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White Teachers' Experiences of Working with Black Students within a Response to Intervention Framework: The Role of Racialized Deficit Thinking

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White Teachers' Experiences of Working with Black Students within a Response to Intervention
Framework: The Role of Racialized Deficit Thinking

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Education Specialist
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ABSTRACT

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a data-based decision-making framework of service delivery that has the potential to improve educational outcomes for all students. Preliminary data appear to bolster this claim. However, it is as yet unclear whether RTI will be able to close the gap in educational outcomes that exists between students of different racial groups. Drawing on theories such as culture of policy (Stein, 2004) and deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010), this study explored the experiences of six White elementary teachers using RTI while working with Black students receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 instructional supports. Using theoretically driven constant-comparative analysis, I illustrated how teachers' personal worldviews as well as local contexts informed their different interpretations of RTI as well as their similar interpretive lens: racialized deficit-based thinking while talking about the causes of the racial gap in schooling outcomes as well as while talking about specific Black students in their classrooms. While speaking about specific students, teachers drew on deficit thinking to explain the roots of problems (e.g., low motivation, lack of parental involvement), and paid comparatively little attention to problems in instruction, curriculum, or other contextual factors. Findings are discussed in light of Stein's (2004) work showing how the culture of policy operates at the school level, and how even equity-oriented policies can be negated by deficit-oriented perspectives and practices.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest concerns for American educators is the disparity in educational outcomes and experiences that exist between White students and Black students. Various school reforms have been implemented to help teachers reduce this racial disparity in schools. Nevertheless, the discourse of school reform continues to be undergirded by technical-rational and color-blind frameworks, and eschews direct, sustained, and in-depth engagement with the issue of racial dynamics in classrooms. Because the teacher workforce in charge of educating Black students is overwhelmingly White, a power differential exists in the teacher-student dyad (Lea & Griggs, 2005). Given this situation, how do White teachers make sense of their experiences of working with Black students within the framework of comprehensive school reform?

One such large-school reform that is underway is Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI proponents argue that RTI holds promise of reducing the racial disparity in education in two ways. First, the RTI framework of decision-making seeks to tailor instructional services to the needs of individual students (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). This might ensure that Black students receive education that is matched to their needs. Second, the data-based decision-making framework of RTI also aims to reduce the role played by teachers' biases in referring low-performing Black students for special education identification (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Therefore, this study seeks to explore how White teachers perceive working with Black students within an RTI framework of service delivery. In the process, the study also hopes to uncover

whether RTI is vulnerable, like its predecessors, to the racialized ideologies of those who make educational decisions for students.

This chapter is organized so as to give a clear understanding of the theoretical framework that forms the basis of this study. In the beginning, I present briefly the evidence that racial disparities between Black and White students exist in education. This information is followed by a description of RTI and the role of teachers in bringing about racial equity in education while working in an RTI framework. I then detail the purpose of this study, followed by the research questions that are asked. I detail the theoretical constructs that informed my selection of this topic, namely the culture of policy (Stein, 2004), and deficit thinking in education (Valencia, 2010). Finally, I discuss the delimitations of the proposed study, as well as definition of some common terms in order to clarify the scope of this study.

Background

Racial patterns in education. Racial patterns in education in American public schools reflect a stark inequality in the educational opportunities and outcomes between Black and White students. The racial disparity is most visible in terms of the achievement gap, and disproportional representation of Black students in special education and school discipline data.

Achievement gap. There is ample data supporting the claim that academic achievement differs between Black and White students, with the former lagging behind the latter at almost every stage of schooling. Rippeyoung (2009) found that this discrepancy is evident as early as infancy. Fryer and Levitt (2006) found that Black students begin their schooling with lower literacy and numeracy development than White students. This early gap persists up to graduation (Robinson, 2010). Researchers have ruled out any biological link between race and ability, and have instead linked the disparity to ecological factors such as marginalization, poverty, discrimination (Cullinan & Kauffman, 2005), and policy (e.g., Rippeyoung, 2009).

Disproportionality. Disproportionality is a widely used term to refer to the phenomenon of overrepresentation of students of color, especially Black students, in discipline referrals and special education (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011). Black students are at substantially greater risk of receiving office disciplinary referrals than their White peers, especially in areas that require a greater degree of subjective judgment on the part of the person making the referral (e.g., *showing disrespect*) (Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Additionally, they also were more likely to receive harsher consequences (e.g., out-of-school suspensions and expulsions) than their White peers for similar problem behaviors (Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011).

Black students are at a higher risk of being classified as having disabilities than their White peers (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Losen & Orfield, 2002; National Research Council, NRC, 2002; Parish 2002; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). These differences more often are found in high-incidence disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders) than in low-incidence abilities (e.g., visual impairment). The difference between the two is that subjective judgment plays a greater role in the diagnosis of the former than the latter (Ahram, Fergus, Noguera, 2011). Although several studies demonstrated overrepresentation in special education, a recent study by Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, Mattison, Maczuga, Li, and Cook (2015) found that minority students were in fact underrepresented in special education. However, this study was criticized by Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, and Harry (2016) for a flawed research design that failed to, “consider the complexities of special education disproportionality” (p. 221), thereby yielding the illusion of minority underrepresentation.

The problems of achievement gap and overrepresentation were often blamed by educational researchers on poor quality instruction and faulty mechanisms for identifying

students for special education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). One of the faulty mechanisms was the discrepancy model which was used to identify students with learning disabilities to receive special education services (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Earnes, 2007). The discrepancy model identified a student as having a learning disability when the student's achievement scores were significantly below the student's aptitude (as measured by intelligence tests) (Spencer, Wagner, Schatschneider, Quinn, Lopez, & Petscher, 2014). Given some researchers' arguments that cultural biases are inherent to most achievement and intelligence tests, the discrepancy model was implicated in the disproportionate representation of racial minorities in special education under the category of learning disability (Harry & Klinger, 2007). In light of these findings, Response to Intervention (RTI) was promoted by some researchers as having the potential to reduce the achievement gap and overrepresentation (McKinney, Bartholomew, & Gray, 2010; National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems [NCCRESt], 2005).

Response to Intervention. IDEIA (2004) and its accompanying 2006 regulations promoted the concept of responsiveness to intervention but did not provide specific guidelines to states regarding RTI implementation. Although several ways of conceptualizing RTI models exist in research literature, well-defined models of RTI typically aim at providing, "multi-tiered supports to prevent academic and behavioral difficulties as well as to address existing academic and behavioral difficulties" (Erickson, Noonan, & Jenson, 2012, p. 34). According to Reschly (2014), researched models of RTI commonly incorporate the following features:

1. Scientifically based academic instruction and behavior interventions matched to student needs and implemented with good fidelity over a time period that is reasonable to expect gains to meet performance expectations.

2. Progress monitoring that is sufficiently frequent and sensitive to match the degree of students' needs and the intensity of the intervention, with results used to compare progress with goals and make changes in goals or instruction/intervention as indicated by progress data.
3. Data-based decision-making about the degree of students' needs and the intensity of educational services required to meet those needs based on student progress toward benchmark goals for performance.
4. Multi-tiered or levels of intervention that vary in intervention intensity matched to student needs. (p. 40)

Although the abovementioned features of RTI enjoy a widespread consensus among the RTI community, disagreement exists among researchers, policymakers, and advocacy groups with regard to the components of RTI implementation. Some states created statewide initiatives to bring about more uniformity in the model of RTI implemented within their school districts. For example, in Florida (the location of this research study), the Department of Education funded statewide projects to guide school districts in creating structures and procedures related to a problem-solving model of RTI. In response to these developments, some school districts in Florida have adopted policies related to RTI implementation. Although most RTI policies do not explicitly mention reduction of racial disparities as a goal, an equity focus is inherent in the discourse around its promotion. A detailed discussion of this issue is undertaken in chapter 2.

Teachers' role in RTI. Teachers play an important role in the functioning of the RTI model (Richards, Pavri, Golez, & Canges, 2007). The teachers' role in serving all students' educational needs within the RTI framework usually involves providing high-quality instruction, regular screening, using data to make instructional decisions, planning and implementing

interventions, and progress monitoring (Richards et al., 2007). In fact, Castillo and Curtis (2014) assert that teachers are the primary stakeholders in the implementation of RTI, and therefore looking at their understanding of and involvement in RTI is crucial.

Purpose and Rationale of the Study

Harris-Murri, King, and Rostenberg (2006) argued that teachers' backgrounds and potential biases, as well as the sociocultural backgrounds of students influence how the RTI decision-making framework is applied with students, and how those students respond to interventions. Given that over 90 percent of the teachers in K-12 schools are White (National Collaborative on Diversity of the Teaching Force, 2004), sociocultural factors must be considered when examining the benefit of RTI to Black students.

Prior research on racial differences in teacher perceptions indicated that many teachers perceived Black students less favorably than White students (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Cullinan, & Kauffman, 2005), and saw them as having lower academic and intellectual ability (Minor, 2014; Wildhagen, 2012). Minor (2014) also found that teachers perceived Black students as having lower social and behavioral skills (e.g., effort, motivation, work habits) than White students. These racial differences in perceived student abilities existed as early as the beginning of kindergarten, and persisted even after controlling for socioeconomic differences between Black and White students (Ready & White, 2011). In other words, lower perceived ability of Black students compared to White peers could not be explained solely along class lines. Downey and Pribesh (2004) argued that persisting racial biases continue to influence the way teachers perceive their students. Even if racial biases may not be expressed overtly, they manifest in the colorblind language of cultural deficit that is commonly used by teachers to explain or justify racial differences in student outcomes (Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Colorblind explanations can involve explanations that do not specifically mention racial inferiority but

nevertheless draw on coded language to explain away racial inequities--for instance, the attribution of poor achievement of Black students to maladaptive home life, lack of parental involvement in education, and limited value placed by the community on education (i.e., cultural deficits) (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011).

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt) (2005) expressed faith in RTI's potential for improving education for Black students. However, their position statement on RTI also cautioned that, "if we do not engage in dialogue about how culture mediates learning, RTI models will simply be like old wine in a new bottle, in other words, another deficit-based approach to sorting children, particularly children from marginalized communities" (p. 1). Extant research on RTI has mainly focused on the essential components, implementation outcomes, implementation fidelity, and teachers' perceptions of RTI. My review of the literature revealed no studies that analyzed critically the role of race in the way White teachers employ the RTI decision-making framework when working with Black students. Therefore, this critical interview study explored how White teachers talked about applying the RTI decision-making framework with Black students, given the needs they perceived the students had. Critical analysis of the collected data revealed how internalized social constructions of race and ability influenced the way White teachers applied the RTI framework to address the needs of Black students in their classroom.

Research Questions

The research study was guided by the following four questions:

1. How do White teachers understand RTI?
2. What do White teachers perceive as being the strengths and limitations of RTI?
3. In what ways do White teachers explain the racial achievement gap and the academic problems (e.g., poor grades in reading or math) of Black students in their classrooms?

4. How do White teachers use racialized, deficit-based thinking to explain the outcomes of a Black student who received tier 2 or tier 3 level instructional support in their classrooms?

Theoretical Foundations of the Research Study

The study is founded within the critical paradigm which seeks to uncover and challenge mechanisms and structures of power that (re)produce injustice in the society. Critical policy analysts specifically look at the way existing power relations are inscribed within as well as reproduced through policymaking. Working within this paradigm, theorists have illuminated how policies (even the ones proposed as equity-driven) contribute to existing inequalities.

Culture of Policy. For this research study, I specifically drew on the Sandra Stein's (2004) work on critical analysis of Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Title 1, also known as Education for the Disadvantaged, provided formula grants to school districts to enhance the basic educational services for students from low-income backgrounds. Using recorded transcripts of Congressional hearings, Stein showed how the dominant perceptions of "poor families" shaped the arguments that were put forth by legislators in favor of passing the Title 1 Act. Furthermore, she showed how these ideologies shaped the funding streams of the Title 1 policy and its implementation. Stein also conducted observations of and interviews with teachers in multiple schools in the U.S. to reveal how the policy resulted in classroom practices and discourses that contradicted the equity claims of the policy proponents. Through these findings, Stein developed the theory she called *culture of policy* to explain how the dysfunctional organizational culture fostered by Title 1 policy was, "born out of historical arrangements and institutional practices, while simultaneously creating recursive consequences that [fed] into the culture of policy itself" (p. 12).

Historical moment. Policies arise within and in response to specific historical conditions. Title 1 emerged in the context of the Cold War and intense competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union for global dominance. The Soviet launching of Sputnik was one such event that fueled nationalistic anxiety about, “a nation made vulnerable by an enemy nation’s technological advances” (p.14). One of the identified points of vulnerability was poverty. In 1964 Lyndon Johnson announced a War on Poverty which deployed nationalistic and militaristic rationales to mobilize nationwide action to end poverty. The anthropological studies of Oscar Lewis (1959, 1961, 1964, 1965) about the behavioral patterns of impoverished families made culture of poverty an influential framework that was used by policymakers to explain the causes of problems and propose solutions. This was the historical moment in which Title 1 was crafted.

Institutional arrangements. Following the passage of Title 1, several funding streams were established that funneled money from the federal government to local schools via state and district mechanisms. Funding was accompanied by the establishment of accountability structures to ensure that the money was being used appropriately. The mechanisms included submitting “program budgets, narrative descriptions of program plans, and other documentation of rendered service” (p. 18) to the federal government to justify the use of Title 1 funds. A compliance-focused culture was born out of these institutional arrangements which focused on narrowly defined and reductive criteria to measure adherence to rules. For instance, schools had to label curricular materials purchased with Title 1 materials, and teachers had to ensure that only those students who were labelled as eligible for Title 1 services were using these materials.

Organizational culture spawned by Title 1 policy. Stein identified three ideas that came to structure everyday thinking at Congressional, state-level, district-level, and classroom settings. First, problems of underachievement were traced to the deficiencies within individual students

and their families, instead of structural or institutional conditions. Policy solutions were thus aimed at curing these deficiencies. Second, government officials were seen as *corrective* agents that were going to, “assuage the social problems of policy beneficiaries through funding allocation, bureaucratic design, and/or national focus.” (p. xiii). In other words, the role of policymakers was to create policies aimed at curing the individual deficiencies of policy beneficiaries. Third, compliance was valued above all else because there was a need to prevent misuse of allotted funds. Because such policies were typically accompanied by federal dollars, “the result was a complex web of individual programs and accountability measures that spoke more directly to the political obligations of the government to keep track of federal dollars than to the educational needs of the students” (p. xv). As a result, Title 1 policy-driven programs grew fragmented as service provision came to revolve around compliance to reductive rules, which ended up reinstating the status quo of disparity.

Language and rituals of Title 1. The organizational culture of Title 1 policy reinforced certain language and rituals in classrooms, and was in turn reinforced by those practices. For instance, the compliance-oriented, deficit focused aspect of Title 1 culture led to normalization of labels such as “*Title 1 kid*” in everyday language. Moreover, these labels exceeded their formal meaning (students eligible for Title 1 services), and became a marker of a stigmatized identity. Thus to be a Title 1 student came to mean to be from an impoverished family with irregular parenting, chaotic household, and lack of character traits that make one a good citizen. Acquiring these labels led to lowered expectation of teachers from those students, which negated the original intention of the policy.

Stein (2004) maintained that the culture of policy is dynamic, and continues to shape and be shaped by the interaction between and within different levels of bureaucracy. This culture not

only shapes the language and practices in the classroom, but also continues to be reinforced by it. For instance, when a policy is due to be revised every few years, the experiences of those implementing it on the ground (e.g., school principals, teachers) feed into the next iteration of policy making, suggesting, “an ever-evolving policy culture that emphasizes different dimensions of the culture of education policy during different historical periods” (p. 20). In sum, Stein’s framework illustrated the way in which the practices and discourses inherent to the policy culture negate the claims of achieving equity or ameliorating disparities. Stein argued that this culture is prevalent in many other equity-oriented policies in education, and can be used to explain why so many equity-oriented reforms fail.

Deficit thinking in education. Valencia (2010) provides an overview of what has widely come to be known among educators as the deficit model of thinking. At its core, this theory posits that, “[a] student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies” (p. 6). This theory of situating student failure within the student remains dominant among the explanations that are advanced to justify the poor schooling outcomes for low-SES students of color in the U.S. In a global context, the earliest variants of this theory can be found in the sociopolitical discourses emerging in Western Europe that were used to justify colonization of Africa and Asia by portraying people in these societies as morally and intellectually inferior.

In the context of education in the U.S., deficit thinking is racialized. Policymakers and educators often have implicated internal characteristics to explain the poor schooling outcomes of low-SES Black, Mexican-American, and Native American students, such as limited intellectual abilities, lack of motivation, and moral deficits. Valencia identified five characteristics of history of deficit thinking in education.

Victim blaming. Social issues of inequality are analyzed in terms of individual deficiencies of those negatively impacted by the problems. The explanation is posited in form of irrationality or irresponsibility of low-SES people of color. Solutions arising from this way of thinking thus aim to rectify these deficiencies.

Oppression. Deficit discourse has been deployed to justify continued marginalization of people of color. For example, proponents of the *separate but equal* doctrine of segregation often invoked the limited intellectual ability and low motivation of Black children to argue against racial integration in schools, which they argued would hinder the progress of White students.

Pseudoscience. The “rational” and “pragmatic” status of deficit thinking was often built upon its purported linkages to scientific knowledge. For instance, the eugenics movement invoked social Darwinism and other acceptable scientific theories of the time to justify social inequality. During the intelligence testing movement in the early 1920s, proponents of deficit thinking cited scientific studies to argue for the intellectual inferiority of Blacks compared to Whites. Thus, Valencia argued that deficit thinking has derived its credibility, in part, by positing itself as a rational explanation based on scientific knowledge.

Educability. Proponents of deficit thinking not only have used it to justify existing inequalities, but also have used it to prescribe future policy solutions regarding the schooling of low-SES students of color. For instance, the perceived uneducability of Black students was used by Lewis M. Terman (1877-1956), father of the intelligence testing movement in the U.S., to propose that, “children of this group should be segregated in special classes and be given instruction which is concrete and practical. They cannot master abstractions, but they can often be made efficient workers, able to look out for themselves” (Terman, 1916, pp. 91-92). This

mode of deficit thinking continues to influence the educational policies regarding the appropriate curriculum for low-SES students of color (Valencia, 2010).

Temporal changes. Some of the characteristics of deficit thinking remain unchanged. For instance, it always has been an endogenous theory focusing on within-person characteristics. It always has been imputational in nature (i.e., used as an explanation for inequality), and oppressive. While these characteristics remain unchanged, the external form (i.e., its presentation) changes in keeping with the “intellectual and scholarly climate of the times” (Valencia, 2010, p. 7). In other words, the paradigm shape-shifts in order to, “conform to politically acceptable notions at the moment” (p.7). For instance, in early 20th century, the theory of genetic inferiority of Blacks enjoyed mainstream acceptance, and often was used by policymakers and politicians to explain unequal schooling outcomes. By the 1960s this explanation fell out of favor, and was replaced by a *culture of poverty* discourse in mainstream politics and media to justify the poor schooling outcomes of low-SES Black students (Valencia, 2010).

Towards the end of 20th century, the culture of poverty discourse metamorphosed into a more sophisticated variant, citing *cultural and accumulated environment deficits* to explain the achievement gap. The newer variant is less moralistic in tone than its predecessor, and frames problems in terms of “inappropriate parenting practices” and “unstructured home environments” to explain the poor performance of low-SES Black students. Thus, Valencia illustrates the continuously changing nature of deficit thinking. Notwithstanding the changes in the vocabulary of deficit thinking, Valencia warns that, “while the popularity of different revisions may change, it never ceases to influence school policy and practice.” (p. 7)

While the theories of Stein (2004) and Valencia (2010) apply to every level of educational bureaucracy, I chose to focus on the classroom level for this research study. I combined the two theories to form an explanation of how status quo is maintained in classroom. Federal or state government adopts an overarching policy to resolve a manifestation of racial inequality in education. This policy filters down through the various levels of bureaucracy (state-, district-, school-) to reach the classroom. At the classroom level, it is interpreted by teachers through racialized deficit-based thinking. This interpretation spawns a numbers of practices and vocabulary that manifests deficit thinking. In this way, policy gets assimilated into the existing racialized deficit-based structures, and thus the status quo is maintained.

Based on this framework, I investigated the ways in which the ideology of racialized deficit-based thinking manifested in White teachers' description of working with Black students within an RTI framework. Because the discourse around RTI promotion posits RTI as an equity-oriented policy that could reduce racial disparities in education (e.g., Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011; Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003), I wished to illustrate the ways in which the racialized deficit thinking infiltrates teachers' discussion of RTI, thereby negating its equity goals.

