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CHALLENGES OF MEETING THE NEEDS OF GIFTED STUDENTS WITHIN AN RTI SYSTEM

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Abstract Response to Intervention (RtI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) have gained popularity as methods for meeting the needs of students in the United States and other countries throughout the world. The purpose of this study was to assess pre-service teachers' knowledge of and confidence in RtI/MTSS implementation. Participants were 116 pre-service teachers. While some of them had heard about RtI/MTSS, most did not have the necessary knowledge and skills to successfully implement these systems and reported little confidence in their ability to do so. Implications for in-service training and teacher preparation programs are discussed in light of the findings.

Keywords: Response to Intervention; Pre-service teacher education; Multi-tiered Support Systems

Introduction

School districts all across the country are beginning to incorporate the Response to Intervention (RtI) model into their classrooms. In 2011, approximately 94% of schools reported implementation of RtI at some level (as cited in Castillo & Bastche, 2012). RtI is a multi-tiered approach used to effectively differentiate material for all students. The model incorporates increasing intensity of instruction; offering specific, research-based interventions matched to student needs; needs that are determined by administration and analysis of formative assessment. As a teacher in a district that has implemented this model, I have come to realize how beneficial the system can be for students who struggle; however, I have also become aware of how little I was giving my "gifted" students and my students who already understood the material. When a formative assessment shows that a student understands the material, they can stop becoming the focus of our attention. Instead, teachers tend to focus on re-teaching students who do not show proficiency on the

formative assessment, and this is a disservice for the students in our classrooms who understand the material.

For the purpose of the research study, the term "gifted" describes students who are above average in general education settings. These students read at grade level or above; write at grade level or above; and do not have a problem with attendance. These students may be ready for Honors/Advanced Placement (AP) or just below the ability level that is required to succeed in Honors/AP. They are the students who are commonly "bored" in the regular education classroom because the content is not challenging enough. When a formative assessment shows that a group of students already understood the material, I am unsure what to do with them while I teach the skill to the students who do not understand the material.

In this school, RtI is set up for underachieving students, not students who are ready for more complex thinking. When a teacher gives a formative assessment and realizes that a group of students do not understand the skill, the RtI process begins. Because the RtI model is not always designed to challenge gifted students, the gifted students might begin to underachieve in the general education classroom (Ritchotte, 2015). The goal of this project is to investigate how teachers within the high school English Department at my current school district challenge gifted students within the RtI setting. As a teacher, I struggle to develop more complex activities for students who show mastery of a skill on the first formative assessment given. The purpose of this research is to investigate how colleagues incorporate "enrichment" or more complex activities into the three-tier RtI system to challenge the gifted students.

Literature Review

Response to Intervention for Gifted Students. The RtI system is designed to help teachers identify learning or skill deficits and provide structure to assist teachers in making curriculum accommodations for those learning deficits. This tiered approach, however, stops once a student has mastered a skill. There is a lack of research in the role of enrichment within RtI, which implies that few researchers are looking into this topic. Most research has been done on the benefits of RtI for lower achieving students, and research has also been done on describing what giftedness is. However, minimal research has been done on how the two might coincide. While researchers have investigated how to challenge gifted students, few researchers have studied how to challenge or "enrich" students within the three-tiered RtI system.

Even though few have published studies on the impact of RtI systems on gifted students, there is evidence that these students are in need of differentiated instruction. Johnsen,

Parker, and Farah (2015) found that advanced students may have already learned some of the basic concepts that are taught to general education students. If they have already learned the basic skills, they may need curriculum compacting or alternative learning experiences that challenge them to think at a higher level. If students learn the basic skills at a faster rate or have already learned the skills, then teachers that implement the RtI system will have a plan to challenge those students. At this time, the published RtI literature does not emphasize promoting intense instruction for students who learn the skills and concepts at a faster rate; however, this can happen within the general education, RtI framework. Research has found, though, that teachers do not feel prepared to do this. One study found that numerous teachers believed giving gifted students extra challenges and support is important, but are unsure of how to put it into practice or are unable to fit the extra challenge and support into the mandated curriculum or intervention design (Ryan & Coneybeare, 2015). This research exemplifies the need to find a way to educate teachers how to enrich gifted students, and RtI is a framework that may provide a supportive structure for teachers to deliver enrichment to gifted students.

