

# Equity in Literacy Education: A Case Study of Tier 2 Personalized Instruction

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*According to the NAEP, proficiency in reading is reported to be 67% in 4th-grade students. General education classroom teachers are responsible for providing Tier 1 and 2 instruction, including interventions in Tier 2. However, many teachers are unsure about implementing interventions and have had negative experiences with Response to Intervention (RTI), finding the process frustrating and overwhelming. This case study examines the effectiveness of teachers who have seen an increase in reading levels and student interest. The research explores the teachers' perceptions, experiences, and skills of the current implementation of RTI using Gibbs' Reflective Practice as a theoretical framework. Data collected from individual interviews and observations are analyzed using open coding. Themes and concepts are identified from the interview and observational data. These findings inform educators and higher education teacher educators about Tier 2 implementation and equitable, personalized instruction in the RTI process, aiming to strengthen the implementation and effectiveness of Tier 2 interventions in the general education classroom.*

*Keywords: personalized instruction, literacy, interventions, equity*

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the low performance of readers in the US, there is an intense need for an increase in literacy skills and achievement in schools. To meet the demands of rigorous literacy standards, educators must understand ways to effectively implement Response to Intervention (RTI). The purpose of RTI is to focus on the diverse needs of students. There is a growing population of students entering the country with little to no background in English literacy. RTI emphasizes the need to try different intervention techniques and value practitioners' input (Noell et al., 2001). The purpose of the study is to identify the practices and qualities of teachers who have effectively implemented literacy RTI Tier 2 interventions in their classroom to strengthen the implementation and effectiveness of Tier 2 level interventions for other educators. Effective implementation of RTI has the potential to provide prevention and close the learning gaps of children in the least restrictive environment with a general education teacher (Gunning, 2008).

RTI became a part of special education law and policy in 2004 within the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act P.L.108-446 (IDEA) (2004). It was designed to replace some flawed procedures that had been previously used to identify students with specific learning disabilities. George W. Bush signed the reauthorized IDEA into law on Dec. 3, 2004, and the provisions of the act became effective on July 1, 2005. The reformed IDEA states a child must not be determined to be a child with a disability if the deciding factor is lack of appropriate instruction in reading, lack of appropriate instruction in math, or limited English proficiency (United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs,

2007). Response to Intervention (RTI) is an alternative educational practice to traditional special education placement for students who are being labeled learning disabled (LD) due to learning gaps instead of true learning disabilities.

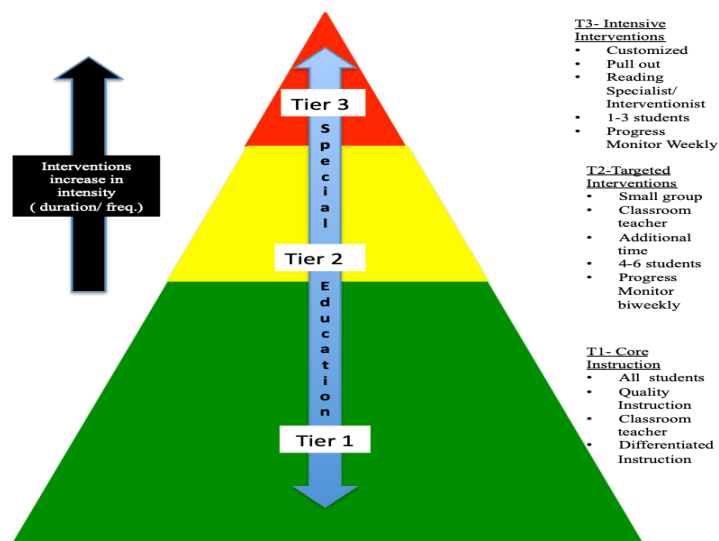
The United States (U.S.) Congress mandated scientific research to help teachers and policymakers identify essential skills and instructional methods needed to achieve academic success (NRP, 2000). The RTI Model was shaped through this mandate. Because of the RTI process, students with disabilities are being served in general education settings. In addition, schools have begun using formative assessments to monitor instruction and make informed decisions about student progress toward annual goals. Specifically, RTI calls for general educators to provide students with and without disabilities with research-based interventions and monitor their progress regularly throughout the process to determine growth (Ardoin, 2005).