Delimitations

My study focused on elementary schools because most of the research on and implementation of RTI has occurred in elementary schools (Spectrum-K12, 2011). My study looked at Black students and not students from other minority groups, because although racism affects all minorities, it affects them in different ways (Delgado & Stephancic, 2012). This is because different groups are racialized in different ways and in response to different political and social exigencies. Finally, my study sample only consisted of teachers who self-reported applying the RTI framework of decision-making to address the needs of their students. This decision was made to ensure that the teachers that were interviewed were aware of RTI.

Definition of Terms

Black. The terms “Black” and African-American” are sometimes used interchangeably. For example, a survey by Gallup (2007) found that a majority of Blacks denied a preference for one term to the other, indicating that they viewed the terms as roughly equivalent in meaning. Nevertheless, I also recognize that the term African-American might exclude the category of Black persons who live in the U.S., are of Caribbean descent, and who self-identify as Caribbean-Americans. The term African-American also may unintentionally include citizens of the U.S. who self-identify as Caucasians, but are of African descent (e.g., White ancestors from South Africa).

For the purpose of this study, I asked White teachers about their experiences with Black students. It is possible that participants were unable to discern the differences (such as the ones mentioned above) that exist within the umbrella term of “Black”. To avoid this confusion, I used the term Black as it is used in its most “common-sensical” form in the dominant (White) discourse in the U.S. In other words, when I asked White teachers to talk about their experiences with Black students, I relied on the assumption that we shared a mutually understood (but unstated) rule about what we meant by “Black” in the U.S. context.

Response to Intervention. Diverse meanings and interpretations of RTI exist in the literature. The disagreements about RTI revolve around (1) viewing it as a framework versus a set of procedures, (2) viewing it as a school-wide system versus a system mainly for special education, and (3) decision-making about service delivery through a standard protocol response to intervention model or through a problem-solving response to intervention (PS/RTI) model (J. Castillo, personal communication, February 17, 2015).

I concur with the Florida Problem Solving/Response to Intervention Technical Assistance Manual in (1) treating RTI as synonymous with PS/RTI, and (2) describing PS/RTI as “(using)

assessment to facilitate the development and implementation of evidence-based interventions in the general education environment and to determine the extent to which students respond to the interventions through continuous progress-monitoring” (Florida PS/RTI Technical Assistance Manual, p. 2). However, given the variability in how different educators, researchers, and districts have conceptualized RTI, I left it undefined while recruiting participants. The purpose of this decision was to avoid privileging one conceptualization of RTI over another. Therefore, my study participants were asked to describe RTI. I used the interview data to understand how they, as individuals, conceptualized RTI.

Policy. Stein (2004) defines a policy as, “[a] system of thought and action used to regulate and organize behavior” (p. 5) in an organization. Within this definition, RTI is not a policy at federal- or state-level. Although, IDEIA allowed, and Florida Department of Education (FDOE) mandated, the use of responsiveness to intervention as a special education identification mechanism, they did not stipulate specific components of RTI, allowing districts to make that decision. Some school districts in Florida adopted the problem-solving model of RTI that was promoted by Florida state-funded initiatives, and helped schools in creating structures and procedures that employees needed to undertake. Stein’s definition suggests that RTI was a policy at the schools of study participants because it regulated and organized the behavior of instructional and non-instructional staff. For instance, all study participants worked in schools which had created structures (e.g., RTI time block, RTI teams), procedures (e.g., frequent progress monitoring), and decision-making criteria to match instructional supports to student needs for reading and math. These schools also required employees to document the Tier 2 and Tier 3 services on certain forms. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, RTI was defined as a policy, and subjected to Stein’s policy analysis framework. Nevertheless, it must be remembered

there is no official mandate at federal- or state-level defining the components of RTI, and differences also exist in research literature about conceptualization of RTI.

Summary

So far, I detailed the role of policy culture and racialized deficit-based thinking in perpetuating racial inequalities in education in the U.S. My theoretical framework, based on the writings of Stein (2004) and Valencia (2010), explained how racialized deficit thinking modulates teacher interpretation of policies at the classroom level, and consequently negates the equity claims of the policy proponents. RTI is one such policy which has been promoted as having the potential to reduce racial disparity in education with its emphasis on research-based interventions, data-based decision-making, and frequent progress monitoring. Because teachers (the majority of whom are White) play an important role in RTI, I wished to illustrate how the discourse of racialized deficit shapes the way they experience RTI when working with Black students.

In the next section, I review extant empirical literature on the pattern of racial disparity in education. The potential of RTI to resolve longstanding racial disparities is discussed followed by a review of factors that could undermine the effectiveness of RTI in bridging the racial gap in education. Given the focus of this study on the teachers, I also discuss past research examining teacher's experiences of working within an RTI framework.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The previous chapter explained the theoretical foundations of this study. Specifically, the chapter explained the importance of policy cultures and racialized deficit thinking to explain why equity-oriented reforms in education often fail. In the current chapter, I begin by providing evidence for racial inequity within American public education. This section is followed by a critical discussion of the factors that perpetuate this inequality in education. In the next section, I delve into RTI, which is promoted by some researchers as a remedy for reducing the marginalization of the Black students in education. I conclude this section by arguing for the need to explore how race influences teachers' experiences of working within an RTI framework to help Black students.

Reproduction of Racial Inequality in Education

The racial patterns in U.S. social, political, and economic life appear in the educational settings as well (Roscigno, 1998). In the arena of education, these inequalities manifest most notably in the form of the achievement gap, and disproportionate representation of Black students in disciplinary actions and special education. The findings on each of these issues are discussed below.

Achievement gap. A number of studies have documented that achievement disparity exists between Black and White students, and persists at every stage of schooling, with Black students performing more poorly than White students (e.g., Robinson 2010; Roscigno, 1998). The achievement gap is detectable even during infancy. For example, Rippeyoung (2009)

examined the data from the nationally representative study on infants, namely the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth (ECLS-B) Cohort, to investigate racial patterns in cognitive skills of infants of Black and White mothers. Cognitive skills were measured in terms of infant behaviors such as babbling, problem solving, exploration, and word usage. Rippeyoung found that the predecessors to underachievement were detectable in infancy. Specifically, the data indicated that infants of Black mothers showed lower cognitive skills than infants of White mothers. This gap was explained by socioeconomic and health-related factors because when the study controlled for these variables, the gap was reversed (i.e. infants of Black mothers showed slightly higher cognitive skills than infants of White mothers).

Other studies demonstrate that the gaps in Black infants' cognitive skills appear to manifest themselves in achievement as well. Black students begin their schooling with lower reading and math skills than their White peers. From there onwards, the gap continues to grow; Black children fall behind their non-Black peers an average of 0.10 standard deviations per grade through the third grade (Fryer & Levitt, 2006).

The gap continues beyond grade three, and persists even at the end of high school. Robinson (2010) examined information of Black and White students from various national survey data sets in order to document the trajectory of the achievement gap on reading and math from kindergarten through the end of high school. The data indicated that the Black-White gap in reading and math is present at school entry, and continues to grow with Black students falling behind their White peers. The gap is the largest during middle school, and declines slightly during high school. Robinson concluded that while both groups show achievement gains in reading and math as they proceed through the grade levels, White students show larger gains. Additionally, high-achieving White students also out-perform high-achieving Black students.

The *Condition of Education 2014* report released by the U.S. Department of Education (Kena et al., 2014) also reported a similar pattern of achievement gaps in the areas of reading and mathematics. The report draws on the data from National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which is administered to a nationally representative sample of students in grades 4, 8, and 12. The report compares the 2013 NAEP scores to the NAEP scores from previous years, starting from 1973. Based on this comparison, the report concludes that while the scores for White as well as Black students have improved since 1990, the achievement gap between Black and White students persists. For example, in mathematics, the gap in average scaled NAEP scores of 17 year-old White and Black students was 40 points in 1973. In 2012, it had decreased to 26 points, but was a significant gap nevertheless. The gap also exists in reading and mathematics in elementary school as well as in middle school.

Disproportionality. Oswald, Coutinho, Best, and Singh (1999) defined disproportionality as, "the extent to which membership in a given group affects the probability of being placed in a specific disability category" (p. 198). Since Dunn's (1968) article, "Special Education for the Mildly Mentally Retarded: Is Much of it Justifiable?", there has been an increase in the research on this issue. For instance, Waitoller, Artiles, and Cheney (2009) conducted a systematic search of empirical studies on overrepresentation appearing in peer-reviewed journal since 1968, and found that more than half of all the articles on this issue appeared after 2000.

A popular trend in studying overrepresentation in identification is that of using *risk ratio* (Bollmer, Bethel, Garrison-Mogren, & Brauen, 2007). Risk ratio is defined as the risk of a child from one racial/ethnic group receiving special education services compared to the risk of a child in general (Bollmer et al., 2007). Table 1 shows the risk ratio of Black students and White

students on various disabilities at the national level. It can be seen that Black children are more than twice as likely as all other children to be identified with emotional and behavioral disorders or mental retardation (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011).

Table 1

Risk-ratios across race and special education categories

Disability	Specific learning disabilities	Emotional disturbance	Mental retardation	Speech and language	Autism	All categories combined
Black	1.29	2.02	2.33	0.89	0.82	1.28
White	0.95	1.08	0.81	1.27	1.68	1.12

Note. From “Addressing racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education: Case studies of suburban school districts,” by R. Ahram, E. Fergus, and P. Noguera, 2011, *Teachers College Record*, 113, p. 2237.

A recent study by Morgan, et al. (2015) found contrary results; after controlling for SES, student achievement and behavioral functioning, they found that Black students were less likely than White students to be identified as having learning disabilities, speech language impairments, intellectual disabilities, and health impairments. They argued that socioeconomic differences were the primary cause of overrepresentation of minority students, and when these differences are statistically controlled using individual-level rather than district-level data, minority overrepresentation shrinks to non-significant levels. Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, and Harry (2015) criticized the research methods of this study. They pointed to the shortcomings of the data collection method with regard to the authors’ reliance on single-item teacher report for identifying the primary disability category associated with a student. When compared to the actual count of students with disabilities (based on data published by Office of Special Education Programs), Skiba et al. (2015) found several discrepancies which led them to question the

accuracy of the data used in Morgan et al. (2015). They also criticized Morgan and colleagues' conclusion that, "current federal educational legislation and policymaking designed to minimize overidentification of minorities in special education may be misdirected" (Morgan et al., 2015, p. 11), by calling it an overreach of, "both their data set and their own analysis" (p. 224).

Disproportionality also has been observed in the area of school discipline. Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, and Tobin (2011) conducted a national investigation of disproportionality in school discipline data in elementary and middle schools. They identified schools that were using the School-wide Information System, which is a "three-component decision system for gathering and using school discipline data for decision-making" (Skiba et al, 2011, p. 89). The program requires schools to document all instances of disciplinary actions with special attention to details (e.g., type of infraction, time and setting in which is occurred, nature of consequence, ethnicity of the student). Out of the over 4,000 schools that were using this system in 2005, 436 schools were identified for data collection based on pre-stipulated criteria that included schools' willingness to share their SWIS data with the researchers. Analysis of the data using descriptive and logistic regression led to conclusions that were consistent with previously reported findings (e.g., Gregory, 1997; McFadden, Marsh, Prince, & Hwang, 1992; Wu, Pink, Carain, & Moles, 1982). It was found that Black students were at greater risk of receiving office disciplinary referrals (ODR) than their White peers. Specifically, Black students were 2.19 times as likely in elementary schools and 3.78 times as likely in middle schools to receive an ODR compared to White peers.

Another area of disproportionality was related to the consequences of behavioral infractions for Black and White students, with Black students receiving harsher consequences than White peers. For example, in elementary schools, Black students committing minor

infractions, were nearly four times as likely as White students committing minor infractions, to receive out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. They also were less likely to receive softer consequences (e.g., in-school suspension) for minor and moderate infractions than their White peers. Similar patterns also were found to exist at middle school level, especially for infractions such as tardiness, truancy, and disruption. One of the limitations of this study is that it did not specifically control for the influence of socio-economic backgrounds of students. However, previous studies (e.g., Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008) found that race of the student continued to be a significant factor in the disproportionality even after controlling for the effect of socio-economic variables.

RTI proponents attributed the presence of racial disparities in education to, “the use of stereotypical, deficit-based constructions of racially diverse students that result in biased, inequitable treatment” (Newell & Kratochwill, 2007, p. 67), and proposed that RTI could help in bridging this gap given its emphasis on objective data to meet the individual needs of all students. Therefore, the following section discusses the core features of RTI, diversity in conceptualizing RTI, RTI implementation across the U.S., and the fidelity of those implementations. I also present the studies on RTI that show its potential for meeting the promises of RTI proponents. Finally, I engage with some of the cautions that have been expressed by educational researchers with regards to the institutional hurdles that may prevent RTI from realizing its full potential.

Response to Intervention

RTI in its current form emerged due to the confluence of various streams and developments. The use of IQ-achievement discrepancy as a method of identifying children with learning disabilities contributed to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education for learning disabilities (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Given that the prevalence rates of

learning disabilities varied widely across states (Reschly & Hosp, 2004), opponents of the discrepancy model pointed to the variance as a sign that the existing mechanism for identifying learning disabilities was conceptually unsound (Hallahan, Keller, Martinez, Byrd, Gelman, & Fan, 2007). RTI was proposed as a promising approach to reduce the variance in disability identification by supplanting the existing mechanism with a more robust early intervention approach (Batsche, Elliot, Graden, Grimes, Kovalevski, & Prasse, 2005; Wehman, 2002). Thus, RTI emerged as both an alternative to the traditional process for determining special education eligibility, as well as a multi-tiered system focused on prevention and early intervention.

Although educational researchers were promoting RTI since nineties (see Gresham, 2002), the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 provided legal impetus for its nationwide spread (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). IDEA mandated states to allow districts to use alternative ways to identify learning disabilities. The IDEA 2004 Part B regulations (2006) also suggested that states permit “use of a process based on child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention” to determine special education eligibility. Although regulations did not specify an RTI model, the language corresponded to general RTI philosophy (Martinez, Nellis, Prendergast, 2006). These changes in policy language were however specific to special education provisions. States such as Florida, taking their cue from research on problem-solving model of RTI (see Telfer, n.d.), introduced policy language that framed RTI in terms of general education services to meet the needs of all children (see FDOE, 2011, p. 14).

Since 2010, school districts in Florida are required to use responsiveness to intervention to identify students eligible for special education services. Florida Department of Education also funded various initiatives and projects, staffed with university-affiliated RTI researchers, to aid districts in implementing RTI (Telfer, n.d.). In response to these developments, some schools

have adopted RTI policies specifying procedures and practices that instructional and non-instructional staff must undertake to meet the needs of all students. For instance, all participants in this study belonged to schools whose RTI policy mandated daily allocation of a time block for providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 services. These schools also used a decision-making system for matching the instructional intensity to the needs of a student, based on specific cutoff scores on certain standardized tests. School staff is required to document the delivery of Tier 2 and Tier 3 services using district-generated forms. In sum, at the federal and state-level, RTI is not so much a policy as a provision related to identification of students for special education. However, at the school level it is a policy within Stein's definition of policies as, "systems of thoughts and action used to regulate and organize behavior." (p. 5). Nevertheless, it must be remembered that a school's enactment of RTI may only partially cover the components and ideas that are found in research literature on RTI.

Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2011) identified three "big ideas" (see Table 2) that constitute RTI, namely high-quality instruction, frequent assessment, and data-based decision-making. According to Horowitz (2005), some of the typical components of RTI models that are commonly found in journals, manuals and books dedicated to explaining RTI to educators are: (1) instruction that is high-quality and evidence-based, (2) frequent and regular collection of data on narrowly-defined academic outcomes of all students, (3) reliance on data to inform the nature and intensity of instruction for each student, and (4) an emphasis on documentation of the process.

Table 2

Three big ideas of RTI

RTI component	“Big Idea”
High-quality instruction	All children deserve effective instruction that leads to the development of functional skills.
Frequent assessment	Continuous assessment leads to skill improvement.
Data-based decision-making	Adjustments to instruction must be based on data.

Note. From *Response to Intervention: Principles and strategies for effective practice*, p. 14, by R. Brown-Chidsey and M. Steege, 2011, New York, NY: Guilford Press.

RTI includes a continuum of support that ranges from standard general education services to highly personalized and intensive instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). RTI proponents lay a heavy emphasis on providing high quality instruction at Tier 1, so that when a student struggles, it can be guaranteed that the problem is not merely due to poor instruction (Batsche, 2007; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Batsche (2007) specified the expected distribution of students across tiers: general education services (i.e., Tier 1) should help 80% of the students meet academic and behavioral expectations without additional supports, 15% of the students will need some supplemental services (i.e., Tier 2) to meet the expectations, and 5% of the students will need more intensive and possibly individualized services (i.e., Tier 3).

Different meanings of RTI. RTI has become, “deeply entrenched in federal law and policy” (Batsche et al., 2005, p. 4), and has seen widespread implementation across the country. After being included as one of the processes that could be used to determine students as eligible for special education under IDEA (2004), RTI was rapidly adopted by many states. A study in 2009 found that only ten states did not allow the use of RTI-based procedures (e.g., failure to show improvement despite evidence-based interventions) for identifying students with a specific

learning disability (SLD), and that 47 states were in some stage of implementation of an RTI model (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). By 2012, all 50 states were permitting the use of RTI-based procedures (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Another study reporting results from school districts surveyed throughout the nation indicated that 94% of schools were at some stage of RTI implementation (Spectrum K12 School Solutions, 2011).

While there is a broad level of agreement across the nation about the big ideas of RTI, disagreements exist regarding the definition, purpose, processes, and the implementation of RTI (J. Castillo, personal communication, February 17, 2015). The varying conceptualizations and implementation of RTI could create widely different implementation practices in local contexts with teachers.

Definitions and purpose of RTI. Disagreement regarding defining RTI involves a number of dimensions. One issue includes describing RTI as a framework versus describing it as a set of procedures. For example, Mellard, Stern, and Woods (2011) defined RTI as, “a framework for providing high quality instruction and interventions that are matched to students’ needs” (p. 1). On the other hand, Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2011) described RTI as, “a set of scientifically based procedures that can be used to make decisions about educational programs” (p. 8). Thus while the former definition framed RTI as a general framework for guiding service delivery, the latter definition emphasized procedural aspects of RTI.

Disagreement regarding the purpose of RTI also involves describing RTI as primarily a system for improving outcomes of all students versus describing it as a device for determination of special education eligibility. For example, the Missouri Department of Education (2010) described the goal of RTI as, “creating collaborative and effective schools where parents, community members, and school staff work together in making data-driven decisions to ensure

positive social and educational benefit for all students” (p. 2). On the other hand, the International Reading Association (2006) defined RTI as a component of comprehensive assessment in serving students with learning problems.

Processes of RTI. Disagreements also exist about the decision-making processes that should be used to deliver interventions within a multi-tiered framework. There are two ways of conceptualizing the decision-making process of delivering interventions, namely the standard protocol response to intervention model and the problem solving response to intervention (PS/RTI) model (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006). A standard protocol approach involves establishing, “a universal program of assessment and intervention that includes decision rules for the movement of students from one tier of the system to another” (Keller-Margulis, 2012, p. 347). In this approach, small homogenous groups of students with specific skill deficits (e.g., reading fluency) are provided standard research-based intervention programs for a pre-determined period of time (Marchand-Martella, Ruby, & Martella, 2007). According to Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, and McKnight (2006), these programs generally last between eight to twelve weeks, and are accompanied by weekly progress monitoring of the student. At the end of this time period, school staff decides whether the student should continue receiving the program, should be given more intensive level of intervention, or should be taken out of the program.

On the other hand, the problem-solving response to intervention (PS/RTI) model emphasizes on individualizing research-based interventions because not all research-based interventions work with every student with similar difficulties (Fuchs, 2002). In other words, there are no universal stipulations (e.g., time limit) for decision-making, and decisions are individualized. The process of matching an intervention to a student’s precise needs involves using empirically validated problem-solving methods (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). Several

models of problem-solving exist in the literature. For example, Deno (2005) gave a five-step problem solving method (see Table 3) which involves going cyclically through a set of procedures such as (1) problem identification, (2) problem definition, (3) intervention planning, (4) implementation and progress monitoring, and (5) problem solution. Bergan and Kratochwill (1990) gave a similar model of problem solving that involved going cyclically through a series of four steps, namely: (1) problem identification, (2) problem analysis, (3) development and implementation of a plan or intervention, and (4) evaluating the student's response to the plan (i.e., program evaluation). Table 3 provides a description of each step of Deno's model, along with the accompanying activities that are part of that step, and the decisions that can be made at that step.

Table 3

Deno's Five Step Model of Problem-Solving

Problem-solving steps	Assessment procedures	Evaluation decisions
1. Problem identification	Observing/recording student performance	Does a problem exist?
2. Problem definition	Quantifying the perceived discrepancy	Is the problem important?
3. Designing intervention plans	Exploring alternative goals and solution hypotheses	Is the solution attempt progressing as planned?
4. Implementing the intervention and progress monitoring	Monitoring fidelity of intervention and data collection	Is the solution attempt progressing as planned?
5. Problem solution	Re-quantifying the discrepancy	Is the original problem being solved through this attempted solution?