What little research that has been done on enrichment in within RtI has found that gifted and talented students are getting a disservice from schools in this current set up. Seedorf (2015) found that only a small percentage of current students benefit from the RtI program as it is most often being used as a way to identify and serve students with special needs. Seedorf (2015) suggests that a paradigm shift needs to take place in how we identify and develop programs for students with special needs. Similarly, Miller and Gentry (2015) found that talent among high-potential students from low- income families often goes unnoticed without support and encouragement from educators. In addition to this, Horne and Shaughnessy (2015) discovered that the gifted student is often times left out of the RtI process. Horne and Shaughnessy (2015) also found that many public schools remain ill-equipped to meet the needs of the population of gifted and talented learners within their school systems. They discovered that few educators and professionals have the necessary training to not only identify gifted learners, but the ability to effectively challenge them as well. There is little research on how to use the RtI system to meet the needs of the gifted students.

Current Curriculum Models for Gifted Students. Although no systematic, extensive studies have examined how gifted students are best served within the RtI framework, there are curriculum models similar to RtI that have research supporting the idea that gifted students benefit a tiered framework. The Purdue Three-Stage Enrichment Model (Moon, Kolloff, Robinson, Dixon, & Feldhusen, 2009) is a model of enrichment where student skills are matched with varying levels of instruction that start with the development of critical thinking skills and move to inquiry-based learning and generalization of those skills to community projects. According to Johnsen et al., (2015), this model has been used in a variety of schools and Saturday enrichment programs, and was successful. Another approach to enriching the curriculum is the Levels of Science (LOS) approach (Treffinger,

1986). According to Johnsen et al., (2015), similar to RtI, it offers services at varying levels of intensity. LOS services range from AP courses accelerating grade level content to AP courses and job shadowing.

Aside from these few models similar to RtI, there is very little research that examines how gifted students fit into the RtI model; however, the research that has been published is positive. One study found compelling evidence that RtI is an educator's best hope for giving students support and additional time that is needed to learn at high levels (Buffum et al., 2010). Werts, Carpenter, and Fewell, (2014) discovered that 72.76% of focus group statements noted that students were receiving a higher level of instruction because of RtI. If we want all students, including those who are gifted, to learn at their highest level, then more educators need to consider RtI as a way to ensure all students receive instruction matched to their needs. However, the focus of RtI decisions, in the classroom and in the literature, remains on struggling learners with gifted learners often being left to underachieve. Given the lack of attention to the importance of utilizing RtI to meet the needs of gifted students, the goal of this project is to bring attention to this issue. Through this qualitative action research we aim to answer the following research question: to what extent do teachers in a focus group made up of secondary English Language Arts instructors feel frustrated with how gifted students are receiving instruction within the general education, RtI setting. I hypothesize that these educators are frustrated and that this is because students are bored with the material and teachers do not have time or the knowledge of strategies to develop additional lesson plans that will challenge this group of students.

Methodology

Participants. Participants were in-service general education and special education educators who served as co- teachers in the general education setting. The two special education educators were included in the study because the English department utilized a collaborative co-teaching model in their inclusive classrooms. The special educators helped plan lessons, lead instruction, and assess all students in the classroom. In total, eight educators from the English department at Clinton High School in Clinton, Iowa were recruited to participate. Clinton High School has 1,100 students and is considered a large school district in Eastern Iowa. The educators' experience levels range from a first-year educator to a veteran teacher. The participants were recruited through a written request for their participation. The participants were told that their names would remain anonymous.

Approximately 93% of participants were female. All educators that participated in the focus group have been born and in raised in the Midwest region of America, and their teaching experience is limited to Iowa school districts. Five of the participants had Master of Arts degrees from various Midwestern universities. The remaining participants had Bachelor of

Arts degrees from various Midwestern universities. All of the participants knew each other as they work in the same department in the same school district.

Focus Group Questions. Creating mediator questions can be one of the most difficult pieces of conducting a focus group study. The questions should guide discussion. They should be focused, and they should encourage open conversation between group members. The questions should provoke honest responses from the group members (Hatch, 2002). The focus group questions for the group of high school English teachers are listed below.

- How do "gifted" students fit in to your regular education setting? What role do they play in classroom instruction/activities?
- What challenges do having "gifted" students in a regular education setting present?
- What kinds of strategies do you use to challenge these students in the RtI setting?
- Where did you learn about these strategies?
- How do you incorporate enrichment into the RtI setting?
- What has been the best way for you to challenge "gifted" students in your general education (RtI) classroom?
- Who/what do you look to for advice for what to do with "gifted" students in the RtI setting?
- What more can the school do to help serve "gifted" students in the RtI setting?
- Is the school's current solution (pushing them into Honors/AP courses) working?
- What effect has switching to teaching the Iowa CORE curriculum (https://iowacore.gov/) had on "gifted" students?