Accountability under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001), along with the pressure to improve student achievement and reduce the over-representation of minorities in special education, caused school districts to use research-based methodology and data to make informed instructional decisions. As a model, RTI is a multi-tiered educational model that is based on research-based interventions. The reauthorization of IDEA allowed states to use RTI to prevent and identify reading disabilities (Al Otaiba, Wagner, & Miller, 2014). The goal of RTI was to avoid the pitfall of waiting for children to fail before intervening with additional intervention services designed to meet their individual needs.

### RTI Framework

The multitier RTI System illustrated in Figure 1.1 provides a structured framework for addressing the needs of students at various levels of support. Tier 1 encompasses all students and focuses on universal screening, high-quality core balanced reading instruction, and differentiated instruction based on students' instructional levels. Tier 2 is designed for students in need of additional support after Tier 1, interventions involving flexible small group targeted interventions and reciprocal instruction with scaffolded supports. Tier 3 caters to students showing minimal response to Tier 2 interventions, offering individualized targeted interventions of increased intensity focusing on reading component skill development and practice with strategies. Finally, Tier 4 (not shown in the figure) is for students who qualify for special education services after RTI, providing instruction tailored to the specifics of the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) developed for the student. This tier involves varying amounts of time and is reviewed and/or updated annually.

**FIGURE 1  
RTI CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

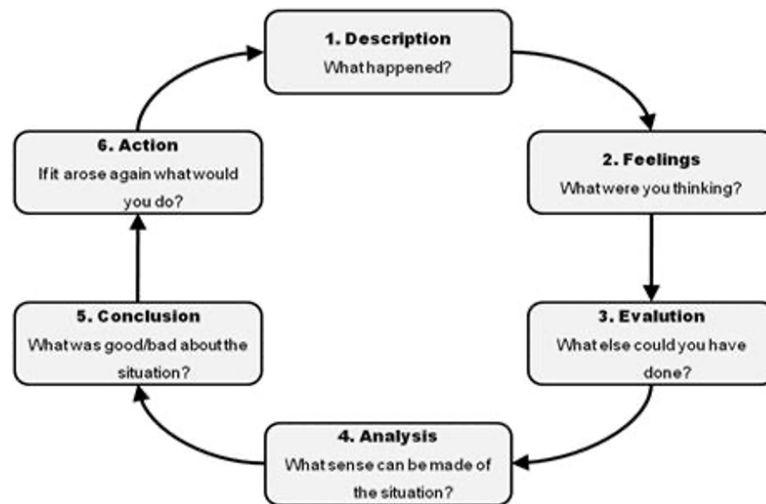


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## Gibbs' Reflective Learning Practice Theory

To truly encompass the thoughts and feelings of teachers, this study's theoretical approach applied Gibbs' Reflective Learning Practice Theory. The process is represented as a cyclical model based on a six-stage process that begins with a description of the experience to conclusions as well as considerations for future events. The Gibbs Model is particularly significant to this RTI study because it seeks to understand teachers' perceptions and experiences about RTI. Gibbs Model is broken down further to encourage the teachers to reflect on their own thoughts and feelings. The model is an effective tool for researchers who value the true impact and depth of the experiences by exploring the thoughts and feelings of the teachers. The Gibbs Model has clearly defined stages:

**FIGURE 2**  
**GIBBS' REFLECTIVE CYCLE**



## LITERATURE REVIEW

The research literature reviewed for this study indicated a consensus regarding the purpose of RTI and the importance of monitoring how students responded to the model (Karcher, 2014). Researchers and educators agreed that there was a significant need for a system that provided early identification and intervention to students at risk for reading and academic disabilities. Among the research, it was evident that educators viewed RTI as an effective resource that allowed practitioners to utilize different approaches to deliver intervention to students identified as at risk for reading and learning disabilities (Al Otaiba et al., 2014). RTI includes teachers and students who are unique in learning approaches and styles. Perceptions and quality of instruction will vary according to the differences of teachers and students. Those differences should be explored, examined, and used for gaining knowledge in problem solving meetings.

McDaniel et al. (2013) found that few RTI articles addressed audiences such as general educators and educational leaders. Published research that provides guidance for general educators as they implement RTI is scant at best. Because RTIs involve working with people, RTI implementation is highly complex and does not follow a linear path (Avant & Lindsey, 2015). While some aspects of the RTI model have been explored at length, a clear gap exists in the literature on an evaluation of the effectiveness of RTI after implementation, considering not only the perceptions of educators but also the context of the model (Wilcox et al., 2013). It is my intent to address this gap through a case study of an elementary school site that has utilized a fully implemented RTI model.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was selected for this study to provide the opportunity to have meaningful descriptions of teachers' practices during RTI sessions. Within a qualitative paradigm, the practices and qualities of the teachers participating in the study were explored. The answers sought were not necessarily measurable in quantitative forms. Data collected for the study were non-cognitive factors, such as the nature of teachers, attitudes, character, inspiration, and mindset. Non-cognitive factors are a kind of overarching term for dispositions or outlooks, not measured by standardized means (Farrington et al., 2012; Heckman & Kautz, 2013; National Council of Teachers of English, 2014).