Note. Adapted from *Problem-solving Assessment*, p. 25, by S. L. Deno, 2005, New York: Guilford Press.

According to Reschly (2014), standard protocol approaches and problem-solving approaches do not constitute an either-or hierarchy; rather they are both used in schools in hybridized forms depending on individual needs of students and situations. For example, a school may offer some standard interventions that have been found to resolve commonly occurring problems, but students who are receiving tier 3 services in that school also may receive interventions that are more individualized. An implication of the differences is that RTI model may be conceptualized differently in different school districts.

Fidelity of RTI implementation. Fidelity of implementation is defined as, “the act of monitoring whether all elements of an intervention or plan were implemented as originally intended” (Keller-Margulis, 2012, p. 3). Because RTI is a multi-component system with widely varying conceptualizations across districts (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009), there is a lack of adequate resources to measure fidelity (Keller-Margulis, 2012). Thus, differences in how RTI looks in different schools within a district also could be related to the fidelity of its implementation. For instance, a school may claim to have implemented the district’s model of RTI, when in fact the school only implemented some components of the model and left out others. As a result, lack of attention to fidelity limits the validity of findings of studies such as Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders (2009) and Spectrum K12 School Solutions (2011) because it is unclear the extent to which the implementation of RTI in those schools occurred with fidelity.

Promises of RTI. Although federal or state policies on RTI do not explicitly touch on issues of racial equity, proponents have often posited RTI as an equity-oriented reform that could reduce racial disparities in the achievement gap and disproportionality. For instance, Ciolfi and Ryan (2011) and Haager and Mahdavi (2007) argued that RTI could reduce overrepresentation

by improving core instruction, and by getting schools to identify students at risk and to intervene early. Proctor, Graves, and Esch (2012) argued that because the difficulty in basic literacy skill acquisition has been shown to predict higher levels of maladaptive behaviors in later school years, RTI's emphasis on early intervention and identification may help prevent such a trajectory, thereby reducing the likelihood of special education referrals.

RTI also could reduce overrepresentation by reducing the room for subjective judgment in eligibility decisions. This is done by emphasizing the importance of quantitative student data in decision-making (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011) as well as by shifting the focus of problem-solving teams away from problem-diagnosing to tasks such as developing and monitoring interventions (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003). RTI also could help reduce disproportionality because it can help distinguish between students whose poor performance is a result of poor instruction from those whose poor performance is the result of a "true" learning disability (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Proctor and colleagues (2012) argued that this aspect is important for Black students because they are more likely to attend schools that have "high teacher turnover, high numbers of uncertified teachers, high teacher-to-student ratios, and few reading and mathematics specialists" (p. 275). Thus, RTI proponents often have drawn on the equity potential of RTI to promote it to policymakers.

Available evidence on the impact of RTI on overall student outcomes is promising. Researchers have studied the impact of implementing RTI in schools on various dimensions such as student performance on high-stakes testing, number of students meeting grade-level reading benchmarks, number of students referred for special education eligibility determination, and the number of students identified with learning disabilities (Shapiro & Clemens, 2009). For example, Bollman, Silberglitt, and Gibbons (2007) reported on the impact of implementation of an RTI

model in the St. Croix River Education District in Minnesota from 1996 to 2006. The improvement in student outcomes across these ten years was visible in terms of increasing the proportion of students in K-6 grades meeting grade-appropriate benchmarks on curriculum-based measures of literacy (e.g., oral reading fluency). Another positive outcome was that the number of students identified with learning disabilities also declined by more than 40% from 1996 to 2006. It also was found that the proportion of students who met grade-level standards on state-level achievement tests rose from 51% in 1998 to 80% in 2005. The major limitation of this study was that it lacked a comparison group and did not control extraneous variables (e.g., change in student demographic over years), which limited the validity of its findings. Additionally, the researchers also did not disaggregate student data by race or ethnicity, which made it difficult to predict whether the benefits of RTI were equitably distributed across students of different ethnicities.

Vanderheyden, Witt, and Gilbertson (2007) reported on the effect of RTI implementation on the evaluation and identification of students for special education. Unlike the Bollman, Silbergliitt, and Gibbons (2007) study, which lacked a comparison group, Vanderheyden and colleagues (2007) used a multiple-baseline design in which an RTI model was implemented in five elementary schools in five consecutive years. Visual analysis across the multiple-baseline data indicated that, following the implementation of an RTI model, there was a reduction in the total number of evaluations across the five schools. This study also presented disaggregated data for student outcomes across various race and ethnicities, which showed that disproportionality between Black and White students was statistically insignificant at the end of five years. These data were, however, inconclusive because the baseline data (i.e., data collected at the beginning

of the study) also had been found to have a statistically insignificant amount of disproportionality.

Marston, Muysken, Lau, and Carter (2003) reported on a program evaluation of an RTI model that was phased in Minneapolis Public Schools since 1994. The researchers analyzed the impact of RTI implementation on student outcomes by conducting a visual data analysis of referrals, and identification in the area of high-incidence disabilities from 1991 to 2001. The data from the years 1991 to 1993 served as a baseline against which data from 1994 to 2001 was visually compared. Graphed representation indicated that there was a gradual reduction in the percentage of students who were identified with learning disabilities, and an increase in the number of students who were referred for early intervention (e.g., Tier 2 and Tier 3) following RTI initiation in 1994.

In 1997, the same school district entered in an agreement with U.S. Office of Civil Rights, which required them to report data on special education placement disaggregated by race between 1998 and 2002. Marston, Muysken, Lau, and Carter (2003) analyzed these data from 41 schools. Table 4 indicates a reduction in the percentage of Black students who were referred for, evaluated for, and identified with special education eligibility.

Table 4

Percentage of Black students out of overall student population from 41 participating schools

	1997 (% of Black students)	2001 (% of Black students)
Student population	44	45
Referrals to special education	64	59

Table 4 (Continued)

	1997 (% of Black students)	2001 (% of Black students)
Special education evaluations	69	58
Identification for special education	69	55

Based on these data, Marston, Muysken, Lau, and Carter (2003) concluded that RTI implementation “had a positive impact on disproportion” (p. 195) for Black students because it reduced the percentage of Black students who were referred, evaluated, and determined eligible for special education services. However, it was unclear whether the reduction was the same or greater for White students. Given that the phenomenon of disproportionality is essentially a relational problem highlighting the advantage that one group has over another group, the statistic used by Marston and colleagues did not reveal whether the positive impact of RTI was as much or greater for White students. As Skiba (2014) argued, “in order to create equal outcomes beginning from an initial state of inequality, such an approach would have to affect groups differentially (e.g., create larger improvements for African-American students) without consciously intending to do so” (p. 114). Thus, when Marston and colleagues measured the impact of RTI on disproportionality using odds ratio, (a more accurate measure of disproportionality [Parrish, 2000]), the results were less optimistic. To calculate the odds ratio, they compared the probability of a Black student acquiring labels related to learning difficulties to the probability of a White student acquiring the same label in the given schools for every year between 1997 and 2001. They found that odds ratio was 2.0 in 1997 and 2.1 in 2001.

In sum, studies on the effectiveness of RTI suggested that while it improved overall student outcomes, its impact on reducing the racial gap between Black and White students

remained unclear. At least one study (i.e., Marston, Muysken, Lau, & Carter, 2003) suggested the resiliency of the racial gap in spite of RTI implementation. This finding is reflected in other reforms that share the basic principles of RTI, such as a multi-tiered data-driven approach to service delivery. For instance, studies on the effectiveness of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS) found that while they improved overall student outcomes on behavioral indicators, their impact on racial gap in disciplinary practices was ambiguous (see Skiba, 2014). Therefore it is possible that socio-cultural factors might contribute to the intractable racial gap that persists despite data-driven instructional decisions to meet the need of every child. Some of the factors that may contribute to the racial gap are identified.

Implementation. While proponents present RTI as an equity-oriented reform to reduce racial disparities in student outcomes, the actual capacity of different schools to implement RTI may be variable (Artiles, Bal, & Thorius, 2010). Research shows that Black students are more likely to attend schools that are underfunded, and consequently have more under-qualified teachers and higher staff turnover than their White peers (Blanchett, 2010). Given the importance of adequate school funding for the effective implementation of RTI (Castillo & Curtis, 2014), it is possible that poorly funded schools attended by majority Black students may see ineffective implementation of RTI.

Evidence-based instruction. Although RTI models stress the importance of using evidence-based interventions, there is a lack of intervention base that has been specifically demonstrated to be effective for Black students (Proctor, Graves, & Esch, 2012). Most studies conducted on academic interventions do not disaggregate participant data by race (Lindo, 2006), which makes it difficult to determine whether recommended interventions are effective with and acceptable to Black students.

Teachers' judgments. Gerber (2005) cautioned that interpersonal as well as intrapersonal processes could go a long way in undermining the effectiveness of RTI. For example, quality of instruction can vary between teachers and within teachers (e.g., a teacher may teach well in one setting, but not so well in another setting). Additionally, because teaching is inherently a transactional process (i.e., student and teacher influence each other's behavior), the quality of a teacher's intervention also may be impacted by a student's responsiveness to that intervention. Given this point, it is important to consider how RTI might play out when the teacher-student dyad is interracial (e.g., White teacher and Black student). This issue is important because, research has shown that teachers also vary in terms of their perceptions of the potential of students with disabilities (Klehm, 2014) as well as Black students (McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Minor, 2014). Thus, teacher's racial biases might contribute to the racial gap in RTI outcomes.

Teachers and RTI

Teachers play a critical role at every tier of the RTI model (Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007). At Tier I, teachers often handle delivery of the core reading curriculum as well as screening to identify at-risk students (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007). The district may put the teachers in charge of screening (Haager & Mahdavi, 2007). Teachers use the screening data to make instructional decisions for their struggling students. They may collaborate with other specialized teaching staff such as reading specialists and special education teachers, as well as speech language pathologists and school psychologists to analyze data, and to develop Tier II and Tier III instruction (Richards et al., 2007).

RTI also has expanded the role of general education teachers. There have been calls for general education teachers to play a greater role in what was earlier considered to be the domain of special education. Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, and Murphy (2007) recommended that in schools with limited resources, general education teachers can be put in charge of developing

and delivering Tier 2 interventions to about 4-5 students in their classrooms. Within the RTI framework, students receiving Tier 3 services will be spending most of their time in general education. Therefore, general education teachers will need to have the skills to serve these students (Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007).

Given the importance of teachers in RTI, it is important to study how teachers experience working with the RTI framework. Although research in this area is scarce, four studies were found that examined teachers' perceptions of RTI and RTI's impact on their professional practices. All of the studies described below used qualitative methods, and involved interviews and focus groups with teachers in elementary schools that were implementing an RTI model.

Castro-Villareal, Rodriguez, & Moore (2014) qualitatively analyzed the written responses of 97 teachers to open-ended questions concerning teachers' understanding of RTI. They found that most teachers (78%) manifested a poor understanding of RTI. A definition was deemed as "poor" if it mentioned two or less points out of the seven key concepts of RTI identified in Fuchs and Fuchs (2005). The typical example of the poor definition involved referring to RTI as being no more than a procedure to get students identified for special education. Castro-Villareal et al. (2014) concluded that teachers, "are not fully bought in and satisfied with RTI as they are experiencing it" (p.110) which corroborated the findings of previous studies (e.g., Tillery, Varjas, Meyers, & Collins, 2010) that showed that teachers in general have a poor understanding of RTI. Castro-Villareal, Rodriguez, and Moore hypothesized that this phenomenon was due to, "limited pre- and in-service teacher training in RTI systems" (p.109) and the top-down implementation of RTI without teacher involvement. This was corroborated by the same study in which participants identified inadequate training as the biggest barrier to effective RTI.

The study also asked participants to list barriers they encountered which prevented an effective RTI program in their schools. Five barriers were identified:

- Lack of adequate training on collecting and analyzing data and implementing interventions.
- Lack of time to perform RTI related activities such as collecting, recording, and analyzing the data, especially with large classes. Teachers also complained that data-related activities took up limited instructional time.
- Lack of resources, such as understaffed schools, and no access to research-based interventions, which limited what they could do in the class.
- RTI process being overly long and complicated, and delaying, “the availability of services to students in need” (p. 108).
- Excessive RTI-related paperwork (e.g., teachers mentioned that some forms were too long, and that there were too many forms to complete).

These responses suggested that RTI was not being implemented well, possibly because schools or districts may have lacked a clear plan for implementation. Castro-Villareal, Rodriguez, and Moore (2014) concluded that, “In an environment where teachers are already overloaded, an inefficient system is likely to increase teacher frustration as they do not have time to figure out what to do next and how to do it.” (p.110). Castro-Villareal, Rodriguez, and Moore also questioned if the participants’ poor understanding of and negative attitudes towards RTI were shaped by poor implementation of RTI in their schools. They concluded that, “it is unknown whether the confusion and criticisms identified relate to dissatisfaction with and misunderstanding of the RTI system and process or are reflections of poor system practices and implementation fidelity.” (p. 110).

Stuart, Rinaldi, & Higgins-Averill (2011) reported on a longitudinal project forged out of a university-school partnership to help a charter school implement RTI for reading. As the implementation progressed, Stuart, Rinaldi, and Higgins-Averill conducted focus groups and individual interviews with eight teachers to understand teachers' perceptions of RTI. They found that teachers exhibited a more sophisticated understanding of RTI during the second year, in comparison to their responses during the first year of the implementation. In the second year, participants had clearer ideas about what they were supposed to do within the RTI framework, and how they were supposed to do it. For instance, they had clearer ideas about developing instructional plans in collaboration with other teachers and support staff. Teachers also reported higher self-confidence in terms of being able to implement RTI effectively during the second year. This finding was a change from the previous year when teachers viewed RTI as a complicated mandate that was imposed on them. In sum, Stuart and colleagues (2011) concluded that teachers demonstrated a greater ownership of RTI during the second year of the implementation process.

Teachers also reported more positive attitudes towards RTI in the second year, and identified the following factors as the being strengths of RTI:

- Reduction in rate of referrals for special education testing. One participant reported that prior to RTI implementation, "the referral process was too easy and too quick and in many cases the only option for teachers when a student was having difficulties." Stuart et al. found that referral rate in the school reduced from 10% to 3% in the two years since RTI implementation. One of the participants identified two ways in which this change had occurred: "we aren't referring as much, and students who might have been referred at an earlier point a few years ago are getting the services they need." (p. 61). Overall

participants attributed these outcomes to using data-driven problem solving to intervene early in case of students who were seen as being at-risk, which allowed them to identify student needs more efficiently and provide targeted intervention.

- Progress-monitoring. Whereas in the first year teachers had concerns about progress monitoring taking time away from instruction, they seemed to have more positive attitude towards it during the second year. One participant reported that, “we now have very concrete data to go into pre-referral meetings.” They also reported that progress monitoring helped them monitor whether core instruction was working, and whether at-risk students were responding adequately to an intervention.
- Improved communication and collaboration. Teachers reported that RTI’s emphasis on collaboration had caused school staff to address gaps in communication. For instance, during the first year of implementation, teachers realized that they were not all on the same page about students or about specific interventions. RTI, with its emphasis on collaborative problem-solving, forced them to address these issues which led to improved collaboration and work culture. For instance one teacher said that “the level of discussion and depth of discussion wasn’t there last year - but now we have a common language.”

Pyle, Wade-Woolley, and Hutchinson (2011) reported on a pilot project at four Canadian schools during the first year of RTI implementation to demonstrate the role of school context in shaping teachers’ attitudes toward RTI. Four focus groups were held, one for each grade from kindergarten to grade three, to understand the perceptions of 13 teachers of the implementation of RTI in their schools. Constant-comparative analysis of the transcripts led the researchers to discern two types of teachers: integrators and islands. Integrators reported satisfactory integration of the RTI framework in their classroom practices as well as in their school as a whole. On the

other hand, islands were those who reported that RTI implementation was unsatisfactory at their schools, and that they had not managed to integrate it in their classroom practices. All the eight integrators were from schools A and B, whereas the five islands were from schools C and D. The researchers compared the responses of integrators with the responses of the islands to reveal the following contextual variables in school environment that might distinguish the two groups:

- Collegiality and collaboration. Islands spoke about feelings of isolation, and not having support to implement the reform. On the other hand, integrators spoke about the supportive climate created from frequent meetings and opportunities to collaborate with other teachers, administrators, and support staff. These meetings provided a forum for reinforcing and clarifying teacher expectations, analyzing data, goal-setting, and instructional decision-making. Opportunities to collaborate through regular meetings provided a forum for knowledge sharing, and helped the teachers in these schools to overcome the feelings of isolation in their classrooms.
- Leadership. Teachers in schools C and D (i.e., islands) reported a lack of leadership which contributed to the sense of lack of direction. For instance, one teacher said, “we need...somebody who knows exactly what is going on and basically leads the meetings and pushes for things to start happening.” On the other hand, teachers from schools A and B (i.e., integrators) reported having people who had emerged as unofficial leaders in facilitating RTI implementation in their schools. These people would schedule and lead the meetings, set agendas, and lead the way in finding solutions to problems. They helped maintain a positive and organized climate, which made other teachers feel empowered to implement RTI.

- Teacher capacity. Islands reported lacking the skills and knowledge to analyze and use data to guide instructional decisions. They also reported not receiving much help from the administration to build their capacity to implement RTI. On the other hand, integrators reported receiving explicit instruction on RTI at the beginning of the implementation. They also reported receiving continued assistance throughout the year from school psychologists in clarifying specific areas of confusion. Additionally, frequent RTI meetings provided opportunities for teachers to consult with more knowledgeable colleagues about using instructional strategies for addressing specific problems in their classroom. Thus, continued assistance and collaboration helped improve teachers' capacity to implement RTI.

Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, and McKenna (2012) explored the perceptions of teachers in an elementary school that had been using an RTI framework for five years. Specifically, the study investigated how the teachers perceived the provision of reading and math instruction to students with academic concerns in reading and math. Teachers perceived RTI to aid in early identification of students and thus helping them provide targeted interventions sooner rather than later. Other benefits of RTI as perceived by the teachers was that it allowed them to address individual needs of students, transform individual work into a collaborative effort among colleagues, and reduce the stigma that was associated with special education. The teachers also identified some concerns about RTI. These included increased paperwork related to RTI documentation, scheduling difficulties for students who get pulled out by many different professionals, increased numbers of students, and staff shortages in response to increased responsibilities.

In sum, studies on teachers' perceptions of RTI have revealed the typical strengths and limitations of RTI as perceived by teachers. Strengths typically included reduced referral rates, early intervention, collaborative decision-making, and more efficient management of resources to meet the needs of all students. Limitations of RTI included excessive paperwork, delay in getting special education services, data collection taking up instructional time, and under-resourced schools. Participants commonly reported receiving inadequate professional development to learn RTI.

Studies also suggest that most teachers have poor understanding of RTI, and there is lack of buy-in (e.g., Castro-Villareal et al., 2014). Pyle et al. (2011) demonstrated the impact of school context in shaping teachers' buy-in for RTI. Their comparative analysis of teachers from different schools suggested that teachers may be more likely to have positive attitudes about RTI when their school environment is characterized by collaboration, leaders with clear goals, and ongoing assistance and professional development. None of these studies explicitly studied the role played by race in shaping teachers' experiences of RTI. The importance of contextual factors in shaping teachers' attitudes towards RTI was highlighted by Pyle et al. (2011). Given that race is a contextual factor too, failure to consider race as a factor modulating teachers' perceptions of RTI could be a limitation of these studies.

Summary

I highlighted the issue of the achievement gap and overrepresentation of Black students in American schools. Although RTI policies do not explicitly aim to reduce racial disparities, proponents often posit it as an equity-oriented reform that could reduce overrepresentation and improve school outcomes for Black students. However, there was scant research on how teachers apply the decision-making framework of RTI to serve Black students. As a result, my study explored White teachers experience working with Black students within an RTI framework, to

understand the role of racialized deficit thinking in shaping these experiences. In the following section, I review the design of this interview study, including data collection, participant recruitment, data handling and analysis, and the underlying research paradigm.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

In the previous chapter, I argued that a study exploring the connections between race, teachers, students, and RTI would address the gaps in the extant literature on RTI relating to its perception among teachers, and its role in addressing the needs of Black students. In this chapter, I discuss the research paradigm and design that guided this study. I also explain how I handled and analyzed data ethically, and the criteria that may be used to assess the validity of this study. I conclude by discussing ethical considerations in this study.

Research Paradigm

My philosophical stance is aligned with critical theory, which is “essentially the critique of ideology” (Noblit, 2005, p. 78). Ideology is the unquestioned assumptions and beliefs that permeate thinking and distort reality, thus preventing the oppressed from recognizing fully the nature of their oppression. The key assumption on which critical theorists operate is that oppressive structures are held in place by ideology (Paul, 2005).

