Alberta Journal of Educational Research, Vol. 57, No. 3, Fall 2011, 258-272

"Just listen to us": The Role of Teacher Empowerment in the Implementation of Responsiveness to Intervention

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Teachers play a vital role in the implementation of new programs. This article discusses how best to support teachers in the face of such change. Specifically, we describe the perspectives of teachers who participated in a pilot project of the responsiveness to intervention model. Through focus group data, the researchers explored the barriers that teachers encountered during the first year of implementation as well as the supports that allowed them to overcome some of these barriers. Despite these supports, one major barrier persisted: all the participants in this study described feelings of powerlessness. This article explores the roots of these frustrations and highlights the resulting role that teacher empowerment can play in the successful implementation of new programs.

Les enseignants jouent un rôle crucial dans la mise en œuvre des nouveaux programmes. Cet article discute de façons d'appuyer les enseignants face à ce genre de changement. Plus spécifiquement, nous décrivons les perspectives des enseignants ayant participé à un projet pilote portant sur le modèle de la réceptivité à l'intervention. Puisant dans les données provenant de groupes de consultation, les chercheurs ont étudié tant les barrières auxquelles les enseignants font face la première année de la mise en œuvre que les appuis qui leur avaient permis de surmonter certaines de ces barrières. Malgré ces appuis, une barrière importante demeurait : tous les participants à cette étude ont décrit un sentiment d'impuissance. Cet article analyse les racines de ces frustrations et fait ressortir le rôle subséquent que peut jouer le renforcement de l'autonomie des enseignants dans la mise en œuvre réussie des nouveaux programmes.

The implementation of a new initiative requires a shift in teacher practice including the introduction of new and/or untried instructional strategies and a change in how teachers work with students. To make these types of changes, teachers must be provided with effective supports concurrently with the opportunity to observe innovations in practice in their own classrooms (Denton, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2003). When it comes to a new program, teachers "believe it works because they have seen it work" (Guskey, 2002, p. 383). In the face of new initiatives, schools and school boards must provide considerable and sustained professional development (PD) programs to facilitate the introduction of the range of new skills that teachers must acquire (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). However, PD alone will not guarantee a sustainable change in teacher practice.

Given that teacher buy-in is largely the result of observing an improvement in student learning, PD must be provided concurrently with the opportunity to implement new practices (Guskey, 2002). For teachers to alter their practice successfully and observe the resulting improvements, they need not only see potential in the new initiative, but must also have confidence in their ability to integrate the essential elements into their classrooms. A sense of empowerment provides teachers with the motivation to and the belief that they can improve their practice by successfully implementing new initiatives (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the experiences of classroom teachers who participated in the implementation of a new initiative. Because this initiative, the introduction of Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI), required that teachers make independent data-based decisions, helping them to feel confident about their judgments was critical to successful implementation.

Implementing New Initiatives

For teachers to begin implementing a new initiative, it is essential that they understand the fundamental elements of the initiative. PD that provides this information is a logical first step. Prior research has demonstrated that this PD must offer the opportunity to enhance content and pedagogical knowledge. For Fullan (2000), this knowledge enhancement takes the form of increased assessment literacy, that is, the improved ability to interpret data and determine the best course of action to improve student learning. To develop and integrate this knowledge, teachers must be given sufficient time that is thoughtfully organized, purposeful and provides opportunities for collaboration (Guskey, 2003). Collaboration should extend beyond individual schools, ensuring that teachers work in partnership with school board and research personnel when making decisions about PD (Guskey, 2003). However, simply providing teachers with the necessary information, resources, and time does not guarantee the successful implementation of new teaching practices.

Teachers can be profoundly resistant to change (Cherniss, 1997; Hargreaves, 2004). This is often the result of the imposition of incoherent initiatives or insensitive implementations (Hargreaves & Moore, 2005). Even those who are motivated to change can become demoralized and lose confidence in the face of a dramatic shift in practice. These feelings are exacerbated by the imposition of standardized policies and increasing accountability (Hargreaves, 2004). In this climate, those implementing any new initiative must consider that many teachers are "increasingly mistrustful of politicians and administrators and their professed purposes for change" (p. 284). Considering that the implementation of new instructional strategies can require a substantial change in teacher practice combined with an existing reluctance to change, we posit that teacher empowerment can play an important role in program implementation.

