

Learning to Read in a Classroom Defined by RTI: 4 Case Studies

By

Rachel A. Caloia

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The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Catherine Compton-Lilly, Professor, Curriculum and Instruction

Mary Louise Gomez, Professor, Curriculum and Instruction

Melinda Gay Ivey, Professor, Curriculum and Instruction

Mariana Pacheco, Associate Professor, Curriculum and Instruction

Kathy R. Fox, Professor, Early Childhood, Elementary, Middle, Literacy, and  
Special Education

## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Ella, who has inspired and motivated me throughout this process. You will always have my encouragement and support.

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## Abstract

Four case studies informed by phenomenology were conducted using classroom observations and interviews with children, parents, and teachers to explore how children experienced the phenomenon of learning to read in one first-grade classroom defined by RTI policy. Charmaz's (2006) grounded coding model involving initial, focused, and theoretical coding was used to analyze data. Findings included that within RTI policy, there were spaces to implement reading curricula in thoughtful and purposeful ways that paralleled the home reading practices of children. Having time to read independently and with others each day and books of interest to choose from were found to be motivating and engaging literacy practices to children. In addition, a thoughtful implementation of RTI and ESL services created opportunities for an English Language Learning student to access the same core, Tier I classroom reading curriculum as her English-speaking peers. Stronger partnerships between home and school may have challenged teachers' deficit views of children and increased learning opportunities. While RTI is a response to an equity issue, equity issues continue to operate in schools and classroom.

## Introduction

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a major intervention policy that has recently been implemented in North American schools. Signed into law in 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) introduced RTI as a means of providing early intervention for children who are underperforming in school as well as a method for identifying children with learning disabilities. While previously practitioners generally identified children as having learning disabilities using IQ-achievement tests, many states now require a process based on RTI to identify students in need of special education. In addition, IDEA 2004 allows school districts to use up to 15% of their special education funds to fund education interventions for students who are not designated as special education students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Since the majority of children who struggle in school and those ultimately identified as having a learning disability struggle with language and/or literacy (Wixson & Valencia, 2011), RTI is often referred to in research and in practice as a literacy policy with interventions typically targeting early reading problems (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

The most common structure for implementing RTI has been a three-tiered framework (Dorn & Henderson, 2010). Generally, the first tier is quality instruction and progress monitoring within the general classroom using the core curriculum (Klinger & Edwards, 2006). All students are expected to receive high quality core instruction, which is expected to be effective for about 80% of the students (NCRTI, 2010a). This Tier I, general classroom setting is the focus of this dissertation. The second and third tiers include additional intensive intervention support either in or outside of the classroom in a small group or one-to-one settings for students who have not made adequate progress as

assessed by informal progress monitoring and assessments (Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009). Individual states adapted their own guidelines for RTI based on the federal policy. While many states chose to use a three-tiered model to depict the levels of instructional intensity based on student needs, the state of Wisconsin, which is where this research study was conducted, created a circular model of the RTI processes. Wisconsin's model for RTI includes the systematic interaction of three elements at varying levels of intensity based on student responsiveness: high quality instruction that is "standards-based, data driven, and research-based" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 9), balanced assessment that is on-going and includes multiple measures, and collaboration between educators, families, and communities. Culturally responsive practices, defined as, practices that "account for and adapt to the broad diversity of race, language, and culture" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 5) should be evident within each element. Individual districts may choose their own structure, including a three-tiered system, for organizing their RTI system based on local resources and needs. Wisconsin requires schools to use an RTI process in order to identify a student for special education (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010). Many school districts across the country and in Wisconsin have invested in pre-packaged curriculum programs and standardized assessments in response to RTI policy requirements that mandate instructional practices that are research-based and regular progress monitoring (Johnston, 2010b). These programs and assessments raise a number of concerns about the teaching and learning in classroom and intervention settings.

Research studies in RTI settings tend to be experimental studies in psychology and special education that focus on measuring children's achievement relative to instruction in intervention settings (Johnston, 2011). A number of studies (O'Connor, Fulmer, Harty & Bell, 2005; Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider & Sweeney, 2008; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small & Fanuele, 2006; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008) have documented that reading interventions in RTI settings can positively affect literacy skills. In these studies, it has been common to compare the scores of basic literacy skills before and after a specific intervention to show student progress as well as the effectiveness of a specific intervention to affect the acquisition of specific literacy skills. Existing studies on RTI do not capture the diverse language and literacy perspectives and experiences of children relative to RTI experience, literacy identity, and background experiences. There is a lack of studies on core, Tier I, classroom settings. More needs to be understood about how children experience literacy in schools defined by RTI policy so that instruction and assessment can be designed and organized to support the diverse language and literacy experiences and interests of students.

During the spring of 2015, I explored how four first-grade students in one elementary school classroom experienced the phenomenon of learning to read in a school defined by RTI policy. This research study involved four case studies of individual first grade children of various reading abilities in Mrs. Bailey's first grade classroom at Woodland Elementary (all names of people and places are pseudonyms) in order to explore how the children experienced reading in the core, Tier I, classroom setting in a school that defined its curricula, assessments, supplemental supports, and schedule according to RTI policy. As Greene and Hill (2005) stated, the majority of research on

and with children has been on “children as the objects of research rather than children as subjects, on child-related outcomes rather than child-related processes and on child variables rather than children as persons” (p.1). Researching children’s experiences recognizes that each child brings unique experiences and perspectives that must be valued and respected (Greene & Hill, 2005) and “implies a view of children as sentient beings who can act with intention and as agents in their own lives” (p.3). Children’s perspectives and experiences were elicited and analyzed within a social constructivist epistemology as this perspective assumes that children are “meaning-making individuals who have genuine knowledge about their experiences” (Freeman & Mathison, 2009, p. vii).

Phenomenology provided the framework for exploring children’s experiences and the sense they made of their experiences, as dimensions of this framework allowed me to look deeply at the perspectives and life experiences of children. Learning to read in the core, Tier I classroom setting in a classroom defined by RTI was the phenomenon explored through the experiences of individual children. Data collection methods included formal semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, participant observations, document analysis, drawings, and conversations elicited about various classroom artifacts related to RTI and allowed me to explore “children’s experiences through their words, images, and actions in their interactions with others and with (me) as (the) researcher” (Freeman & Mathison, 2009, p.vi). Data analysis involved coding data using grounded codes identified in the data to identify significant themes within each case study and then looking across the four case studies by comparing codes from one case to another. Conducting multiple in-depth case studies of students’ reading experiences, allowed me

to explore how specific children experienced reading in the core, Tier I, classroom setting to fill a current gap in existing literature on RTI and associated literacy practices that have generally focused on summary measures of student performance in intervention settings.

Classroom observations and interviews with the principal and teachers at Woodland Elementary School helped me better understand how New Meadow School District and Woodland Elementary, in particular, responded to the classroom requirements of RTI. The purpose of this analysis was to understand the school context of children's RTI experiences. I gained an understanding of how New Meadow School District and Woodland Elementary used RTI policy requirements to revisit their schedule, supplemental support, curricula, and assessments in thoughtful ways that also considered the types of readers and writers they wanted their students to become. In Chapter 4, I describe the classroom and intervention curricula used district-wide and the established methods of assessment and progress monitoring to illustrate what is possible in accordance with RTI policy requirements when schools emphasize a rich view of literacy, value professional development and teacher expertise, and encourage conversations and professional decision-making among teachers. I also explore the tensions and contradictions within these spaces. That is, while RTI policy is a response to an equity issue, equity issues continue to operate in schools and classrooms. In Chapter 5, I focus on Mrs. Bailey's first grade classroom at Woodland Elementary to understand how four focal children experienced the core, Tier I, classroom reading instruction in her classroom. All children, regardless of ability, had time to read independently and with others each day. Children described these practices as purposeful and were enthusiastic

about reading. They had favorite and familiar texts and opportunities to choose books choices they could read successfully and independently. A focus on reading leveled books resulted in high achieving students comparing themselves to others; however, all children of various abilities identified themselves as good readers and were motivated to read. I explore the parallels between home and school reading practices, and argue for providing all children with opportunities to choose, read, and discuss real texts. These practices build on the authentic home reading practices that many children have experienced across their young lives. In Chapter 6, I explore first-grader, Ana's, unique experiences as an English Language Learner (ELL) and struggling reader in Mrs. Bailey's classroom to understand how a thoughtful implementation of RTI and English as a Second Language (ESL) services created opportunities for Ana to access the same literature-based reading curriculum as her English speaking peers. While Ana had access to the core, Tier I reading curriculum and opportunities to develop her English language and literacy skills without missing classroom instruction, there were missed opportunities to organize the classroom in ways that may have further supported her language and literacy growth. In addition, a strong partnership with Ana's family may have challenged many assumptions that teachers made about her home language and literacy experiences that resulted in deficit views and confusion about how best to support Ana as a reader. Ana's story illustrates what may be possible for English Language Learning students in an RTI model that is thoughtfully implemented by professional educators and the risk of over-relying on RTI policy to meet the needs of English Language Learning students when classroom teachers lack a strong understanding of "the interaction between

linguistic, cognitive, and academic development” and when little is known about “the unique cultural and linguistic abilities” of each ELL (NCRTI, 2010b, p.1).

The focus for this study is based in my experiences as an elementary classroom and reading teacher. Over the course of six years, I found myself teaching in a number of different states, districts, and elementary schools. While there were many similarities in policies and curricula and assessments, there were also a number of surprising differences in the ways in which districts, schools, and individual teachers took up national and state literacy policies. I often wondered how children’s home and school literacy experiences and identities were influenced by classroom curriculum and instruction that was often tied to ideas of what policies or “research” assumed was best instruction rather than considering what educators and parents really wanted for the students as readers. I often wondered if students, both my highly successful and struggling readers, were learning “because of” or “in spite of” my classroom reading instruction.

As a second grade classroom teacher who was required to implement specific literacy curricula and assessments in the core, Tier I RTI setting, I believed that the literacy instruction I was required to implement by my school district and elementary school ignored a rich body of literacy research as well as the unique needs and interests of my students. I witnessed how the ways in which my school district framed RTI policy and the literacy curricula and assessments associated with it impacted the literacy experiences of students. The experience of one particular student, David, has remained with me. David was a second grade student who tested below grade level in reading on a standardized assessment three times during the school year. As a result, he was required to participate in a scripted, direct instruction reading intervention outside of the regular

classroom multiple times a day throughout the year. This intervention curriculum was not consistent with classroom curriculum. In addition, this reading intervention was implemented by a first-year special education teacher who lacked training and expertise in reading. Although his mother, a reading specialist, and I did not agree that the assessment was an accurate measure of David's reading ability or that the direct instruction intervention was in David's best interest, our hands were tied. David struggled to make sufficient progress throughout the year and remained labeled as a struggling reader.

As a result of my personal teaching experiences with RTI policy in the core, Tier I classroom setting, I was expecting to conduct this research study in a school district and elementary school that implemented RTI policy and associated literacy curricula and assessments in standardized, inauthentic ways that limited children's school reading experiences. I am pleased to present school settings and data that challenged my initial assumptions. While Woodland Elementary, where the data for this study was collected, was not perfect, overall the school district, school, and classroom in which I observed the focal children learning to read were positive places for literacy learning. I found it meaningful to be a researcher in the classroom of a knowledgeable and professional teacher whose instructional choices and opinions I respected. I am proud to present data from a classroom that has the potential to empower schools and teachers to think carefully about the literacy curricula and assessments they implement. I am also pleased to focus on the experiences and perspectives of children, a perspective that is so often missing in educational research. The majority of research in schools has been on

“children as the objects of research rather than children as subjects” (Greene & Hill, 2005, p.1).

The following questions provided the focus for this research study:

- How do children of various reading abilities experience learning to read in a classroom defined by RTI policy?
  - What reading instruction and assessment practices are implemented in classrooms when schools implement RTI?
  - How do children describe and conceptualize their reading experiences in a classroom defined by RTI?

## **Chapter 1: Literature Review**

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) was signed into law. IDEA introduced Response to Intervention (RTI) as a means of providing early intervention for children who are underperforming in school as well as a method for identifying children with learning disabilities. RTI has now become a major intervention policy implemented in North American schools. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I will provide a brief overview on RTI as a literacy policy, including RTI for English Language Learners, and present research on RTI and literacy in school, classroom, and intervention settings. Then, I will describe literacy programs and assessment tools common in RTI settings that present combinations of the following approaches: progress monitoring, responsive instruction, use of leveled texts, and computerized components. Finally, I will describe the research on children's home and school experiences of literacy learning to identify current gaps in this area of research.

### **A Brief Overview: RTI as a Literacy Policy**

In 2004, IDEA introduced RTI language for identifying whether a child has a specific learning disability by requiring states to use “a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention” (Federal Register, 2006, p. 46786). Below, I will examine the specific language used in the law to understand what is and what is not expected of assessments and instruction.

Within RTI, measures of student potential (IQ) are replaced by the evaluation of a performance relative to a defined academic standard (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008). The law goes on to state that it may only be determined that a child has a specific learning disability if the child does not make sufficient progress to meet age or grade-level

standards when provided with appropriate instruction for the child's age or grade level or research-based interventions (Federal Register, 2006). In the process, it also must be determined "that underachievement . . . is not due to lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math" (Federal Register, 2006, p. 46787). This requires that data is used to demonstrate the child was provided appropriate instruction in regular education and intervention settings prior to the referral process and that data is used to document ongoing assessments of achievement that reflect student progress during instruction (Federal Register, 2006).

IDEA legislation requires regular progress monitoring, data to inform instructional decisions, and data to determine the effectiveness of interventions. It does not specify the nature and frequency of assessments (Johnston, 2011). Much of RTI assessment is progress monitoring (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), as practitioners are encouraged to use assessment to guide instructional decisions and identify students with specific learning disabilities.

IDEA legislation also mandates the use of scientific, research-based interventions and access to appropriate instruction in the regular classroom by qualified personnel (Federal Reserve, 2006). As with assessment, the law does not specify the nature of instruction or interventions (Johnston, 2010a).