A case study research design best fits the information that can be used to help teachers successfully implement RTI in their classrooms in the future. This case study research was conducted in the natural setting of a classroom, which allowed close interaction of teachers, students, and resources (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The method of case study research also involved multiple data collection methods, and the researcher developed a holistic picture of RTI (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The question of what made teachers successful is a multifaceted question that involves complex reasoning.

Teachers' practices are not always visible to others because the "magic" often happens inside a classroom. Exploring what takes place in teachers' classrooms became visible to the researcher utilizing this design. The positive change that took place in a few classrooms within a school has the potential to expand to other teachers, students, schools, districts, and states.

### Setting

The selected site of study is a K-8 charter school located in a rural area in Southern United States. The school has 260 students from Kindergarten to 8th grade, with 15% classified as students with disabilities and 92% as economically disadvantaged (LDOE Charter School Annual Review, 2017). This school was selected because of criteria regarding its intense focus on RTI and autonomy in interventions, assessments, and educational decision-making. Collins, Onwuegbuzie, and Jiao (2007) documented purposive sampling schemes Criterion and Convenience, which were selected for this study. Both criterion and convenience schemes were used in the selection of the school site. The researcher has ready access to the site as an employee and assistant principal. The selected school has issues in overall literacy achievement, but there is evidence of special cases of high-performing teachers indicated by student literacy gains and confidence in reading.

### Participants

The participants selected for the study were chosen using purposive sampling. According to Collins, Onwuegbuzie, and Jiao (2007), a variety of purposive sampling schemes can be identified for research studies. For this proposed study, criterion and convenience schemes were deemed appropriate. Criterion, in this case study, was based on a selection of teachers who teach children who need RTI and who agreed to participate; convenience was also appropriate as the target participants were teaching in a public charter school system in which the researcher was also employed (Collins et al., 2007). Further, the selected teachers who agreed to participate were identified as high-performing teachers as indicated by student literacy gains on state tests and who expressed confidence in teaching reading, with a positive outlook of RTI.

The population of interest for this project study is elementary teachers responsible for implementing RTI in a rural charter school in Louisiana. The specific selection criteria for selecting participants were (a) kindergarten to 4th-grade general education teachers, (b) responsible for implementing Tier 2 RTI, and (c) effective in implementing RTI.

To gain insight into effective approaches used for successful RTI implementation, the study focused on lower elementary grade teachers at the chosen site who were selected due to their RTI participation in primary grades. Two research questions guide the investigation for this, with an aim toward understanding the educational perspectives of general education teachers' implementation of RTI Tier two interventions

and to explore how they select pedagogical practices that result in the growth of their students' reading ability following the implementation of RTI Tier two interventions.