Teacher Empowerment

For the purposes of this study, teacher empowerment is defined as the confidence to make and the power to enact situationally appropriate instructional decisions that improve the quality of education for students (Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Maeroff, 1988). Using this definition, in this section we explore the conditions that facilitate the development of teacher empowerment.

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) define an empowering environment as one that fosters the development of intrinsic motivations. For Guskey (2002), this motivation is fostered when PD

promotes and facilitates a change in teacher practice. This change in instructional approach, materials, curriculum, and/or teaching procedures leads to a change in student learning outcomes. Teachers' perceptions of the improvement in their students' learning then translate into a change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs. This attitudinal shift leads to the intrinsic motivation that is necessary for the creation of an empowering environment (Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Maeroff (1988) suggests that empowerment begins with the boosting of teacher status. This means treating teachers like the professionals they are by ensuring that they retain control over their own practice (Wan, 2005) and over the decisions that affect their own classrooms (Blasé & Kirby, 2009). Maeroff (1988) describes two additional elements that are essential to teacher empowerment: (a) an increase in knowledge, and (b) the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues. These conditions emphasize the role of increased confidence in empowering teachers to make informed instructional decisions.

Cherniss (1997) discussed the role that a teacher's sense of empowerment can play in the implementation of innovations. Through interviews with seven teachers during both the first and 12th year of their careers, the participants described their involvement in and attitudes toward innovations. At both stages of their careers, these teachers described feeling most committed to sustaining initiatives when they played an active role in their planning and organization. The conditions described by these teachers highlight the importance of providing teachers with contexts that enable them to feel that they have the power to enact instructional decisions in a manner appropriate to their educational situation.

Implementing Responsiveness to Intervention

One new initiative that is drawing much attention in both the research and educational communities is RTI. This model provides teachers with the opportunity to identify students at risk for later learning difficulties and to provide these students with intervention as early as Kindergarten. In the document *Education for All*, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME, 2005) offers a plan based on RTI research termed the *tiered* approach. In the first tier, teachers use empirically validated instructional strategies and embedded formative assessment techniques to ensure that all students are meeting benchmarks. Students who do not meet the initial benchmarks or do not make expected rates of progress would be recommended for the second tier. In the second tier, struggling students receive more intense, small-group intervention in addition to their regular classroom instruction. This model acknowledges that not all students will demonstrate substantial improvement as a result of first or second tier programming. Students who continue to struggle are referred for psycho-educational assessment and possible special education identification and services in the third tier.

RTI requires a substantial change in how educators work with students who are struggling academically. Thus schools implementing this model must consider how best to introduce the components that will facilitate its success. Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) describe six components including the need for three tiers, beginning with the use of a universal screening tool and five to eight weeks of progress monitoring data to identify students who require intervention. Intervention should consist of a standard treatment protocol and a method for determining those students who do not respond. It is their recommendation that dual discrepancy be used to determine non-response, that is, the rate of improvement combined with the student's final level as compared to normalized criterion. Once a student is identified as at risk, a multidisciplinary

approach to evaluation should be used to determine how best to facilitate the student's learning. Their final recommendation involves the use of special education services for students who enter tier three.

Some, but not all the recommendations discussed by Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) are reflected in *Education for All* (OME, 2005). This document does describe the use of a three tiered model, with the third tier consisting of special education services. Furthermore, the recommended use of multidisciplinary evaluation is supported through psycho-educational assessment coupled with classroom observations and teachers' assessments of student performance to guide future instruction and to provide the basis for referral for special education. However, identifying the students who are at tier two and determining an intervention protocol are not described. In addition, although this document does address the need for students who do not respond to intervention to be moved to the third tier, it does not define what constitutes a lack of response.