Individual states adapted their own guidelines for RTI based on the federal policy. While many states chose to use a three-tiered model to depict the levels of instructional intensity based on student needs, the state of Wisconsin, which is where this research study was conducted, created a circular model to capture the implementation of RTI. Wisconsin's model for RTI includes the systematic interaction of three elements at

varying levels of intensity based on student responsiveness: high quality instruction that is “standards-based, data driven, and research-based” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 9), balanced assessment that is on-going and includes multiple measures, and collaboration between educators, families, and communities. Culturally responsive practices, defined as, practices that “account for and adapt to the broad diversity of race, language, and culture” (p. 5) should be evident within each element. Individual districts may choose their own structure for organizing their RTI system based on local resources and needs. A student can only be identified for special education in Wisconsin through the process of RTI (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010).

### **English Language Learners and RTI**

English Language Learners (ELLs) in schools across the United States are a rapidly growing population (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010). While the majority of ELLs speak Spanish as their first language, it is important to remember that ELLs represent a diverse population that includes a variety of languages, ethnicities, nationalities, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Klingner, Soltero-Gonzalez, & Lesaux, 2010). In addition, second-language acquisition is not a linear process. English Language Learners vary in their language proficiency as they acquire English (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Klingner et al., 2010). Below I provide a brief overview of RTI as a way to provide ELLs with high-quality, appropriate instruction that is culturally and linguistically responsive (Klingner et al., 2010).

An RTI system has the potential to benefit English Language Learners by “taking into account students’ English language proficiency, academic proficiency, previous

educational experiences, and cultural background” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p.14). It is suggested that when applying an RTI framework with English Language Learners teachers have a strong understanding of “the interaction between linguistic, cognitive, and academic development” as well as “the unique cultural and linguistic abilities” of each of their English Language Learners so that “evaluation of ELLs can be applied equitably and appropriately to produce the development, growth, and high achievement desired for ELLs” (NCRTI, 2010b, p.1).

Teachers need to provide ELLs with culturally and linguistically responsive instruction and assessments in learning environments that view students’ diversity as assets. Literacy instruction needs to “build on and expand students’ existing oral language competencies in English to support literacy learning and content knowledge” (Klingner et al., 2010, p. 145). ELLs need daily opportunities to develop their oral language through differentiated instruction and instruction that is responsive to and builds on their home language, culture, and interests (Klingner et al., 2010).

Assessments must be varied and need to include a comprehensive assessment system with measures of oral language and vocabulary. Those educators reviewing assessment and progress monitoring data should have “sufficient knowledge and expertise in second-language acquisition, culturally responsive instruction, and if possible, bilingual education” (Klingner et al., 2010, p.143). Parents should also be actively involved in decision-making processes (Klingner et al., 2010).

### **Research on Effective Systemic Approaches and RTI**

Johnston (2010b) explained, “many approaches to intervention are piecemeal in that they try to set up a separate RTI program as an add-on, with little relation to other

parts of the school system” (p. 333). This is problematic for students and teachers alike as there is little consistency between classroom and intervention curricula and teachers lack learning communities in which they can work together (Johnston, 2010b). Below I examine effective systemic approaches, with a focus on RTI approaches, to understand how preventing students from experiencing reading difficulties requires whole-school reform.

International researchers, McNaughton and Lai (2009), described the Learning Schools Model used to help schools in New Zealand meet educational challenges in reading comprehension. The Learning Schools model is based on the following key principals: teachers are treated as experts and seen as the key to school change; instructional practices are based on evidence of teaching and learning and a range of assessments are used to guide instruction; professional learning communities are comprised of a variety of experts in the school and community that engage in collective inquiry; partnerships between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are focused on improving teaching and learning; teacher leadership is encouraged; existing reading comprehension approaches are modified to be more effective instead of implementing a new program for reading comprehension; teachers plan, observe, and reflect together over time. The researchers noted that this model has been implemented and replicated across three clusters of schools over more than five years. The researchers also emphasize that in order for a school to truly be effective there needs to be a strong home and school relationship.

Alvarez and Mehan (2006) also describe a systematic approach for struggling students in high school. Instead of providing students with intervention programs, their

intervention is to restructure the high school with rigorous college preparatory courses that have engaging curriculums and scaffolds to support student success including smaller classes, longer blocks of classes, a longer school year, after-school tutoring, and professional development for teachers to collaborate. The first graduating class had 100% of students set to attend colleges, including prestigious 4-year colleges as of Fall 2004.

Pressley, Gaskins, Solic, & Collins (2006) similarly documented factors in one school that influenced the high achievement of students ages 6-15 previously identified as at risk in reading. The results were found to be: a well-trained staff that takes part in professional development and provides intense, personalized instruction, as well as parental involvement. The literacy processes in place at the school were evidence-based instruction for word recognition, spelling, writing, vocabulary and comprehension strategies. There was consistency in the literacy strategies taught across grade levels and the instruction was found to be motivating for students, as instruction was scaffolded for academic success and students were taught to be self-determined and collaborative learners.

As previously discussed, the most common structure for implementing RTI has been a three-tiered framework (Dorn & Henderson, 2010). Generally, the first tier is quality instruction and progress monitoring within the general classroom using the core curriculum (Klinger & Edwards, 2006). All students are expected to receive high quality core instruction, which is expected to be effective for about 80% of the students (NCRTI, 2010a). The second and third tiers include additional intensive intervention support either in or outside of the classroom in a small group or one-to-one settings for students

who have not made adequate progress as assessed using regular progress monitoring and assessments (Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009). Dorn and Schubert (2008) argue that while the tiered approach is a positive step for an RTI approach, it may be problematic for students struggling the most because they may have to wait too long to receive the most intensive-Tier 3 intervention. In addition, the traditional tiered model is more about doing the same thing with more intensity (Dorn & Henderson, 2010). The researchers introduced the Comprehensive Intervention (CIM) as an RTI approach with multiple layers of intervention that can be adjusted if the student is not progressing. Within the CIM approach, all teachers are intervention teachers because all teachers are using data in systematic ways to respond to the needs of students. The most intense intervention is delivered up front to students with the highest need instead of waiting for struggling readers to move through tiers of instruction. Less intensive interventions are provided in small-groups for other struggling readers. Interventions are expected to be dynamic and interactive. CIM recognizes Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993) as the best, intensive early intervention, with small-group interventions for children of lesser need. Individual and small-group interventions align with classroom curriculum and there is an emphasis on professional development, assessment, and teacher collaboration. The CIM approach has been replicated and sustained in a variety of contexts and with diverse student populations over 15 years. This model “is a conceptual framework for aligning interventions across classroom and supplemental programs, ensuring consistency for our most fragile learners” (Dorn & Schubert, 2008, p.356).

To move away from “quick fixes” (Johnston 2010b, p. 333) in RTI implementation, it is recommended that schools adopt a systemic approach to

intervention. Effective systemic approaches emphasize the shared characteristics of teacher collaboration, professional development, responsive teaching, data-driven decision-making, and alignment between classroom and intervention curricula.

### **Research on High-Quality, Tier I Classroom Literacy Instruction**

Within RTI, all students are expected to receive high quality core instruction (NCRTI, 2010). As Johnston (2010b) explains, this is a key component of RTI because “if regular classroom instruction were optimal for each child, few if any children would find themselves handicapped by learning disabilities. If that happened, we would avoid the complications of interventions” (p. 27). Below I will examine the current research on high-quality classroom literacy instruction-Tier I classroom instruction in an RTI framework, and identify gaps in the research.

Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Allington, Block, Morrow, Tracey et al. (2001) studied the characteristics and strategies of five first grade classrooms, selected based on high academic engagement and classroom literacy performances. The teaching of the most effective teachers included: excellent classroom management; students encouraged to be independent, self-regulated learners; a positive, cooperative environment; a lot of teaching happening in whole and small groups with appropriate scaffolding to keep students challenged but not frustrated; a large amount of skills instruction often in response to the needs of a reader or writer and balanced with holistic reading and writing (students are doing meaningful work not low-level workbook exercises). This includes explicit instruction of word-recognition skills and comprehension strategies. This study documented that effective instruction in first grade classrooms involved balancing multiple components. Pressley (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2000) stated that “if there

is one important message I have learned from exemplary classroom teachers, it's that they incorporate strategies instruction and other effective approaches into their ongoing teaching. . . you never see these teachers following a script; they are consistently responsive to children's emerging literacy needs" (p. 6).

Allington (2010) similarly reviewed the characteristics of effective literacy instruction based on his and others' research on the characteristics of exemplary teachers. He argues that "expertise matters" (p. 29) and that effective teachers provided extensive time for students to read and write, children had a large supply of books with appropriate complexity, teachers actively modeled and demonstrated strategies good readers use without the use of scripted programs, conversational classroom talk was encouraged and supported, reading and writing tasks were longer and involved student choice instead of using worksheets, and student work was evaluated on effort and improvement rather than achievement. Allington (2010) also noted that a few of the exemplary teachers he studied credited their school districts for supporting their professional development and for providing them with space to make choices for the teaching and learning in their classrooms. He emphasized that his findings documented that exemplary classroom teaching is responsive to students and cannot be packed in a program. He called on education professionals to help create schools where every teacher can become more of an expert.

Exploring the school and classroom factors influencing primary-grade reading achievement in moderate to high poverty schools, Taylor, Pearson, Peterson and Rodriguez (2003) led a research study involving 14 schools with 2 teachers in each of grades K-3. Teachers were observed 5 times during an hour of reading instruction and 2

low and 2 average readers from each class were tested in the fall and in the spring on measures of reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Statistically significant school factors included strong partnerships with parents, systemic assessment of student progress, and strong teacher collaboration and communication. Statistically significant teacher factors included time spent in small-group instruction, time spent in independent reading, students' on task behaviors, and strong home and school communication. Reading was a priority at the most effective skills with the most accomplished teachers implementing higher-level questions in text discussions and supplementing explicit phonics instruction with teaching strategies for applying phonics to students' daily reading.

Also exploring the school and classroom factors that influenced children's reading, Turner (1995) documented how literacy contexts, that is the tasks identified in early reading instruction, influence young children's behaviors during reading and writing instruction and how those experiences influence students' conceptions about literacy. Eighty-four first grade children in six classrooms using basal reading instruction and six in classrooms using whole language contexts were observed during daily literacy instruction. Researchers documented the types of literacy tasks children completed and children's use of motivated behaviors. Children were interviewed after observations. It was documented that the strongest predictor of motivation was the literacy task. During tasks in which children had control, there were opportunities for challenge, higher order thinking was required, interests were satisfied, and there were opportunities for collaboration, children used more reading strategies, were focused for longer, and were more attentive to the task.

Research on exemplary classroom teachers and high-quality classroom literacy instruction identifies a number of factors influencing student achievement including: having time to read, small group instruction, effective classroom management, home and school partnerships, responsive teaching, and collaborative learning environments where conversations and student choice are encouraged. While there is a large amount of research on RTI and literacy interventions, which will be discussed below, there is a lack of research on high-quality Tier 1 classroom literacy instruction specific to RTI settings.

### **Research on RTI and Literacy Interventions**

Research studies in RTI settings tend to be experimental studies in psychology and special education that focus on measuring children's responses to instruction in intervention settings (Johnston, 2011). As mentioned above, a number of studies (i.e., O'Connor, Fulmer, Harty, and Bell, 2005; Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider, and Sweeney, 2008; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, and Fanuele, 2006; Wanzek and Vaughn, 2008) have documented that reading interventions in RTI settings can positively affect literacy skills. In these studies, it has been common to compare the scores of basic literacy skills before and after a specific intervention to show student progress as well as the effectiveness of a specific intervention on the acquisition of specific literacy skills. One study (Scanlon et al., 2008) demonstrates that responsive teaching interventions by highly trained teachers can positively affect literacy outcomes for students. It also should be documented that one study (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008) noted a number of "difficulties" (p. 139) with students during the intervention. Specifically, students experienced fatigue and behavior difficulties as a result of participating in certain experimental research studies on interventions. Below I will

briefly examine some of the current research on reading interventions in RTI settings and identify gaps in RTI research.

Focusing on a tiered approach to reading interventions in kindergarten through third grade, O'Connor, Fulmer, Harty, and Bell (2005) found overall improvement in reading abilities and a decrease in special education classification for students previously classified as at risk. The findings revealed that the tiered instruction was an effective approach to improving reading of so-called at risk students in kindergarten through third grade (O'Connor et al., 2005).

Additional studies reported the effectiveness of early reading interventions for preventing reading difficulties in at-risk students. For instance, Vellutino et al. (2006) concluded that early and long-term reading difficulties in most children at risk could be prevented if children are identified early and interventions focused on establishing foundational literacy skills. They further contended that early and long-term reading difficulties in most children are caused by lack of experience and instructional deficits rather than cognitive deficits.

Scanlon et al. (2008) also described the reading growth of at-risk kindergarteners assigned to three different intervention groups. The researchers examined the effectiveness of teacher professional development only, intervention only, and both teacher professional development and intervention. The *Interactive Strategies Approach* (Scanlon, Anderson, & Sweeney, 2010) was implemented as an intervention for all three groups. The lesson format included reading books, learning about letters and letter sounds, phonemic awareness, and writing. Classroom teachers assigned to professional development participated in a 3-day workshop on the *Interactive Strategies Approach*

and were encouraged to analyze and use this approach to respond to the instructional needs of students. The findings suggest that all three intervention approaches were effective in helping to reduce the incidence of children being identified as having early reading difficulties. The researchers emphasized that professional development rather than a highly prescriptive program was effective.

Within a tiered framework it has been a common assumption that increasing the frequency of an intervention will increase its effect (Johnston, 2010b; Johnston, 2011). Wanzek and Vaughn (2008) challenged this assumption. They analyzed struggling readers' responses to reading interventions. First grade students identified as needing interventions by curriculum-based assessment measures received an intervention either once a day for 30 minutes or twice a day for 30 minutes. The researchers documented all students in the intervention groups as demonstrating accelerated learning over time; increasing the amount of instructional time did not affect learning. It was also documented that students in these scripted, experimental intervention settings with tutors, experienced fatigue and behavior difficulties.