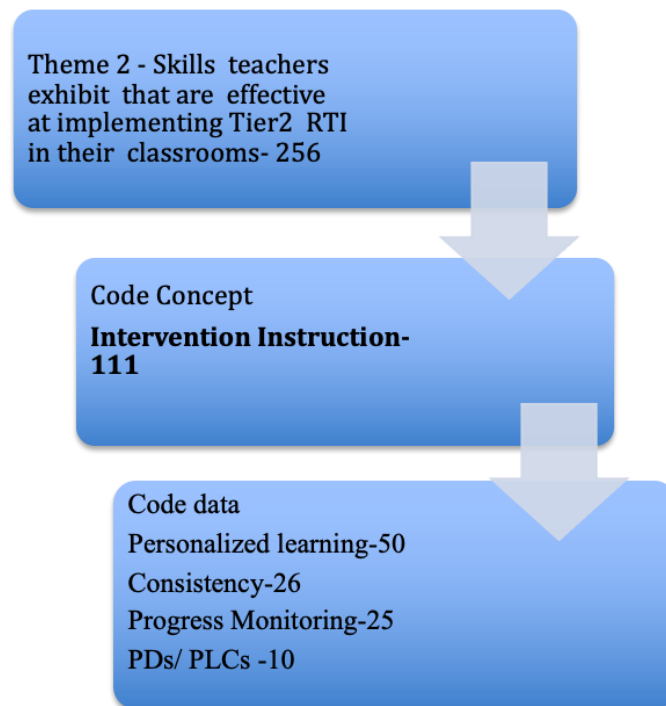
### Data Analysis

A priori coding was the chosen method for this study. This method of data analysis was most appropriate for this study because the list of codes was predetermined based on codes of answers to the broad categories of research questions but remained open to different meanings in data sources as the coding changed and was renamed several times throughout the rereading and analysis. The process entailed condensing the key themes into more manageable chunks data was compared to research questions, as well as the study's purpose and problem statement. Data analysis of interviews, observations, and documents involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting teachers' responses and what the researcher has seen and read. The process of analysis involves organizing the data, conducting a preliminary read-through of the data, reducing the data into themes by coding and condensing the codes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation of the data (Merriam, 1998).

### FINDINGS

Data analysis from the analytical process (Saldana, 2015) of coding major data sources, observations, interviews, and artifacts resulted in final themes. Two primary themes emerged: Theme 1: Qualities of teachers exhibit who are successful at implementing Tier 2 RTI in their classroom and Theme 2: Skills teachers practice who are successful at implementing Tier 2 RTI in their classrooms. For purposes of this paper, I focus on the results from Theme 2: Skills teachers' practice who are successful at implementing Tier 2 RTI in their classrooms. Corresponding code instances, created from individual codes, also emerged from the data. The discussion presented addressed the highest frequencies of code instances to the lowest instances as delineated in the Skills Code frequency Table 1.

**FIGURE 3**  
**THEME-TO-CODE MODEL FOR CONCEPT INTERVENTION INSTRUCTION**



**TABLE 1**  
**SKILLS CODE FREQUENCY**

Code Frequency	Code
50	Personalized Learning
26	Consistency
25	Progress Monitoring
10	Professional Development

### **PERSONALIZED INSTRUCTION**

The data indicated that personalized instruction was coded at a high rate among the skills relevant to the skills teachers exhibited that are effective at implementing Tier 2 RTI interventions in their classrooms. This code was among the highest instances of all codes in Theme 2, Skills. It was noted 50 times – the second highest in the study, with reflectivity of Theme 1, Quality, being the first with 51 codes. The personalized instruction code was mentioned or demonstrated by all of the teachers in the study. I coded personalized instruction when teachers described or demonstrated literacy instruction in small groups, personalized any aspect of instruction, personalized RTI, and or personalized workstations/centers.

Data analysis indicates that the teachers in this study personalize instruction to meet the needs of their students as a habit of practice. The teachers also proved to be effective and have skills in intervention instruction during RTI in their regular classroom with Tier 2 students.

Teachers shared their experiences about how they use various resources and methods to prepare for lessons because they can be utilized to help personalize reading instruction and interventions for students. This is a key factor in their approach because not all students learn to read in the same way or at the same pace. Mrs. Royal stated,

Knowledge of your students plays a significant role in providing personalized instruction for RTI. Now that I've been properly trained to implement RTI and like RTI, I still don't feel really prepared until I know my students, so I prepare the best I can at first with what I initially have, but I know I may have to change things based on their needs.

Mrs. Patton had a similar response on the topic of personalized instruction. She explained,

I begin early in the summer to understand who my children for the upcoming year are and where they are [academically]. I try to meet the parents. Get a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) in place ahead of time so I can see where we're going, but all the time, knowing things can and most of the time change.... Throughout the first days of school, I'm still in the learning phases, and students are constantly moving [groups], but I'm learning how I can best meet their personal needs.

In the lower-grade classrooms, the personalized approaches were hands-on. I noticed how students spent time working with letters, sounds, and words. During this time, they used a lot of verbal language. In both Mrs. Royal's kindergarten and Mrs. Patton's first-grade classes, students in the Tier 2 group were constantly practicing speaking, writing, and scribing the letters, sounds, and words with their teacher. During the RTI lesson, students were instructed to work together during word work as they made words they needed to practice.

Mrs. Patton gave special assistance to students but also took notes of words and patterns they continued to have problems with during the session. Making words was used for a variety of literary skill practices. The words were used to segment, blend, spell, pronounce, create a sentence, illustrate, and practice letter-sound relationships. Mrs. Patton spent about half of the time of the RTI lesson on word work. She personalized the lesson further by working with students in their weak areas as they worked on that component of literacy during RTI. For instance, If Raegan is particularly weak in vocabulary, during the reading, Mrs. Patton ensures opportunities for Raegan to use context as clues to clarify the meaning of a word.