The components described by Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) are echoed in the existing research of RTI implementation. For example, Lembke, Garman, Deno, and Stecker (2010) studied one elementary school's journey. The results of their study indicated (a) the need for school support, (b) problem solving teams who met regularly to discuss school-wide and student-specific data, (c) the selection of an evidence-based progress monitoring tool, and (d) the necessity of tiered instruction. Their study describes the type of environment that can promote positive results. How to develop this type of environment remains an area of contention in the research. Burns and Ysseldyke (2005) described the need for extensive training and thoughtful implementation. However, these recommendations, although valuable, do not provide specific guidance. Thus many researchers express the belief that the information about RTI implementation continues to be vague. For example, Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) argue that there is a lack of procedural direction in the research, including questioning the preparation that teachers require and the type and intensity of intervention provided to students who are at risk. Thus school-based personnel must make decisions despite a lack of specific guidance.

Many factors must be considered in the implementation of RTI, and although teachers' perspectives play a central role, they have rarely been included in the research (Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010). For teachers to implement RTI, they must be confident in both the usefulness of the model and their ability to integrate the essential elements into their classrooms. At present, teacher empowerment is an under-researched component of RTI implementation. However, empowerment, or a lack thereof, can be related to teachers' abilities to make informed instructional decisions including the data-based decision-making that is necessary for RTI to become an integral part of their practice. Thus the purpose of this qualitative study was (a) to describe the views of Ontario teachers who participated in a pilot project of the RTI model, (b) to identify the enablers and barriers that they faced, and (c) to explore their perceptions of the role that empowerment played in the success of the implementation.

Method

The RTI pilot was conducted in five schools in a mid-sized school board in Ontario. Schools were selected through an independent nomination and review process carried out by the district school board. The larger research initiative sought to report on (a) the benefits of RTI for student literacy achievement, (b) the increased capacity of classroom teachers to provide literacy instruction, (c) the viability of RTI, and (d) the enablers and barriers to bringing RTI and

progress monitoring into classrooms. To facilitate the implementation of the model, administrators and teachers (i.e., primary classroom teachers, special education teachers, literacy improvement teachers, and English as a second language teachers) were teamed with board personnel (i.e., special education consultants, school psychologists, child and youth workers, and speech and language pathologists). These teams were created to facilitate the implementation of tier one programming, including progress monitoring. Some other elements of RTI, including tier two interventions, were not introduced in the first year. Aside from the use of curriculum-based measurement (CBM), individual schools were advised to make their own programming decisions in an effort to respect differing learning environments. Focus group data addressing the enablers and barriers encountered throughout the pilot were gathered from classroom teachers at the end of the first academic year of implementation.

Teachers were given the letter of information and consent form on arrival at the focus group before discussions began. (The proposal, including all letters and forms, received clearance by the General Research Ethics Board of Queen's University and the participating school board.) Once all the consent forms were signed, one of the authors facilitated the focus groups, but did not participate in any other aspect of the pilot project. The researcher moderated the discussions by asking standardized open-ended questions, for example, "Can you please share one thing that you've introduced in your classroom as a result of the RTI pilot and the impact it's had on your teaching?" and probing questions, for example, "Could you tell me more about progress monitoring?" to elicit elaboration from the participants. The conversations from the focus groups provide the foundational data for this article.

Sampling Procedure

One teacher per grade from each of the five pilot schools was invited to participate. One group was held for each grade, Kindergarten through Grade 3, resulting in a total of four focus groups. Teachers' participation in the focus groups varied by school, so representation from the schools was not consistent across the grade groupings. Four of the schools were represented, and one declined to participate in the focus groups sending no representatives from any grade. The participant selection process resulted in a total of 13 teachers (12 women) whose years of teaching experience ranged from three to 26 years. None of the teachers had any experience or training in RTI before the beginning of the pilot.

Data Collection

The focus groups consisted of three to five teachers. Although these are small groups, this decision was made to allow each teacher more time to describe thoroughly his or her experiences. Thus we were able to gain a more in-depth understanding of teachers' perspectives of their participation (Morgan, 1996). The composition of the focus groups also ensured that teachers working at the same school would not be in a focus group together because relationship and rank differences can often make people cautious about what they say (Champion, 2003). Furthermore, grouping teachers from different schools allowed for their diverse experiences to be shared and questioned by fellow participants. The resulting discussions provided teachers with the opportunity to question their own level of involvement while commenting on the supports and successes of others. By creating grade-specific focus groups, we were able to

balance heterogeneity with homogeneity and to ensure increased comfort levels (Flores & Alonso, 1995).