Existing studies in RTI settings focus on intervention settings and demonstrate that responsive and comprehensive literacy interventions in small group or one-to one settings by teachers trained in reading instruction techniques can improve the reading abilities and prevent reading difficulties in struggling readers. There remains a gap in research on Tier I classroom settings and on the experiences and perspectives of children in RTI settings. While claiming to be responsive, existing studies do not capture the diverse language and literacy experiences of children relative to RTI experience, literacy identity, and background experiences. In particular, the perspectives of children are

missing. It is also important to note that in experimental studies child participants have been known to experience a large amount of stress (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008). More needs to be understood about how children experience literacy in classrooms defined by RTI so that instruction and assessment can better support the diverse language and literacy needs and abilities of students.

### **Common Literacy Approaches in Response to RTI**

While the law requires “appropriate,” scientific, research-based” instruction by “qualified personnel” (Federal Register, 2006, p. 46786) it leaves specific decisions regarding methods, frequency of instruction, and assessment up to states and local school districts (Johnston, 2010a). Wisconsin guidelines emphasize that “RTI is something you do and not necessarily something you buy” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 7). However many school districts in Wisconsin, and across the country, have invested in pre-packaged curriculum programs and standardized assessments in response to RTI policy requirements of instructional practices that are research-based and regular progress monitoring (Johnston, 2010b). A number of these programs and assessments raise a number of concerns about the teaching and learning in classroom and intervention settings. Lipson and Wixson (2010) emphasize that there is not one approach that is best for all readers and that multiple approaches to RTI have been validated by research.

Literacy programs and assessment tools implemented in RTI settings often present combinations of the following four literacy approaches: 1.) progress monitoring, 2.) responsive instruction, 3.) use of leveled texts, and 4.) computerized components. First, progress monitoring is understood as the ongoing assessment of students’ performances over time for the purpose of using this information to guide instruction

(Clay, 1993). It can vary in the reading skills and strategies it assesses as well as the informal or formal, standardized nature of the assessments. IDEA legislation requires regular progress monitoring (Johnston, 2011). Second, responsive instruction is defined as the practice of tailoring instruction to support the individual learning needs of students. It can be based on informal teacher observations and/or more formal assessments such as running records of students' reading. Within RTI, students must be provided appropriate instruction in the regular classroom and in intervention settings (Federal Register, 2006). Data must be used to inform instructional decisions. (Johnston, 2011). Third, leveling refers to the practice of assigning levels to texts that represent their approximate level of difficulty (Brabham & Villaume, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1999) and enables the practice of matching books to readers (Calkins, 2001). The goal is to provide students with texts that provide a sufficient balance of support and challenge (Brabham & Villaume, 2002; Fry, 2002). Different text progressions use different criteria for leveling. In an RTI framework, providing differentiated instruction in both the classroom and in intervention settings is an important prerequisite to referring a child for special education services (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). Reading texts that gradually increase in difficulty has become a regular literacy practice in classrooms (Kontovourki, 2012) as a means of providing such differentiated instruction. Finally, literacy programs and assessment tools with computerized components provide standardized instruction such as reading passages with comprehension questions and/or standardized assessment data on individual students' reading skills and/or abilities. Computerized approaches are a common form of assessment and instruction in response to RTI both in the general classroom and in intervention settings because they either provide curriculum for students, meeting the

IDEA requirement of providing appropriate instruction (Federal Register, 2006) and/or they provide a large amount of assessment data on the reading performance of individual students that can be used to progress monitor students.

Below I briefly describe and analyze widely used literacy programs that exemplify combinations of these four characteristics: Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993), Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI; Fountas & Pinnell, 2010), and the Interactive Strategies Approach (ISA; Scanlon, Anderson, & Sweeney, 2010). I will then briefly explore and critique two assessment tools that have been applied to RTI settings: Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS; The University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2013), and the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993).

### **Literacy Programs Used in RTI Settings**

Literacy programs used in RTI settings often include assessment tools to monitor student progress as well as curriculum that may be responsive to student learning and leveled texts to scaffold instruction. Below I briefly describe and analyze three common literacy programs used in RTI settings: Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993), Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI; Fountas & Pinnell, 2010), and the Interactive Strategies Approach (ISA; Scanlon, Anderson, & Sweeney, 2010).

**Reading Recovery.** Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993) is a research-based literacy intervention program developed by Marie Clay in New Zealand over 30 years ago for first graders with extreme early reading and writing difficulties. This program is characterized by daily lessons that are responsive to the individual needs of students, students' reading of leveled texts, and daily progress monitoring of reading and writing

behaviors. Teachers are trained in an initial yearlong training and receive ongoing professional development to deliver this supplemental instruction. Working with individual students for 12-20 weeks at a time, teachers follow a daily 30-minute lesson format that consists of reading familiar books, reading yesterday's new book and taking a running record, word work, writing a story, assembling a cut-up story, and reading a new book (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2014). Progress monitoring, responsive instruction, and use of leveled texts operate in Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993).

*Analysis.* Reading Recovery was designed by Marie Clay (1993) to be responsive to the unique skills and abilities of struggling readers. Over the past 30 years numerous research studies have reviewed Reading Recovery. Recently, three national agencies funded through the Department of Education have reviewed Reading Recovery research studies they deemed used "rigorous" standards in their studies: What Works Clearinghouse, National Center on Intensive Intervention, and National Center on Response to Intervention.

The What Works Clearinghouse identified four studies (May et al., 2013; Pinnell, DeFord, & Lyons, 1988; Pinnell, Lyons, DeFord, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994; Schwartz, 2005) of Reading Recovery. Each of the four studies examined the effect of Reading Recovery on the reading skills of first-grade students randomly assigned to the intervention. In the most recent study (May et al., 2013), researchers found, and the WWC confirmed, Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993) to have a significant positive impact on the general reading achievement of struggling first grade readers and statistically significant positive impacts in the general reading achievement and reading comprehension domains.

The National Center on Intensive Intervention has currently identified three Reading Recovery research studies: Center, Wheldall, Freeman, Outhred, and McNaught (1995), Iversen and Tunmer (1993), and Schwartz (2005) as showing large effect size for students. Center et al. (1995) evaluated the effectiveness of Reading Recovery in 10 primary schools in New South Wales. Children were randomly assigned to either Reading Recovery or the typical reading intervention support provided to struggling readers. Students were tested using 8 measures: Burt Word Reading Test and the Clay Diagnostic Survey, Neale Analysis of Reading Ability, Passage Reading Test, Waddington Diagnostic Spelling Test, Phonemic Awareness Test, Syntactic Awareness Test, and Word Attack Skills Test. The researchers documented that students in Reading Recovery performed better on all tests measuring reading achievement. At 30 weeks there were no longer any differences between students in Reading Recovery and in the control group on 7 of the 8 measures.

Iversen and Tunmer's (1993) research study on Reading Recovery also demonstrated that Reading Recovery was effective in raising the reading performance of students. The focus of the study was on determining if the Reading Recovery program would be more effective for struggling first graders if it included systematic phonological recoding skills. Struggling first graders were divided into three groups of 32 students each: a Reading Recovery group, a modified Reading Recovery group that included systematic instruction in phonological recoding, and a standard intervention group. Findings indicated that students in both Reading Recovery groups met reading performance expectations necessary for exiting the program and those in the modified Reading Recovery group reached these levels of performance more quickly.

**Leveled Literacy Intervention.** Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) is a small-group supplemental literacy intervention developed by Fountas and Pinnell (2010) to be used with students who need intensive support to achieve grade level competency in reading. Similar to Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993), LLI (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010) includes leveled texts for students to individually read, progress monitoring of students' reading using running records, and responsive instruction as teachers need to tailor lesson plans to meet the individual needs of students. Each level from beginning reading in kindergarten to competency at the middle and secondary school level provides reading, writing, and word study practice as well as explicit skill and strategy instruction and ongoing formative running record assessments. Teachers are encouraged to use professional judgment to tailor provided lesson plans to meet the specific needs of students as identified by ongoing observations and running record analysis. That is, the authors provide suggested language, texts, and word study activities teachers may use during the lessons but this is not intended to be a scripted program as teachers need to match readers with books and choose skill and strategy lessons that meet the individual needs of students.

*Analysis.* There are limited research studies that explore the effectiveness of LLI. One study by Ransford-Kaldon, Flynt, and Ross (2011) documented the effectiveness of LLI in positively impacting student literacy achievement when compared with classroom instruction alone for economically disadvantaged K-2 students who were struggling with literacy achievement. Students in their study were assessed using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark System and DIBELS. These scores were used to place struggling readers in LLI small groups of three that met daily for 30 minutes for 18 weeks. These students

also received their regular classroom literacy instruction. Researchers found that all student participants in the LLI program across K-2 grade levels made greater gains than those receiving only classroom instruction. Student participants finished on par with grade level goals. This study demonstrates that LLI can be an effective literacy intervention for economically disadvantaged students in K-2. Leveled Literacy Intervention (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010) includes progress monitoring, responsive instruction, and use of leveled texts.

**Interactive Strategies Approach.** The Interactive Strategies Approach (Scanlon, Anderson, & Sweeney, 2010) is an approach to preventing reading difficulties that is grounded in providing intervention and classroom teachers with professional development to help develop their knowledge about the potential causes of reading difficulties and how these difficulties might be addressed through responsive instruction. The Interactive Strategies Approach (Scanlon, Anderson, & Sweeney, 2010) encourages teachers to develop their instruction around five goals that can be pursued in whole class, small group, and one-to-one settings through read-aloud, shared reading, and supported reading and writing. Goals include: developing students motivation to read and write, developing students' understanding of the relationship between printed and spoken language; developing a large number of sight words; developing vocabulary and oral language; and developing comprehension skills and strategies (Scanlon & Anderson, 2010). The Interactive Strategies Approach (Scanlon, Anderson, & Sweeney, 2010) has been tested in a number of studies and includes progress monitoring, responsive instruction, and the use of leveled texts.

*Analysis.* The Interactive Strategies Approach (Scanlon, Anderson, & Sweeney, 2010) has been tested in a number of studies that have found it to be effective in reducing the number of primary grade children who experience reading difficulties. Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, Small, Pratt, Chen et al. (1996) documented that the Interactive Strategies Approach was an effective intervention when provided to first-grade struggling readers in a one-to-one setting. The next major study (Scanlon, Vellutino, Small, Fanuele, & Sweeney, 2005) revealed that when the Interactive Strategies Approach was provided to struggling readers in kindergarten through a small group format, the number of students who qualified as struggling readers in first grade was reduced. More recently, Scanlon et al. (2008) documented that when first grade classroom teachers were assigned to professional development on the Interactive Strategies Approach and were encouraged to analyze and respond to the instructional needs of students using this approach, the incidence of children being identified as having early reading difficulties was reduced.

Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993), Leveled Literacy Intervention (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010), and the Interactive Strategies Approach (Scanlon, Anderson, & Sweeney, 2010) are three widely used literacy programs in RTI settings. These three programs present combinations of progress monitoring, responsive instruction, and the use of leveled texts. Recent studies have also analyzed the effectiveness of each in meeting the needs of struggling readers.

### **Assessments Used in RTI Settings**

In addition to programs that include assessments to monitor student progress in RTI settings, a range of assessment tools have been applied to RTI settings. These include Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS; University of

Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2013) and the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993). Below I describe and analyze these assessment tools commonly used in RTI settings.

**Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills.** Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) (University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2013) is an example of a screening tool that was designed to identify children in need of additional reading support but is also commonly used as a progress monitoring tool in RTI settings. The University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning (2013) defines the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) as a set of standardized procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skill from grades K-6. These were designed to be one-minute formative fluency measures used for universal screening to monitor children's progress in the development of the literacy skills emphasized by the National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). When used as recommended by its developers at the University of Oregon, the results are said to help practitioners identify children in need of additional literacy instruction in order to become proficient readers and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions for those children receiving support (Kaminski et al., 2007). Using standardized administration and scoring procedures, DIBELS' subtests provide indicators of phonological awareness, alphabetic principle and phonics, fluency and accuracy with connected text, vocabulary, and comprehension.

**Analysis.** As DIBELS has "woven itself into the fabric of early literacy policies and pedagogy" (Allington & Pearson, 2011, p. 70), criticisms have included that it does not provide instructionally useful information and is being incorrectly used to guide

instruction (Allington & Pearson, 2011). Riedel (2007) examined the assessment results from first grade students who were administered the DIBELS subtests and maintained that the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) subtest, in which the number of words a child read and retells correctly are documented, proved to be a good predictor of reading comprehension at the end of first and second grade and that the remaining subtests were less accurate predictors of reading comprehension. Riedel (2007) suggests that if the goal of using DIBELS is to identify students at risk of having reading comprehension difficulty, then it is not necessary to administer all of the DIBELS subtests, as by the middle of first grade the ORF subtest provides the best indicator. The other DIBELS subtests are less accurate predictors of reading comprehension. In contrast, Pressley, Hilden, and Shankland (2005) investigated what could be learned about a student's reading from the ORF subtest at the end of third grade and concluded that DIBELS did not predict reading performance on other assessments. They argue that it is a better measure of who reads quickly than of who comprehends. Similarly, Valencia et al.'s (2010) study raised concerns about the widespread use of assessing oral reading fluency by documenting the number of words read correctly per minute (wcpm) and then using this data to make high stakes decisions. For example, it is common for schools to have students read aloud standardized passages for one minute as the teacher notes decoding errors. This produces a wcpm score, which is then used as an indicator of oral reading fluency. Unfortunately, measures of wcpm only take into account indicators of accuracy and rate of reading. Proficient readers, as the researchers noted, use more than these two skills to fluently decode and comprehend texts. Assessments of oral reading fluency that included multiple indicators of rate, accuracy, prosody, and comprehension, provided a

clearer picture of oral reading fluency and acted as a stronger predictor of overall comprehension.

**The Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement.** The Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993) is the primary assessment tool for Reading Recovery and was created to help teachers observe young children as they begin to read and write (Clay, 1993). The assessment tool contains six measures or observation tasks: running records, word list, letter identification, Concepts About Print, writing vocabulary, and hearing and recording sounds in words (Clay, 1993). Running records provide a way to document a child's reading behaviors as the teacher records and analyzes everything a child says and does as he or she reads. Letter identification inventories the printed upper and lowercase letters a child knows as the child is asked to identify letters by name, sound, or a word beginning with the target letter. Concepts About Print is a check on what a child has learned about how text is printed as the child is asked questions that require him or her to show what he or she is attending to in a book. Word Lists sample a child's reading vocabulary as the child reads from a list of words commonly found in first grade texts. The writing task asks the child to write all the words he or she knows to provide an inventory of words the child can control in writing. Hearing Sounds in Words provides knowledge of the child's phonological awareness and phonic knowledge as the child records a dictated sentence (Clay, 1993; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). These tasks provide a standardized way to screen and monitor students' performances over time as the teacher summarizes what she has observed the child knows and can do and uses this information to guide her instruction.