Design and Procedures. For the purpose of gaining information on enrichment for gifted students within the RtI framework, a qualitative research design was utilized. Qualitative research allows the researchers to understand what participants are thinking (Krueger, 1988). A qualitative research design will allow for a better understanding of the feelings, values, and perceptions that underlie and influence the English department's teaching practices. The specific type of qualitative research that was used is a focus group. Focus group research is a way of collecting qualitative data, which involves holding a group discussion with a small number of people in an informal setting. The discussion is based around a particular set of issues (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). According to Baumgartner, Strong, and Hensley (2002), focus groups usually last between one and two hours and consist of 6-12 participants. The researcher acts as the facilitator to keep moving the group discussion forward. According to Krueger (1988), focus groups allow for more candid and open responses than that of a survey. Participant informed consent was obtained in writing. Participants were placed in focus groups based on their current teaching position as high school English teachers at the district under study.

Data Analysis. The researcher used an inductive analysis approach to analyze the data. According to Hatch (2002), "Inductive thinking proceeds from the specific to the general" (p.161). In other words, the researcher started by looking at specific elements within the transcriptions and then the researcher found connections between those elements. Inductive analysis is, overall, a search for patterns of meaning within data that has been collected. According to Hatch (2002, p.162), there are nine steps to following when doing inductive analysis. They are as follows:

Step one: Read the data and identify frames of analysis. This process of data analysis begins by repeatedly reading the data because each time the data is read, new insights are made. The first question the researcher should ask when approaching the transcription is: *What will be my frames of analysis?* (Hatch, 2002). For this research study the initial frames were the following: *Conversations related to defining "giftedness;" Conversations related to strategies; Conversations related to the current system in place; and Conversations related to interests in professional development.*

Step two: Create domains based on semantic relationships discovered within frames of analysis. The goal of this step is to create categories of meanings or what Hatch (2002) calls, "domains," that reflect overall relationships that are represented in the data. Discovering domains gives researchers a way of getting at how participants organize their understandings and schema. As the inductive analysis progresses, these categories will become more specific.

Step three: Identify salient domains, assign them a code, and put others aside. This is the stage in which preliminary decisions are made as to which domains will be important to further examine and which ones will not. Once the researcher has decided upon salient categories, each category should be given a code. For this study, roman numerals were used to label each domain, and letters were used to label sub points for each domain.

For this research study, the following codes were established in this stage of the data analysis:

I. Defining gifted students in the general education setting

      a. "Will" students—student who do poorly due to lack of effort

      b. "Skill" students—students who do poorly due to lack of knowledge or skill

II. Difficulties of having gifted students within the RtI setting

      a. Boredom

      b. Lesson planning

      c. Classroom management

      d. Challenging them

      e. The current system of RtI

III. Strategies used to enrich gifted students within the RtI setting

      a. Enriching Iowa CORE standards

      b. Rigor vs. More Work

      c. Bloom's Taxonomy

      d. Reading Lexile- a framework for matching readers with a text of the same scale

IV. Desired Professional Development

      a. No one to turn to

      b. Applicable strategies

      c.   Re-thinking curriculum

Below Table 1 details the preliminary domains that were important to further examine.

Table 1: Step Three: Identify Salient Domains. Assign them a Code, and Put Others Aside

Domain	Thematic Domain	Characteristics of Domain
Domain I	Defining gifted students in the general education setting	• "Will" students-- student who does poorly due to lack of effort • "Skill" students-- students who do poorly do to lack of knowledge or skill
Domain II	Difficulties of having gifted students within the RtI setting	• Boredom • Lesson Planning • Classroom Management • The current system of RtI
Domain III	Strategies used to enrich gifted students within the RtI setting	• Enriching Iowa CORE standards • Rigor vs. More Work • Bloom's Taxonomy • Reading Lexile
Domain IV	Desired Professional Development	• No one to turn to • Applicable Strategies • Re-thinking curriculum

Step Four: Re-read data, refining salient domains and keeping a record of where relationships are found in the data. In this stage, the researcher should re-read the data while keeping in mind the already established domains. In this stage of the data analysis, the researcher should seek to find similarities between different domains. Hatch states that, "The process of searching and coding within salient domains will lead you to look more closely at your data and give you a better sense of the richness and importance of the

domains you are finding" (Hatch, 2002, p. 169). It was in this stage of the research that the researcher discovered some similarities between the previously established categories. One of the similarities was that the concept of "student boredom" was found in almost every conversation. In addition to this, the idea that there is a lack of "enrichment" opportunities came up in multiple conversations.