Data Analysis

Rigorous analysis of the verbatim transcripts began with the Kindergarten transcript. Each teacher was given a code to identify the grade and the participant. For example, K-1 means that the statement was made during the Kindergarten focus group by participant number one. Subsequently, each teacher's statements were coded line by line. As categories began to emerge, they were listed in a separate file. In the Kindergarten transcript, 27 codes emerged that were grouped into eight relevant categories. For example, teachers made statements about their desire to improve student learning and to improve their personal teaching practice. These two codes were grouped into the category *motivation* as they served to illuminate teachers' motivations for participating in the project. Throughout data analysis, Patton's (2002) method of constant comparison was used to generate codes, categories, and themes. To enhance validity, we discussed differences in coding and interpretation, which occurred infrequently, and achieved consensus (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

We then repeated the same process with the remaining focus group transcripts. Although the number of codes differed across the groups, both the Grade 1 and Grade 2 groups had all eight categories in common with the Kindergarten group: motivation, personal teaching improvements, personal teaching challenges, supports provided, supports that were lacking, emotional reactions, and prior professional knowledge. The Grade 3 group had seven categories in common with the other groups, not discussing their emotional reactions to the project.

Subsequently, we analyzed the categories for themes. Of particular interest were the teachers' contradictory statements about their levels of participation in the project. Following this theme analysis, on the second pass through the data, each teacher was coded individually as we sought statements that described classroom implementation, including the presence or absence of teacher empowerment and the conditions that promoted or inhibited this empowerment.

Results

We present the results in terms of the five major themes that emerged from the data. The first theme, the teachers' motivations for participating in this pilot, is consistent with prior research on the implementation of new initiatives (Guskey, 2002). The subsequent three themes are consistent with research on teacher empowerment (Cherniss, 1997; Maeroff, 1988) and describe the importance of collegiality and collaboration, the role of leadership in the implementation, and the increase in teachers' knowledge about the elements of RTI. These results are summarized in Table 1. The fifth and final theme addresses the teachers' frustrations in the face of this new initiative.

Teachers' Motivations

The motivations reported by the teachers mirrored researchers' descriptions of the conditions necessary to the implementation of new initiatives (e.g., Guskey, 2002). The first of these was the desire to improve their own practice, which was most often discussed in conjunction with the desire to improve student learning.

Table 1

The conditions that support teacher empowerment

Conditions	Integrators	Islands
Teacher motivations Thomas & Velthouse, 1990 Guskey, 2002	• improve practice • improve student learning	• improve practice • improve student learning
Collegiality and collaboration Maeroff, 1988 Cherniss, 1997	• regular meetings • participation in planning and organization • collaborative problem solving	• feelings of isolation
Leadership Maeroff, 1988	• lead teachers	
Well informed and knowledgeable teachers Maeroff, 1988 Greenfield, 2010	• explicit instruction about testing procedures and data analysis • sharing of practical instructional strategies	• uninformed about testing procedures

> We have a huge group in primary . . . that are super-dedicated and always looking for the next new thing to do with their students to get them to the next level and we really thought that would come out of this. (1-1)

The teachers believed that RTI could provide the type of support that they felt their students needed: "I remember that first meeting we went to . . . what really triggered me is that I remember them saying statistics about the kids' improvement and I was like wow, maybe this is really going to be something" (1-3). The hope that RTI could have a positive effect on student learning motivated the teachers to nominate themselves for participation in the pilot. However, despite initial motivations, the implementation was challenging. Teachers encountered barriers that resulted in varied levels of teacher empowerment and thus varied levels of success.

Islands and Integrators

When we analyzed the focus group transcripts, two distinct groups emerged: one group that implemented RTI and one group that *attempted* to implement the model but was not successful. The first group described the integration of RTI in both their individual classrooms and in their school as a whole; we called these teachers *integrators*. The latter group described quite a different experience: they did not feel empowered to implement RTI. These teachers communicated their confusion in the face of the model and the resulting limited implementation in their individual classrooms and their schools as a whole. As one teacher explained, "I sort of feel like I'm working in the dark" (2-3). Because of these teachers' common descriptions of their feelings of segregation from the pilot, we called them *islands*.