*Analysis.* Schwartz (2005) investigated the effectiveness and efficiency of the Reading Recovery intervention and specifically, the efficiency of the Observation Survey to identify children for early intervention services. He found that the Observation Survey correctly identified students at risk for reading failure. Exploring the Observation Survey more in depth, Denton, Ciancio, & Fletcher (2006) evaluated the validity, reliability, and utility of five of the six subtests of the Observation Survey, including letter identification, word reading, writing vocabulary, hearing and recording sounds in words, and text reading. The researchers found that with some limitations, the Observation Survey can be validly implemented to assess components of early reading development.

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2013) and the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993) are two widely used assessments in RTI settings. The assessments present combinations of progress monitoring and use of leveled texts. DIBELS (University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2013) also uses computerized components to progress monitor. The Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993) was designed to provide a way for teachers to screen and monitor young children's progress as they begin to read and write. It also provides teachers with information they can use to guide instruction that is responsive to students (Clay, 1993). While DIBELS was also designed as a tool to screen and monitor children in need of additional reading support but has been criticized for being incorrectly used to progress monitor students and for not providing teachers with instructionally useful information to guide their instruction (Allington & Pearson, 2011).

**Conclusions: Literacy Approaches and RTI**

The following literacy programs and assessment tools exemplify combinations of progress monitoring, responsive instruction, use of leveled texts, and computerized components: Reading Recovery and the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993), Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI; Fountas & Pinnell, 2010), the Interactive Strategies Approach (Scanlon, Anderson & Sweeney, 2010), and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS; The University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2013). While RTI policy requires the use of regular progress monitoring and scientific, research based interventions (Federal Reserve, 2006) it is important to remember that people use the term “scientifically based” research to mean different things. The term scientific research-based does not mean that the particular practice or product has been tested in a research study-only that it has been designed to be consistent with research findings (Duke & Martin, 2011). It is uncommon for adopted school reading programs to have been evaluated in true experiments despite what is often claimed by policy makers and publishers (Pressley, 2003).

If RTI is understood as a policy meant to identify how to improve instruction in order to reduce the number of children identified as having reading difficulties then assessments need to be formative, valid, and reliable and instruction needs to be comprehensive and responsive to the individual needs of students. Reading Recovery and the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993), the Interactive Strategies Approach, and a knowledgeable implementation of Leveled Literacy Intervention (Fountas and Pinnell, 2010) are examples of widely used programs that meet these criteria. It is important that administrators and teachers understand the language of RTI policy and implement practices that meet the demands of the policy in ways that are

responsive and sensitive to the needs and abilities of their students. As Genishi and Haas Dyson (2009) noted, there is often a disconnect between the diversity of our students and the “uniformity, homogenization, and regimentation of classroom practices, from prekindergarten onward” (p.4). While few studies have looked directly at children’s perspectives and experiences of the literacy assessments and practices schools implement, especially in regards to RTI, below I present the current research on children’s home and school experiences of literacy learning to explore what research has revealed. This provides a framework for my current study on the literacy experiences and perspectives of children in a classroom defined by RTI policy and provides evidence for the importance of instruction and assessment methods that are responsive and comprehensive to meet the diverse abilities of students.

### **Children’s Home and School Experiences of Literacy Learning**

Below I review the research on children’s experiences of literacy learning at home and in the general classroom. These studies are significant to my research on children’s experiences of learning to read in the core, Tier I classroom setting because they reveal that effective literacy instruction builds on the unique knowledge and experiences children bring to the classroom and includes authentic and meaningful literacy opportunities for students. In these studies, literacy is understood as a “message-getting, problem-solving activity” (Clay, 1991, p.6), not only a set of skills to be mastered. Among the conclusions of the studies is that children need authentic and meaningful opportunities to engage in reading that recognize and build on the unique knowledge and experiences they bring to the classroom (Doake, 1985; Taylor, 1993). For example, Mason (1980) documented the role of parental guidance and home reading on four-year

old children's knowledge of letters, words, and learning to read. The researcher used parental surveys on home reading and children's knowledge about letters and words as well as regular assessment of children's word and letter knowledge and reading interest to conclude that children who were guided at home to attend to letters, signs, and labels and are given opportunities to read, spell, and print learned important knowledge about reading before going to school.

Doake (1985) also discussed the importance of children's home literacy experiences as well as providing authentic and meaningful opportunities for children to engage in reading. The researcher documented the reading-like behavior that develops when preschool children and their parents read together. Among the observations were that while children participated in reading in a variety of ways, reading for meaning dominated children's efforts. Among the recommendations were that children be engaged in daily reading of real books in the classroom and in the home.

Taylor (1993) also referenced the importance of building on the home experiences of children and used the writing and drawing of primary grade students to argue against deficit views of children. She concluded that educators need to learn from their students and recognize the knowledge and experiences children bring to the classroom in order to understand how children construct their literacies.

Similarly, Kendrick and McKay (2004) noted that drawings provided ways for children to communicate their diverse and meaningful literacy knowledge and experiences and that these multifaceted ways of knowing need to be valued in the classroom. The researchers used drawings to investigate children's perceptions of literacy in and out of school. They led first and second grade students in 60-minute

discussion/drawing sessions about literacies in the lives of the students. Following the literacy discussion/drawing sessions, students individually met with a researcher to explain their drawings. Common themes and patterns found in children's drawings included: literacy events in home and family contexts, such as maintaining relationships with absent family members; imagined literacies and identities, such as imagining oneself as a future teacher and using literacy to teach the ABCs; and drawings as a way to demonstrate metalinguistic awareness about language and literacy, for example using thought bubbles to present what the student thinks about as he writes.

Genishi and Dyson (2009) also described how children's personal experiences in and out of school influenced their literacy tasks and identities. With a focus on writing, the researchers observed the writing of prekindergarten through second grade students and found that when provided with space to choose writing topics, students' everyday experiences, such as going to the library and personal relationships and the voices of cousins and friends were resources for school writing. That is, even with young children purpose is important in relation to text. The researchers argued that in addition to teacher guidance, children need "time, materials, and one another" (p. 105) to make writing relevant to their lives. Genishi and Dyson also explained that children need the opportunity to build on what they know, something that is not possible when teachers follow a scripted program and outcomes are expected to be the same for all children. The following study (Falchi & Siegel, 2014) documents the impact of such a program on the writing experiences of two English Language Learning students.

Falchi and Siegel (2014) analyzed the writing of one English Language Learning student in kindergarten and one English Language Learning student in second grade to

explore the impact of a writing curriculum on students' experiences of learning to write. The researchers analyzed the writing each student produced during writing workshop and observed the student/teacher writing conferences. The researchers concluded that because the focal students' writing did not match the scope and sequence of the school's writing curriculum and teacher observations and classroom assessments did not recognize the students' development, each was labeled as "at risk" for future literacy success. The analysis further concluded that children's experiences of learning to write were influenced by their unique knowledge and experiences and that teachers needed to recognize and value what children brought to school and provide opportunities for children to build on what they know.

Studies on the rich literacy experiences that children bring to the general classroom reveal important ideas about literacy learning that must be considered when designing instruction in RTI settings. That is, reading and writing tasks need to be authentic and purposeful for the child (Doake, 1985; Falchi & Siegel, 2014; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Taylor, 1993). This means teachers need to learn about their students and their families and avoid using scripted programs that ignore the diverse abilities and cultural backgrounds of students.

Many of the studies on children's experiences of literacy learning in school are quite dated and require the reader to infer about children's experiences from the researcher's observations. That is, there remains a lack of research that looks more directly at the literacy experiences and perspectives of children in school. More research must be conducted on the experiences and perspectives of children to understand how they experience literacy assessments and instruction. Systematic observations of children

experiencing literacy in RTI settings and detailed documentation of conversations (Taylor, 1993) with students about their literacy experiences, backgrounds, and identify would provide insight into the importance of authentic learning activities that build on the experiences and knowledge children bring to school and challenge uniform assessments and practices that ignore the diversity of children.

### **Conclusion**

The literacy practices and assessments that districts and schools implement are responsive to how districts and schools frame classroom-based RTI instruction (Johnston, 2010b). When research-based practices and programs are used to inform instruction, practitioners must be careful not to over generalize as a practice shown to be generally effective with children cannot be assumed to be effective for individual children experiencing difficulty in a different educational context (Johnston, 2010a). Therefore, it is essential when choosing instructional practices and interventions “to find out what works with whom, by whom, and in what contexts” (Klingner & Edwards, 2006, p. 110). Within RTI, all students are expected to receive high quality core instruction (NCRTI, 2010). Moving away from scripted, pre-packaged instruction may allow states and districts to place more emphasis on teacher expertise and responsive teaching that considers the context, abilities, and needs of the individual student (Johnston, 2010b). In this sense, if the child struggles to make adequate progress, the instructional practices would be evaluated before labeling the child. This could lead to a reduction in the number of children identified as having specific learning disabilities (Johnston, 2010a; Johnston, 2010b).

As Johnston (2010b) argues, if the goal of RTI is to reduce the number of children with reading difficulties then it is not enough to monitor student progress. Classroom teachers need instructionally relevant information about students' learning from formative and comprehensive assessments to implement instruction that is comprehensive and responsive to the individual needs of students. In this research study I explore how children of various reading abilities experienced learning to read in a classroom defined by RTI by examining the core, Tier I reading instruction and assessment practices they engaged in and how they described and conceptualized their experiences.

## **Chapter 2: A Theoretical Framework**

Phenomenology provided the theoretical framework for this research, as this study focused on developing knowledge and insight into how children of various reading abilities experienced the phenomenon of learning to read in the core, Tier I RTI classroom setting. Phenomenology is both a twentieth century school of philosophy and an approach to qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). Below I will provide a brief history of phenomenology as a philosophical approach, identify various constructs of hermeneutic phenomenology, and describe the following three dimensions of phenomenology that will guide my research of children's literacy experiences: exploring and bracketing of preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs; investigating the lived meaning of experience; and describing these findings through insightful, evocative descriptions.

Finally, I will explore research studies that have used phenomenology with children and argue for more research that focuses on children's perspectives and experiences in education.

### **A Brief Overview of Phenomenology**

Traced back to Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, phenomenology was founded as a philosophy and method for a reflective inquiry into the mind/consciousness (Danaher & Briod, 2005). Husserl thought of phenomenology in transcendental terms and emphasized its contribution as a pure, non-empirical discipline. Husserl argued that researchers in this tradition search for the "essential, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience" (Creswell, 1998, p.52). Husserl believed the researcher must bracket or suspend any previous

assumptions or biases when studying the phenomena in order to capture the meaning of the experience for the individual (Cerbone, 2006; Creswell, 1998). Martin Heidegger, a younger colleague of Husserl's, became an important voice in phenomenology by defining it as a study of what it means to be a human being not just a study of consciousness (Danaher & Briod, 2005).

Over time, different philosophical groups in the social sciences have embraced the general tenets of phenomenology and identified and described approaches to phenomenology including reflective/transcendental phenomenology, existential phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, psychological phenomenology and social phenomenology (Creswell, 1998). For the purposes of this study, a hermeneutical phenomenological approach will be adopted because it will allow me to study and describe the lived literacy experiences of children in RTI settings.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a descriptive and interpretive study of lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). Just as studies that involve unpacking the meaning of a literary text can be defined as hermeneutic accounts, so can describing and interpreting a person's lived experiences. Phenomenology emphasizes that the lived experience of the individual is situated within a sociocultural and historical world (Hammond, Howarth, and Keat, 1991) and that by studying the world as it is experienced, a deeper understanding of the meaning of our everyday experience will be revealed (Van Manen, 1990). A deeper understanding of the phenomena can lead to one acting with more thought and consideration in certain situations (Van Manen, 1990). The task of the phenomenologist, then, is to depict the essence or basic structure of lived experience (Merriam, 2009) through "insightful descriptions" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9), with the

understanding that any lived experience is more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal (Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological inquiry involves an interest in the concreteness (the ontic) and the essential nature (the ontological) of a lived experience—rather than experimentation or factual aspects (Van Manen, 1990). That is, phenomenology always asks, “What is the nature of the phenomenon as meaningfully experienced?” (p. 40). It is useful for studying affective and emotional human experiences (Merriam, 2009).

### **Dimensions of Phenomenology**

In order to investigate and depict the literacy experiences of children in the core, Tier I RTI classroom setting, the following three dimensions of phenomenological research were used to guide my work: exploring and bracketing of preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs; investigating the lived meaning of experience; and describing these findings through insightful, evocative descriptions. Below I explain how phenomenologists suggest incorporating these dimensions into phenomenological inquiry and I articulate how I used these in my research with children.

#### **Exploring and Bracketing of Preconceptions, Assumptions, and Beliefs**

It is suggested that when doing phenomenology, the researcher explores and brackets personal beliefs and experiences related to the phenomenon in order to both challenge oneself to explore the phenomenon deeply through the experiences of participants and to avoid unknowingly allowing preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs from impacting data collection and analysis (Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenologists suggest that the researcher explores his experiences with the phenomenon by writing about any direct personal experiences with or beliefs about the phenomenon prior to data

collection. By making one's experiences with the phenomenon explicit in writing, it is easier to then bracket them (Van Manen, 1990). Bracketing involves temporarily suspending, or staying fully aware of, these beliefs and assumptions during data collection. While the process of examining and bracketing one's preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs is subjective and the ability of anyone to completely bracket these is highly debated (Merriam, 2009), acknowledging one's preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs in writing can help the researcher develop an awareness of and more easily recognize when these personal experiences are influencing data collection (Van Manen, 1990). The goal of phenomenological inquiry is to accurately depict the experiences of the participants and this process allows the researcher to bracket their own view and thus increase the fidelity of the research (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995).