Step five: Decide if your domains are supported by the data and search data for examples that do not fit with or run counter to the relationships in your domains. This is the stage in which the researcher determines whether or not the domains are supported by evidence. Up until this point, the data analysis was hypothetical. This is the stage in which the researcher must ask whether or not there is enough data to support including the domain. The researcher must also determine if there is data that does not fit in the expressed domains. After completing this stage of the data analysis, the following categories were removed: II.D: *Lesson Planning;* III.d: *Reading Lexile*; and IV.c: *Rethinking Curriculum.*

Step six: Complete an analysis within domains. According to Hatch (2002), completing an analysis with domains means revising the data that has already been collected in order to find new semantic relationships and discover new ways to organize the data. The researcher looks within the data in this stage in order to fill in missing blanks of information or develop new understandings. The complexity of the initial outline will expand in this stage. After going back through to re-examine the domains, a new outline was developed. Below is the modified version of the outline.

I. Defining gifted students in the general education setting
   a. "Will" students
      i. Lose the "will" when content and levels of thinking get easy
      ii. It is difficult to find ways to motivate students to maintain a "will"
   b. "Skill" students
      i. We commonly think of "skill" students as "skill-deficit" students; not "skill-equipped" students
      ii. We struggle to match skill to content
II. Difficulties of having gifted students within the RtI setting
   a. Boredom
   b. Lesson planning
      i. We have to plan three lessons for every class period—too much to do in our allotted prep time

      ii. Once we establish "proficient" criteria we never establish "enriched" criteria—this needs to happen

      iii. Aligning difficult content to a skills-based class is difficult

  c. Classroom management

      i. This aligns with the boredom statement about and should be put with that

      ii. Best way to differentiate is in small groups; what are the logistics of that

      iii. Should we group all gifted students together or is it better to intermingle them with other students

  d. The current system of RtI

      i . Three tier system is designed to help our failing students

      ii. We only have interventions for students who have not mastered the skill

      iii. The current system allows gifted students to put off work because we do not count it late

      iv. Neglecting the gifted

III. Strategies used to enrich gifted students within the RtI setting

  a. Enriching Iowa CORE standards

      i. Looking ahead a grade level

      ii. Using reading Lexiles

      iii. Using ACT readiness guidelines

      iv. Options for going cross-curricular

  b. Rigor vs. More Work

      i. The difference between the two terms

      ii. More work is "easier", thus it happens more

      iii. More problem/inquiry based collaborative learning is needed

  c. Bloom's Taxonomy

      i. The last two tiers of Bloom's are what we should use

      ii. Do we scaffold gifted students the same way

      iii. Using question stems

IV. Desired Professional Development

  a. No one to turn to

      i. We can turn to: Department heads, PLC leaders, Administration; but no one outside of the district

      ii. All responders listed their PLC leader as the only person they go to

        iii. We could use more help from outside sources

        iv. It would be nice to visit other schools to see how they do it

        v. We really need a talented and gifted coordinator

    b. Applicable strategies

        i. We want a list of hands-on strategies we can use in the classroom

        ii. We need common vocabulary

        iii. More teacher-training on how to enrich the Iowa CORE standards

        iv. We need to re-think our curriculum-writing process

Below Table 2 displays the revised, more complex data.

Table 2: Step Six: Complete an Analysis within Domain

Domain	*Thematic Domain*	*Characteristics of Domain*
Domain I	Defining gifted students in a general education setting	a. "Will" Students • Lose the "will" when content and levels of thinking are easy • It is difficult to find ways to motivate students to maintain a "will" b. "Skill" students • We commonly think of as "skill-deficit"; not "skill-equipped" • We struggle to match content to skill
Domain II	Difficulties of having gifted students within the RtI setting	a. Boredom b. Lesson planning • Have to plan three lessons for every class period--too much in given time • We establish "proficient" criteria; we never establish "enriched"

		criteria
		• Aligning difficult content to a skills-based class is difficult
		c. Classroom Management
		• This aligns with the boredom statement about and should be put with that
		• Best way to differentiate in small groups; what are the logistics of that
		• Should we group all gifted students together or is it better to intermingle them with other students
		d. The Current System of RtI
		• Three tier system is designed to help failing students
		• We only have interventions for students who have not mastered a skill
		• Neglecting the gifted
Domain III	Strategies used to enrich gifted students within the RtI setting	a. Enriching CORE standards
		• Looking ahead a grade level
		• Using reading Lexiles
		• Using ACT readiness guidelines
		• Optins for going cross-curricular
		b. Rigor vs. More Work
		• The difference between the two terms
		• More work is