Another assumption of critical theory is that “... social life is constructed in contexts of power that dominate some in serving the interests of others.” (Paul, 2005, p. 76). Thus, researchers who are influenced by critical theory take an explicit stance towards ending oppression by seeking to dismantle the structures of race, class, gender, and ability that hold it in place. In fact, critical ontology assumes that reality exists, but is filtered through the lens of class, race, gender, ethnicity, etc. These rigid structures distort the perception of reality to help perpetuate oppression and injustice. Given that their ways of knowing are constrained by the

structures of oppression within which they are embedded, it is important for critical researchers to reflect on “how their own acts of studying and representing people and situations are acts of domination” (Paul, 2005, p. 77).

I also bring in insights and constructs from the field of critical policy analysis to RTI research. Specifically, I make linkages between Sandra Stein’s (2004) critical work on Title I policy and RTI because both of them are commonly promoted as equity-oriented policies aimed at ameliorating problems of unequal student outcomes along the lines of class and race. Bringing in a critical framework contributes other perspectives to enter the field of RTI research, which remains heavily post-positivistic in its approach.

Research Design

Because my study sought to understand teachers’ perceptions and experiences, my research design took the form of an interview study. Interviews are helpful in eliciting information about people’s perceptions or attitudes to various issues (Johnson & Turner, 2003). In interviews, the researcher has lesser control over the questions asked than some other forms of quantitative data collection. Because interviews can afford more space to the interviewees to talk openly about their construction of reality, interview studies are helpful in understanding how people construct reality and the meanings they assign to various experiences (Punch, 2009).

Data Collection

Interviews are one of the major methods of data collection (Johnson & Turner, 2003). Punch (2009) called it “the most prominent data collection tool in qualitative research” (p. 144). Common components involve developing rapport, asking questions, and probing for further details or clarification regarding participants’ responses (Johnson & Turner, 2003). For my study, I used semi-structured interviews, which required the researcher to have a general guide with questions (see Appendix A) to ask. But unlike the structured interview, the semi-structured

interview allows the interviewer a degree of flexibility to pursue interesting avenues that arise through interviewee responses.

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) recommended that qualitative interviews resemble natural conversations as much as possible in order to build rapport with the interviewee and to elicit more in-depth and candid responses. Thus, I sought to keep my interviewing style as informal as possible within the constraints of my interview questions. Nevertheless, I was in charge of guiding the flow of the conversation by asking clarification questions and probing to elicit additional information whenever I felt it was needed to answer the research questions.

I used Roulston's (2010) conceptualization of the constructionist interview to inform my interviewing method. This style is well-suited when the data collection hinges on accessing, "particular versions of affairs produced by interlocutor on specific occasions" (p. 219). Rather than finding what *actually* happened, I wanted to find out the way participants made sense of their experiences in working with Black students within the RTI framework. Through the constructionist mode of interview, I was able to access the ways in which, "participants engage[d] in explaining, attributing, justifying, describing, and otherwise finding possible sense or orderliness in the various events, people, places, and courses of action they talk[ed] about" (Roulston, 2009, p. 219). By asking participants about their rationales for why RTI existed, why the achievement gap existed, and why Black students responded to instructional supports in a certain way, I was able to access the ideologies and worldviews that possibly were guiding these explanations.

Participants

The participants in my study were teachers in public elementary schools in a southeastern state in the U.S. who (1) self-identified as having applied the RTI framework of decision-making to address the academic and behavior needs of Black students, and who (2) self-

identified as White. In order to arrive at the number of interviews, I referred to Baker and Edwards (2012) who presented opinions of 12 leading research methodologists regarding the optimal number of interviews that students should conduct in qualitative research projects. In Baker and Edwards (2012), one of the methodologists, Alan Bryman, emphasized the notion of *saturation* (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to determine the number of interviews. Going by the saturation factor, the researcher stops conducting the interviews when incoming information no longer appears to lead to any new analytical categories.

To illustrate the role of saturation in determining the number of interviews, Bryman cited the experiment by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) who found that saturation was reached after twelve interviews. Guest and colleagues analyzed transcripts of a study that had a set of narrowly-defined interview questions (how women discuss sex) and participants that had similar characteristics (i.e., all participants were women at high risk for HIV). Bryman concluded that when the questions are narrowly defined, and when the participant pool is fairly homogenous, the number of interviews can be small (13 in case of Guest et al., [2006]).

My research questions also were narrow because they asked how White teachers discuss the use of the RTI decision-making framework to serve Black students in their classes. The participant pool was fairly homogenous in terms of race (i.e., White), profession (i.e., teaching in a public elementary school), setting (elementary schools) and service delivery (i.e., the teacher self-reported having used a RTI decision-making framework with a Black student). Therefore, in my study, I used 12 interviews. Because the interviews addressed many issues of a personal nature (e.g., teachers' understanding of race), I conducted two interviews with each teacher. Therefore, I interviewed six teachers. The interviews were done face-to-face in a location chosen by teachers outside of regular school hours.

Participant recruitment. I recruited the prospective participants through the method of snowball sampling, which involved using existing participants' social networks to locate new participants. I started by talking to people (e.g., faculty in colleges of education) who were in a position to refer me to individuals meeting my eligibility criteria. I contacted the referred people through email, informing them about the person making the referral, description of my study, eligibility criteria, and issues of confidentiality. If they consented to participate in the study, I requested them to sign a letter (see Appendix B) electronically or physically. I compensated the participation by giving a ten dollar gift card at the beginning of the first interview.

Data Handling and Analysis

Data storage. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The audio as well as the transcripts were stored digitally on a password protected computer that had a firewall and an antivirus software program to prevent unauthorized break in or data theft. All the signed consent forms (see Appendix B) were kept in a locked cabinet in my house. All personal identifiers (e.g., names of participants, name of the schools in which they work) were de-identified.

Transcription. I transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim in Microsoft Word. While transcribing the interviews, I ignored non-verbal fillers, such as "um" and "uh." While transcribing, I came across words or phrases that were rendered inaudible because of the recording. In order to minimize the chances of this happening, I transcribed the interviews soon (i.e., within one week) so that I could use my memory of the interview as a reference to fill in spaces where the participants words were inaudible. I proof-read the text and rectified any spelling mistakes and punctuation errors.

Coding. The most common strategy to go from transcribing data to answering research questions in qualitative research involves coding (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). According to MacLure (2013), the prevalent practice of coding, regardless of the research approaches taken,

consists of four phases, “(a) body of ‘data’ (interviews, field notes, responses to questions, documents, personal narratives, ‘naturally occurring interactions’, visual images, etc., (b) a search for recurrence and pattern, through (c) naming and collecting (categorizing); and (d) reduction of complexity through the assembly of data into superordinate categories or concepts” (p. 165).

In my case, the body of data consisted of transcribed interviews. I drew on the three-phase process that was suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008) to arrive at a theory. I started with open-coding; I coded every data segment that seemed even remotely connected to my research questions. The codes served the function of making the information easy to identify and organize. Then I performed axial coding, which means that I organized the available open codes based on their common properties to create broader categories. However, in a departure from the inductive approach often associated with this method, I drew on my research questions to inform the broader categories. For instance, I grouped some open codes under the category *Teacher’s Explanation of Failure* which was based on my fourth research question. I also looked for different sub-categories or patterns that emerged within every broad category. For example, I found that under the category of *Teachers’ Explanation of Failure*, there existed three different sub-categories, each of which consisted of a different explanation for why some Black students failed to respond to Tier 2 or Tier 3 instructional supports. I looked at these sub-categories analytically to see how they connected to my theoretical framework of a racialized deficit-based policy culture.

Reflexivity

Critical theorists also emphasize the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research because the researcher’s social, cultural, and ideological characteristics influence every stage of her research, right from determining what research questions she asks to the analytic methods

she uses (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Harding, 1991). Reflexivity involves, “[a] critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how that knowledge is generated.” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 274). Therefore, reflexivity in context of the present study involved contemplating the ways in which my social markers (e.g., race, gender, class, and professional status) impacted my research study in terms of the research questions I asked, the kind of data I was able to collect, and the ways in which I made sense of the data. A detailed discussion of these questions is presented in Chapter 6.

Validity

Whereas the quantitative research tradition has standardized the criteria to assess the quality of research (e.g., reliability, validity, generalizability), the literature on judging qualitative research presents a variety of criteria for determining what constitutes a good study (Tracy, 2010). Researchers such as Bochner (2000) criticized the search for universal criteria that can be used to judge qualitative research, claiming that imposing such universal regulatory standards does injustice to the vibrant and dynamic field of qualitative research. On the other hand, Tracy (2010) argued that criteria are helpful because (1) they inform amateur researchers who are still grappling with qualitative research, (2) they help researchers belonging to a certain research tradition to demarcate the core values that form the basis of their research, (3) and they help in establishing consensus on criteria that help the researchers to convey to grant agencies and other gatekeepers how their research is to be judged. Other researchers, however, see the existence of diverse axiologies as a strength and a characteristic that is in keeping with the burgeoning eclecticism of qualitative research (J. Wolgemuth, personal communication, November 13, 2014).

Several researchers (e.g., Bochner, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Lather, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) have proposed criteria for judging the goodness of qualitative research. For my study, I relied on the framework provided by Tracy (2010) because I found that her framework was concise enough to be applicable to different types of qualitative research, while also being broad enough to include the standards that have been invoked by other researchers from different qualitative traditions. Tracy acknowledged that “values for quality, like all social knowledge, are ever changing and situated within the local contexts and current conversations” (p. 838) and encouraged her readers to choose from among the eight criteria that best align with their approach and goals. For my study, I chose the following criterion that could help reviewers judge the goodness of my research: significance of the contribution.

Significant Contribution. This criteria lends value to an inquiry that either builds upon existing knowledge or introduces new ways of looking at a phenomena by weaving together different theories or creating new ones. According to Richardson (2000a), a study that makes a significant contribution is one that, “contribute[s] to our understanding of social-life” (p. 254). This research study contributes to understanding (1) teachers’ perceptions of RTI, and (2) the role of teachers’ racialized deficit thinking in the context of using the RTI framework.

Existing research on teachers’ perceptions of RTI has reported the facilitators and barriers that teachers commonly report in schools implementing RTI. However, I was unable to locate studies that investigated the role of personal worldviews and deficit thinking in shaping teachers’ understand of RTI. In this study, I presented the various strengths and weaknesses of RTI as perceived by teachers based on their classroom experiences, which corroborated with findings of previous studies. Additionally, I illustrated the multiplicity of meanings that emerged within teachers’ responses discussing RTI. The multiplicity was especially visible in the way four

teachers working within the same RTI model assigned different meanings to RTI based on their worldview, work experience, and professional training. Thus, my study contributed to existing literature on RTI implementation by showing how personal and contextual variables play a role in the way teachers interpret and enact RTI.

I presented thick, rich descriptions aided by interesting quotes to illustrate the role of racialized deficit thinking in teachers' experiences of working with Black students within an RTI framework. Although RTI is a data-based decision-making framework that seeks to minimize the role of subjective judgments in instructional decision-making, I found that racialized beliefs often inflected the ways my study participants interpreted the schooling outcomes of Black students, and the solutions they suggested. In this way, my study goes beyond existing literature to illustrate the role of race and deficit thinking in teachers' understanding of RTI.

I also bring in insights and constructs from the field of critical policy analysis to RTI research. Specifically, I make linkages between Sandra Stein's (2004) critical work on Title 1 policy and RTI because both of them are commonly promoted as equity-oriented policies aimed at ameliorating problems of unequal student outcomes along the lines of class and race. By bringing in a critical framework, I make contribution to field of RTI research which remains heavily post-positivistic in its approach.

Ethical Considerations

Before collecting the data, I got my participant recruitment plan approved by the Institutional Review Board at University of South Florida. When approaching prospective participants, I followed best practices on informed consent such as informing them as fully as possible about the nature and purpose of my study. I informed the study participants about the precautions that I would be taking to keep their responses confidential. Measures taken to ensure

confidentiality of responses involved securely storing the data and de-identifying information. The process of de-identification began with transcription. When I transcribed the recorded interviews, I substituted any identifying information with pseudonyms.

When I interviewed the teachers, I asked them to talk about their experiences of serving a Black student within an RTI-based decision-making framework. It was possible that teachers might give away identifying information about a student when they were talking about their experiences. In order to avoid this, I requested them at the beginning of the first interview to use a pseudonym when talking about a student or student's family. During the second interview, I reminded them of this request.

Apart from gaining informed consent from and maintaining confidentiality of the study participants, my responsibility towards them also involved analyzing the data ethically. Given that I operated from a critical orientation, my analysis of teachers' words was critically interpretive in nature. In other words, I delved beyond the surface of the participants' words, and drew on critical theories to make various interpretations. This process threw up the possibility of representing a participant as racist when such a representation may go against his or her self-image. In other words, the ethical dilemma involved misrepresenting the participants.

I minimized the risk of misrepresentation by guarding against racial essentialism while interpreting the responses of White participants. Racial essentialism consists of a belief that, "racial groups possess an underlying essence that represents deep-seated and unalterable properties indicative of traits and abilities" (Tadmor, Chao, Hong, & Polzer, 2013, p. 99). Guarding against racial essentialism involved being open to the complexity of lived experiences of participants, and proceeding cautiously when assigning racist intentions to their words. I used the following strategies to guard against essentialist interpretation at points where I felt a

participant was saying something racist. First, I justified my judgments by providing actual quotes of participants where appropriate. Second, I situated the quotes within a broader context by showing how they were produced by socio-historical forces, and not by individual deficiencies of my study participants. For instance, while discussing the deficit-centered responses of teachers, I brought in the history of deficit discourse in education, and showed how it has been deployed time and again to continue the marginalization of Black students in the U.S. In the section on Implications, I concluded this line of thought by urging researchers to resist blaming individual teachers, and focus on the broader sociopolitical contexts, which shape such a line of thinking.

CHAPTER FOUR:

TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF RTI

In the previous chapter, I discussed the methods of data collection and data analysis to help me answer the four research questions. In this chapter, I discuss findings for the first two research questions. These questions dealt with (1) teachers' understanding of RTI, and (2) teachers' perception of the strengths and limitations of RTI. I conclude this chapter by interpreting these findings in the light of Sandra Stein's (2004) work exploring the ways in which top-driven education policies trickle down to the classroom level where they are interpreted by teachers in keeping with their pre-existing worldviews and pedagogical beliefs.

Participants' Understanding of RTI

I found three themes that revealed participants' understanding of RTI, namely (1) operationalization of RTI, (2) purpose of RTI, and (3) situation of self with respect to RTI. I start by reviewing how teachers discussed the operationalization of RTI in their respective schools and/or districts. These descriptions provided by teachers dealt with the specific procedures and structures that have been created by the school or district in relation to RTI (e.g., specific cutoff points on standardized test scores to place students in Tier 1, 2, or 3). I will follow this discussion with a description of various reasons or rationales that teachers attributed to the existence of RTI. In other words, I looked at how teachers understood the function or purpose of RTI. Finally I discussed the linguistic usage of the term "RTI" to illustrate how teachers situated themselves in relation to RTI. I found that, more often than not, teacher's use of the term "RTI" in their sentences suggested that they tended to locate themselves *outside* of RTI, rather than

seeing it as a framework which encompassed their practice. For example, teachers often referred to RTI as something they “do” during a specific time of the school day *to* a specific set of students. I conclude this section with a brief description of how these three themes portray participants’ understanding of RTI.

Operationalization of RTI. This theme involved teachers’ description of the various structures and processes that had been laid down in their schools in response to their district’s mandates. Although there were similarities among the RTI models in all the schools, I found that there also were some differences depending on in which district a school was located. The six participants in my study were drawn from two school districts in a southeastern state in the U.S. As Table 5 indicates, two participants were from one district and the remaining four were from another district.

Table 5

Pseudonyms for district, school, and the six participants.

District	Storybrooke		Bon Temps	
	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4
Participants	Stacy Melanie	Melissa Leena	Elizabeth	Jennifer

I found many similarities in the participants’ description of the RTI model in their school, and specifically in their grade level. All schools used a three-tiered model of RTI in which Tier 1 denoted universal instruction (i.e., instruction received by all students). Students who did not respond adequately to Tier 1 instruction were provided more intensive supports in form of Tier 2 and Tier 3 services.

Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports typically took the form of small-group teaching and computer adaptive software, namely iReady, and were provided during a specific time block allotted for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions (which participants referred to as the RTI block). For instance, Stacy reported that 30 minutes from 9:15am to 9:45am from Monday to Thursday is allotted for providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. During this period, all the students “are working on a menu of items, and anyone who is considered Tier 2... small group... is going to come visit me in the back of the room and I have some sort of alternative activity for them.” Her use of the qualifier “small group” after Tier 2 reflected the view of all participants in my study, namely that teachers seem to interpret Tier 2 as small group activities with struggling students. Another common intervention all the participants reported using for Tier 2 and Tier 3 services was iReady, a computer adaptive program purchased by both the districts. This program typically includes pre-assessments, targeted exercises, and tutorials targeting specific narrowly defined skill-sets, such as identifying the main idea in a reading comprehension passage. Participants reported having students sit on iReady working on a specific skillset while the teacher ran a small group for another skillset.

Another commonality in schools’ operationalization of RTI was the use of data obtained from frequently-administered measures of academic skills (e.g., easyCBM, Developmental Reading Assessment [DRA], etc.) to monitor the progress of all students. The teachers convened grade-level meetings to analyze the data in order to decide the intensity of instruction (i.e., Tier 1, 2, or 3) needed by a student. These meetings would be attended by members of support staff who were trained in RTI and acted as consultants on the problem-solving process. In Bon Temps school district, this person was typically a school psychologist. However, in Stacy’s school it was the guidance counselor who served as the “RTI person” who would attend meetings, and

help teachers analyze the data to identify students needing Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports. In addition, the person also would assist teachers in completing the district forms that required teachers to document problem identification, problem analysis, development of intervention plan, and plan for its implementation.

A fourth commonality among the schools' operationalization of RTI was the presence of professional learning communities (PLC), which typically took place at every grade level. Grade-level teachers and support staff (e.g., school psychologists, special education teachers) would meet approximately once every two months to review the grade-level data, analyze the progress of students who were receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 services, and modify existing Tier 2 and Tier 3 groupings depending on students' response to intervention. For example, students who had not shown improvement on a specific skill after receiving Tier 2 instructional support for that skill might be moved up to receive a higher tier of instructional support. On the other hand, students who had shown the desired level of improvement may be kept on the same tier or may even be switched to a lower tier. These meetings commonly took place once every two months; thus, giving teachers time to implement an intervention and collect data.

Some differences also were noted between schools in the two counties in terms of the role of parents in RTI. Elizabeth mentioned that teachers in Bon Temps were not required to contact parents for moving students between tiers. Teachers only were required to contact parents for evaluating a student for ESE eligibility. On the other hand, Storybrooke county policy required teachers to contact parents to inform them about the change in instructional support for a student (e.g., when a teacher wanted to move a student from Tier 2 to Tier 3). Thus, Stacy showed me the Record of Parent Conference form in which teachers documented the date of parent contact. The protocol also prompted teachers to inform parents about the discrepancy

between student performance and expected performance, and the instructional supports they had planned for the student. Thus, the policy and protocol in Storybrooke County seemed to place greater emphasis on parental involvement than Bon Temps County.

Purpose of RTI. This theme is about how teachers explained the purpose of RTI. I accessed understandings through questions such as “What do you think is the purpose of RTI?”, and “Why do you think RTI is being promoted in your district?”. I found that there were five motives that were commonly attributed for the introduction of RTI in the school district.

To improve identification of students with specific learning disabilities. Elizabeth believed that RTI was introduced by the district to enhance the procedure for identifying students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). She felt that it was an improvement over the past method of doing so, namely the achievement-intelligence discrepancy model. The biggest benefit of RTI was that teachers had to use multiple data sources to identify students suspected with SLD. She believed this model of SLD identification worked better than the discrepancy model because “you have different measures, and sometimes based on a triangulation of these three or four different things you are using, a student can bomb one and do quite well on the others, and show that they are clearly not learning disabled”. Thus, she saw the introduction of RTI as a way to get a more reliable and valid procedure for identifying students with SLD.

To differentiate instruction. All the participants except Leena mentioned that the role of RTI was to facilitate the differentiation of instruction to enable teachers to meet each student at their level, wherever that was at a given point in time. However, there was some variance in their responses which suggested some disagreement about the extent to which RTI is meant for “all” students versus the extent to which it is mainly for students who are struggling to meet district benchmarks. Stacy and Melanie felt that RTI should be meant for all students. Stacy said, “The

premise of it (is that) you are responding to an intervention, you are responding to what someone needs at that moment, and that will benefit (them). I mean I hate to say that it's just for marginalized population or it's just for a certain population. It's for every child". Melanie said, "You are finding what you don't know and you are learning it. I mean isn't that what RTI is?"