As a previous elementary school classroom teacher and reading teacher I experienced teaching and assessing students in RTI settings. Since I had direct experience with this phenomenon, prior to data collection I reflected in writing on my experiences with literacy teaching and learning in RTI settings to examine the dimensions of my experiences and to become fully aware of my preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs. My reflection included a description of the literacy professional development I received related to RTI, the literacy teaching and assessing I did in RTI settings including the curriculums, routines, and settings, my beliefs about how the teaching and assessing I was required to do impacted student learning, and particular children that have contributed to my views. It was important to articulate these experiences and beliefs prior to data collection and to revisit them often during my research. This helped me bracket, or remain fully aware of, my preconceptions, assumptions and beliefs, which

assisted me in maintaining fidelity toward my participants' stories and their understandings of their stories (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995); Danaher & Briod, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Van Manen, 1990).

### **Investigating the Lived Meaning of Experience**

Van Manen (1990) explains that lived meaning “refers to the way that a person experiences and understands his or her world as real and meaningful” (p. 183). Phenomenologists suggest interviewing and observing as useful methods for exploring lived experiences and the significance of these experiences for participants (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006; Van Manen, 1990). Seidman (2006) describes a three-interview series for in-depth, phenomenological interviewing with each participant. The focus of interview one is on the life history of the participant. The researcher asks the participant to tell as much as possible about him or herself up to the present time in regards to the topic of study. The goal is to understand the context of the participant's experience. By asking the participant “how” questions the participant can reconstruct and explain a number of events in his or her past related to the research topic. As Capps and Ochs (1995) wrote, “the subjective, multifaceted nature of narrative is critical to understanding how people perceive themselves and others in their world” (p. 21). In addition, Linde (1993) explained that “life stories express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way. They are also one very important means by which we communicate this sense of self and negotiate it with others” (p.3). Stories do not stand alone, “thus, when any new story is added to the repertoire of the life story, it must be related in some way to the themes of the other stories included in the life story, or at least it must not contradict them” (p. 25). The stories the participants tell and the ways they connect them will tell

about their experiences as readers. The focus of interview two is on the concrete details, not the opinions, of the participant's current lived experience in regards to the topic of study. The researcher may ask the participant to reconstruct a day in his or her school life, for example. Additional details can be elicited by asking for stories about the experience. The goal of the second interview is for the researcher to reconstruct the concrete details of the participant's experience. The focus of interview three is on the meaning of the experience for the participant. Participants are asked to reflect on the significance of their experience by considering how the various factors of their past and present situations interacted to bring them to where they are today. They may also reflect on where they will be in the future. The first two interviews establish the conditions for this third interview reflection. Seidman (2006) suggests a 90-minute interview format for each in order to stay focused on the topic as well as space from three days to a week apart in between a participant's interviews so he or she has time to reflect on what was discussed.

The in-depth nature and focus on participants' reconstruction of and reflection on their experiences are strengths of the three-interview process. Challenges include the amount of time needed to conduct three interviews with each participant as well as issues of validity and reliability because participants' comments could be untrustworthy. In addition to the lengthy interviews, challenges of Seidman's approach for young children include the abstract nature of interview questions in the first and third interviews. That is, children may not be accustomed to reconstructing and reflecting on their experiences. Seidman (2006) addresses the issue of time, especially with younger participants, by explaining that the 90-minute format can be adjusted to meet the needs of the

participants. What is important is that all three-interviews occur because each has a specific purpose. In regards to the issue of validity and reliability, Seidman (2006) explains that the three-interview structure increases the validity of the research as participants' comments are contextualized and inconsistencies can be addressed over the course of the interviews. Finally, in order to help young children reconstruct and reflect on their experiences data collection during interviews may include children's drawings and conversations elicited about various artifacts.

Van Manen (1990) suggests the indirect method of close observation for collecting data. This can be especially useful for accessing the experiences of children. Close observation means that the researcher tries to enter the world of the participant by participating in it. With children this could involve playing with them, talking with them, drawing, painting, and following them into their play spaces. Challenges of close observations are that the researcher is required to be a participant and an observer at the same time and the researcher must establish a relationship with the participant prior to being invited into the participant's world. Despite these challenges, close observations offer the opportunity for the researcher to gain unique access to the experiences of young children.

A modified version of the three-interview format (Seidman, 2006) and close observation allowed me to explore the lived experience of each case study participant. In order to apply the methods of phenomenological interviewing and close observations I completed three home visits with three of the four parent and case study child participants. Due to schedule conflicts, I completed two home visits with one of the parent and case study child participants, combining interviews two and three. Each of the

three interviews with the child participants took place during a home visit and one close observation with each case study child took place during a home visit. Interview one included asking each case study child participant to describe how he or she has experienced reading at school and at home up until this time in his or her life. I used this first home visit to do a parent interview that asked the parent to explain how his or her child has experienced literacy at school and at home up until this time. The parent's comments helped to contextualize the child's literacy experiences and provided unique insights into the home reading lives of the children. The second interview with each case study participant occurred after I had observed each child during the reading block of time at school. This enabled me to use classroom artifacts and observations of literacy routines to elicit conversations with the child about the concrete details of his or her reading experiences at school. I also conducted a close observation of each child during the second interview, reading and discussing a book the child chose and reflecting upon the meaning of that experience for the child. I used the third home visit to interview each child participant about the meaning of their reading experiences at school, such as how they see themselves as readers now and in the future.

### **Insightful, Evocative Descriptions**

Phenomenological research concludes with offering a rich, in-depth description of the phenomenon. The goal is to “construct an animating, evocative description of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 19) so that the reader comes away with a deep understanding of what it is like for someone to experience the described phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Van Manen (1990) explains that in order to do this the researcher needs to produce writing that is rich and deep. In order

to produce rich, descriptive writing phenomenologists suggest capturing the life experience of the participant in anecdote or story. Interviews can be organized to reconstruct life stories or conversations can be analyzed for relevant anecdotes. These narratives reveal the uniqueness of an individual's experience and engage the reader (Van Manen, 1990). The depth of lived experience can be revealed in descriptions that explore the meaning beyond the concrete details of the experience. Phenomenologists suggest that descriptions capture not only the words and actions of participants but also their intentions, emotions, or other embodied expressions as these may provide important insight into the overall sense and meaning of the experience for each participant (Danaher & Briod, 2005). These rich, in-depth descriptions are a result of detailed fieldnotes and thorough interviews and observations that record the words, actions, expressions, and meaning of participants' experiences.

In order to construct rich, in-depth descriptions that engage the reader and provide insight into how individual children experience literacy in RTI settings, I observed each case study participant during the first grade intervention and reading blocks of time at school for two hours two to three mornings a week for seven weeks. I used an observation protocol to document in one column the time in 3-10 minute intervals and in the second column I noted what was happening. I documented the literacy practices I observed and running notes of what I observed with my specific case study participants. Observations included the actions, words, expressions and emotions of participants. This allowed me to collect rich, detailed data that I have used in my final writing to illustrate the experiences of case study participants. Home visits with each case study participant and a parent included three interviews with each child. As previously explained,

interview one focused on the life history of the participant, interview two focused on the concrete details of the participant's school reading experiences, and interview three focused on the meaning of the experiences for the participant. Conversations were elicited with classroom artifacts, and a close observation was completed with each child. In addition to detailed field notes during all home visits that described settings, activities, and participants' words, physical actions, expressions, and emotions, I attempted to capture the meaning of the experiences for participants. This allowed me to produce writing that is not only rich with description but has depth (Van Manen, 1990). Finally, I analyzed my data for relevant stories and used these anecdotes in my writing to engage the reader and offer insight into the experiences of case study participants.

### **Phenomenological Research with Children**

Hermeneutic phenomenology with children is aimed at unpacking and uncovering the meanings of their experiences (Danaher & Briod, 2005). As Graue and Walsh (1998) wrote, "the goal of research with children should be to understand meaning . . . These meanings are shared" (p. 34). Most phenomenological research studies of children are in the field of psychiatry and focus on the phenomenology of clinical disorders such as depression and complicated grief in children and adolescents (Melhem, Moritz, Walker, Shear, & Brent, 2007; Mitchell, McCauley, Burke, & Moss, 1988). Some phenomenological studies are in the field of education but generally identify the parents and teachers of children as the primary participants and it is their experiences that are the focus of the study (Hadley, 2012; Kermanshahi, Vanaki, Ahmadi, Kazemnejad, & Azadfalsh, 2008). A few studies (Kirova & Emme, 2011; West, 2013; Whiting-MacKinnon & Roberts, 2012) use phenomenology to explore the experiences of children

in school. Below I review the research studies that have used phenomenology as a framework and/or methodology to study children and school and articulate the need for more studies of children's educational experiences.

Kirova and Emme (2011) used phenomenology as a theoretical framework to research the experiences and perspectives of immigrant children's first day of school. In order to explore the experiences and perspectives of participants, the researchers used photography as a method for collecting data. Participants learned how to use cameras during their lunch break and then created visual stories of their first day of school by taking photographs of others acting out their experiences and then adding text in to explain their images. The results were photo-comic style stories of their first day of school. The researchers felt that photography allowed them to explore the perspectives and experiences of the children in a more complete way because it allowed participants to explain their experiences and perspectives using images instead of only words. Focusing on the perspectives and experiences of participants and collecting rich, in depth data that captured the emotions and stories of participants in addition to their words and actions are phenomenological aspects of this research study.

Using phenomenology as both a framework and methodology, Whiting-MacKinnon and Roberts (2012) studied how children with epilepsy experienced school and the meaning of that experience for them. The researchers analyzed data for essential themes that revealed the essence of this phenomenon. Participants included six children ages 7-12 who had been diagnosed with epilepsy. Data were gathered through open-ended, semi-structured interviews and were analyzed to identify the essential experiences of children with epilepsy. The four themes that emerged from the children's narratives

were seizures, academics, social belonging and awareness. Children described how their seizures caused academic difficulties and feelings of not belonging but how educational services were helpful. The participants suggested ways to promote awareness throughout their school community. Phenomenological aspects of this study include the focus on participants' experience and the meaning of that experience for them as well as the methodological techniques of open-ended interviews and analysis of data to identify themes that characterize the essence of the phenomenon.

Finally, West (2013) used constructs of phenomenology to research the experiences and perspectives of five African American alternative high school students who had dropped out of traditional school. Focusing on the experiences of participants and the meaning of that experience for them, the researcher conducted open-ended interviews and focus group sessions that asked participants to describe their academic experiences in traditional school. Data was analyzed to identify themes that characterized how students experienced the phenomenon. Findings indicated that students felt disconnected from their teachers and the process of education and, as a result, were left behind in the education system. Phenomenological aspects of this research study are the focus on experience and the meaning of experience for participants, the open-ended interviews, and the analysis of data to identify themes that reveal the essence of the phenomenon.

Phenomenology as a framework and/or methodology allowed researchers to focus on the life experiences and perspectives of children. This focus on children provided unique insights into educational issues and situations. There is a need for more

phenomenological research with children in schools, specifically in RTI settings, so that educators can understand how students experience reading assessments and instruction.

### **Conclusion**

Hermeneutic phenomenology provides the framework for exploring how children experience reading in a classroom defined by RTI policy. The dimensions of phenomenology that I applied to my research include: exploring and bracketing of preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs; investigating the lived meaning of experience; and describing participants' experiences in writing through insightful, evocative descriptions. Focusing on the perspectives and experiences of children in the core, Tier I classroom setting fills a gap in the current research on RTI and the associated literacy practices and assessments. By focusing on the literacy experiences of children I learned how the ways in which a classroom organized its literacy instruction and assessment in regards to RTI policy impacted the literacy experiences, perspectives, and identities of children. This study provides insight into how we, as educators, can more carefully and thoughtfully organize literacy instruction and assessment in RTI settings to meet the diverse abilities of learners.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

Case study provided the methodological framework for this research project. The phenomenology methodological strategies of exploring and bracketing preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs; investigating the lived meaning of experience, and writing rich, evocative descriptions (Van Manen, 1990) helped me design in-depth, descriptive case studies for each case study child. Four case studies of individual first grade children in the core, Tier I, classroom setting were conducted in order to explore how the focal children experienced learning to read in a classroom defined by RTI policy.

There are a number of strengths and limitations to consider when conducting case study research with children. Strengths include the ability to gather rich descriptive data from the perspectives of participants that honor the holistic and lived experiences of participants. Limitations include the inability to generalize findings, and the unavoidable influence of researcher positionality and biases on research findings. Below, I articulate my research study methodology including data collection and analysis. Finally, I reflect on my role as researcher.

#### **Case Study**

Merriam (2009) defines a case study as an “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). While there are many ways to do case study research (Stake, 1995), “the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). That is, “the case is a specific, complex, functioning thing” (Stake, 1995, p.2) around which there are boundaries that fence in the unit of analysis. The case could be one particular person, program, group, institution, or policy selected because it is an example of some phenomenon such as a

process, issue, or concern (Merriam, 2009). Choosing case study as a methodological framework depends on what the researcher wants to know but the detailed, in-depth data collection over time to explore a bounded system or multiple bounded systems makes it a useful design choice for researchers interested in “insight, discovery, and interpretation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 42). A case study methodological framework involves a search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary tool for data collection and analysis, an inductive investigation, and a richly descriptive end product (Merriam, 2009). These characteristics resulted in a number of strengths and limitations to consider when conducting my case study research.

A commonly identified limitation of case study research is that because it focuses on the meaning and understanding of a particular case, the findings cannot be generalized (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995). Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that formal generalization is only one way of gaining knowledge and a descriptive case study is a legitimate method of research and can be valuable even without the attempt to generalize. There is much to be learned from a single case (Merriam, 2009) and although the findings do not produce grand generalizations, case studies can play a role in advancing knowledge as broader themes may be transferable across contexts, grand generalizations may be modified (Stake, 1995), and insights may produce tentative hypotheses to structure future research (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, Stake (1995) notes that the objective of case study research is particularization not generalization. Case study is not undertaken as a means of understanding other cases; the goal is to understand this one case and the uniqueness and complexity of the case are important to developing nuanced understandings of various issues related to education and literacy. Currently, there is a gap in research on

children's experiences in RTI settings. Conducting four case studies with individual children in the core, Tier I RTI setting positioned children as the primary participants, highlighting their perspectives and experiences in a classroom defined by RTI policy. Although these findings are not generalizable to all children in RTI settings, my findings provide an understanding of how learning to read in a classroom defined by RTI was experienced by these individual children and may provide insight into other children's experiences of learning to read in a Tier I classroom setting.