		"easier"; thus it happens more
		• More problem/inquiry based collaborative learning is needed
		c. Bloom's Taxonomy
		• The last two tiers of Bloom's is what we should use
		• Do we scaffold gifted students the same way
		• Using question stems
Domain IV	Desired Professional Development	a. No one to turn to
		• We can turn to: Department heads, PLC leaders, Administration, but no one outside of the district
		• All responders listed their PLC leader as the only person they go to
		• It would be nice to go to other schools to see how they do it
		• We really need a talented and gifted coordinator
		b. Applicable strategies
		• We want a list of hands-on strategies we can use in the classroom
		• We need common vocabulary
		• More teacher-training on how to enrich the CORE standards
		• We need to re-think

our curriculum-writing
process

Step seven: Search for themes across domains. This is the stage in which the researcher looks for connections among domains. In this stage, the researcher looks for broad elements that bring the data together. As the process of inductive analysis suggests, the conclusions being made from the data are starting to become broader. From this the researcher will discover common themes. For this study, the researcher identified the four following themes:

- Challenging "gifted" students within the RtI framework is challenging
- Strategies that eliminate classroom management struggles
- Strategies to challenge "gifted" students
- Professional Development Goals

Step eight: Create a master outline expressing relationships within and among domains. In this step, the researcher will create a final, master outline that details how existing domains and subgroups fit into the overarching themes. Hatch (2002) states that if the themes do not account for all of the data, the themes should be reconsidered. The relationships that become present in the final outline will undoubtedly have a major influence on how the findings are reported.

Step nine: Select data excerpts to support the elements of your outline. This is the stage in which the researcher begins to find examples from the transcription that can be used to support the themes that have been discovered. This is the final step in data analysis before the final writing process begins.

Results and Discussion

Theme One: Challenging "Gifted" Students within the RtI Setting is Challenging. A common theme that was found throughout every focus group discussion was that reaching gifted students within the RtI framework in a general education setting is difficult. All teachers in the group came to the consensus that the gifted students were the ones that could have pushed themselves to be in the Honors/AP classrooms, but for whatever the reason, did not do so. As one teacher stated, "My gifted students are usually those who should have pushed themselves harder and taken AP, but were either too concerned about grades or too lazy to put forth the effort needed for AP." The gifted students are the ones who show mastery of a skill early on (sometimes even on a pre-test) and then require a form of enrichment while the other students are re-taught the skill. However, the challenge with this comes with finding a way to present this "extra work." One teacher, for example, stated that, "The gifted students need to be challenged without thinking they are being punished." The idea

behind challenging students within the RtI framework is to provide them with enrichment activities once they master a skill. Teachers in this study, though, found it to be challenging to find a way to present these enrichment activities without students viewing the extra work as a form of punishment. Teachers also found it challenging to find a way to present the material in a way that does not make it seem like they are doing the same skill over and over again with varying texts or levels of difficulty.

In addition to finding a way to present enrichment activities to students, keeping gifted students from becoming bored with the material was another challenge that teachers reported. Every teacher stated that their biggest challenge is finding a way to keep the entire class engaged with the material. One teacher stated that, "I think that my gifted students find many of the lessons and activities boring. Because of this boredom, they often end up playing one of two roles: the distracting student or the student who finishes everything and waits patiently for the next thing to complete. Either they are sitting around doing nothing or distracting others." Teachers agreed that the boredom led to classroom management issues like the teacher above described.

