building on English language learners' background knowledge and making connections with prior learning, (d) differentiating instruction to meet students' various needs, and (e) developing the attributes of successful culturally responsive teachers (Klingner, Méndez Barletta, & Hoover, 2008). These professional development activities should be situated within collaborative-based approaches that allow RTI stakeholders (administrators, teachers, staff, parents) structured participation opportunities that promote effective interventions, progress monitoring, and differentiated instruction for all students at all levels (Murawski & Hughes, 2009).

Finally, exposing teachers to sociocultural theory would help them develop the conceptualization skills necessary to educate Latino English language learners. This lens would provide teachers with an assets-based approach that would allow them to identify and build on students' cultural and linguistic strengths and empower them to seek and incorporate culturally responsive teaching

methods that have been validated with this population. Most importantly, a sociocultural approach would allow teachers to become more reflective, thus critically examining their instructional practices and allowing them to make instructional modifications as needed to further improve on their instruction without lowering their standards (Padron, Waxeman, & Rivera, 2002).

Research. This study suggests that the challenges faced by schools as they implement RTI are complex. Oversimplifying these challenges may result in losing sight of important pieces of the puzzle needed to move forward with improving and sustaining this model. For this reason, research should not only investigate the effectiveness of specific instructional approaches but also provide descriptive information about the circumstances under which and with whom a practice is most likely to be successful. Only mixed-methods and qualitative studies can help us understand essential contextual variables that contribute to the effectiveness of a practice (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Research must be relevant to complex issues that involve culture, language, social interaction, institutions, and cognition (Gee, 2001).

Several other questions are still unanswered and should be explored through future research. The first and perhaps most important question is whether a culturally and linguistically responsive approach would have been a more effective way to address and educate English language learners at this school (Au, 2005; Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Xu & Drame, 2008). If so, under what conditions would it be most effective? Sociocultural research suggests that education must provide multiple and multilingual resources to address the needs of this growing population (August & Hakuta, 1998). Finally, other researchers should conduct research on teachers who are in the process of applying RTI reading interventions from various instructional paradigms (e.g., ESL, bilingual) with Latino English language learners to see if these teachers are encountering the same challenges and issues as the teachers in this study.

Conclusion

At this point, it is too early to know whether RTI will have a systematic effect on the educational opportunities provided to English language learners. Not only must schools adequately interpret the RTI concept, but they then need to decide how to implement this recommended model according to the nature of their student body and the community context. If the model fails, the assumption may be that school personnel were incapable of or resistant to carrying out the model when in fact implementation might not succeed because of an inability to provide teachers as well as students with the learning supports they need.

Appendix

Tom es Valiente Translation

A small group of students are seated at a round table where guided reading is conducted. Teacher says, "Today we are going to read a book called *Tom is Brave*. What do you think the word brave means. She is trying to activate prior knowledge. Teacher pauses for a bit, then realizes they may not recognize the word. Teacher, "That's okay. Has someone every been afraid of something." Some students say, "Yes." Teacher, "Does someone want to tell me if they are afraid of something." Student, "I am afraid of dogs." Teacher, "there is nothing bad with being afraid of dogs. I do not like cats." "Who also is afraid of something?" Another student raised her hand, "I am afraid of the dark when I go to sleep." Teacher, "Oh, you are afraid of the darkness. Darkness is another word for night." [Nice way to improve the student's vocabulary.] Teacher, "We all know the we are all afraid of something. Now, the word brave (pointing to title page) signifies not being afraid of anything." Teacher, "Now we are going to read *Tom is Brave*." (Title page has a picture of Tom with his mom putting a band aid on his knee.) Teacher directs one student to read. Student begins to read, "*Tom went to the store with his mom*." (The page next to this passage has a picture of Tom walking to the store.) Teacher asks another student to read. Student reads, "*!Tom! !Tom! Watchout [sic] where you are walking! Watchout where you are walking!*" (picture of Tom crossing the street almost being run over by a motorcyclist) Teacher pauses and then asks, "Do you remember how to read a passage when you see the exclamation point." One student replies, "We have to read with excitement." She then asks the student to re-read the passage with emphasis, and the student does. Teacher, "Very good." Another student raises his hand and replies, "I remember when I had to cross a highway and I was really afraid. Teacher, "But, you crossed it. You were so brave!" Connection made to students prior knowledge and today's vocabulary concept. Teacher then directs another student to read. Student reads with emphasis, "*!Oh! !Oh! !Oh!*" (Page next to this passage has a picture of Tom getting off the road quickly and stumbling onto the sidewalk.) Same student reads next page, "*Tom cried and cried*." (Picture of Tom on the sidewalk clutching his left knee, crying in pain.) Another reads the next page, "*Tom went to his house. Momma, Momma, I am bleeding. !Oh, Tom!*" said his mom". (Picture of Tom running home, mom is waiting on the door steps with open arms.) Teacher asks, "What does bleeding mean." Three students raise their hands, teacher picks one of them to answer. Students, "It is when you cut yourself with something pointy and blood comes out." Teacher smiles, "Have you cut yourself with something sharp?" Student looks perplexed. Teacher then comments, "The word sharp is more appropriate than saying prickly. For example chile is hot."

Teacher prompts another student to read. Student, "*'Here you go,' said the mother. 'You are brave.'*" (Picture of mama applying a Band-Aid to Tom's knee.) Student keeps reading, "*Tom went to the market. !Look! he said. !Look!*" (Picture of Tom at the store showing his Band-Aid to people.) Teacher then says, "*The end*."

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Note

1. By *English language learner*, we mean students who speak a language other than English, who are in the process of acquiring English as a second or additional language, and who have not yet achieved full English proficiency. We use this term rather than *limited-English proficient* or *English learners*.

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About the Authors

Michael John Orosco is an assistant professor of education specializing in bilingual special education. He was a bilingual special education teacher for 5 years before earning a PhD in education, equity, and cultural diversity with an emphasis in bilingual special education.

Janette Klingner is professor of education specializing in bilingual special education. She was a bilingual special education teacher for 10 years before earning a PhD in reading and learning disabilities from the University of Miami.