On the other hand, Melissa, Jennifer, and Elizabeth seemed to conceptualize RTI more as a way to remediate learning for students who were not benefiting from the regular instruction. Jennifer believed that RTI was probably for "those students who were low-performing, slow learners, struggling learners, not necessarily identified as exceptional students or even language learners. But those kids who just at times fell through the cracks." Melissa maintained that RTI was brought in to "remediate those students that are struggling."

To hold teachers accountable for reteaching. Melissa, Melanie, and Stacy believed that RTI was not a new phenomenon. Rather it was introduced to ensure that teachers were making an effort to meet the needs of students who did not benefit from Tier 1 supports alone. Recounting the time she tried to explain RTI to a co-worker, Stacy said, "You are already doing it. You just have to document it a little differently or document it at all". Melissa said, "My kids are in college. So there was no RTI then, other than what was being done in the classroom. They just came up with an acronym for it."

Conceptualizing Tier 2 and Tier 3 support as a "fancy name" for reteaching, these participants believed that their districts introduced RTI to make sure that teachers were pulling out small group of students during the reading block, and giving them extra practice on reading fluency and comprehension. Thus, Melissa showed me a form in which she was required to document the names of students who were receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 services, and the dates, times, and duration of those re-teaching sessions. In other words, they saw RTI as an

accountability mechanism for reteaching. Speaking about the accountability logic of RTI, Melanie stated that in “any kind of occupation, there is gonna be people that aren’t doing what they are supposed to do. And I would imagine that’s part of the RTI process... it’s a quality assurance... Are you doing what you are supposed to do? How can you have children at the end of the year that have a D and an F in a subject area you are responsible for? And where is the evidence you have tried to meet their needs?”

To reduce ESE expenditure. Melissa, Leena, and Elizabeth attributed the district’s push towards RTI to the drive to cut down on the expenditure for ESE services. Melissa believed that the district was making it harder and harder to get students evaluated for learning disabilities by introducing the intermediary steps related to RTI (i.e., Tier 2 and Tier 3). Additionally, she felt that the district kept lowering the cutoff scores for moving students to a lower tier in a deliberate move to make it difficult to get those students qualified. Speaking of three students in her class, Melissa said, “They should be ESE for sure. But they are never gonna qualify for it because they keep lowering the bar so much. And apparently that saves the district a lot of money. If we don’t qualify them, we don’t have to give additional services. We have now put it on the classroom teacher”. Leena also thought along similar lines: “... a lot of us think that the RTI was just brought or invented or whatever to reduce the amount of kids in ESE. Because what we have found happening is that, we think, the ESE population is gonna dwindle because it’s getting harder and harder to test them, because they have to meet certain criteria.”

Leena and Elizabeth also believed that RTI was part of district’s plan to reduce the ESE staff, and transfer their responsibilities to the general education teacher. For instance, Elizabeth reported that, “Somewhere in the background, there is a discussion... that all the universities are now requiring pre-service teachers to graduate with an ESE certification... So the writing is on

the wall that not only all the colleges are getting in line to make sure that you are leaving school with ESE certification but everyone in the classroom coming in now will be certified to have those kids in their class. And you will no longer need a varying exceptionalities teacher to come into the room because you will have the expert right there.” Leena said, “And so what I see happening is that the regular teacher has to do it all. We are not only the ELL teacher but we are also going to become the ESE teacher.”

How teachers situate themselves with respect to RTI. In 2008, the Florida Department of Education disseminated the Statewide Response to Instruction/ Intervention Implementation Plan to assist school districts in Florida (the setting for this research study) in RTI implementation. In this plan, RTI was defined as a decision-making framework that encompasses all aspects of instructional service delivery in a school, a grade-level, or a classroom. Rather than something that individuals ‘do’, RTI is a decision-making framework that teachers, schools, and districts use to allocate resources proportional to the student needs. From this description of RTI, it is clear that teachers in Florida school districts function *within* the RTI framework.

Nevertheless, I noticed many instances in which the study participants’ linguistic usage of the term RTI denoted RTI as something that they *do* with a specific subset of students in a specific time-period. I coded all such instances with the code “teachers outside RTI”. In this section, I present various illustrations of such linguistic usage.

There were three instances of using RTI as a verb. For instance, Melissa said, “I have not even RTI’ed someone... in all of seven years that’s off the top of my head... that came from a middle class family”. Another sentence by Stacy was, “I didn’t get to RTI this week as much as I should have.” These sentences frame RTI as something teachers *do* to or with struggling students.

Another common phrase from many participants was in relation to students who were seen as struggling. Stacy said, “If you have a student with a D or a GPA of 2.0 or lower, then you are obviously full-fledged in an RTI program.” Melanie said, “Our math teachers for example, they had to do their RTI which was required. I mean it wasn’t optional. When you have a child that’s got a D or an F in math... its like ‘Ding! You got a ticket for RTI.’” Such a usage of the term RTI implies that RTI is a program or a service provided to students who are struggling academically.

Another common linguistic usage denoted that RTI was a specific time period in the day. For example, Melissa said, “Here is my social studies block from 9:50 to 10:10, and then here is my RTI block, from 11:11 to 11:30. This is 19 minutes of RTI.” When I asked Jennifer to talk to me about what RTI looked like in her school, she replied, “RTI is blocked out on every teacher’s schedule. This is the minutes allotted. So during RTI, you tend to have push-in services and pull-out services. So during that time, you might have a fifth grade teacher working with a small group, a reading group of students working independently but silently on their reading journals (or) whatever.” Thus, participants saw RTI as a block of time for pulling out small groups of struggling students and re-teaching concepts.

In sum, three themes helped me in understanding participants’ conceptualization of RTI. Participants’ description of their school RTI model informed me about the structures and procedures that had been set up in their schools. I noticed many similarities in the structures and processes between the two districts. Additionally, I found that participants’ personal conceptualization of RTI was couched within these structures. Thus, although I found some incongruence between participants’ descriptions of RTI and the description that was being promoted at the state-level policy, I realized that their understanding of RTI was probably shaped

by the way RTI policy was interpreted in their school or district. Secondly, participants also assigned various rationales, explaining why they felt RTI was introduced in their districts. These perceived motives ranged from seeing RTI as a way to meet the needs of *all* students to a way to cut down on ESE expenditures. Finally, participants revealed that they saw RTI as something teachers *do* to a specific population in a specific time period during the school day. This understanding of RTI was discrepant from the definition promoted by the Florida Department of Education which communicated RTI as an overarching framework for decisions making and instructional service delivery.

Teacher-reported Strengths and Limitations of RTI

Teachers play a crucial role in RTI implementation (Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007). Therefore, I wanted to see what teachers saw as the strengths and limitations of this reform. I found three strengths and five limitations of RTI in the participant responses. As discussed in the previous section, participants' understandings of RTI were couched in the distinct way that RTI was operationalized in their districts and schools. Thus, many of the strengths and limitations might refer to either RTI in general or the RTI model specific to that school or district.

Strengths of RTI. Teachers reported data-driven decision-making and increased collaboration as the main strengths of RTI. They also reported that RTI's structure helped them meet the needs of all students.

Data. Data-based decision-making is an important part of RTI. Teachers use data obtained from frequently administered standardized curriculum-based measures (e.g., easyCBM, DRA) to track students' progress. The data obtained from these tests are then used to guide further instructional decisions. For example, a teacher looks at a graph consisting of eight weeks of weekly scores for a student, and decides that the student is not improving at the pace that will

allow her to reach the district benchmarks at the end of the year. The teacher can use this information to make further instructional decisions (e.g., increase the duration of services that the student receives currently). Within the RTI framework, data are not only used at the classroom-level, but also at the grade- and school-level to aid early identification of patterns of deficits.

Jennifer felt that the data gleaned from the regular and frequent assessments (including progress-monitoring, curriculum-based measurement, weekly class tests) was helpful in ensuring that at-risk students were not falling through the cracks. For instance, she cited the example of her use of formative assessment when she taught third grade at her previous school. Informal analysis of the results of the weekly class tests would help her identify certain patterns of weaknesses for either the whole class, small group, or individuals which she would have otherwise missed. She would then use this insight to plan further instruction. She felt that this way of data-informed decision-making ensured that teachers were not “*forgetting about kids*” who were likely to fall through the cracks. She also felt that these data fed into the larger school, district, and state systems. Possession of these data could enable these agencies to conduct cross-district or cross-school comparisons which could potentially further guide policy-making.

In addition to improved identification and policy-making, Stacy felt that the benefit of data was in allowing the students to see and judge for themselves how they were doing in relation to specific skills. For example, she described that she had instituted a system in her class whereby “kids own their own data”. The students maintained a portfolio that would contain a record of their scores and products. Over the course of the year, Stacy would get them to re-visit their own scores and make cross-time comparisons. She felt that this system enabled the students to judge whether they had improved or stayed the same on certain areas. “I will say, *Go back to your September work and see*”. And they will say, *‘oh, I am not struggling in cause and effect*

anymore!’ or ‘Man, I still stink at drawing conclusion!’ You know, they can actually see that they haven’t mastered those skills.” Thus, allowing students to review their accumulated data helped them in reflecting on their progress (or lack thereof) on certain areas.

Melanie also mentioned that having data may help placate parents who feel their child is being treated unfairly. For instance, Melanie shared the time when she had contacted the parent of a Black student to talk about her academic concerns. Because the student had performed well in earlier grades, the parent was skeptical about Melanie’s concerns. She accused Melanie of racially profiling the student because he was Black. She said that “my eyeballs were just popping out of my head with ... He is... you know. I can show you the test scores... I had like five, you know... not five but several test scores, and he wasn’t doing well, and just from class performance I also knew he was struggling”. Melanie mentioned that the test scores helped in convincing the parent that he was struggling in some areas, and helped her rebuild her rapport with the parent. Like Melanie, Stacy also felt that numerical data helped teachers communicate with parents about students’ academic difficulties. Therefore, she prepared for parent meetings by gathering as much data as possible on the student.

Collaboration. Increased collaboration between teachers and between teachers and parents was another strength of RTI. Within the RTI problem-solving model, groups of teachers as well as other support staff meet on a regular basis to review student performance at a grade-level. These meetings often provide them opportunities to exchange ideas, grow professionally, and also serve as a support group. For example, Melanie said, “So we found generally that RTI is basically reminding you how to be a good teacher which is something we all need: the reminder. So you don’t become stuck in a rut. A behavior rut. So there is very good aspects of RTI in my opinion. Techniques you can learn through the discussions from others of what works for them,

what has been effective with students that have had similar problems that you are seeing in your classroom maybe. So in that part of it, I think it's fabulous... is the collegial conversations that take place."

Like Melanie, Stacy also appreciated that RTI emphasized collaborative work among teachers in terms of problem-solving. The collaborative problem solving also would allow teachers in a grade level to join forces to remediate problems that were common to all the classrooms within that grade level. Stacy gave example of how all the teachers at her grade-level met to remediate four skill deficits they were seeing across classrooms for that grade level.

We had 3 teachers on our little team and instead of me pulling a small group in my class, [we] took let's say 4 skills that I would teach: cause and effect, inferences, main idea, and sequencing. And we tested all the kids...65 kids or so... And then if you didn't need any remediation in that skill, then you were given an independent learning exercise. And one teacher was in the independent learning room for that morning. And then if you needed support in sequencing, you would come to me for 45 minutes and I would teach a lesson. So only kids in that group were receiving that instruction. And then, if main idea was tough and [another teacher] was teaching main idea, the [students who had deficits in main idea] would all go in her room, and then we would switch. And that's actually because we had so many kids who struggled. So that worked well: like if you have a large proportion, you wanna try to reach as many kids as possible in a short amount of time. Thus, RTI helped Stacy and her grade-level teachers to join forces to resolve a commonly occurring issue.

Another strength of RTI also was that it increased parent collaboration. According to Melanie, RTI had increased her contact with the parents of struggling students in her class. She

reported that the increased contact largely was because the problem-solving protocol in her district required teachers to conference with a student's parents to discuss academic concerns. Melanie appreciated the increased parent-teacher contact because she felt that getting parent buy-in was important to enhancing a student's academic performance.

Meeting the needs of all students. Elizabeth and Leena reported that RTI helps teachers in meeting the needs of all students by providing targeted learning and smaller student-teacher ratios for students who are struggling, and enrichment for students who are meeting district benchmarks. Elizabeth said that targeted learning is important for students whose poor academic performance is not a result of "true" disability. She cited the example of students in her schools whose poor performance was seen as a result of poor school attendance: "So they have missed a ton of school the year before and miss a lot of the key concepts in order to build a good foundation for reading. Those students can be helped by RTI because you are providing very targeted skills that they need in order to fill those gaps and really just move forward." She also said that Tier 2 and Tier 3 allow for having a lower student-teacher ratio which is helpful for meeting the needs of "higher-needs kids".

On the other hand, Leena said that RTI also can help teachers in providing enrichment to students who are not in need of Tier 2 or Tier 3-level supports.

We forget that sometimes there is so much emphasis placed on the lower quartile that the higher kids you forget... But that's why now with RTI you are not just working with lower quartile... when you are doing that, the other students seem to be enriched. So that's what we are doing. And at least they are getting something extra. Which is nice. That part is nice. That part is good.

She believed that when teachers pull out small groups of students for Tier 2 or Tier 3 level services, all other students can be given tasks based on an enriched curriculum.

Teacher-reported limitations of RTI. Among the aspects of RTI that drew criticism from some teachers were its emphasis on struggling students, excessive documentation, data-based decision-making, and difficulty in getting students qualified for ESE services, as well as the way it was implemented in schools.

“Reverse” discrimination. Melissa felt that RTI’s emphasis on providing more attention and resources to serving struggling students was unfair to the other students in the classroom. She also felt that it discriminated against families who value education.

We have taken time from families who truly do value education. We have taken time away from their students so that we can remediate students whose parents are completely not involved. To me that’s not fair... We have to hold parents accountable. I mean we are continually giving out government aid, government aid, government aid [taps desk 3 times], but these parents are not being held accountable for their children. And their children are the ones that don’t make it through high school, that we continually spend all our time and resources on. And it’s not fair. It’s not fair for your child that you have done your job, you have raised them right, you work with them at home, you provide the structure and support, and compared to the other parent who has done none of that, and it’s not fair.

Stacy felt that one of the costs of RTI was that, “it takes you away from the kids that are high and are independent”. Further, she said, “I will be full-fledged in supporting my high achieving students, but at the end of the day I spend less time with my high achieving students

than I do with my low achieving students. Is that fair to them? Some people say yeah that's totally fair! You know, I would say, no, it's not."

Increased workload, and time constraints. All the interviewees identified increased number of meetings and resulting paperwork as one of the major drawbacks of RTI. Melissa said, "We work all the time. And it's because of yet another piece of paperwork... We have RTI meetings. We have problem solving leadership team meetings. So it's just more and more. But I don't know where they think we are getting this time." Melanie said that teachers were forced to fit the meetings in their already packed workday: "I mean there would be a time when we would have a [RTI-related] meeting, and there would be a line outside the door. Class is over. There was the bathroom line. And the meeting is like across the hall. And people would be coming in late to the meeting because they were trying to get some bathroom time."

Additionally, teachers felt that the increased responsibilities related to RTI were interfering with other things in school. Melanie, Stacy, and Melissa also spoke about the difficulty of fitting Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 services within the constraints of the school schedule. Because students receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 services were supposed to receive supplemental instruction (e.g., 20 minutes of direct instruction on reading comprehension three times a week) in addition to Tier 1 instruction, the teachers wrestled with fitting Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 services within the limited time afforded by the reading and math blocks. Melanie reported that she tried to attain some balance by providing supplemental instruction during recess, but this, she felt, was not fair to the students who were missing out on recess. She also provided supplemental instruction during the reading and math blocks. During this period, Melanie would pull out a small group of students who were receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 services, and provide them with remedial instruction. Meanwhile, she would assign the rest of the class to

work independently or in a pair on a new lesson or some enriched curriculum. Nevertheless, Melanie felt students who had been pulled out for supplemental instruction were missing out on the lesson that the rest of the class was practicing.

Leena, Melissa, Jennifer, and Melanie felt that the increased number of tests that they had to administer took up valuable time from the teachers. Leena stated, “It’s like, we have to assess every two weeks in RTI. Well, when you are doing that, there goes your RTI time to work with these kids. It’s too much. You know I understand that everything now is so data-driven. It’s kinda like the corporate world. Data data data. But they are human beings. And as a teacher, you kinda can figure that out in the first week who needs the extra help. All this is just extra paperwork that we have to fill out. And then you give it to somebody else and then you.... It’s like well if we spent less time doing this and just working with the kids, maybe we would get better results.”

Difficulty in getting ESE services. Melissa, Elizabeth, and Melanie spoke about how RTI had made it difficult to get students eligible for ESE services. Melissa mentioned that the district had sought to make eligibility difficult by increasing the threshold required to refer a student for ESE-eligibility evaluation. She explained that her district policy was that students who scored less than a 30 percentile on Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) would officially be assigned to the Tier 2 level of supports. In order to receive the next most intensive level of services (i.e., Tier 3), students would have to earn 16 percentile or less on the same test. Melissa felt that 16 was too low a cutoff because there were students in her classroom whom she wanted to qualify for Tier 3 services, but could not do so because their score was slightly above 16.

Melissa and Melanie also felt that tiered progression prolonged the process of a student getting much-needed ESE services sooner. For instance, Leena said, “you could have a child

struggling in August and September... you start to implement RTI. You would have nine weeks, then you are supposed to meet again. And then another nine weeks. So by the time the whole year went by, even if the child hasn't improved, he has been in this situation for months and months and months. It's debilitating."

Inadequacy of data-based decision-making. Melanie felt that the increased focus on data was causing teachers to lose focus on the whole child as well as the dynamic factors that play out in the classroom. For instance, she spoke about how data obtained from tests would fail to capture the funds of knowledge that students possessed, but that were not tested by standardized tests or curricular probes.

Jennifer also criticized what she saw as the prescriptive and empiricist aspect of RTI decision-making criteria to determine the effectiveness of an intervention. She felt that the complex and qualitative aspects of learning outcomes could not be effectively captured by the numerical language employed by RTI.

So we are gonna use graphic organizers for all independent writing for nine weeks. And then we are gonna look that every independent writing is at least 3 details and we are gonna meet back here, and discuss it. Well, that's kind of this artificial constraint... what is the quality of the details, or are the details on topic. Do they add to the point that the writer was trying to make? Like, I dunno if that helps you. I think Response to Intervention is looking for, "data-in, intervene, data-out, prove it did or didn't work, and I think that human... I don't think the human machine is that linear.

Melanie felt that RTI's approach to data was very mechanistic because in its quest for hard data, it ignored the dynamic processes which create that data. She gave examples of gifted students from non-White cultural groups whose funds of knowledge were not adequately

captured in the tests and screeners that were mandated by the school's data gathering policy. As a result, even though these kids were gifted, they would end up in Tier 2 because the tests or probes that were being used to assess their achievement were asking questions that were outside of the student's funds of knowledge. In other words, she felt that the tests that she was asked to use by her district were not culturally sensitive, and led to over-identification of non-White students in Tier 2 and 3. This case is another illustration of how participants' critique of RTI was shaped by the district's operationalization of RTI.

Implementation. Melissa, Stacy, and Melanie felt that teachers were not being treated as stakeholders by the school district in RTI implementation. Melissa described the process by which RTI guidelines get communicated by the district to the teachers to illustrate the lack of teacher involvement. She showed me a set of documents that the district had disseminated to the teachers that week. The papers contained standards and instructions related to complying with RTI guidelines. Melissa said, "I need your degree to understand this paperwork. And this is what they gave us. This Tuesday. They gave us this whole paperwork, all new, and said *here, do this.*" Stacy reported, "We feel like... things [are] done to us as opposed to with us... I think sometimes there is like: Here you go. Here just do it".

Leena and Melissa also criticized the district administration for its seeming lack of faith in teachers' professional judgment in instructional decision-making. For instance, Melissa believed the fixed cutoffs provided by her district in categorizing the tiered need of each student (e.g., Tier 2 if a student scored less than 30 out of 100) failed to provide space for the teacher's opinion based on daily interaction with the student as well as informal class tests. Melissa and Leena felt that their daily interactions with the students, their weekly class tests, and professional

judgments also were valuable sources of data on which the instructional decisions could be based.

Jennifer felt that RTI operationalization in her school had shifted the focus of teachers from serving students in attaining holistic development to implementing reductive rituals geared towards meeting numerical goals. She gave the following example to illustrate her point: “If you are a level 2 RTI, you need this many minutes. If you are three, you need this many minutes... So I need to have X number of minutes with this group of students this many times a week so [that] it can be documented that we are meeting the RTI to meet their standards before we push forward for an ESE.” Jennifer felt that her role as a Tier 2/3 interventionist had been reduced to, “You were here for X number of minutes. We can check it off.”