A final challenge was finding time to create these enrichment lesson plans. One teacher stated that, "These students play almost no role in instruction because we are only worried about getting everyone through the standard; we are not concerned with students reaching beyond the standard proficiency...They lose out on learning because the classroom is not designed to challenge them on a daily basis. We don't have time to create three lesson plans for every single class." The current system requires that a teacher develop a "re-teaching" lesson, a "base-level" lesson, and then the "enrichment" lesson. When teachers are so focused on making sure everyone is reaching proficiency at the skill, the "enrichment" lesson was found to be the one that was put off due to lack of time. A teacher in the focus group stated that, "Although ideally differentiation with multiple levels of activities and multiple choices for students would run simultaneously in a classroom, I have not yet perfected how one or two human beings can do so with 30+ (or even 18) students with quite a range of abilities." Like addressing the issue of boredom, finding time to create enrichment activities was a challenge that all teachers faced. As a result of this, teachers felt guilty about doing a disservice to students. As one teacher stated, "...the other main difficulty I face is my own guilt. I feel guilty, like I am cheating these students out of the education they deserve."

Theme Two: Strategies that Eliminate Classroom Management Struggles. The second theme found throughout the data was that the teachers in the group had a few strategies they used specifically to address the classroom management problems that were a result of having gifted students in the general education, RtI classroom. One strategy that the group utilizes is strategic grouping. Many of the teachers stated that they pair gifted students with students who are at a lower level in order to allow the gifted student to essentially teach

their partner. While there are limitations to this type of strategic grouping, all of the focus group members stated that it works to alleviate some of the classroom management problems that arise from having gifted students who are bored with the material. In addition to pairing, teachers suggested grouping all gifted students together for certain activities so that the rigor of the assignment can be brought up a level to challenge everyone in the group. Finally, all teachers mentioned that more rewards should be put in place for students who excel in the classroom. One teacher stated that, "They need to be rewarded more often to keep them motivated; we need to give them a reason to want to succeed in class." Teachers in the focus group agreed that in order to eliminate classroom management struggles, more rewards should be implemented in the classroom. In the current tiered RtI system, the only reward is "enrichment," which to the students is more work. Teachers need to find other ways to reward students for excelling in class; rewards that do not necessarily involve more work. Rewards could be things like open, "free-reading" time or writing time; more choice in assignments; or an extension project that is geared more for an authentic audience.

Theme Three: Strategies to Challenge Gifted Students. A third common theme was that teachers discussed a variety of different ways to challenge gifted students in the general education, RtI setting. One of the ways teachers challenge students is by increasing the rigor of the work assigned to gifted students. The teachers discussed how making work more rigorous was not the equivalent to assigning more pages to read; longer writing assignments; more practice problems; etc. Rigor requires a student to put forth more effort, not complete a higher volume of work. One way to challenge gifted students, then, is to develop more rigorous learning experiences. Three teachers said that in order to increase rigor, they do project-based learning in their classrooms. This way, the learning tasks can be differentiated for different ability levels.

The teachers in the focus group also stated that they use Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) as a way to script questions in order to more effectively challenge students. One teacher stated that she uses Bloom's Taxonomy, "...as a way to create question stems to challenge gifted students. I use Bloom's Taxonomy as a guide for moving students past lower-level thinking questions like basic recall questions." For example, if the skill is analyzing a text from multiple mediums, the teacher should refer back to Bloom's Taxonomy when developing an assessment for that skill. When looking to challenge gifted students, the teacher should look to the top tiers of Bloom's Taxonomy instead of having students do basic skills like identifying the similarities or differences between the two different mediums. Overall, one of the most prominent strategies discussed in the focus group was the strategy of using Bloom' Taxonomy as a guide for asking questions. One teacher reiterated this point when she stated, "It is all about how the teacher asks questions. They need to ask students to do more complex thinking, and that all comes back to what the teacher asks of the student."

Theme Four: Professional Development Goals. The group's first professional development goal was to simply gain access to more resources. When asked where each teacher goes to get strategies for challenging gifted students, all of the teachers said that their ideas came from other teachers in the building. Not one teacher mentioned having an outside resource. One teacher summarized this need when she stated, "I look to my co-workers and PLC for advice, and then I do the best I can with what I've got." Their hope is to attain more knowledge from outside of the department in the future in order to learn new ways to challenge students. One teacher stated, "Why not have a 'challenge teacher' in the classroom to take those gifted students to a higher level of learning? The general education teacher does not have time to take care of everyone. If we have special education teachers, we should have teachers that specialize in challenging students as well." If teachers are going to successfully challenge students in their classroom, they need a resource to go to that will help them accomplish that. The RtI system is designed in a way to provide interventions to students who fall behind, and many of the interventions include one-on-one help with a variety of teachers. The teachers in this focus group discussed the need to have the same type of interventions available for challenging gifted students.