The flexibility and wide range of practices associated with case study make it vulnerable to methodological inconsistency. Merriam (1998) notes that, "case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis. Any and all methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study, although certain techniques are used more than others" (p. 28). It is critical, then, as Compton-Lilly (2013) explains for case study researchers to be "explicit about the roles they play, the positionings they assume, and the methods they use . . . so that readers have a clear sense of how researchers approach and understand the case they present" (p. 62). In the following sections, I clearly articulate my methods of data collection and analysis to be transparent and increase the trustworthiness of my work (Smagorinsky, 2008).

In case study research, the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data. Some view this as a limitation as it can raise ethical concerns related to bias (Merriam, 2009) since the positionality of the researcher affects data collection and analysis. Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to be transparent about their "biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken" (Merriam, 2009, p. 219), to reflect on how they affect the research processes and analysis, and to make use

of triangulation to increase the reliability of their findings (Stake, 1995). The phenomenological strategy of reflecting in writing on my experiences with RTI prior to data collection allowed me to examine the dimensions of my experience and to become aware of my preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs so that I could attempt to bracket them in order to accurately depict the experiences of my participants (Danaher & Briod, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Van Manen, 1990).

A major strength of case study research is the collection of rich data from multiple sources that allows the researcher to produce a descriptive, holistic account of the particular case and triangulate various types of data to clarify and verify the findings (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2000). Guided by the research questions, data collection in case study research typically involves interviewing, observing, and reviewing documents (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Interviewing provides the researcher with a “fuller understanding of the experiences of (the) respondents” (Weiss, 1994, p. 3) and allows the researcher to capture multiple viewpoints (Stake, 1995). During observations the researcher has the opportunity to record events, interactions, and contexts that increase understanding of the case. Gathering and reviewing documents allows the researcher to gain insight into information that cannot be directly observed (Stake, 1995). Generally, one or two of the methods may predominate while the other(s) provide supplemental insights on the case (Merriam, 1998). This “recursive, interactive process” (Merriam, 1998, p. 134) allows the researcher to triangulate the data to check for misunderstanding and verify the findings (Stake, 1995; 2000). By using semi-structured formal interviews, informal interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and conversations elicited through the use of various classroom artifacts I was able to collect a variety of

data that allowed me to construct rich, evocative descriptions (Van Manen, 1990) of children's experiences in the Tier I classroom setting so that the reader comes away with a deep understanding of what it was like for the focal children to experience reading in a classroom defined by RTI policy (Merriam, 2009).

Finally, an additional strength of case study research is that it promotes inquiry in service of understanding human experience (Stake, 1995). Particularly, case study is a useful methodology to researchers in language and literacy who "are interested in how children, teachers, and other educational participants experience the world around them" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 19). That is, case study allows the researcher to use particular methods of data collection and analysis to gain insight into the "dimensions and dynamics" (p. 81) of a particular phenomenon and to understand how the phenomenon matters and is understood from the perspectives of the case study participants (Dyson and Genishi, 2005). To explore how children experienced reading in the core, Tier I classroom setting and the meaning of that experience for participants, I used more general qualitative methodology techniques of participant observations of case study participants, semi-structured formal and informal interviews with teachers, parents, and principals, analysis of curriculum and assessment methods, and the use of artifacts to elicit conversations along with the phenomenology methodology techniques of a modified three-interview format and a close observation with each child participant.

By conducting case studies informed by phenomenology of individual children in the core, Tier I classroom setting, I am able to clearly align the theoretical framework of phenomenology and the methodological framework of case study as dimensions of phenomenology: exploring and bracketing of preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs;

investigating the lived meaning of experience, and constructing insightful, evocative descriptions were used to conduct ethically sound and descriptive case studies of children's experiences of learning to read in a classroom defined by RTI to fill this current gap in research on RTI.

### **Research Study**

I conducted four case studies of individual first graders in one elementary school classroom to understand how they experienced reading in the core, Tier I classroom setting and the meaning of that experience for them. Over the course of ten weeks I collected data through interviews and observations for this study. I spent seven of those ten weeks observing the reading practices and experiences of four first graders in Mrs. Bailey's first grade classroom at Woodland Elementary. Two to three mornings a week for, a little over two hours each morning, I observed the focal children during the classroom's reading block and Intervention and Enrichment (IE) block. As Compton-Lilly (2013) notes case study researchers need to clearly define the boundaries of their case as well as richly contextualize the case within multiple contexts. The boundaries of my case studies were individual children from one elementary school classroom. Case study, informed by phenomenology, allowed me an in-depth, holistic understanding of the ways specific children experienced reading. Data was collected through semi-structured formal interviews with each child participant, a parent, the school principal, the classroom teacher, a Title I teacher that provides Tier II reading interventions, and an ESL teacher that provides supplemental language and literacy instruction to ELLs. Informal interviews with the classroom teacher and ESL teacher took place during participant observations. Participant observations of each child participant in the

classroom during the core, Tier I reading block and the intervention block took place two to three mornings a week for two hours each over the course of seven weeks. Data collection also included conversations elicited about books from home and school, document analysis of reading curriculum and assessments used with each child participant, a close observation reading and discussing a book with each child participant, and a drawing by each child of him/herself during reading at school. This research study fills a current gap in existing literature on RTI and associated literacy practices that have focused on summary measures of student performance and a current gap in existing literature on the experiences and perspectives of children. Below I articulate my research questions, participants, setting, data collection and analysis methods, and my role as the researcher.

### **Research Questions**

Since RTI language is part of the IDEA law, RTI is often linked to children with disabilities as the policy provides an alternative method of qualifying children for special education services. While previously practitioners commonly identified children as having learning disabilities using IQ-achievement tests, IDEA 2004 allows school districts to use up to 15% of their special education funds to fund education interventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). As a result, school psychologists and special education instructors have been active in influencing RTI policy and practices. The majority of those in these professional groups share a common belief that literacy teaching and learning should emphasize speed and accuracy of reading and a belief that literacy development is linear and can be assessed in a standard way (Johnston, 2011). Therefore, research studies on RTI policy tend to be experimental studies in psychology and special

education that focus on measuring children's responses to instruction (Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider, and Sweeney, 2008; Scanlon & Sweeney, 2010; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, and Fanuele, 2006; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008). More research needs to be done in classrooms on how students of various reading abilities experience literacy in RTI settings and the meaning of that experience for them. The following questions provide the focus for this study:

- How do children of various reading abilities experience learning to read in a classroom defined by RTI policy?
  - What reading instruction and assessment practices are implemented in classrooms when schools implement RTI?
  - How do children describe and conceptualize their reading experiences in a classroom defined by RTI?

### **Participants**

The participants for this study included four first graders of various reading abilities as identified by school-wide literacy assessments in one elementary school classroom, their parent(s), their classroom teacher, school principal, and an ESL teacher that provided language and literacy support to ELLs in the classroom and during the intervention time block. I approached the school district in order to obtain permission to complete my study with a specific principal at an elementary school. I obtained principal permission to identify and work with a classroom teacher in first grade and teachers that provided supplemental literacy instruction during a district-wide intervention time including a Title I teacher and ESL teacher. Teacher and parent permission was obtained in order to observe and interview specific students within the classroom. I also, as

Freeman and Mathison (2009) write, created the conditions for children to give their consent to participate. This included: clearly explaining the research purpose to children and committing to listening to them, assuring that their participation was voluntary, working with them in child-friendly spaces and using child-friendly language, ensuring their physical and psychological safety such as protecting their confidentiality, and involving them in the research process. Each child was able to choose a children's book to keep as a thank you following each interview. School-based participants each received a \$10 gift card to a local coffee shop as a thank you.

First grade teacher, Mrs. Bailey, invited me into her classroom two to three days a week for seven weeks so that I could observe the literacy practices and experiences of four focal students in her classroom during her reading and intervention/enrichment blocks. I also observed Mrs. Garcia, an ESL teacher that provided language and literacy support to one of the focal students in the classroom and outside of the classroom during the Intervention and Enrichment (IE) block. Of the 14 first graders in Mrs. Bailey's classroom, seven boys and seven girls, four children and their parent(s) participated in this study. The participants represented the racial, linguistic, cultural, and economic diversity of Mrs. Bailey's class. The four first-grade focal children for this study were:

- Laura, an outgoing, confident, and funny blond-haired and blue-eyed child that reads above grade level and lives with her parents and younger brother in a one-story house near school. Laura and her father are in a water-ski club and frequently train throughout the summer. Laura's mother and father also participated in the study and told me how Laura loved to be active but also

- enjoyed her downtime. Reading came easy to Laura in kindergarten and she recently started reading to her younger brother in the mornings before school.
- John, a self-described dedicated reader that reads above grade level and recently moved with his mom and two older siblings from an apartment to a rental house in the same neighborhood as Laura and several other classmates. John frequently had a smile on his face at school and was always the first one to greet me when I arrived to the classroom. John's mother also participated in this study. She explained that John enjoyed playing sports, video games, and reading his brother's comic books. John said that he also liked reading and "snuggling with mom."
  - James, an energetic, English Language Learner from the country of Togo in West Africa who reads slightly above grade level, but struggles with comprehension. James lives with his parents and younger sister in an apartment near school and James' parents speak to each other in French and their native country's language of Ewe. James understands some French and fully understands and speaks Ewe. James did not speak English before coming to the U.S. when he was four. He does not receive ESL services at school because his parents did not inform the school that languages other than English are spoken at home. James was frequently observed interacting with his classmates at school and earned an award for his polite behavior at the end of the school year. James' father also participated in this study. He explained that he has worked hard with James on his reading and that the saying in their house is "there is a time to work and a time to play."

- Ana, an English Language Learner who speaks Spanish and English and receives literacy and language support from an ESL teacher. Ana has been reading below grade level throughout the school year but has made significant growth. Ana lives with her parents and younger sister in the same apartment complex as James and many other Spanish-speaking families that attend Woodland Elementary. Ana's mother also participated in this study. She explained that Ana was a good girl who always completed her homework before going out to play. Ana was happy and talkative with her friends at school. She enjoyed the books she read at school as well as the books written in Spanish that she brought home to read with her mother.

### **Sites**

Data for this study was collected in a public elementary school located in a suburb of a mid-sized Midwestern city that is currently implementing RTI policy. Woodland Elementary School is a one-story brick building adjacent to a nature preserve and community park. Large oak trees shade the building and picnic tables on the front lawn provide a place for staff to gather. Woodland Elementary is one of six elementary schools in New Meadow School District that serves approximately 6,700 students in six elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, and a charter high school. Woodland Elementary is a Title 1 school that, according to the most recent 2013-2014 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction School Report Card, serves approximately 414 students in grades kindergarten-fifth grade. Approximately 55.1% of students are White and 45.9% are students of color with 15.5% of students identifying as English Language Learners and 42.0% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunches. On the

2013-2014 School Report Card, Woodland Elementary met or exceeded state expectations for reading and math growth and achievement as measured by state assessments (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction School Report Card, 2013-2014). As of the 2014-2015 school year Woodland Elementary became a kindergarten through fourth grade elementary school.

Children at Woodland Elementary generally attended pre-kindergarten off site and then entered kindergarten at Woodland Elementary when they were 5-years-old. It was common for most children to continue at Woodland Elementary through fourth grade before moving on to the district's middle school, although there was occasional mobility with the student population.

Interviews with parents and each focal student were conducted at a local public library and the homes of the participating families.

### **Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected through formal semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, participant observations, close observations, drawings, and document analysis.

**Interviews.** Interviewing provides the researchers with a “fuller understanding of the experiences of our respondents” (Weiss, 1994, p. 3). A semi-structured interview format, as Merriam (2009) states, allowed me to guide the interviews with a list of topics and questions while I also remained responsive “to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 90). A modified version of the phenomenological three-interview format allowed me to explore the perspectives and experiences of case study participants (Seidman, 2006). Formal interviews were

audio recorded and transcribed. In addition, as Merriam (2009) suggests, I took notes “to record reactions to something the informant says, to signal the informant of the importance of what is being said, or to pace the interview” (p. 109). This is also a useful backup in case the recording device fails. Below I articulate the formal, semi-structured interviews that I conducted. The case study participants’ perspectives and experiences were the central focus of this study. Interviews with the principal, teachers, and parents provided background context on the experiences of the children.

The phenomenological three-interview format was conducted with each of the four case study participants. The purpose of using this interview technique was to hear about the experiences of each participant and the meaning of that experience for each participant (Seidman, 2006). Each of the three interviews took place during a home visit and lasted a maximum of one hour. The focus of interview one was on the literacy experiences of the child up until this point in his or her life. Each child was asked to draw a self-portrait during this interview time. Questions included:

- Draw me a picture of yourself. Tell me about your picture.
- Tell me about yourself.
- Tell me about yourself as a reader.
- What did you do when you were little to help you become a reader? What did you like to read growing up? Who helped you with your reading?

The focus of interview two was on the concrete details of the child’s current reading experiences. Artifacts included children’s books from home and school and children’s drawings of themselves in the core, Tier I classroom setting during reading. A close

observation (Van Manen, 1996), described below, was also completed with each child.

Questions included:

- Tell me about school. What do you like/dislike?
- Tell me about reading at school.
- Draw me a picture of yourself during reading time. Tell me about the picture.
- Tell me a story about working with (classroom teacher, reading teacher).
- What do you like to read? What do you read at home? At school? (Have them bring me books from home and school and tell me about them. Is there a favorite?).
- Can you pick a book you would like to read with me? (Listen as the child reads and discuss the book with the child after. Reflect on the meaning of that experience for the child).

The focus of interview three was on a reflection on the meaning of the student's reading experiences. Questions included:

- What does it mean to be a good reader? Are you? What would help you?
- How do you explain your reading experience?
- How do you see yourself as a reader in the future?

One formal, semi-structured interview lasting a maximum of one hour took place with a parent(s) of each child participant. The purpose of these interviews was to hear about the home reading experiences of these families, their hopes for the school reading experiences of their children, and their understanding of the reading assessments and curriculum their child experienced at school. Questions included:

- Tell me about your child.