Melissa, Stacy, Elizabeth and Jennifer also mentioned that their district had been changing RTI-related rules frequently which added to some confusion and frustration among teachers. For instance, Elizabeth told me about the process of “triangulation” that was used in her district to decide the tier in which a student would be placed for reading and math. In this process, teachers would administer multiple standardized tests selected by the district. The teachers would combine multiple scores to arrive at a decision regarding the students’ tier-wise placement. These decisions were made based on the cutoffs dictated by the district but “that changes almost yearly... what tests they decide to use in it, where the cut is for what’s significantly below, mildly below or acceptable and that changes too”. Elizabeth further said, “And so there is always questions as to, well, what if they are significantly below on this one, they are mediocre on this one, and they are fantastic on the last one... There is no real guidance. And it changes so often that they are very confused.”

Discussion

In this research study, I explored how teachers in a southeastern state in the U.S. understood RTI. This state has seen a widespread state-driven initiative to implement RTI in all its public schools, following the inclusion of the RTI clause in IDEIA (2004). The state department of education has partnered with a university to create a guiding framework for RTI which defines the RTI as a data-driven multi-tiered service delivery system to meet the needs of *all* students. State-sponsored agencies such as Florida's Student Support Services Project work in concert with the university researchers to disseminate guidelines that assist districts in implementing this framework of RTI. Thus, there seems to be a state-wide effort to promote a uniform understanding of RTI across school districts. Nevertheless, districts are ultimately responsible for developing their own RTI model. This autonomy may result in district RTI models that differ in terms of the data system they use, the training they provide, and the paperwork they require. Furthermore, there may be difference in such details even within districts. In sum, although a uniform idea of RTI emanates from the state, its ultimate operationalization in schools creates many differing *versions* of RTI.

Thus, I found a lot of variability in the participants' understanding of RTI. For instance, the participants' understanding of RTI differed from the official model of RTI used in statewide implementation projects funded by the state's department of education. For instance, the Florida Problem Solving-Response to Intervention project sees RTI as a framework of decision-making and service delivery for meeting the needs of *all* students (Batsche, Curtis, Dorman, Castillo, & Porter, 2007). Thus RTI is not a specific procedure or a setting in which services are provided. However, my participants' responses commonly implied that they saw RTI as a procedure or a specific service provided to struggling students during a specific block of time. Such

conceptualizations came across in participant responses that involved phrases such as “doing RTI”, “receiving RTI”, “to RTI someone”, and “RTI block from 11.11am to 11.30am”.

I also found differences in terms of the varying functions that participants attributed to RTI. The common functions assigned to RTI were improving identification of students with “true” learning disability, making teachers accountable through frequent documentation, differentiating instruction, and reducing district expenditure on ESE services. It is possible that these differing interpretations of the function of RTI were partially related to participant background. For instance, Elizabeth’s stated function of RTI as an LD identification mechanism could be related to the fact that she was a Varying Exceptionalities teacher, a position funded by federal funds for special education services. In the world of special education, the ascent of RTI was largely in response to the perceived inadequacies of the ability-achievement discrepancy model in identifying students with learning disabilities (Martinez, Nellis, & Prendergast, 2006). Bollman, Silberglitt, & Gibbons (2007) also claimed that, “the notion of RTI has commonly been considered as a special education framework” (p. 328). Given this background, it is possible that Elizabeth’s job and training in special education influenced her understanding of RTI as an LD identification mechanism.

The meanings participants associated with RTI also were influenced by a district’s particular RTI model. For instance, two participants complained of the reductionist tendency of RTI to determine the needs of students (in terms of appropriate level of support required by a student) based on fixed cutoff scores on specific tests. They criticized such criteria for lack of flexibility and leaving no space for professional judgments. Although this criticism was connected to the district-specific operationalization of RTI, it became a criticism of RTI in general. This finding is reflected in Pyle, Wade-Woolley, Hutchinson (2011) who compared the

responses of teachers from four schools that had implemented RTI. They found that the way RTI was operationalized and implemented shaped teachers' perception of RTI. For example, in two of the schools, universal screenings occurred with little to no involvement of teachers. The researchers quoted one of the teachers as saying, "The kids were taken away... whatever they did, they did. And they brought them back, and there was no feedback... Well the feedback came back but it was a few names that were at the Tier 1 or Tier 3 level. I wasn't shown the test. I didn't know what they were doing." Pyle, Wade-Woolley, and Hutchinson found that teachers from these schools had more negative conceptualization of RTI than teachers in schools where the operationalization was relatively more democratic. For instance, teachers in the former schools saw RTI as more alienating and redundant than teachers in the latter group. This example illustrates how participants' experiences of local context of implementation color their understanding of a policy in general.

In addition to differences between participants, I also found differences *within* participants especially in terms of the ensuing debate about whether RTI is meant for all students or only for those who struggle academically. For example, Stacy at one point mentioned, "I mean I hate to say that it's just for marginalized population or it's just for a certain population. It's for every child." However at other times, she also responded in a way that implied that RTI was a specific program meant for struggling students (e.g., "if you have a student with a D or a GPA of 2.0 or lower, then you are obviously full-fledge in an RTI program"). The contradictory messages embedded in these two statements made within the same interview illustrates the multiple and fragmented meanings that participants seem to attribute to RTI.

This multiplicity also may arise from the variability seen in the definition of RTI among its proponents. National advocacy organizations such as International Reading Association

(2006) promoted RTI as a component of comprehensive assessment of students suspected of learning disability. The incorporation of RTI clause in the IDEIA also was in the context of identifying special learning disabilities. However, there has been a nationwide push to promote RTI as a reform of general education because it is, “a framework for providing high quality instruction and interventions” (p. 1) matched to the needs of all students (Mellard, Stern, & Woods, 2001). Some RTI proponents affiliated with OSEP, OSERS, and colleges of education also promoted RTI as a general education initiative rather than one that was limited to special education (A. Posny, personal communication, April, 12, 2016). For example, Bollman, Silberglitt, & Gibbons (2007) recommended that, “although the notion of RTI has commonly been considered as a special education framework, buildings are strongly encouraged to consider this systems change as one that first occurs within general education” (p. 328).

Given these discrepancies, it was difficult to arrive at a unitary theory of what participants understood by “RTI”. According to Stein (2004), this is a typical course of most policies as they flow down from federal level to state level to district level to school level to classroom-level. At each level, the policy filters through the personal and context-specific worldview of the gatekeepers before reaching the classrooms where teachers, “make their own sense of policy mandates, further interpreting the policy’s intent and combining or challenging the policy proscriptions with personal beliefs” (p. 136). Consistent with Stein’s assertion, I found that the state-driven top-down implemented RTI-related reform also had resulted in multiple and fragmented meanings of RTI in the minds of the participants. These multiple understandings were shaped not just by district’s and school’s operationalization of RTI, but also by the teacher’s personal pedagogical beliefs, reflecting the finding of Stein (2004) and Looi, Sun, Seow, and Chia (2014).

I found a similar pattern (i.e., a multiplicity of meanings) when analyzing participants' perceptions of strengths and limitations of RTI. Participants identified three aspects of RTI as strengths: (1) use of data in making better instructional decisions, (2) fostering increased collaboration between teachers and student services, and (3) helping the teachers meet the individual needs of *all* students. On the other hand, participants identified the following limitations of RTI: reverse discrimination, increased workload, difficulty in accessing ESE services, inadequacy of data-based decision-making, and improper implementation of RTI.

The strengths and limitations identified by participants reflected the claims of Stein (2004) and Looi, Sun, Seow, and Chia (2014) that teachers' understanding of a reform is shaped by (and is therefore inseparable from) districts interpretations of the policy as well as by personal pedagogical beliefs. For example, when Jennifer alleged that "RTI is looking for data-in, intervene, data-out..." or when Leena asserted that "we are all just data points", they were referring to their districts policy of using fixed cutoff scores on a standardized reading test (easyCBM) to identify the tiered intensity of instruction appropriate for each student.

Personal worldviews also inflected teachers' critiques of RTI. For example, participants who criticized RTI as being a barrier to ESE testing regarded ESE identification and special education placement as necessary for struggling students. While this view is prevalent in education, many researchers have questioned the effectiveness of special education services in improving student outcomes (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). Researchers have argued that special education labels serve as a segregation mechanism for students that teachers deem as uneducable or troublesome, and who are typically low-SES students of color (Blanchett, 2009; Hosp & Reschly, 2003).

Some of the participants' criticism also was directed towards the unidirectional and non-reciprocal nature of RTI-related communication between the district office and the teachers. Specifically, they expressed unhappiness with the way the ever-changing guidelines and rules about RTI were communicated, often in form of a stack of documents delivered to teachers. Teacher responses reflected emotions such as frustration ("stop degrading us"), and confusion ("I need your degree to understand this") with respect to this method of implementing RTI. The unidirectionality of this communication resonated with the criticism often levelled at large-scale school reforms. One of the most common criticism is that these reforms are typically top-down in nature, and also fail to win the trust and build capacity of teachers (Fullan, 2010; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). Castillo and Curtis (2014) argued that although teachers are the primary stakeholders in such reforms, "the discussion, planning, and even implementation of changes have involved seemingly everyone but classroom teachers. Principals, special education personnel, school psychologists, and other related services professionals then *inform* teachers about the new procedures." The original emphasis on "inform" is consistent with the unidirectionality of RTI-based communication reported by study participants.

In sum, my research study revealed that teachers attribute many different (and sometimes contradictory) meanings to RTI. Teacher's understanding of the concept of "RTI" is situated within their district's particular configuration of RTI. As a result, it is difficult to tease apart participants' critique of RTI in general from their critique of their district's RTI model and the implementation process. What was clear was that participants saw RTI more as a specific procedure that is done to specific students in a specific block of time, rather than seeing it as an overarching framework of decision-making.

CHAPTER FIVE:

RACIALIZED DEFICIT THINKING AND THE RTI FRAMEWORK

In the previous chapter, I discussed the multiple meanings that participants attributed to RTI, and how this pattern of multiplicity goes against the relatively homogenous RTI framework being promoted by various state-funded RTI initiatives and projects. In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which racialized deficit-based discourses shaped the participants' interpretation of Black students' academic outcomes. This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, I analyze the various explanations that participants provided for the existence of the achievement gap in general. In the second part, I analyzed how they explained the outcomes of a *specific* Black student in their classroom who was receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 instructional supports. In the third part, I connect these findings to broader literature in order to argue that racialized deficit-based thinking continued to play a major role in shaping the way participants understood the outcomes of Black students within an RTI framework.

Participants' Explanation of Achievement Gap

In this section, I present the findings on how White teacher participants explained the pervasive problem of achievement gap in the U.S. These explanations most often were provided to the interview question prompting them to offer explanations for the existence of achievement gap. Most of the participant responses presented below reflected interrelated reflections about parental values and home environment. Responses also reflected, albeit to a lesser extent, reflections on systemic issues such as policies and racial trust deficit.

Parental values and home environment. These responses commonly entailed attribution of poor academic and behavioral outcomes of Black students to their parents' values and behaviors. While sometimes this was said directly, more often than not, it was implied in the assumptions that teachers made about the students' family environment. For instance, Melissa said, "The problem is when these students go home, they have no structure, no support, no stability, and then they come back to school completely unprepared. So they may have structure and stability here, but they go home to nothing". Although, she does not specifically accuse the parents of failing to create structure, the portrayal of Black students' family environment as being unstructured and chaotic implicates the parent(s) in failing to provide a stable environment for the student. Melissa believed that these parents wanted to help their children, but "... they have not been raised that way. And now they are living in poverty themselves so they can't help their own children. So they just have more children. So this family that I would help, who would have no electricity, I would help them get their electricity on. By the time I left that Title 1 school where I met her child, she had five children of her own. And those five children needed a lot of help, because she was a product of her environment, and then those kids are now gonna be a product of their environment, and the scenario is gonna continue." Thus, Melissa felt that emphasis on schools and teachers was futile because the causes for the achievement gap emanated from intergenerational family dysfunction at the students' homes. She mentioned barriers such as multiple jobs, having too many children, and inadequate parenting skills resulting in parents being unable to provide opportunities that, "grow their brain, you know, [visiting] science centers, and just learning from experiences, [and] travelling."

Leena felt that the achievement gap existed because there was little value placed on education. For instance, when I asked her whether policies like RTI would be helpful in bridging

the achievement gap, she responded: “I think they need to start at home... The parents should be held accountable... This is what I think: A lot of the immigrants came over here in the 1800s. Their parents who came over were uneducated. Didn’t know the language. But they instilled in these kids..... And they were poor. But they instilled in their children the values of an education and they pushed them... And many of those kids became successful. They learned a work ethic, and they valued education. They were taught that it was important. What I see a lot of times now with a lot of kids, the ones that really....not all of them but many of the kids that struggle... it seems to me that they have a different work ethic, and that education is not as valued as it should be.”

Apart from invoking differences in parental values along ethnic lines, Leena also hypothesized financial factors that might contribute to parents not being involved in their child’s education. “If you have two working parents, a lot of times the parents can’t work with the kid or just make sure that their kids are doing what they are supposed to be doing, because they come home exhausted.” And further, “Some of them who are from the apartments over here with the public [housing]... Those parents just don’t have the funds so they can’t get them tutors.”

Leena also identified “disintegration of the family” as a cause for why Black students might not receive adequate support at home. She clarified this remark, saying, “Not that it’s terrible to come from a single family household, but when you don’t have a strong family unit it can make it really hard for those kids too. Just having someone to read with them at night. Or someone who is able to listen to them read or just somebody who would make sure that their homework is done and put in their binder or backpack...”

Elizabeth, speaking about a Black student who was currently receiving Tier 3 services, believed that lack of encouragement at home resulted in a lack of self-efficacy beliefs, which

prevented the student from trying his best in school: “I feel like he is capable of doing and making progress. But he is now telling himself that he can’t. He has no one at home telling him he can.” Another hypothesis that Elizabeth provided for the achievement gap was that “these kids don’t go to pre-school. They don’t go to the preparatory stuff before kindergarten. So a lot of these kids show up and they are already behind. I don’t know why that is. I mean it’s free. Maybe it’s just inconvenient.” In sum, Melissa, Elizabeth and Leena alluded to certain inactions on the part of the parents as being reasons for the academic gap. Jennifer reported that this attitude was quite common in the schools she had worked in so far, where minority student outcomes were, “often blamed on the home, the parents’ socioeconomic status, amount of literacy in the home, [amount of] books in the home, too much child directed speech as opposed to conversational speech. So it’s back to, “well, it’s their fault that the kids are this way.”

On the other hand, Stacy’s parental hypothesis went in the other direction. When talking about a fifth grade Black student who was struggling in reading, she reported, “So I would say, he had [skills] deficits, but... he [also] had to overcome his aversion to work. You know, his mom was so involved in his life that she literally did a lot of things for him: did his homework for him, did his projects for him, did a lot for him. So when it came [time] for him to independently function in the classroom, he fell flat on his face... So, I know his mom picks him up every day, but she just couldn’t get out of his own way sometimes, I think.” In this passage, Stacy attributed the students’ classroom difficulty to getting too much parental support at home. She deemed the parental support as becoming a crutch for the student which hindered his ability to function independently.

The anecdotes and stories told by Melissa, Leena, Elizabeth, and Stacy differed in terms of attributions of parental behavior. While Melissa, Elizabeth, and Leena’s stories spoke about

too little parental support, Stacy's story talked about too much parental support as being responsible for the student outcomes. Nevertheless, one of the things common to all these stories was the inordinate amount of attention paid to the parental actions and values to explain the difficulties faced by Black students in classrooms.

Structural factors. Responses coded as "structural factors" typically involved references to extra-individual factors that perpetuate systemic inequality and maintain the status quo. These responses indicated an awareness about the ways in which policies perpetuate the achievement gap. For example, Jennifer stated that she was not hopeful that school reforms were alone going to close the achievement gap because, "I think there are bigger societal issues which is not blaming parents, but things like not earning a living wage, not having food security, not having healthcare access, not having appropriate clothing and shoes, and all of these kind of things also have to be met in order to have extra instruction in a classroom work to its best advantage." Her response alluded to the need to reform governmental policies related to minimum wage, healthcare, and social security in order create conditions in which schools can fill the achievement gap.

Jennifer also mentioned ways in which educational policies might perpetuate the achievement gap. Giving the example of her schools, she said, "... in the IB classrooms, I saw none of the ESOL [students], and... in English classes, maybe 1 African-American child on the IB track.... But when you go in the remedial reading classroom, it's more than half African-American in a school that's fewer than 20 percent African-American." She theorized that these inequalities are driven in part by which cultural symbols are privileged over others. She gave the example of how standardized English is used in assessments that determine student's grades and academic tracks. "So... the less your natural spoken speech is like standard edited English, the

less your writing is. I mean writing reflects speaking in a lot of ways. And kids can learn to codeswitch between dialect and formal writing, but someone has to teach them. And if that isn't a concerted effort, then they don't usually get identified because [for] honors, advanced, gifted, AP, you must know more. If you are really bright but don't use the formal language, it doesn't necessarily show." Jennifer's response reflects concerns about how educational policies reproduced dominant cultural codes (e.g., 'standard' English versus A.A.V.E.) that marginalize the populations that do not use these codes.

Elizabeth also mentioned "mediocre preparation" of teachers as one of the important factors for not bridging the achievement gap: "So, if you have a student like John in a class who needs severe interventions... it's very often that you have teachers who are kind of bachelor's degree, and I am realizing that there is not a lot of education for teachers in that degree that are actually teaching them how to teach students with high needs... down to rules for phonics or the double L rule just as an example of small things that teachers don't really know." Furthermore, she stated, "I am realizing that there is a huge gap in teacher preparation. They teach you the basics... like they breeze over certain topics, but they don't really dig down into beginning reading. I wasn't prepared in my bachelors program to meet the needs of these kids." Jennifer attributed these problems to policies regarding teacher credentialing. She mentioned that teachers considered as being "highly-qualified" based on NCLB criteria are not necessarily, "experts or specialists even though they are [considered] highly qualified... For example, to be a reading specialist, you need to have gone through a teacher prep program that gets you *reading endorsed*, which is three standalone classes and infusion in most of the Florida models. Or you can take five online courses through the district. That makes you *reading endorsed*." Thus, Jennifer

indicated that the policies around teacher preparation led to inadequately prepared teachers which then resulted in achievement gap.

Trust deficit. Stacy also spoke about the lack of trust with which Black students and communities view institutions given their historical experiences with institutional racism. For example, Stacy said, “School needs to be the one place you go to where you feel safe. You are respected. It’s trusted. For me, it’s where I go to shine... And I don’t think that a large portion of the African-Americans [feel that way about schools], and I think it’s generational... I think it obviously comes from a history of having not been allowed to attend school or having been forced to go to certain schools.”

Stacy drew on her personal experience to illustrate how the history of public schooling in the U.S. is fraught with unjust actions towards African-American students.

At my high school, they bussed... I think there were three buses of [African-American] students that they sent 15 miles. They could not attend their neighborhood schools because they had to come to [school name]. And those students... were frustrated. They were like, ‘Why are we [coming to this school?]....This isn’t even in our neighborhood! We don’t support the football team! This is ridiculous! Like, we don’t wanna come to this school!’” and they had to get up extra early just so they can fill the diversity quotient so to speak. That’s not fair. It’s just not. So of course you are not gonna take school seriously!

Jennifer and Stacy also spoke about the mistrust and suspicion with which Black students view White teachers as reasons for their academic and behavioral outcomes. For example, Jennifer who described herself as a “middle-aged White lady”, mentioned her experience of doing push-in services with Black students who were referred to her by their class teacher: “So... when I initially started that school, there was a lot more pushback from students who look less

like me. And certainly not all, but from a couple. They are like, “What are you doing here? Why are you in my space? What do you think you can do for me?”...kind of attitude. And older students will much more directly say that. Younger students... it’s not necessarily as direct. They get older and they just tell you, “Who do you think you are? What do you think you are doing?” Stacy’s response also resonated with Jennifer’s when she said, “... these students look to you as maybe being a foreign entity. [They think that] you don’t understand them, [and that] there is no possible way you can understand what it means to be Black in the society. Which is true. I don’t know that. But I think recognizing that is the first step.” She stated that teachers and schools need to work on establishing a relationship of trust with Black communities in order to bridge the achievement gap.

Thus far, I have identified different explanations participants provided for the existence of the achievement gap in the U.S. The explanations ranged from deficits in family values to institutional mistrust given the historical race relations in the U.S. In the next section, I discuss how participants explained the outcomes of *specific* Black students in their classrooms who were receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 level of instructional supports.