In Kindergarten, more time was spent with books and reading. Mrs. Royal spent a lot of time with book features, making predictions and illustrations, and reading the book. The book was leveled for the Tier 2 student group that needed guidance with the core instruction of text analysis for close reading comprehension skills of retelling and identifying the main idea and key details. As students were in intervention, personalized instruction was provided in small, manageable chunks. Mrs. Royal modeled and guided students through each step with think-alouds (i.e., Thinking aloud her thought processes as she read the book). Various reading strategies were used to read each page of the book as Mrs. Royal conducted quick skills check with students. As students read, Mrs. Royal listened to students read and gave feedback to improve each child's literacy skills. Then, she gave them an opportunity to practice the skill in context. It was a meaningful way for students to practice the specific skills they needed. It was evident that the teachers had a firm core belief that every student is unique and comes with an array of experiences and skills.

### **Consistency**

According to the data, consistency is highly relevant when it comes to the effectiveness of RTI. The data indicates that the teachers in this study are consistent in meeting the needs of students in RTI. This topic was discussed in interviews and initiated by teachers when asked what they attribute to their success of RTI and/or what is a challenge. Mr. Kris was one of the teachers who said it was both a success and a challenge. Although he consistently pulled the RTI Tier 2 group, it was a challenge for him.

There's so much to do in a day, but you do the things you know your students have to do to be successful. It's difficult, though. I must admit—you know, to remain consistent, and I think that's probably one of the hardest things to overcome, but it has the biggest impact.

### **Progress Monitoring**

Results showed that effective teachers monitored the progress of their students in RTI. Progress monitoring is a factor that makes RTI successful for teachers. Progress monitoring was described or demonstrated in the data 25 times. I coded progress monitoring when I noted formal or informal assessments that tracked students' performance in literacy. Mrs. Royal discussed that in kindergarten groups can change rapidly. "I love that they move levels, and they do too, but it takes a lot to keep up with all the data," she explains. There are many resources she uses for tracking. In her classroom, I observed a large binder, clipboard, and folder used for notetaking and keeping data. I noticed how Mrs. Royal uses notes and other informal data to analyze the progression of her students. She discussed in the interview whether her literacy data indicated a student had progressed in vocabulary but showed weakness in fluency, and she knows how to adapt her interventions to meet the student's needs in fluency.

The 1st-grade teacher, Mrs. Patton, keeps informal reading notes for her students too.

I write on regular paper and keep anecdotal records, so I know where my students are and how to focus on their deficiencies. But mostly, I like to see how they've grown. We keep track so other teachers in the grade know when they come to help. We use it to monitor progress.

Progress Monitoring is utilized to help students transition between tiers and out of RTI, back into the general classroom setting with independence and an enjoyment of literacy.

## **Professional Development**

The topic of professional development emerged in the data 10 times. Teachers discussed professional development as an initial training and follow-up in weekly PLCs and data chats. Mrs. Royal says, “I really didn’t know what I was doing until I was properly trained. So now I know the difference between the whole group and Tier 2. Gaining that knowledge has helped me understand the process a lot better.” There was frustration among teachers about the implementation of RTI and the complex nature of the problem-solving approach our school adopted. Mr. Kris conformed to RTI but admitted, in the beginning, he “didn’t fully understand the purpose.” But he explained how PLCs, specific to RTI and data chats, helped clarify the purpose of individualizing needs. In the meetings, teachers shared their experiences of being comfortable talking about kids, often with a level of specification even when things are not progressing. The meetings are designed to be reflective in nature and to problem solve for teachers, with supportive feedback from team members, specialists, special education teachers, and administration. Mrs. Patton discussed professional development for RTI in her interview.

We received classes at the beginning of the year and training and moral support from other teachers who are excelling at it [RTI] in the classroom. They supported us all year and showed us some of their ideas. The principal comes into the classroom and works with the children and us. She showed how she would do it, but she didn’t show us how we had to do it. She showed us some effective ways to choose to work with students.

Mrs. Patton shared how PLCs have assisted her because she can immediately implement suggestions in her classroom, and she has a team that can assist if she needs follow-up. Specific strategies and placement decisions are made along with data action steps during PLCs and data chats. Although initially, the problem-solving approach seemed problematic to teachers, in the end, it afforded teachers a greater sense of autonomy and personal efficacy as educators. In PLCs teachers’ information and ideas were factored into the overall process. Teachers truly matter when influencing positive learning outcomes in literacy.