A second professional development goal identified by the group was to have more teacher - training on finding methods to enrich the Iowa CORE curriculum. The teachers discussed a need for having a set of applicable, ready-made strategies they could put in place. One teacher stated that, "...the foundation of RtI, especially when viewing the staple pyramid diagram of the program, is based on the students who need help meeting the learning target, not those who rise above it. Furthermore, there is little to no literature out there on what to do with 'gifted' students in a classroom that is focused on teaching the CORE." Currently, the teachers spend a few days each school year writing their curriculum and aligning it to the Iowa CORE. The teachers agreed that it could be during this time that training could be done on ways to enrich the curriculum they set in place.

Discussion. The initial hypothesis investigated in the present study was: Teachers in the focus group will report frustration with how gifted students receive instruction within the general education, RtI setting because students are bored with the material and teachers do not have time or the knowledge of strategies to develop additional lesson plans that will challenge this group of students. The focus group discussions, along with the published literature, suggest this hypothesis to be retained. While there are strategies or systems of instruction out there that do provide an extra challenge for gifted students, teachers do not feel they have the knowledge or time to implement such strategies or systems of instruction.

In order to effectively challenge these students, teachers need to allocate time in their schedule to plan lessons that implement research-based strategies that challenge gifted students. One of the applicable strategies discovered was using Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) as a way to formulate questions that increases the complexity of thinking.

Bloom's Taxonomy provides question stems that will allow a teacher to almost script their lesson plans and questions in a way that will increase the rigor for gifted students. Both the literature review and the focus group pointed out that rigor is not an increase in the volume of work; it is an increase in the required effort to attain proficient completion. Sousa (2009) explains that educators should learn the difference between complexity and difficulty. Using Bloom's Taxonomy as a guide for phrasing questions and learning tasks will allow teachers to increase the complexity of thinking without necessarily adding "more work" to a learning task.

Another strategy that the focus group discussed was using project- based learning or collaborative learning as a way to challenge students within the RtI general education classroom. Through the use of effective grouping and differentiated tasks, a teacher can challenge students at their appropriate level. Essentially, a group of gifted students could complete a more challenging task while the other students in the class who need re-teaching or more interventions get that necessary instruction. In order to complete this type of group work effectively, teachers will need to set guidelines for group work in advance so students can work efficiently without the constant guidance of a teacher. Blackburn and Williamson (2009) explain that in addition to this, teachers should scaffold students of all ability levels in order to challenge them more effectively. The teachers in the focus group also emphasized the importance of making the learning tasks authentic for students, no matter what the ability level. If students are producing a project or product that is for an authentic audience, all teachers in the focus group agreed that they put forth more effort.

Finally, the teachers brought up the idea of using Lexile scores, ACT readiness standards, and the Iowa CORE standards as a way to gauge rigor of the content being taught to gifted students in a general education, RtI classroom. The teachers in the focus group suggested looking ahead a grade level at the Iowa CORE standards as a way to increase the rigor of a certain learning task. If the class is at the highest level of the Iowa CORE, ACT readiness standards can be utilized as a guide for increasing the rigor of a learning task.

Even though there were a variety of strategies and systems of instruction that have been found to challenge students, the first step in providing higher quality education to this group of students is to educate the teachers on how to do so. An overwhelming concern expressed by the teachers was that they feel ill-equipped to effectively challenge gifted students in the general education, RtI classroom. The members of the focus group felt confident in implementing the three-tiered RtI approach to learning; however, they did not feel confident in implementing the "enrichment" aspect of RtI. The focus group members discussed how they feel instruction stops once a student shows proficiency, at that point, they know how to assign "busy work" to keep them working. This lack of knowledge is due primarily to a lack of educational literature and professional development opportunities. As one teacher in the group stated, "Most literature focuses, once again, on the students who

do not meet the standard. With resources for gifted instruction in the Core and in the RtI process being so slim, it is no wonder we are having difficulties finding a place for these students in classrooms today. This needs to change soon because we are well on our way to cheating our best students and brightest hopes for the future out of a quality education." It is clear from the responses made by the group that they desire more professional development in this area. Teachers in the group also commented on a desire for more professional literature on this topic as well. Research has found that with professional development, teachers' attitudes and beliefs can be significantly altered, leaving teachers with less stereotypical beliefs about new teaching practices (Ryan & Coneybeare, 2015). If teachers are given the opportunity to learn how to better challenge gifted students, then these gifted students will receive an improved and more challenging education.