Participants’ Explanation of RTI Outcomes of Black Students in Their Classes

Deficit-based thinking in education is a form of heuristic that leads teachers to attribute students’ problems to some alleged deficit within the student or her sociocultural background. Deficit-thinking is a racialized phenomenon in U.S. history because it has been deployed time and again by policymakers, social scientists, politicians, and educators to explain the poor outcomes on indicators of education, health, poverty, incarceration, etc. for low-SES Black and Hispanic communities (Stein, 2004; Valencia, 2010). This way of thinking forecloses the possibility of seeing schooling structures and processes (e.g., curriculum, assessment, and policymaking) as perpetrating the inequalities in the educational outcomes. Thus, a teacher

employing this form of thinking might attribute the academic problems of low-SES Black students to their internal characteristics (e.g., unmotivated, low cognitive capability) or to family and cultural values without considering the ways in which the schooling process itself marginalizes the student.

In this section, I present the ways in which such thinking manifested in teachers' stories about working with a *specific* Black student within an RTI framework. I elicited these stories by asking participants to tell me about a time they worked with a Black student within an RTI framework. I specifically focused on (1) how participants interpreted the student's initial presenting problems and (2) how they interpreted the student's response to a Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention. Through these analyses, I show how deficit-based thinking manifested in the differing explanations offered by participants to these two questions. Out of the six teachers, only five (i.e., Stacy, Melanie, Melissa, Leena, and Elizabeth) were able to tell me about cases wherein they had provided a Tier 2 or 3 intervention to a Black student. The sixth teacher, Jennifer, had newly started working in that school and had not yet started Tier 2 interventions. Therefore, this section will present an analysis of the five cases that participants narrated.

Teacher's justification for student's presenting problems. I directed participants to think of a Black student in their class who received Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports, and asked them for possible explanations why the student had ended up in that tier. In other words, I wanted to find out how they made sense of the presenting problems which landed the student in Tier 2/3. The justification that participants offered for the presenting problems of a Black student were either student-centered (i.e., skill deficits, low self-esteem, student's intellectual ability) or family-centered (e.g., lack of parental support).

Skill deficits. When Leena showed me the problem-solving sheet they used in her county, I asked her which of the four domains were frequently implicated in her students' problems. These domains included *learner, instruction, curriculum, and environment*. Leena answered, "To me, for most of them [referring to students] it's the learner. There is gaps. And a lot of them do not have the foundation that they need. So when they are coming up, and if they can't read basic site words, if they can't sound words out [then] they can't comprehend what they are reading". Like Leena, all other participants identified specific skill deficits as being important in academic outcomes of the struggling Black students in their classrooms. For instance, Melissa and Melanie attributed their students' outcomes to deficits in effective study skills. Melissa spoke about a third grade student, Tyrisha who had difficulty in reading comprehension. Melissa attributed these problems to Tyrisha, "not using any strategies that would help her remember important events within the text" and employing reading comprehension strategies such as, "going back and rereading it, understanding it, thinking, making corrections... clarifying, going back, all of those comprehension strategies that we use to understand whatever it is we are reading".

Melanie also attributed the causes of her fifth-grade student Bobby to not using effective reading comprehension strategies such as looking for main idea and looking for cause and effect. Because of failure to utilize these strategies, "[Bobby] had just flat-lined. And we needed to show that there were so many other ways to do analytical thinking. You know, all the cognitive aspects there, yeah." In both these cases, the intervention involved teaching the student the requisite study skills.

Self-esteem. Leena's and Elizabeth's explanation for the academic outcomes of two of their Black students involved attitude and low self-esteem. For example, Elizabeth spoke of John who had difficulty reading fluently at grade level and also had some behavioral issues: "He is

starting to act out based on not being able to do the work. He will copy his neighbor's work just so that he has something on his paper. Or he will deflect and pretend and accuse people of stealing his belongings to create a scene to avoid work." Elizabeth felt that these problems were occurring because John watched his classmates "move forward" while he himself was lagging behind. Plus he was not getting encouragement or support from home which impacted his self-esteem. She said, "And so now he has just given up. Even when I am there one-on-one helping him, I am getting nasty attitude: '*I am not doing this!*' And I think that's a coping mechanism to not feel more failure." She further added that Bobby had no one at home to tell him that he was capable, as a result of which he had not developed self-efficacy beliefs. Thus, Elizabeth attributed Bobby's behavior and academic outcomes to personal characteristics (fear of failure, lack of confidence) and further connected them to his family background (i.e., unsupportive home environment).

Leena also spoke of Jane, who could not read at grade-level. Leena attributed this partially to Jane's attitude of helplessness: "Everything is, 'oh I can't do this!' Yeah. Everything is, 'I can't do this'. It's just an automatic response of her." In an RTI-PLC meeting held to problem-solve Jane's issue, Leena reported mentioning learned helplessness as one of the reasons for Jane's academic outcomes. Melanie, who also taught fifth grade in the same gifted school, described the case of Bobby who was struggling with reading comprehension. Like Sarah, Bobby also was new to the school, and was there as a result of qualifying as a "gifted" student in his previous school. Melanie chalked Bobby's problems to being intimidated by the new environment. She mentioned that for many new entrants at her school, "it's a shock! Because of the pace at our setting and the intensity and the level that's expected. And I think also maybe sometimes they will... become intimidated, you shut down."

Intellectual capacity. Stacy described the case of Sarah, a Black student in her classroom. Sarah was new at Stacy's school and had transferred from her neighborhood school to Stacy's school after qualifying as a "gifted" student. Stacy mentioned that Sarah was "getting red-flagged" in fifth grade because, "her reading level, just off the bat, was probably fourth grade. We tend to have kids who are reading, I could even say, at the college level. Or they are reading high school. They are very, very bright. But she was reading you know basically fourth grade level material coming into fifth grade. So nothing spectacular." Stacy attributed Sarah's comparatively low reading level to not being truly a gifted student. For instance, she said, "I think she may have been, she probably would not have benefited from full time gifted services. I think that there were moments or pockets of brilliance, but not necessary for full time. So, she probably would have been better served at her neighborhood school." Here, Stacy stated that Sarah is not a good fit for a school for gifted students, and that her needs would have been better served at her neighborhood school. Stacy acknowledged that Sarah showed "pockets of brilliance", but thought that these displays were not comparable to those typically shown by full-time students at that school. In other responses, Stacy's spoke about deficits in Sarah's mental and physical abilities, which made her a poor fit for the school meant for gifted students. Thus, Stacy attributed Sarah's academic outcomes to her intellectual capabilities in relation to her peers at the gifted school.

Lack of parent support. Melissa and Leena also spoke of their individual students, Tyrisha and Jane, who were receiving Tier 2 level interventions. Both acknowledged that their students were capable, but attributed their academic difficulties to their home environment. For instance, Melissa mentioned that, "she was a smart girl, but she was not doing what she needed to do at home." She further stated, "There was no value to education". Melissa chalked Tyrisha's

difficulties to not being held accountable at home by her mother. Leena's description of her student's problem reflected similar attributions with regards to family life and parental expectations. Leena described that Jane was a third grade student in her classroom the previous year, and was struggling in areas of reading and writing. Her behavioral concerns included not completing homework and not being on-task. Leena chalked Jane's problem to her mother's non-involvement in her schooling: "Mother would always make an excuse or say she would [do something but] never follow through."

Teacher's explanation for student's responses to Tier 2/3 interventions. Within the RTI model that was operationalized in all these schools, students who are assigned to Tier 2/3 receive increased amount of direct instruction (i.e., intervention in form of small groups) from a teacher. Student's skill growth is monitored (through frequent assessment) to determine whether the student is responding well to the increased intensity of instruction. Here, it is possible that the intervention might succeed (i.e., student performance will improve up to the desired level), or it will fail (i.e., student performance will show little or no improvement). Therefore, I asked teachers about the consequences of being placed in Tier 2/3 for these students. The responses to this question are presented.

Melissa reported that her Tier 2 intervention for Tyrisha included teaching strategies for reading comprehension in a small group during the "RTI block". In addition, Melissa also worked with Tyrisha after school for an hour daily. In response to these interventions, Tyrisha, "did very well, very, very well on SAT! Out of 30 she scored a 27!" Melissa attributed these gain to the effort that Melissa put into working with Tyrisha. For instance, she stated, "... I worked with her afterschool, again on my own time. And then we did RTI with her every morning. So it's not the RTI that helped. Because we are already doing that within our classroom. It is all of

the extra support: the working lunches, the staying after school, the me following up with her mom every single day.” Melissa repeated this thought at least twice again in the interview stating that the gains that her students made following Tier 2/3 intervention were because of her as a teacher going the extra mile for that student. Melanie and Stacy also resonated this line of thinking when talking about the success of their Tier 2/3 interventions in bringing about the desired level of improvement in their students. For instance, Melanie said in response to question about her student’s response to intervention, “I am gonna tell you I have never had a negative ending. There has always been some growth. Always. Because I am relentless. That’s my job. But it’s not just a job, it’s a calling.”

Melissa and Stacy also attributed their students’ successful response to his or her capabilities. For instance, Melissa believed that her student “was already a smart girl” but that she had just not received a structured environment at home. Therefore, when Melissa provided her with a structured environment and held her accountable for completing her work, Tyrisha was able to perform to her full potential. On the other hand, Stacy attributed Sarah’s adequate gains to Sarah’s motivation: “... she was definitely one that would rise to the occasion, come prepared, you know, good posture, ask questions, work collaboratively.”

Leena spoke of a student who was getting Tier 3 intervention which involved getting, “either iStation or working in small group” five days a week. When asked if she saw any change, Leena replied in the negative. She further went on to say, “see what I think is, for these kids that come from certain areas where education is not stressed, I wish they would have community centers in all those areas where they would teach the parents how to help the children”. This statement seems to attribute the lack of student’s response to Tier 2/3 interventions to family background and sociocultural factors. Similar to Leena, Elizabeth also mentioned not noticing

much improvement in her student's reading following Tier 2 intervention. She attributed this lack of improvement to lack of cooperation and getting "nasty attitude" from the student. She felt that the student had not gotten enough encouragement from his family which led to low levels of self-efficacy beliefs. Thus, resistance and defiance to the teacher was a way for him to save himself from future failure.

Discussion

In this chapter, I answered the following research question: to what extent do White teachers understand the role of structural factors in the achievement and behavioral outcomes of Black students? This question was important in context of the problem-solving model of RTI promoted by state-led initiatives and adopted by many school districts in Florida. This RTI model seeks to rectify some of the mistakes of the past, specifically the tendency of school staff to attribute poor outcomes of students to individual student characteristics (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011; Knotek, 2003). While the problem-solving model does not deny the role of intra-individual deficits in causing poor outcomes, it also prompts educators to consider how extra-individual factors such as instruction, curriculum, and classroom or school environment might be implicated in the creation and perpetuation of student problems.

Nevertheless, Weiner, (2006) claimed that the deficit thinking paradigm is deeply embedded in educational discourse, and, "reflects... a narrow focus on the perceived individual and group weaknesses" (p. 42). Valencia (2010) defines deficit thinking as, "an endogenous theory- positing that the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies." Such deficits are often attributed to individual student characteristics such as "limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior" (p. 7) or familial and cultural characteristics of the student. Furthermore, the model is a racialized one because it is most often used to justify the underachievement of low-SES

students of color. These theories color the educators' perception of the problem, their hypotheses for the causes, and their proposed solutions, all of which focus on changing the individual rather than the structures that (re)produce inequalities and poor outcomes for these students and their families. Thus, deficit based thinking is in some ways contrary to Florida's RTI problem-solving model because while the latter aims at modifying the child's school environment (curriculum, instruction, school or classroom environment), deficit thinking precludes any such modification because it blames the child's outcome on her immutable internal characteristics or on familial/cultural background.

In an effort to find out the extent to which teachers recognized the importance of structural factors in Black students academic outcomes, I asked my participants to list some common reasons why Black students struggle in schools. Additionally, I probed their responses for possible explanations for the racial achievement gap in the U.S. The responses that I got overwhelmingly supported Valencia's (2010) assertion about the predominance of deficit thinking in education. The most common participant responses revolved around parental values, financial hardships and student characteristics. For instance, some participants believed that these students lacked adequate structure and support at home. Many of these assumptions that participants made about the home environment of low-SES Black students echoed findings of Harry, Klingner, and Hart (2005). Some participants also stated that these parent(s) placed limited value on education and failed to hold their children accountable for school performance. These characterizations of low-SES Black families as being unstructured, chaotic, and placing limited value on education draws on a discursive variant of deficit-based thinking called the culture of poverty (Valencia, 2010).

According to Valencia (2010), this term was coined by anthropologist Oscar Lewis who published several ethnographic studies of impoverished families in Mexico and Puerto Rico in the sixties. He identified 70 traits that he commonly “observed” among these families, such as wife-beating, high tolerance for psychological deviance, and limited ability to defer gratification. According to Stein (2004), “During the mid-1960s, the culture of poverty thesis became a common reference point for politicians and scholars during policy debates” (p. xi), and colored policy solutions offered in the federal education policy called Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act during Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty. Since then, the culture of poverty has become a mainstay in the mainstream educational discourse in the U.S.

Although the culture of poverty relied on a colorblind language of class and psychology, its racially coded nature was clearly visible in the research sample of Oscar Lewis’ ethnographic work: low-SES non-White Hispanic families living in Mexico, Puerto Rico and urban cities in the U.S. The racial coding of this construct became much more explicit with the publication of a U.S. governmental report published in 1965 titled “*The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*” (popularly referred to as The Moynihan Report), which asserted that “... at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed it will be found to be the principle source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation” (Moynihan, 1965, p. 30 as cited in Valencia, 2010).

Themes in participant responses (e.g., unstructured and chaotic home environment, intergenerational patterns of unhealthy parenting, lack of value for education) pointed to the culture of poverty discourse utilized in the Moynihan Report. The racially coded nature of the culture of poverty discourse also was visible in participants’ responses such as Leena’s anecdote

contrasting the values of the European immigrants who came to the United States in nineteenth century, with the values of impoverished Black families, or Melissa’s anecdotes about the family environment of many of her Black students.

I also accessed deficit-thinking by having participants tell stories of specific Black students in their classroom who were receiving Tier 2/3 supports. I noticed a contrast between the explanations that teachers offered for student’s initial problem (which led to them being assigned to Tier 2/3), and the consequences of that assignment. Teachers’ explanation for the students’ initial problems invoked causes such as skill deficits, intellectual capacity, and unsupportive home environment. However, when I asked about the explanations for students’ response to the intervention, the pattern of responses changed (see Table 6). For instance, in cases where the outcomes of receiving Tier 2/3 support were positive (i.e., student made adequate gains), teachers tended to attribute the success to student’s internal characteristics (“she was a bright girl”) as well as to their own actions. On the other hand, when the student failed to respond adequately, the attribution focused on student characteristic (e.g., student being uncooperative) and the home environment.

Table 6

Variations seen in participant responses

Participant	Student’s presenting problem attributed to	Students’ unsuccessful response to intervention attributed to	Students’ successful response to intervention attributed to
Leena	Student, Parent	Student, Parent	
Elizabeth	Student, Parent	Student	

Table 6 (Continued)

Participant	Student's presenting problem attributed to	Students' unsuccessful response to intervention attributed to	Students' successful response to intervention attributed to
Melissa	Student, Parent		Teacher, Student
Stacy	Student		Student
Melanie	Student		Teacher

As table 6 illustrates, a student's presenting problem was attributed to either the student or family. On the other hand, participants were more willing to consider the role they played in the student's response to intervention when the outcome was positive. This pattern can be interpreted as being testament to the ways in which deficit thinking modulates the way White educators understand their interaction with Black students within an RTI framework.

Going back to the research question that propelled this inquiry, it can be suggested that participants saw the academic problems of Black students as a result of the individual and familial/cultural deviations from the 'norm', and there was a limited attempt to problematize, challenge, or question the norm. Even the participant who spoke about trust deficit and segregation did so in context of a question addressing the issue of Black students in general; however, her explanations reverted to student-centric and family-centric deficit thinking when she spoke about specific Black students with whom she worked. This pattern suggests that racialized deficit-based thinking can manifest in situated particularities even in educators who espouse a critical understanding of education in general.

The deficit thinking patterns contradict the stated equity-oriented goals of the problem-solving model of RTI promoted in Florida. The deficit mode of thinking can preclude White

teachers from considering ways in which their instruction, classroom environment, or school curriculum continue to marginalize Black students. The resulting interventions stemming from this line of thinking are typically geared towards changing the individual without changing the school environment in which she learns (Stein, 2004). Therefore, it is important for RTI proponents to recognize how this persisting deficit thinking in education can take us away from the purported equity-oriented aims of such reforms.

CHAPTER SIX: REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Response to Intervention is a decision-making framework that aims to meet the needs of all students through data-based allocation of services matched to student need. Its proponents argue that RTI, when implemented with fidelity, can help bridge the racial gap in education. Study participants were six White elementary teachers from schools which had a policy regarding the use of RTI-based procedures. I interviewed these teachers about their experiences of working with Black students within the RTI framework. Critical analysis of the data revealed that teachers understood RTI in differing ways which were influenced by their personal experiences as well as by the way in which RTI policy was operationalized in the schools. These findings were discussed in light of Stein's hypothesis that a policy rarely exists as a singular entity, but takes multiple forms depending on the worldviews and interpretations of gatekeepers and stakeholders. Racialized deficit-based thinking was visible in the way White teachers discussed their experiences of providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports to Black students. Teachers tended to attribute academic difficulties of their students to deficits within the child or family, and these attributions existed within a broader context of perceived cultural deficits in Black families. In this chapter, I reflect on my role in this study, the limitations of this study, and the implications of its findings for future research.

Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity is an important component of an inquiry guided by critical theory, given the epistemological assumption that individuals are positioned in unique ways vis a vis multiple

structures of hierarchy such as race, gender, class, etc., and that these positions can engender specific ways of seeing the world (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). When researcher's self comes in contact with research process, numerous "personal qualities" are released that can, "filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in written statement" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Reflexivity can thus enable the researcher to clarify to readers the specific ways in which, her "self and subject became joined" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Reflection on my positionality involved contemplating the different ways in which the structures that I inhabited enabled, as well as restricted, the questions I asked, the data I collected, and the interpretations I made (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Research questions. The research questions guiding this inquiry stemmed from being part of a doctoral program with a deep investment in Response to Intervention. The program director is a nationally recognized proponent of RTI. Several of the program's faculty members are involved in projects funded by Florida Department of Education for scaling up RTI implementation at a statewide level. The philosophy of RTI and allied components (e.g., problem-solving) are infused into every level of the curriculum and practicum experiences of this program. Students in this program are trained to work with teachers in the capacity of consultants, helping them problem-solve academic and behavioral concerns using data. As a result, my research questions pertained to teachers and their understanding of RTI.

In addition to interest in RTI policy and implementation in Florida schools, I also am interested in matters of social justice and multiculturalism. Critical scholarship in education helped me to make sense of issues of racial inequity in education, such as the achievement gap and disproportionality in special education identification. As a result, I decided to explore the

racial component in RTI. Thus, my initial research questions about teachers and RTI was expanded to cover ways in which White teachers interact with Black students within an RTI framework.

Data collection. I collected data using semi-structured interviews with White elementary school teachers. During interviews, I asked questions that were developed to access their understanding of the role of race in a Black student's academic achievement. Some of the teachers' replies surprised me. For instance, when Melissa spoke about low-SES Black parents not valuing education, or when Leena reported that impoverished Black communities lack the work ethic of early European immigrants, I was surprised by their willingness to share these observations with me because I am a person of color. As I tried to make sense of this event, Bonilla-Silva's (2006) writing on the emerging tri-racial system of stratification in the U.S. seemed to offer some answers. Bonilla-Silva (2006) argued that "model minorities" form a buffer zone in the traditional two-tiered racial strata in the U.S. which helps the top layer (i.e., Whites) to retain their position. In return, model minorities are accorded the position of "honorary Whites" and are consequently positioned above Blacks and dark-skinned Latinos in the racial hierarchy. They also are leveraged as an evidence of colorblind meritocracy to deny the struggles of, or to counter the challenges by, those at the bottom of the hierarchy.

In line with this theory, I hypothesized that participants perceived me as "Indian" due to my physical appearance, name, and accent. Perceiving me as an Indian student in a doctoral program made it easier to position me as a "model minority" during the interviews. Such a construction may have made them feel at ease disclosing their feelings about Blacks. Thinking of my interaction with Lisa and Linda in light of this theory yielded one possible explanation for the

kind of data I was able to collect with respect to participants' deficit-centered attitudes towards Black communities.

Data interpretation. Finally, my positionality as male-researcher-academic-non-teacher could also have influenced data interpretation. For instance, feminist educational researchers such as Grumet (1988) have pointed to the issue of a largely male-driven field of education research studying, analyzing, and criticizing the teaching practices of a largely female workforce of teachers. Doyle (1992) further revealed how the academic language and abstract theories of such educational research forms part of the broader phenomenon of researchers, administrators, and policymakers exercising power over the workforce by remote control. The gendered epistemological hierarchy enabled by these practices renders educational researchers' analyses as more valid than the lived experiences of teachers (Carter, 1993).