- Tell me about your child as a reader.
- What do you do at home to encourage and support reading?
- What is reading like for your child at school?
- How does your child feel about reading?
- What do you hope for your child as a reader?

One formal, semi-structured interview took place with the classroom teacher of the child participants and lasted a maximum of one hour. The purpose of this interview was to hear how the teacher interprets RTI policy, the literacy assessment and practices she employs, her experiences with and observations of the case study participants, and her reading goals for her students. Questions included:

- Tell me about your teaching background.
- Tell me about your students.
- How do you understand RTI policy?
- Tell me about the district's literacy assessments and curriculum.
- How do you teach and assess reading in your classroom? Why?
- How are students identified that need additional reading support? How is this support provided? How is this communicated to parents/caregivers?
- Tell me about (case study participants). What are your goals for them as readers?

One formal, semi-structured interview took place with a Title I teacher and an ESL teacher, two teachers that provided supplemental support to students during the Intervention and Enrichment block. Interviews lasted a maximum of one hour. The purpose of the interviews was to hear about each teacher's professional experiences, how they understood RTI policy and the literacy assessments and practices they each

implemented with students, and for the ESL teacher, reflections on the case study participant whom she supports. The following questions provided the focus for these interviews:

- Tell me about your teaching background.
- What are your responsibilities in your current position?
- Tell me about (case study participant).
- How is RTI implemented in your school? How are students identified? How is their progress monitored and documented?
- What curriculum and assessments are you expected to use? Do you do anything differently? Why/why not?
- Do you communicate with the families of your students? When? How?

One formal, semi-structured interview lasting a maximum of one hour was conducted with the school principal. The purpose of this interview was to hear how the school district and school frame RTI policy and the literacy curricula, practices, and assessments that are implemented in the school. Questions included:

- Tell me about RTI in this school district/school.
- Tell me about the literacy curriculum you use district-wide and/or at this school.
- Tell me about the literacy assessments you use district-wide and/or at this school.
- How do you identify students in need of reading interventions? How is their progress assessed and documented?
- How are parents/caregivers informed that their child is in need of a reading intervention?

- What types of interventions do you provide? Who provides these? When? How?  
Is there a specific literacy curriculum for interventions?

As Dewalt and Dewalt (2011) discuss, “the type of ‘interviewing’ that is part of participant observation is usually informal . . . after all, the goal of the technique is for the researcher to participate in naturally unfolding events, and to observe them as carefully and as objectively as possible” (p. 137). Informal interviews with the classroom teacher and ESL teacher clarified and informed my observations.

**Participant observations.** Merriam (2009) writes, “Observation is a research tool when it is systematic, when it addresses a specific research question, and when it is subject to the checks and balances in producing trustworthy results” (p. 118). Participant observations of the focal students during the reading and Intervention and Enrichment (IE) blocks occurred two to three mornings per week over seven weeks. This included whole class, small group, and individual instruction and reading time. The purpose of the observations was to observe and document in field notes the physical environment, interactions, and literacy assessments and practices students were engaged in, as Stake (1995) explains, “*vicarious experiences* for the reader, to give them a sense of “being there” (p. 63) and to provide the rich details necessary for developing writing that provides insight into the literacy experiences of case study participants (Van Manen, 2006). I utilized an observation protocol that allowed me to document in one column the time in 3-10 minute intervals based on the observed activity and in the second column what I observed happening. I also documented the literacy practices I observed. In addition, I kept running notes of what I observed with the focal students such as their emotions, engagement, ease/difficulty of task, and help needed/received.

**Close observations.** Close observations involve the researcher entering the world of the participant by actually taking part in whatever activity the participant is engaged in (Van Manen, 1990). I conducted one close observation during the second interview at home with each case study participant. I participated in reading a book of his/her choosing with the child and reflected in writing on the meaning of the experience for the participant immediately following the observation.

**Document analysis.** Classroom reading curriculum and assessments were analyzed to understand the literacy programs and assessments used in the core, Tier I classroom setting.

**Artifacts to elicit conversations.** Artifacts including children's books from home and school and children's drawings of themselves were used to elicit conversations with children. Each child was asked to share 2-3 books he/she had from home and from school during interview two. Each child was also asked to draw and explain a picture of him/herself. Danaher and Briod (2005) explain that, "children's drawings, movements, singing, and playing could all be fruitfully explored in phenomenological studies" (p.221).

### **Data Analysis**

Following each classroom observation and interview I wrote detailed field notes to record the setting including what it looked like, who was there, what happened, and what was said. I also recorded my thoughts, questions, and concerns in a journal. These field notes and journal entries were the beginning of my analysis while collecting data. Once data collection was complete, all recorded interviews were transcribed, initially coded, and memoed separately. Interview data drove analysis for this study. Data for

each of the four case studies was first analyzed separately to ascertain how each child experienced reading in the core, Tier I classroom setting. Below I describe how I used Charmaz's (2006) grounded coding approach to guide my data analysis as well as the strengths and limitations of this model.

In Charmaz's (2006) grounded coding model three types of coding (initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding) are used to identify themes and possible relationships. Grounded coding occurs in two phases: initial and focused. During initial coding the researcher names each word, line, or segment of data with short, simple, and active codes that are found in the data. By focusing on closely examining pieces of data the researcher is able to construct codes that have "fit and relevance" (p. 54) as data is separated into categories. I used initial coding to name each line or segment of transcribed interview data, memoing on the codes to explain their meaning, and then coding the memoes. Immediately, patterns were identified within and between case studies. At the same time, the first few weeks of observational data were analyzed using initially coding to name each line or segment of data. Interviews with the principal and teachers were also initially coded separately, line by line or by segments of data.

The second phase in coding is focused coding. During focused coding the researcher selects the most significant and/or frequent initial codes to sift through in order to organize large amounts of data, developing the most salient categories. In this research study, once interview data for each case study was analyzed separately using initial coding, I used focused coding to select the most significant codes by constantly comparing data with codes and codes with data to determine fit and relevance (Charmaz, 2006) within and between case studies, within and between interviews with the principal

and teachers, and to code the remaining observational data, field notes, and journal entries in order to develop the most salient categories in this large amount of data. Throughout both phases of coding, codes were defined and refined as codes and data were constantly compared with one another. In addition, throughout the analytic process, memos were informally written to define categories and explore relationships (Charmaz, 2006).

The codes that were constructed through initial and focused coding included: liking reading, loving books, focusing, knowing books, reading words, having confidence, wide reading, growing as a reader, independent reading, reading with others, emulating, absorbing, reading family, reading across contexts, teacher collaboration, having time to read, having books, reading leveled books, and choosing books. These codes were eventually collapsed into categories and properties including: identifying as a good reader (having confidence, being a good reader), liking reading (loving reading, focusing on books, knowing books, having favorite and familiar texts), experiencing success (reading words well, reading chapter books, knowing how to decode, knowing how to comprehend, growing as a reader), comparing, dedication (reading all day), motivation (enthusiasm), reading families (reading across contexts, loving books, loving reading, valuing reading, motivating), early childhood literacy (emulating, absorbing, fitting in, using technology), and school reading (wide reading, independent reading, reading with others, teacher collaboration).

Charmaz (2006) suggests theoretical coding as the next analytic step after focused coding. During theoretical coding the researcher specifies possible relationships between categories (Glaser, 1978), which can make analysis more precise and clear (Charmaz,

2006). Glaser (1978; 1998) presents a number of coding families, such as the six C's (causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions), that the researcher can use to conceptualize how the focused codes relate to each other. I used the six C's (Glaser, 1978; 1998) to theoretically code my data to specify possible relationships between categories to help make my analysis more clear. Through this process I identified the home and school reading practices and goals as the contexts for children's reading experiences and perspectives in a classroom defined by RTI policy. I also identified children's views and experiences within these contexts and the outcomes of these views and experiences. These findings will be discussed in the following data chapters.

### **Strengths and limitations**

A common concern with grounded coding is that because analysis is inductive it may be easy for researchers to force data into preconceived codes and categories (Charmaz, 2006; Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). While Charmaz (2006) acknowledges that analysis is constructed, she cautions researchers to avoid simply noting what an experience or event means to them on the coded data. It is suggested that to avoid this limitation, the researcher remains reflexive about "what we bring to the scene, what we see, and how we see it" (p. 15). In addition, throughout the research process codes and categories should be constantly compared with the data and the data with the codes and categories to ensure that the data fits and supports assertions. The inductive nature of grounded coding is also a strength of this analytic approach as the codes and categories can capture the views and actions from the perspectives of the

participants (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, using grounded coding will allow codes to be checked and informed by each coding method.

A second limitation of grounded coding is that analysis can be time consuming if the data set is too large (Harry et al., 2005). Harry et al. (2005) found that in their use of grounded coding with 12 case studies, they compromised quality for quantity as the complexity of the data made it challenging to thoroughly explore the many possible connections present in the data. Grounded coding requires that the researcher collect a thorough amount of data so that categories are saturated and the study is credible (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978) but not so much that the quality of the analysis is compromised.

The methods of grounded coding are strengths of this analytic approach as they allow the researcher to identify additional areas to be explored, ground findings in the data, and construct new insights. Since analysis starts with early data and continues throughout data collection, it allows the researcher to notice questions or gaps that can be further explored through additional data collection while still in the field. The interactive process of defining and refining codes by constantly comparing data to codes and codes to data continues to identify areas that need to be examined so that findings are grounded in the data and claims are well supported. Finally, the methods of grounded coding help the researcher view data in a focused and critical way that allows new meanings and insights to be discovered (Charmaz, 2006).

The inductive nature of this approach allowed me to capture experiences from the perspectives of children that are often missing in current research on RTI literacy policy and associated practices (Charmaz, 2006). The intended size of my research study

provided me with a thorough amount of data for grounded coding analysis but not so much so that the quality of my analysis was compromised (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). I was able to begin identifying significant themes and possible relationships immediately following initial data collection and I was able to make use of the multiple forms of data to inform my analysis. Grounded coding provided me with the analytic tools I needed to conduct an in-depth analysis of my data to understand the ways children experienced learning to read in a classroom defined by RTI.

### **Researcher Reflection**

A qualitative researcher does not enter the research setting as a neutral research tool (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2011) and so it is necessary to consider how a researcher's identity influences data collection and analysis. Merriam (2009) writes, "Investigators need to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken" (p. 219). As a previous classroom teacher and reading teacher I hold specific ideas of how I believe reading should be taught and assessed in the elementary school classroom. Also, in preparation for this research I read quite a bit about the policy and practices I observed. In order to control my biases and their affect on my data collection and analysis I documented in detail the events I observed and conversations I engaged in and continually assessed through journal writing following each observation and interview how my identity was influencing what I did and did not observe.

As a previous Title I teacher at Woodland Elementary, before RTI policy was implemented, I knew the principal and teachers that participated in this study outside of my role as a researcher. I needed to note this in my writing and articulate the influence of

it on my data collection and analysis in order to bracket my previous experiences and relationships with the participants.

#### **Chapter 4: Implementation of RTI Policy in One Elementary School**

As discussed in Chapter 1, RTI has now become a major intervention policy implemented in North American schools. The most common structure for implementing RTI has been a three-tiered framework (Dorn & Henderson, 2010). Generally, the first tier is quality instruction and progress monitoring within the general classroom using the core curriculum (Klinger & Edwards, 2006). All students are expected to receive high quality core instruction, which is expected to be effective for about 80% of the students (NCRTI, 2010a). The second and third tiers include additional intensive intervention support either in or outside of the classroom in a small group or one-to-one settings for students who have not made adequate progress as assessed using regular progress monitoring and assessments (Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009).

Individual states adapted their own guidelines for RTI based on the federal policy. While many states chose to use a three-tiered model to depict the levels of instructional intensity based on student needs, the state of Wisconsin, which is where this research study was conducted, created a circular visual model of the processes in RTI. Wisconsin's model for RTI includes the systematic interaction of three elements at varying levels of intensity based on student responsiveness: high quality instruction that is "standards-based, data driven, and research-based" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 9), balanced assessment that is on-going and includes multiple measures, and collaboration between educators, families, and communities. Culturally responsive practices, defined as, practices that "account for and adapt to the broad diversity of race, language, and culture" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 5) should be evident within each element. This model articulates the guidelines

for RTI in Wisconsin, but individual districts may choose their own structure, including a three-tiered system, for organizing their RTI system based on local resources and needs (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010). That is, “the way a district chooses to structure their RTI system is a local control decision left to individual districts” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 6). Many school districts across the country and in Wisconsin have invested in pre-packaged curriculum programs and standardized assessments in response to RTI policy requirements of instructional practices that are research-based and regular progress monitoring (Johnston, 2010b). As discussed in Chapter 1, these programs and assessments raise a number of concerns about the teaching and learning in classroom and intervention settings.

I used classroom observations and interviews with the principal and teachers at Woodland Elementary School to better understand how New Meadow School District and Woodland Elementary, in particular, responded to the policy requirements of RTI. The purpose of this analysis is to understand children’s RTI settings. I gained an understanding of how New Meadow School District and Woodland Elementary used RTI policy requirements to revisit their schedule, curriculum, and assessment in ways that aligned with a balanced literacy model (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) of instruction. While this literacy model encouraged teachers to consider the types of readers and writers they wanted their students to become, it did little for equity including a lack of multicultural literature that provided accurate representations of diverse students and a lack of attention to the unique linguistic abilities of English Language Learners. In this chapter I explore the classroom and intervention curricula used district-wide and the established methods of assessment and progress monitoring to illustrate what is possible in accordance with

RTI policy requirements when school districts emphasize a wider view of literacy, value professional development and teacher expertise, and encourage conversations and professional decision-making among teachers. I also explore the tensions and contradictions within these spaces and argue for teachers to continue to develop their literacy goals and instructional practices. In Chapter 5, I focus on Mrs. Bailey's first grade classroom at Woodland Elementary to understand how four focal children experienced the core, Tier I reading instruction in her classroom and in Chapter 6, I explore first-grader, Ana's, unique experiences as an English Language Learner and struggling reader in Mrs. Bailey's classroom.