## **DISCUSSION**

All teachers provide highly personalized instruction for students. There were commonalities within the data among the teachers, but each teacher was unique. The teachers in the investigation valued qualities such as noncognitive skills referred to as soft skills, that contribute to a person’s personality, character, and demeanor, including relationships, interactions, passion, and optimism. It was reasonable to assume that because all three participants valued these character attributes, what they valued carried over into their teaching and was reflected in practice, resulting in highly personalized or differentiated literacy instruction. In tandem with qualities, teaching skills that are usually acquired by learning and practicing, such as progress monitoring and personalized learning strategies, were also found among all teachers. All of these factors help contribute to an effective classroom teacher of RTI, where students are challenged and nurtured to continuously grow in literacy.

Findings revealed that despite differences in RTI approaches to teaching literacy, individual relational teaching style, how they elected to provide support, and differences in personality did not impact how they responded to students’ individual needs. And, importantly, despite perceptions that RTI is a formulaic approach, these teachers personalized instruction that is differentiated to students’ specific literacy needs, which ensures an equitable learning environment for all students.

## **Implications for Teacher Education**

As initially theorized, reflectivity plays a significant role in effective Tier 2 teachers because it leads to developmental insight. A critical benefit of reflective practice is the opportunity for teachers to reflect and collaborate in PLCs. The problem-solving approach was used to cultivate an environment for teachers to think critically about teaching and learning while using problem-solving methods to improve instructional practices. Reflective practice was utilized to create an environment of collaboration that is conducive for



teachers to share best practices and draw on others for support. Ultimately, reflection makes sure all students learn more effectively, as learning can be tailored to match student needs. Strategic reflection has implications for teachers of all levels and of all discipline-specific content.

### **Personalized Learning**

The results of the study indicate that effective teachers personalize learning for their students in RTI. Among the data collected, coded, and analyzed, teachers demonstrated personalized instruction more than any other skill. There were various ways in which effective teachers in the study approached this practice. There are also many components involved in the RTI design. One such example is planning for a small group lesson, where specific skill gaps of an entire group are identified to create lessons that target individual skill development for each child.

### **Assessment Data Analysis**

Formal and informal data are continually utilized to determine student's areas of concern, strengths, and diagnosis of skill gaps, deficiencies, and/or potential health concerns. Both kinds of data sources help teachers to paint a portrait of student strengths and weaknesses. Analysis of the data assists teachers in making informed decisions about how to target instruction and interventions to match the specific needs, strengths, and interests of students.

### **Progress Monitoring**

As a biweekly assessment used as a monitor to determine how students are progressing in the area of concern, progress monitoring can be used as a reflection stimulator for conversation and collaboration in PLCs. Progress monitoring assessments inform teachers of the effectiveness of teaching and learning. But this is not a static process; rather, it is an ongoing kind of monitoring and shifts based on what students know and need to know. After reflection, decisions can be made about what actions will be taken to best meet the needs of the students.

### **Implications for Social Change and Equity**

The research findings have the potential to lead to significant social change by promoting the continued success of Response to Intervention (RTI) with a focus on equity. The effective implementation of RTI can address the needs of all students and enhance their literacy skills, consequently boosting their confidence. This, in turn, may reduce the number of students requiring special education services, decrease grade retention rates, and improve performance in state standardized tests. As a result, school performance scores could rise to meet state and federal requirements while promoting equity in education. Enhancing literacy can have far-reaching benefits for students and their families, ultimately improving their social and economic circumstances. From personal experience, I have witnessed the repercussions of inadequate education on individuals' earning potential and overall well-being, particularly in relation to equity. Literacy is intertwined with every critical social issue, and promoting equity in literacy opens doors to better job opportunities and economic stability, thereby positively impacting families and communities. It empowers students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, to break free from the cycle of intergenerational poverty and pursue higher education or fulfilling careers. Quality education serves as a catalyst for addressing various social challenges, including equity in educational outcomes. This study sheds light on RTI as a potential breakthrough for promoting equity in education and supporting students trapped in the cycle of poverty. Educators wield the power to transform schools, communities, nations, and the world by breaking the cycle of poor education and providing equitable support to all students. By ensuring that students, especially those facing inequities, have the tools to succeed, we can prevent them from falling into a cycle of poverty characterized by limited access to opportunities, low-paying jobs, unplanned parenthood, crime, and single-parent households. Equipped with the right resources and an equitable educational experience, students will be poised to lead stable lives and support their families in the future.

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