Only after the two groups of teachers had been formed did we look at the schools where they taught. This information provided new insight into the data; all eight integrators worked in two

Table 2

Teacher membership of integrator and island schools

Integrators				Islands			
School A		School B		School C		School D	
Kindergarten	K-1	Kindergarten	K-2	Kindergarten	K-3	Kindergarten	K-4
Grade 1	1-3	Grade 1	1-1	Grade 1	1-2	Grade 1	-
Grade 2	2-2	Grade 2	2-1	Grade 2	-	Grade 2	2-3
Grade 3	3-1	Grade 3	3-3	Grade 3	-	Grade 3	3-2

of the pilot schools, and all five islands worked in the other two schools (see Table 2). As the reporting of the data below shows, two schools created conditions that facilitated empowerment whereas the other two did not, thus demonstrating the importance of school environment. An exploration of the varied support structures described by these two groups of teachers clarified the type of environment that can facilitate the empowerment that supports the implementation of an innovation like RTI.

Collegiality and Collaboration

Many theorists describe the role of collegiality and collaboration in creating an empowering environment (Maeroff, 1988; Guskey, 2003). This is especially important when trying to alleviate the sense of separation that many teachers experience within the walls of their individual classrooms.

Islands. The islands commonly described feeling abandoned during the pilot and the sentiment that this project was the sole responsibility of the teacher: "There's one person being spread out so thinly. There's so many demands and it's always the teacher's responsibility" (K-3). Teachers attributed some of the responsibility for the lack of implementation to themselves: "It's just one of those things that didn't get done, and am I disappointed? I am disappointed in myself that I didn't do it" (K-3).

Integrators. Although the integrators also worked in the isolation of their individual classrooms, they described two supports that helped them to overcome this barrier: (a) regular meetings and (b) opportunities to collaborate. The integrators met regularly to discuss the implementation: "We've been meeting monthly with our RTI team; the special ed consultant, speech and language, the psychologist and all of the primary team is released for the morning and our principal" (2-2). Responses indicated that one of the positive aspects of these meetings was the consistent dissemination of information that provided teachers with clear expectations, allowing them to implement the requisite elements into their classrooms. However, regular meetings alone were not sufficient. These meetings required purposeful discussion of RTI. They needed to be "laid out specifically because at some of these meetings it has been a total waste of time and I would much rather be in the classroom teaching and applying those strategies that I know my twos and threes need" (3-1).

These meetings promoted collaborative discussions about the analysis of student data, goal-setting, instructional decision-making, and problem solving. This was especially necessary when teachers faced new and unfamiliar tasks. For example, the method for initial benchmarking

(fluency tests using CBM probes) was an unfamiliar method for assessing student achievement. As is typical with CBM, data were calculated using a words-per-minute formula, a new calculation method for the teachers in this pilot. The collaborative atmosphere allowed them to discuss these challenges openly and gain the support that they needed to complete the weekly progress monitoring successfully.

> [The special education consultant] showed us how she did the test and she gave us the sheet with her notes saying this is what I did, this is what you'll find, this is how the kids reacted. So we were actually shown personally by her, which made a huge difference. (K-2)

This PD provided teachers with the knowledge they needed to complete the testing and with a greater understanding of the information derived from the data about their students' abilities. This knowledge resulted in their setting collaborative goals that addressed students' needs and collaborative instructional decision-making as groups of teachers tried to determine how best to improve student learning. This is not to say that the integrators' schools did not encounter challenges, but the collaborative atmosphere allowed them to design and implement creative solutions to their problems.

> In Grade 1, we've had one of our teachers, who has the highest number of high needs children in her classroom, she went to the training [for Reading Mastery] and so she's actually going to use it in place of her guided reading with those students . . . the rest of us Grade 1 teachers are going to take the remainder of her class for the time that she's doing that . . . and insert them into our literacy centre groups. (1-1)

The integrators overcame the barrier of isolation through these collaborative exchanges at least in part because "teachers feel more powerful when they are part of a group with a common purpose than when they are on their own" (Maeroff, 1988, p. 24). A collaborative support structure made a difference to the teachers' ability to implement RTI, which highlighted its absence in two of the pilot schools.