It is possible that my research study is complicit in this pattern, because I (a male research with no experience of classroom teaching) critique female participants' understanding of RTI and race. For example, when discussing how each participant spoke about a Black student receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports, I analyzed the various factors they listed as primary causes of that student's ongoing problems. Reading this data along with Valencia's (2010) writings on deficit thinking, I declare teacher-identified causes (e.g., lack of comprehension skills) as a manifestation of racialized deficit-thinking. It is possible that the respondents would have made a similar analysis while talking about a White student receiving Tier 2/3 support. However, as someone who has never taught in school, my lack of lived experience as a school teacher makes it more likely that I would rely on abstract theories to make sense of teacher responses. Additionally, it is possible that my immersion in the "ivory tower" of university-based research

predisposes me to assume an expert role while critiquing “local” teachers’ understanding of race and RTI.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study was that it did not focus on racial groups other than Blacks. Black students are not the only ones who are at institutional disadvantage. Others such as Native Americans and Latinos are found to fall behind their White peers on academic achievement, and are overrepresented in special education. Thus, my research questions left out these important groups.

A limitation of the data collection method was inherent to the form of interviewing I used, namely constructionist interviewing (see Roulston, 2010). This method of interviewing accesses the way participants make sense of their worlds, and is not, “a means of accessing interior or exterior states of affairs of speakers or access to authentic selves” (p. 209). In other words, the data collected were a *representation* of reality as experienced by the participant at the time of the interview. It is, however, possible that a participant misunderstood a rule or procedure related to RTI, and this misunderstanding resulted in her negative representation of RTI.

This was definitely the case in one instance when one of the participants criticized RTI for making her *jump through hoops* in order to get a student identified for ESE. She supplemented her critique by saying that she was required to maintain a student on each tier for about 18 weeks before he or she could be referred for ESE evaluation. However, this claim was not corroborated. District policy documents and information gathered from participant interviews indicated that the minimum time to maintain at a tier was about nine weeks, and that too only in cases where the intervention was seen as working. When it was deemed to be not working, the teacher could move a student to a higher tier at any time. It is possible that there were several

other such instances of misrepresentation that went undetected, given my method of data collection. From a post-positivist standpoint, this method failed to corroborate the “authenticity” of their accounts, and was therefore limited in the credibility of the data it yielded.

Another limitation is related to the depth of data I collected. I used data based on two interviews conducted over a period of two weeks with each teacher to illustrate the appropriation of RTI policy into the existing racialized deficit-based environment of schooling. However, de Jong (2008) argued that policy appropriation is a slow, complex, and dynamic process that cannot be effectively studied over a short period of time through interviews only. Stuart, Rinaldi, & Higgins-Averill (2011) also illustrated the evolution of teachers’ thinking on RTI over a period of two years. Given these insights, an ethnographic approach of data collection including multiple interviews with teachers as well as students, classroom observation, and participant observations over a sustained period of time would have been more appropriate to answer the research questions.

Because my data were based on two interviews conducted over two weeks, my analysis also might have failed to capture the change in teachers’ thinking about RTI in the same way as Stuart, Rinaldi, & Higgins-Averill (2011) did. Additionally, my data collection method failed to incorporate the perspectives of students with regards to how they experience RTI. Classroom observations also could have revealed things that were not reported by participants during the interviews, and could have thus enriched my data findings about the way White teachers construct RTI and the way they employ its principles while working with Black students.

Reflections and Recommendations for Future Research

In the previous section, I reflected on the limits placed on the findings and conclusions by my subjectivities. In this section, I present interconnected reflections on the challenges of this kind of research, implications of the findings, and recommendations for future inquiries.

Use ethnographical methodology. The present study, like de Jong (2008), relied primarily on teacher interviews conducted over a short period of time to understand the ways in which teachers appropriate RTI with their existing beliefs and local conditions. de Jong (2008) argued that this method of data collection helped them access the discourses that had emerged among teachers in context of a particular reform policy. However, they also pointed to the limitations of relying on interviews conducted over a short period of time to understand the slow, complex, and dynamic process by which a policy becomes assimilated into practice. They proposed that ethnographic methodology, involving long-term sustained engagement with teachers and classroom observations, could yield a better understanding of the translation of policy to practice.

A similar argument for the application of ethnographic methodology can be made for research on RTI implementation. This methodology would involve long-term study of a selected site (e.g., classroom, a grade-level, school) where the researcher observes classrooms and interacts with teachers over a sustained period of time to get a clearer picture of how district policies on RTI are enacted by school teachers. Such an approach might reveal the nuanced ways in which teachers navigate the procedures that come with RTI, and how they mold it in keeping with their existing beliefs and local conditions.

Study policy appropriation literature. Levinson and Sutton (2001) critique traditional policy implementation research as being undergirded by a technical-rationale framework that seeks to break down what is actually a complex social act into a series of linear steps where

rational actors either do or do not conform to official policy mandates. Policy is assumed to be created by state officials and researchers, and then passed on to local practitioners (e.g., teachers) to implement it. Such a research trend privileges a top-down conceptualization of policymaking over a bottom-up one where teachers' practices influence district, state, and federal policies. The top-down directionality also fails to recognize the agency of teachers who selectively and strategically apply the policy to their local conditions, thereby making the classroom a site of policymaking as well.

This act of policy appropriation is increasingly studied in educational policy research (Levinson and Sutton, 2001). For instance, Looi, Sun, Seow, and Chia (2014) illustrated how teachers in a school appropriated a new science curriculum policy. Looi et al. found that this appropriation led to differential enactment of the policy by different teachers even though they all worked at the same school. Looi and colleagues argued that these differences occurred because teachers took hold of the policy, and appropriated it into their existing pedagogical beliefs and classroom environment. de Jong (2008) concluded that, "rather than mere implementers, teachers are active constructors of educational policies as they negotiate reform efforts and policy directives within their own context, personal experiences, and knowledge and skill base" (de Jong, 2008, p. 350-351).

The emancipatory potential inherent to policymaking at the classroom level also must be recognized. Stein (2004) argued that the classroom is an important site for making a grassroots-level intervention in the policymaking process. She illustrated how some socially conscious teachers exercised "cultural resistance" and "thoughtful noncompliance" to counter the anti-egalitarian culture engendered by Title 1 policy mandates. Two of the participants in this research study also manifested cultural resistance to the dominant racialized deficit ideology by

refusing to reduce the problems of the achievement gap to cultural deficits in Black families. Their understanding of the achievement gap acknowledged the role of structural inequities and historical racism in maintaining the racial disparities in school outcomes. Thus, future implementation research should engage with a bottom-up agenda which explores how socially conscious teachers appropriate or resist RTI-related procedures, and how this appropriation plays into RTI policymaking at the district and state levels. For this line of inquiry, researchers might find it useful to look into the growing literature on policy appropriation in educational research.

Understand RTI in a context-sensitive and historically grounded manner. RTI policy does not exist in isolation, but rather blends in with other existing policies, which makes it challenging to discern teacher's experiences of RTI from those of other school reform policies. For instance, one of the participant-reported limitations of RTI was the increased testing which took up valuable time and also added to the stress of students as well as teachers. Although she said this in response to a questions about RTI's limitations, it is possible that this response was in response to testing as a whole. According to Alvarez (2014), Florida was one of the pioneers of the test-based accountability movement as former Gov. Jeb Bush introduced high-stakes testing as well as a school rating system based on test scores. Adding to Florida's focus on test-based accountability was the fact that the No Child Left Behind made high-stakes testing mandatory in order to receive federal funds. Other initiatives such as Race to the Top grants also obliged recipient states such as Florida to include student's scores on standardized tests in teacher evaluations. Together, these actions have made Florida a state where students are tested more than students in most other states (Alvarez, 2014). Seen in this context, it becomes difficult to decide whether participants' criticism of increased testing was specific to RTI.

I also found it difficult to discern between teacher's perceptions of RTI from the way it was operationalized in their districts. For example, in response to questions like "What according to you is RTI?", teachers commonly talked about district-mandated procedures, such as using triangulation to group students into tiers, pulling out small groups of students assigned to Tier 2/3, administering specific district-required curriculum-based measures (e.g., easyCBM fluency test) to progress-monitor, and meeting about once every six weeks with the problem-solving team. In other words, teachers understood RTI in context of the way it was operationalized in their districts. Thus, when asked about limitations of RTI, Lisa mentioned that she did not like the fluency measure that was being used to determine student need because third grade was about reading comprehension, not fluency. As this instance illustrates, her criticism of RTI in this case was in response to a specific configuration of RTI in her district which was perceived as being unresponsive to student needs.

It is possible that these difficulties are an inevitable consequence of being acted upon by multiple reform policies simultaneously. In this case, teachers are presented with a *gestalt* of multiple overlapping policies that is more than a sum of its parts. This policy *gestalt* might present constraints that are hard to attribute to any one policy. An implication of this insight is that future research on teachers' perception of RTI must strive to understand RTI within a context-sensitive and historically grounded manner.

Resist blaming the teacher. Stein (2004) described how equity-oriented policies often end up spawning a teacher discourse in which, "representations of the policies' equity imperatives are largely absent" (p. 121). Illustrating this outcome through a case study of a school that was implementing policy mandates related to desegregation and bilingual education,

she reported how “integration” came to imply a specific time block on the teacher schedule rather than a historical imperative to improve race relations.

Comments such as, “After recess I have integration,” “I’ll pick up Lorena [for Title I-funded Reading Recovery] at the beginning of integration,” and “You’re in my room for integration,” were common to all schools with defined periods for integrated activities. A teacher trying to get students to walk quietly through the hallway ordered, “If you can’t be quiet, we’re going to spend our whole integration time learning how to walk.” The use of the term “integration” to represent a scheduled activity became a normalized part of the schools’ daily vocabularies. (Stein, 2004, p. 121).

Stein concluded that this discourse reflected a preoccupation with “technical issues of compliance and daily organization rather than the deeper tensions of pluralism and instructional effectiveness that challenge educators on a daily basis.” (p. 121). This anecdote can be compared to the teacher discourse on RTI. One instance of this was when Jennifer reported that RTI had turned differentiated learning into reductive rituals driven by documentation. She explained the attitude in her school was, “you were here for X number of minutes. [Therefore] we can check it off”. In this case, her criticism was directed towards the specific rules laid down in her district mandating the frequency and duration of Tier 2 and Tier 3 services per week. Further, accountability-driven rules also required teachers to maintain a log of the Tier 2 and Tier 3 services they provided. These policies resulted in a school culture in which a compliance-oriented approach dominated the provision of instruction designed to meet the needs of all students.

It would be easy to blame the teachers for this outcome. However, Stein (2004) encourages researchers to think beyond the realm of individual choices and actions of local practitioners to understand why equity-oriented policies get enacted. Specifically, she showed how this compliance-centered approach was enabled by district's policy configuration. The district's desire for an accountability mechanism to ensure desegregation birthed numerical formulas (e.g., schools could not exceed 40-45% of any one ethnic group), which led to school administration making complex rules of class scheduling, staffing, and teacher assignment to fulfill the numerical goals. This culture understandably led the school staff to align their practices and conversations around compliance. In the case of RTI, school districts might lay down specific rules (e.g., provide 19 minutes of tier 3 services 5 times week). Schools may respond by redesigning their schedule to include an "RTI time bloc" in which teachers can do this tiered instructional delivery. Thus, teachers' reductionist approach to RTI can be made inevitable by the policy configuration of their districts.

Clarify the impact of RTI on racial gap. Extant research on the efficacy and effectiveness of RTI has demonstrated improvement in overall school performance, and reduction in overall special education referrals and placements in schools implementing RTI with fidelity (e.g., Bollman, Silbergitt, and Gibbons, 2007; Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003; Vanderheyden, Witt, and Gilbertson, 2007). While these results applied to the overall student population, results demonstrating RTI's impacts on reducing the achievement gap and disproportionality in special education identification are unclear. For instance, out of the two studies reporting the impact of RTI on the achievement gap or disproportionality in special education referral or placement, one study (i.e., Vanderheyden, Witt, and Gilbertson, 2007) reported non-significant level of disproportionality at the beginning of the study (i.e., baseline);

as a result, it could not provide conclusive evidence of whether RTI helped reduce disproportionality in special education placement.

The other study (i.e., Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003) reported conflicting accounts of impact of RTI on disproportionality in special education referral, evaluation, and placement. At one point, the researchers concluded that RTI, “had a positive impact on disproportionation for African-American students during the four year period” (p. 195) by reporting that a lesser percentage of Black students were referred, evaluated, and found eligible for special education in 2001 than in 1997. This data are not accompanied by data on White students, and it is possible that this reduction was greater for White students. Indeed, when the researchers reported odds ratio (a more accurate measure of disproportionality [Parrish, 2000]), their conclusion about RTI reducing disproportionality was contradicted. The odds ratio (i.e., the probability of a Black student qualifying for a label related to learning difficulties *compared to* the probability of a White student qualifying for the same label) for the 1997 was 2.0 and for 2001, it was 2.1. Because RTI proponents have argued for RTI’s ability to reduce racial inequities, further research needs to be conducted in the area to clarify the impact of RTI on achievement gap, and special education referrals and placement.

At the same time, existing criticism of race-neutral solutions to race problems (see Skiba, 2014) needs to be taken into account. These criticisms have typically pointed to the popularity of race-neutral solutions with the government because they are less polarizing and have more bipartisan support, compared to policies that are avowedly anti-racist in their intent as well as design. In fact, a 2003 report released by the U.S. Department of Education explicitly advocates for race-neutral policies over race-preferential policies for solving the problems of racial inequity in postsecondary education because the former, “can help expand equal opportunity in our

society while avoiding the controversy caused by traditional race-preferential policies (Office for Civil Rights, 2003). The idea of race-neutral solution for race problems was most clearly articulated by the Florida governor who replaced affirmative action with race-neutral policies to address the issue of racial disproportionality in college enrollment. His One Florida plan (which guaranteed admission in state schools for the top 20 percent of high school graduates) was cited as having the potential to bridge the racial gap in enrollment without employing race as a factor (Kahlenberg, 2012). However, as Ellingboe and Chu (2015) reported, the policy resulted in a 10.9% decline in enrollment of Black students because the students most likely to be in the top 20% of class were White.

Critics of race-neutral policies thus question the extent to which an equality-oriented policy that is framed as benefiting “all” students can realistically ameliorate the gap between White and Black students because, “in order to create equal outcomes beginning from an initial state of inequality, such an approach would have to affect groups differentially (e.g., create larger improvements for African-American students) without consciously intending to do so” (Skiba, 2014, p. 114). As this research study illustrated with the case of one such equity-oriented race neutral policy framed in language of universality (“all”), RTI was enacted and interpreted by teachers in keeping with their existing worldviews and beliefs. Thus, RTI’s data-based decision-making framework did not preclude teachers from using racialized deficit discourses to explain the causes of their Black student’s poor academic performance.

There are several implications of RTI’s race neutral focus. Although RTI proponents call for an ecological understanding of a student’s performance (i.e., considering factors outside the student that may contribute to achievement deficits), racialized deficit-thinking might cause teachers to focus on within-student variables, while ignoring the deficits in instruction or

curriculum as a potential cause of the Black student's academic problem. RTI proponents' call to consider ecological factors could also be interpreted as being a call to consider the role of family deficits in explaining a Black student's academic performance. This pattern might fundamentally limit the kind of instructional supports received by Black students. Thus, RTI proponents and implementers must engage in difficult conversations about racialized deficit-thinking with stakeholders at RTI implementation sites. RTI proponents also must develop greater awareness about ways in which existing ideologies of race, class, and gender infiltrate the data-based decision-making process, and subvert its claim of achieving equity through a language of objectivity and universality. Reflexive conversations must take place within the RTI research community in order to help each other unlearn the unquestioned assumptions about universalism and racial progress. To aid this process, RTI scholars could use existing outlets such as conferences, symposiums, newsletters, websites, and discussion boards to engage with writings of critical race scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Richard Delgado, who have articulated the limits and pitfalls of racial reforms.

Summary

Reflecting on my positionality, I discovered how my raced and gendered subjectivities impacted the questions I asked and the data I collected. I discussed the limitations these factors placed on the way I interpreted the data. Based on the findings and reflections, I made several recommendations for future directions in research on RTI. Given the multiple and fragmented meanings of RTI that arose within participant responses, I suggested that RTI researchers might benefit from literature on policy appropriation to understand the fluid and dynamic ways in which stakeholders of RTI interpret and enact the policy. I argued the benefits of ethnographic methodology to understand aspects of RTI enactment that might escape quantitative

methodology often employed in RTI implementation research. Ethnographic methodology could help researchers understand RTI implementation in a context-sensitive and historically-grounded manner, because RTI does not exist in vacuum and often coheres with other policies (e.g., high-stakes testing) to present constraints that are hard to attribute to any one policy. The organizational culture spawned by these policies can overdetermine teachers' compliance-driven approach to RTI. Therefore, an attention to structural factors can help RTI researchers avoid blaming teachers for poor implementation of RTI. Finally, I discussed the importance of decentering the assumption that race-neutral reforms can ameliorate racial problems, given the pervasiveness of racialized deficit-based thinking in education. I recommended that RTI researchers and proponents challenge and unlearn their own assumptions of universalism, and also strive to bring these conversations into the realm of implementation sites to the stakeholders.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide for First Interview

1. Tell me about yourself.
 - a. (Probe) what did your teacher preparation look like?
 - b. (Probe) what does racial diversity look like in your classroom?
2. Tell me about some of your experiences (challenges, personal testimonies) in applying RTI-problem solving framework?
 - a. (Probe) what did your RTI training look like?
 - b. (Probe) what is your understanding of how problem solving is used in RTI?
 - c. (Probe) what does RTI model look like in your school?
3. Please give an example in which you applied RTI problem-solving framework to address academic concerns of a Black student?
 - a. (Probe) Tell me about the time you applied RTI to address the academic or behavior issues of a Black student.
 - a.i. What are/were your concerns about him or her?
 - a.ii. What steps/procedures related to RTI did you follow to help that student?
 - a.ii.1. How did you know there was a problem
 - a.ii.2. How did you set a goal
 - a.ii.3. How did you determine the cause of the problem
 - a.ii.4. How did you determine what intervention to use

a.ii.5. Tell me about how you used data to map student responsiveness to the intervention

Interview Guide for Second Interview

In our previous interview, you told me about how you applied RTI problem solving steps to come up with an intervention plan for your student. Today, I want to follow-up on that case.

1. What was the result of all this for the student? Did it lead to positive outcomes?
2. If the intervention failed, why do you think it failed? If it succeeded, why do you think it succeeded?
 - a. What are some of the common reasons why interventions have or have not worked out in the past for Black students?
3. What are some common reasons Black students struggle from your experiences?
4. What are some ways in the RTI approach helped you in addressing the needs of the Black student.
5. What are some ways in which the RTI approach fell short in helping you to address the needs of the Black student?

APPENDIX B
RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear [INSERT NAME],

I am a graduate student in the School Psychology Program at the University of South Florida. I am conducting a qualitative study on White teachers' experiences serving Black students within an RTI framework.

Eligibility. For this study, I am seeking participants who meet the following four criteria:

- (1) Self-identify as White,
- (2) Currently employed full-time as a general education teacher
- (3) Have applied or are currently applying RTI to address academic and/or behavioral needs of Black students.
- (4) Available to give two interviews over a period of two weeks *outside of school in a location of their choosing*. Each interview will be roughly one hour long.

Purpose. The study will contribute to the understanding of RTI by illuminating the role of socio-contextual processes in teacher-student interactions. The participants' contribution also will increase our understanding of teachers' personal experiences of working within RTI framework.

Confidentiality. Teacher interviews will be audio-recorded. Recordings will be kept in a secure location. All information will be kept confidential, and will be used purely for research purposes. Names and other identifiers of the participants (e.g., name of school and school district) will be de-identified when disseminating the results of the study.

If you meet the eligibility criteria and would be interested in participating in the study, please contact me via text, phone, or email. I can be reached at 813-484-0124 (cell) and svsabnis@mail.usf.edu (email). Alternately, if you know anyone who meets the criteria, please forward this message to them.

Regards,
Sujoy Sabnis
University of South Florida

Note. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of University of South Florida (approval no. [Pro00022446](#); dated 06/23/2015)

APPENDIX C

LETTER OF I.R.B. APPROVAL



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

June 23, 2015

Sujay Sabnis
Educational and Psychological Studies
TAMPA, FL 33613

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**

IRB#: Pro00022446

Title: Applying critical race theory to understand White teachers' experiences of working with Black students within a Response to Intervention framework

Study Approval Period: 6/23/2015 to 6/23/2016

Dear Sujay Sabnis:

On 6/23/2015, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):

Protocol Document(s):

[Protocol V#1 6.17.2015.docx](#)

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:

[Teacher V#1 6.17.2015.docx.pdf](#)

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review

category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kristen Salomon", followed by a horizontal line.

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board