In regards to the concern of time, it is clear that teachers will undoubtedly have to put forth more time in order to effectively challenge gifted students in the RtI setting. Enrichment lessons do not create themselves, and no matter what the strategy put in place, it will require more work on the teacher's end. The focus group placed a heavy amount of concern on a lack of time to create three different lesson plans, and if this is the case, the district, department, or PLC needs to re-think the utilization of curriculum writing and preparatory times. The focus group members discussed how curriculum writing and PLC time was utilized to create assessments and rubrics. In addition to this, time should be utilized as a group to generate enrichment lessons that will challenge students to think at a higher level for an authentic audience. In the case of this focus group, it is not a lack of provided time to create enrichment lessons, rather teachers are spending the time they do have focusing on re-teaching lessons for students who do not meet proficiency. Too much of curriculum writing time is spent on finding ways to get students proficient; not finding ways to extend their learning. If teachers feel they are doing a disservice to gifted students in a general education classroom by focusing too much on the students who do not show mastery of a skill, then the teachers need to allocate more time to creating strategies that will challenge students. In order for teachers to do this, though, more professional development on how to go about challenging gifted students needs to be put in place.

Limitations

Even though the focus groups lend themselves to honest and open discussions, there were a few limitations. This particular focus group is limited to secondary high school English teachers. While the teachers have a vast array of previous educational experiences, they are limited to one content area. In addition to this, all teachers came from the same school district. While it proved to be beneficial in offering similar group knowledge on RtI and gifted students, the responses were limited to the experiences of one school district. In addition to this, the small size of the focus group may not be a good representation of the population at large.

The focus group design also comes with many strengths and weaknesses. One of the main strengths of this design is that it allows for a more broad exploration of feelings and thoughts than a simple survey would. Another strength of this design is that it allows the researcher to follow up with questions immediately. Instead of looking at survey data and then following up with questions, the researcher can be immediate in their feedback.

Implications

It is clear that more research needs to be done on how the RtI process can benefit gifted students in the general education setting. The lack of research on this issue implies that there is more work to be done in this area. Specifically, more research needs to be done on the teaching strategies that work best to challenge gifted students within the RtI general education setting. In addition to this, more research needs to be done on how teachers can more efficiently plan to meet the needs of all students. A major concern expressed by teachers in this study was that there is a lack of time when it comes to preparing three lesson plans for each skill. The teachers focus on planning lessons for students who have not mastered the skill; the needs of students who have shown mastery are put on the back burner. More research needs to be done on finding a solution that will minimize the time constraint currently put on educators. More research also needs to be done on whether or not the RtI system is actually helping these gifted students. At some point in the conversation, every teacher made a comment similar to the following one stated by a teacher in the focus group: "Some may say that RtI includes enrichment for those who need instruction above and beyond the minimum. However, the foundation of RtI, especially when viewing the staple three-tier pyramid diagram of the program, is based on the students who need help meeting the learning target, not those who rise above it." In other words, the essential flaw of the system is that it is solely designed for students who do not show mastery. As a result, the gifted students are not receiving the necessary amount of attention. Researchers need to look further into the effects the RtI system is having on gifted students. It would be interesting to see if this system is causing a higher number of students to underachieve academically.

Conclusion

Research has shown that the RtI process, when implemented in a general education classroom, is beneficial at achieving higher student success rates for students who do not normally succeed in a general education setting (Buffum & Mattos, 2009). What research has not shown, though, is how this RtI process impacts gifted students, or students who master skills at a faster rate and are ready to move on to more rigorous learning. The teachers in this focus group discussed the frustration felt in that they feel ill-equipped to challenge these gifted students. This frustration is due to a lack of time; a lack of access to

professional development; and a lack of knowledge on research-based strategies that challenge this group of students. While the literature brings to light some useful strategies and systems of instruction that have proven to be effective in challenging students, there needs to be an effort made to educate all educators on these strategies or systems of instruction. In order to prevent underachievement of gifted students in the general education classroom, more work needs to be done on preparing teachers to increase the rigor for students in the general education setting. Matthews (2006) found that academic performance is one of the strongest predictors of a student's decision to drop out of school. In order to prevent this, administrators need to invest time in equipping their educators with the knowledge and skills they need to better help the gifted students and help them achieve success at higher levels. When schools choose to implement the RtI system of intervention, they need to consider what effect the implementation will have on their gifted students.

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