Leadership

Islands. The teachers who worked in isolation did not describe experiencing leadership during the implementation. Rather, they expressed the need for a leader in their schools: "That's what we need: somebody who knows exactly what is going on and basically leads the meeting and pushes for things to start happening" (1-2).

Integrators. The integrators, unlike the islands, consistently described lead teachers who spearheaded the implementation. These lead teachers were not appointed, but rather emerged organically during the implementation. They scheduled regular meetings, facilitated the dissemination of information, and ensured that the meetings met the teachers' needs: "She listens in on our primary division meetings, listens to questions and concerns and tries to base our agenda on that" (1-1). By assuming responsibility for these tasks, these lead teachers demonstrated increased comfort levels with discussing challenges with all members of the research team, including teachers and board personnel, and created an environment where these challenges could be addressed.

Although ensuring regular and productive communication was a key element in the role of

the lead teachers, many participants described another, more motivational role. The lead teachers acknowledged the challenges and frustrations of teachers. Their deeper understanding of the complexities of classroom practice allowed them to remind the team of the positive contributions that RTI could make for students and teachers.

> It's very easy to be negative and get frustrated when we're bombarded with a lot, she did say it's a pilot project . . . I have a little guy who probably wouldn't be seen as much as he is. It just has drawn a lot of attention back to that we need to look at these kids when they're younger so I mean that's one of the positive things. I think it's got our focus back on that. (1-3)

In maintaining a positive and organized atmosphere, the lead teachers contributed to the success of the implementation and to the creation of an empowering environment where teachers were provided with the increased knowledge necessary to implement RTI.

Well-Informed and Knowledgeable Teachers

An increase in teachers' knowledge is one of the conditions that facilitates empowerment (Maeroff, 1988) by instilling in teachers the confidence to make instructional decisions that will benefit their students. In the context of this RTI pilot, the teachers needed to be knowledgeable about the processes involved in learning to read and about the best instructional strategies to facilitate this learning. This increase in knowledge is especially important when teachers are asked to introduce a new teaching practice into their classrooms, as the unfamiliar can sometimes engender discomfort and fear (Fang, Fu, & Leonard Lamme, 2004), which can potentially lead to a lack of implementation (Klingner, Ahwee, Pilonieta, & Menendez, 2003).

Islands. The islands experienced this type of discomfort, which resulted in an unsuccessful implementation of RTI: "Quite honestly, we haven't been doing it at our school because there is no support" (1-2). This lack of support began with the pre-testing.

> I think part of the problem was that we didn't even see what they were tested on. The kids were taken away . . . whatever they did, they did. And they brought them back and there was no feedback, nothing and I thought what are they doing? . . . Well the feedback came but all it was was a few names that were at the tier one or tier three level. I wasn't shown the test. I didn't know what they were doing. (K-3)

This statement echoes many participants' frustrations at their lack of understanding of the testing procedures and their inability to use the student data productively to gauge improvement in learning. As a result, the islands were unwilling to invest the time needed to use the progress monitoring tool: "It's just unrealistic to use that much time when we don't even really know what we're doing and then after we collect the data we don't know what we're supposed to do with it" (1-2). Without an increase in assessment literacy (Fullan, 2000) that would facilitate an understanding of the results, the islands felt powerless to do anything with the data.

Integrators. The experiences shared by the integrators differed greatly from those of the islands. At the beginning of the pilot, the integrators received explicit instruction. The topics of the instruction were initially determined and presented by the board-level personnel responsible for organizing the pilot project. However, as the year progressed, teachers began to take ownership and started to request additional instruction in areas that they felt would support their ability to implement RTI. The participants' self-selected instruction was provided by both

board-level personnel and by the teachers themselves, depending on the topic being addressed and the expertise of the people on the RTI team.

Initially, teachers required explicit PD about the elements of RTI, as they were unfamiliar with its overall framework and the specific assessment tools. Like the islands, the integrators had some difficulty understanding the pre-test data that were shared at the beginning of the pilot. However, additional training to explain the significance of the data allowed teachers to begin to use these data to guide their instruction: "Not everybody is a data person, and it didn't come with an explanation, so we had our psych person come in to sit with us and talk about what it was and how to read the data" (1-1). However, once teachers began the progress monitoring, new questions arose. For example, they were still uncertain about the use of a fluency test as a measure of student achievement. Although this method has proven effective in prior empirical research (Simmons et al., 2008), until this pilot, the teachers had been instructed to use the Developmental Reading Assessment with a focus on comprehension as opposed to fluency, which led to some discomfort: "I couldn't get through my head the fluency part of it. Why time these kids?" (K-1). This type of questioning led to the provision of PD and an increase in teachers' knowledge. This new knowledge increased their confidence and empowered them to integrate the new assessments into their practice.

The testing procedures and data analysis required explanations from professionals with expertise in these areas, but PD was also provided by fellow classroom teachers. When seeking increased knowledge in practical instructional strategies, the integrators turned to their colleagues who had expertise in these areas.

> We have a lot of ESL children and we feel that a lot of the fluency and vocabulary issues are due to ESL. We think that's one of the reasons that the kids aren't developing fluency. So we developed some web resources that parents and teachers can refer to. We did that with our ELL teacher. (2-1)

The provision of PD by colleagues led to a boost in teacher status as the importance of practical classroom knowledge was acknowledged.

Shared Frustrations

During the focus group sessions, the integrators described collaborative environments where information was shared and active participation was welcomed; the islands described a dramatically different experience fraught with isolation and a lack of information. However, while these two groups differed in their implementations, there were similarities in their stories. All the teachers, islands and integrators alike, described feeling devalued when their professional judgment was challenged and powerless in the face of the increasing demands of RTI. These descriptions served to reinforce the importance of an empowering environment during implementation.

The teachers' first tangible exposure to RTI involved a baseline assessment of their students' reading abilities. Introducing the model in this manner, although necessary for pilot evaluation, conveyed a different message to the teachers, which they interpreted as a questioning of their abilities: "I could have told them everything that they told me and more about this kid before I found the results . . . just listen to us and go ahead and help us" (K-1). This lack of recognition of the value of existing data-collection methods resulted in many teachers expressing frustration. Their emotional reactions demonstrated a lack of empowerment as their status was questioned

rather than boosted (Maeroff, 1988): "That was almost insulting as a teacher. That's our job, to know these kids. We could have told them these are the kids we need to target" (1-3). This frustration was present not only when teachers were discussing their evaluations of their students, but also when they discussed their professional practice.

The teachers perceived that their existing abilities were not considered in the design of the pilot project or when it was decided what information would be shared. The resources given to the teachers served to alienate them further, as they contained photocopies of OME resources that are mandated for use in classrooms.

> I looked through this and I thought "wait a second" it was a photocopied page of *Education for All* and then a photocopied page of *Effective Reading and Writing for Primary* and I kept reading and I go, What the heck is going on here . . . I was insulted frankly. This is not a professional resource. (3-1)

This lack of acknowledgment that the teachers were already using the recommended strategies served to evoke strong emotions from both integrators and islands. As a result, the teachers expressed feeling that RTI was calling into question their abilities as professionals. In response, many teachers, both integrators and islands, defended their practice, attributed student success to their existing program, and questioned the benefits of RTI.

> Their scores have all increased. I think not because of the RTI but because of what we're doing in literacy centres every day, guided reading every day, reading for fluency, working in their journals, working with their little dictionaries, getting words off the word wall . . . so I have seen an increase but it's probably the things that were already in place. (2-3)

Although the teachers questioned the value of RTI, more telling was their questioning of the amount of respect that was afforded them and their existing programs: "But these are the things we do day in, day out so . . . just allowing us the credibility that we do these things" (1-3).

Teachers' frustrations about the lack of acknowledgment of the existing tier one programming in their classrooms was further compounded by the failure to introduce a tier two intervention: "There's pieces missing . . . we've focused on . . . the assessment piece . . . but there's been no new strategies so basically all year I've been assessing whether or not the children are growing based on what I have already done, what I've always done" (1-1). Throughout the focus groups, the teachers expressed their desire not for more PD about classroom instruction, but rather for strategies that would help improve the learning of those students identified as at risk. They expressed frustration with the research team's decision to introduce RTI through a partial implementation of the model: "It just seems like they picked the one thing to focus on that was the least important to staff and students" (1-1). The limited implementation, with a singular focus on tier one programming, caused considerable frustration. The teachers talked repeatedly of the need for a tier two intervention model that would improve their abilities to intervene with students who were at risk and see the improvement in student learning that motivated their participation in the pilot.

Discussion

Determining how best to implement change in classroom practice is a topic frequently addressed in research (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Guskey, 2003; Hargreaves, 2004). The results of

this study provide further evidence about the importance of an empowering environment including opportunities to increase teachers' knowledge. Although the integrators did receive PD designed to provide them with the necessary information, they continued to express frustration. It appears, then, that it is important to consider not only the information that is prescribed by the initiative, but also what is required by the teachers.

Professional Development Content

When implementing RTI, PD must increase teachers' assessment literacy (Fullan, 2000). The challenge of interpreting the progress monitoring data and determining how best to translate this information into classroom practice was a barrier frequently described by all the teachers in this pilot. This challenge was mitigated for some when necessary instruction was provided (Maeroff, 1988). However, all the participants at some point described a need for greater understanding of the instruction that could be used to improve the learning of students who are at risk. It is clear that explicit instruction in both the data collection tool and the translation of these data into instructional practice is critical (Greenfield et al., 2010).

RTI is a complex model that emphasizes a tiered approach to working with students at risk for later learning difficulties. The teachers' expressed motivation for participating in this pilot was the potential to improve student learning. However, the pilot's partial implementation approach did not allow for the introduction of tier two intervention. It seems from teachers' views that this level of intervention is essential if teachers are to see the improvement in student learning that will empower them to continue implementation in their classrooms and thus increase the sustainability of the model (Guskey, 2002). Although an incremental introduction of RTI may be perceived by those driving the initiative as less overwhelming, it does not allow teachers to experience the benefits to student learning that are essential to teacher buy-in. The complexity of RTI does not seem to allow for the introduction of only a single tier, to be followed by subsequent tiers in subsequent years. Instead implementation must address the multiple tiers concurrently.

Accompanying greater instruction in tier two programming, there is also a need to address the role of fluency in reading development. The shift from comprehension-centered instruction and assessment to an emphasis on fluency and decoding was uncomfortable for all the teachers in this pilot. Teachers who received instruction in the role of fluency did increase their understanding of and thus commitment to progress monitoring. However, no instruction was provided on the role of fluency in the development of comprehension. Providing information about the interrelated nature of these skills is critical to empowering teachers to be confident instructional decision-makers when they implement RTI (Greenfield et al., 2010).

Professional Development Context

The context in which PD occurs is another key consideration in the implementation of RTI. This study revealed that the translation of new strategies into classroom practice was best accomplished through regular opportunities to collaborate with both in-school colleagues and board-level personnel (Maeroff, 1988). The implementation was more effective when these supports were provided through regular meetings at participating schools. The meetings were initiated and planned by an in-school lead teacher who played a central role in the success of the implementation by promoting frequent collaboration.

In maintaining a positive and organized atmosphere, the lead teachers contributed to both the success of the pilot's implementation and to the creation of an empowering environment. As Maeroff (1988) states, "teachers don't ordinarily have power because they do not have access to those who wield it" (p. 80). The lead teachers provided the participants with access to someone who they perceived had the power to make decisions and who encouraged their participation in making these decisions (Cherniss, 1997; Harpell & Andrews, 2010). Better yet, the person with access to this power was a colleague who understood the complexities of a classroom environment and thus understood both the teachers' concerns and the information that they required to implement RTI successfully.

Conclusion

This study suggests that when implementing a new initiative that requires a substantial shift in teacher practice as is the case with RTI, it is critical to provide a context that teachers experience as empowering. It is more likely that those administering the initiative will receive cooperation and enthusiastic adoption when teachers feel connected to their peers and an integral part of the initiative. The findings of this study focus attention on ensuring that teachers experience leadership from other teachers and from other professionals and that they feel well informed. For their frustrations to be minimized, they need to feel that their expertise is valued and respected. Given these implications, studying teachers' experiences of implementing innovative programs appears essential for translating research into practice. These teachers were clear in their request: "Just listen to us."

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