### **Woodland Elementary School**

As explained in Chapter 3, Woodland Elementary School is a public school located in a near west suburb of a mid-sized Mid-western city. Woodland Elementary is one of six elementary schools in New Meadow School District that serves approximately 6,700 students in six elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, and a charter high school. Woodland Elementary is a Title 1 school that, according to the most recent 2013-2014 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction School Report Card, serves approximately 414 students in grades kindergarten-fifth grade. Approximately 55.1% of students are White and 45.9% are students of color with 15.5% of students identifying as English Language Learners and 42.0% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunches. On the 2013-2014 School Report Card, Woodland Elementary met or exceeded state expectations for reading and math growth and achievement as measured by state assessments (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction School Report Card,

2013-2014). As of the 2014-2015 school year Woodland Elementary became a kindergarten through fourth grade elementary school.

Each morning I arrived at Woodland Elementary the staff and guest parking lot would already be filled with the cars of staff members, parents, and community volunteers. A small metal cart in the front entrance held a variety of children's books for students to read if they arrived before the start of school. On the front entrance of the school, a sign directed visitors to the newly redesigned office where an administrative assistant warmly greeted me each morning. Outside of the principal's office, whose door remained open throughout the day, a whiteboard contained a list of the day's absent staff members and their substitutes. A handful of chairs and a small table lined a wall in the office for visitors and students waiting to see the principal or nurse. I was impressed by how clean, quiet, and organized the school office and hallways remained each day. Students and teachers moved quietly between classrooms and the library, which was situated in the middle of the school. Small cubbies with hooks outside each classroom neatly held the coats and backpacks of students with student artwork displayed above.

The school boasted a mission statement centered on empowering students, valuing community, and embracing diversity. Throughout the school this message was reiterated on bulletin boards with phrases including, "We Embrace Diversity" and "Respect is Blossoming." Posters and signs reminded students of the Woodland Positive Behavior expectations: Be responsible, be respectful, be safe, be a learner. A letter to parents on the school website asked parents and caregivers to commit to ensuring that their children attended school on time every day because research showed that high attendance rates were identified as being linked to high student achievement.

### **Developing Readers and Writers**

IDEA legislation requires access to appropriate instruction in the regular classroom by qualified personnel and the use of scientific, research-based interventions (Federal Reserve, 2006). The law does not specify the nature of instruction or interventions (Johnston, 2010a). Many school districts have responded to requirements by investing in pre-packaged curriculum programs (Johnston, 2010b) that are often scripted and focus on surface level reading skills. While RTI policy requires the use of scientific, research based interventions (Federal Reserve, 2006) it is important to remember that people use the term “scientifically based” research to mean different things. The term scientific research-based does not mean that the particular practice or product has been tested in a control group effectiveness study-only that it has been designed to be consistent with research findings (Duke & Martin, 2011). It is uncommon for school reading programs to have been evaluated in true experiments despite what is often claimed by policy makers and publishers (Pressley, 2003). Wisconsin guidelines emphasize that “RTI is something you do and not necessarily something you buy” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 7). In Wisconsin, implementation of RTI includes high quality, differentiated, and culturally responsive core academic instruction. High quality instruction is defined as “engaging, standards-based, data-driven, and research-based and is grounded in culturally responsive practices” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 9). Woodland Elementary is in a school district that was in its second year of implementing a core, Tier I reading curriculum all students receive that built children’s stamina and interest in reading by reading real books for extended periods of time each day. Tier II, supplemental reading

intervention curriculum also focused on reading and comprehending books. Below, I describe the classroom reading and intervention curricula used in New Meadow School District to understand how the curricula both met RTI policy and supported students as readers and writers.

### **Classroom Literacy Curriculum**

All six elementary schools in the school district, including Woodland Elementary, used *Lucy Calkins' Units of Study for Teaching Reading and Writing* (Calkins, 2016) in grades kindergarten through fourth grade. This was the second year classroom teachers used the Reading Workshop curriculum and the fourth year they used the Writing Workshop curriculum. Previously, classroom teachers did not have a literacy curriculum to follow. Within a balanced literacy framework they implemented various reading and writing activities but there was little consistency across grade levels, little to no writing, and little time for students to read connected texts. According to Mrs. Dell, Woodland's principal of six years and former elementary school teacher, there has been a "huge difference" as kids are now more frequently "talking about books and noticing about books and writing from kindergarten on-It's amazing." Mrs. Dell explained:

Writing now has a purpose and you see it build through the grade levels and you see kids love to do it and the same with reading. I've seen a difference with, I give kids birthday books, so I call kids down to get a birthday book. It used to be I would have that tub of novels and maybe five would be gone in a couple months time. [Now] I can't keep the novels in stock. I am buying more and more novels because kids aren't-kids would see a thick book and not want to read it because it

was thick. Now they're, 'Oh, I read this one by this author or I read a book on this.' They go straight to it and it's like this no intimidation factor.

Mrs. Dell articulates how the reading curriculum the school has implemented is supporting students in becoming the types of readers and writers that are eager and confident to engage in literacy.

First grade teacher Mrs. Bailey, a teacher with 9 years of teaching experience including 4 years of special education, followed the first grade *Units of Study for Teaching Reading and Writing* (Calkins, 2016) for her reading instruction. Reading topics included what it meant to be a reader, characterization, dramatization, nonfiction, and bringing characters to life. Every 4-6 weeks a unit focused on one of these topics and in those units, there were specific reading skills that children learned to help them develop as readers. In first grade, skills included decoding new words, identifying characters and setting, retelling stories, and moving between fiction and nonfiction. Each 50 minute reading block began with a teacher-directed mini-lesson. The students then transitioned to a large block of time that involved students independently reading and ended with students engaging in book discussions with their peers. During the reading block, Mrs. Bailey conferenced with individual students and met with guided reading groups. Reflecting on the current reading curriculum, Mrs. Bailey explained that while she was reluctant at first to implement yet another curriculum, she now explained that, "I'm teaching with more purpose, and teaching research-based skills and practices that work."

### **Intervention Reading Curriculum**

District-wide, students who qualified for Tier II, reading intervention instruction received the *Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010). As discussed in Chapter 1, Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) is a small-group supplemental literacy intervention developed by Fountas and Pinnell (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010) to be used with students who need intensive support in order to achieve grade level competency in reading. LLI (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010) includes systematically designed lessons and engaging, original leveled books that support students from beginning reading in kindergarten to competency at the middle and secondary school level. Each level provides reading, writing, and word study practice as well as explicit skill and strategy instruction and formative running record assessments. Teachers are encouraged to use professional judgment to tailor provided lesson plans to meet the specific needs of students as identified by ongoing observations and running record analyses. That is, while the authors provide suggested language, texts, and word study activities teachers may use during the lessons, this is not intended to be a scripted program as teachers need to match readers with books and choose skill and strategy lessons that meet the individual needs of students.

In addition to LLI (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010), Mrs. Dell, Woodland Elementary's school principal, explained that the Title 1 reading teachers were currently investigating other interventions because they felt that LLI was very similar to the core, Tier I classroom instruction that the children received. They worried that if the classroom instruction and LLI were not working for kids, they needed to find something totally different. As Mrs. Dell explained, "that's still under investigation. I don't feel like we have something that's totally different. We need to find something." Mrs. Dell and the

Title 1 reading teachers at Woodland were evaluating the instructional practices they were using prior to labeling children who were struggling as having learning disabilities. This was a result of the school district emphasizing teacher expertise and responsive teaching—something that is often missing when schools implement scripted, pre-packaged instruction and interventions (Johnston, 2010b). The danger in trying to find something completely different from what the district is currently using is that it may be easy to assume that implementing a pre-packaged scripted intervention program that is focused on isolated skills will meet the needs of struggling readers. One reading teacher, Mrs. Miller, a previous special education teacher, alluded to this as a possibility, “[we are] looking at like a phonics based [intervention] for the first grade where you are just drilling sounds and letters that the kids didn’t get.” This contradicted the school district’s focus on balanced literacy approaches for students who qualified for interventions, and would greatly change children’s literacy experiences in reading intervention settings.

Current classroom and intervention reading curriculum were grounded in a balanced literacy approach that invited students to learn specific reading skills and strategies while engaging in reading actual texts. There was space to connect students with books that interested them and opportunities to make next-step decisions that were responsive to individual students. These curriculum choices met basic RTI policy requirements but also considered the types of readers and writers the school district wanted students to become. That is, students who were excited to read new and more challenging texts as well as students who were eager to engage in and develop as writers with consistency across grade levels. Limits of the current pedagogy, though, include little attention to equity such as the inclusion of multicultural literature and attention to

the unique abilities of English Language Learners. That is, while there are many aspects of the curricula to be celebrated, there remains space for teachers to develop wider literacy goals and equitable instructional practices for students. Below I articulate the professional development and teacher expertise that helped teachers to implement *Lucy Calkins' Units of Study for Teaching Reading and Writing* (Calkins, 2016).

### **Professional Development and Teacher Expertise**

The importance of teacher expertise and providing teachers with quality professional development is well documented (Allington 2013; Scanlon et al., 2008). Below, I describe the on-going professional development that teachers in New Meadow School District received in order to understand and implement core, Tier 1 classroom instruction.

Classroom teachers in New Meadow School District were not just given another reading curriculum to blindly follow. In fact, Mrs. Dell explained that the school district had “built a huge professional capacity that [they’ve] never had before to that extent.” For the past three years, since the school district adopted the *Lucy Calkins' Units of Study for Teaching Reading and Writing* (Calkins, 2016), teachers and principals, including Mrs. Dell and Mrs. Bailey, attended the summer reading and writing institute at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City. Trained teachers then came back to the school district and lead professional development trainings for additional teachers in the district. As Mrs. Dell reported, “it’s really empowered our staff.”

As Johnston (2010b) wrote, moving away from scripted, pre-packaged instruction and interventions may allow states and school districts to place more emphasis on teacher expertise and responsive teaching that considers the context, abilities, and needs of the

individual student. The professional development teachers received in New Meadow School District went beyond RTI requirements, supporting what is known about the importance of providing teachers with quality professional development (Allington, 2013; Scanlon et al., 2008). Below I explain how teachers' professional judgments alongside data was valued Woodland Elementary and how teachers collaborated to determine the best reading support for struggling readers.

### **Conversations and Professional Decision-Making**

IDEA legislation requires regular progress monitoring, data to inform instructional decisions, and data to determine the effectiveness of interventions. It does not specify the nature and frequency of assessments (Johnston, 2011). As discussed in Chapter 1, it has been common in implementations of an RTI framework for practitioners to only use standardized assessments such as screening tools designed to measure the number of words a student reads correctly from a text in a minute. This not only assumes a narrow view of literacy by focusing on accuracy and speed of word identification (Johnston, 2011) but limits the use of data for instructional planning (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009). Teachers need instructionally relevant information about students' learning from comprehensive assessments to guide appropriate instruction. Wisconsin's vision of RTI includes a balanced, continuous review of student progress using multiple types of data as well as educator and family input. Collaboration between educators, families and communities, where people work together toward common goals, is also an essential element of Wisconsin's model of RTI (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 10-11). Below I explore how classroom, Title I reading, and ESL teachers at Woodland Elementary collected and analyzed data together to monitor students' progress

and abilities. I show how teachers at Woodland Elementary engaged in ongoing conversations with one another about the best ways to support students. At Woodland Elementary, teachers' professional judgment was valued alongside data and teachers depended on conversations with one another to determine the best support for struggling readers.

### **Classroom Assessments**

New Meadow School District required classroom teachers to assess students' reading using the state required Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2016) for kindergarten through second grade, the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* including running records (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016) for kindergarten through fourth grade, and the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2016) for second through fourth grade. PALS is a "research based screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring tool" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2016) that for kindergarten measures phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, knowledge of letter sounds, spelling, concept of word, and word recognition in isolation. For first and second grade, PALS measures spelling, word knowledge, letter sounds, oral reading in context, alphabet knowledge, and phonemic awareness (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2016). The *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* running records (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016) is an in-depth running record with miscue analysis and comprehension assessment that teachers can use to determine students' independent and instructional reading levels, form reading groups, select texts for instruction, assess the outcomes of teaching, and document student progress across time (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016). MAP

(Northwest Evaluation Association, 2016) is a computerized test offered in reading, language usage, and mathematics content areas that measures student growth on Common Core State Standards that in reading focus on comprehending literature and informational text as well as developing phonics and fluency literacy skills (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016).

Mrs. Bailey explained that the PALS assessment (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2016) was required by the state in the fall and in the spring but was optional in the winter. She also explained that first grade teachers used the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* running records 3 times a year (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016). While the running records from the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016) were useful, the first grade teachers at Woodland worried it was a lot of assessing and felt that they could receive similar information from the first grade PALS (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2016). However first grade teachers in other elementary schools in New Meadow School District felt that they could not get from the PALS (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2016) what they obtained from the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016). While the assessment took a lot of time and effort for the first grade teachers, it is important to note that I observed that children were excited to complete the running records from the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016) with Mrs. Bailey. Children also discussed how they read with Mrs. Bailey for this assessment because she wanted to hear what good readers they were.

Mrs. Bailey also completed a running record about once a month with each student in her classroom on a book that they had previously read. This helped her understand the decoding strategies children were using in familiar, instructional level text as well as their comprehension abilities. It is important to note that Mrs. Bailey had time to implement these conferences, which were not required but were instructionally useful to her as a teacher.

### **Intervention Progress Monitoring**

Title 1 reading teachers and a reading specialist at Woodland Elementary were responsible for Tier II reading interventions and progress monitoring of students in those interventions. Mrs. Miller, a Title 1 teacher at Woodland Elementary, explained that children stayed in a reading intervention for two 6-week cycles during which time the Title 1 reading intervention teachers would come together to examine children's progress as monitored throughout the intervention using a progress monitoring tool called AIMSWEB (Pearson, 2014) and running records within the LLI program (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016). Based on data and conversations with one another, the two Title 1 reading teachers and the reading specialist who provided the reading interventions regrouped students or changed the intervention [i.e., focusing more on writing, using Guided Reading + (Dorn & Soffos, 2012), or changing the intensity of the intervention by having fewer students in a group or adding an extra ten minutes to the intervention]. A common assumption in an RTI framework has been that increasing the intensity of an intervention will increase its effect (Johnston, 2011). Wanzek and Vaughn (2008) examined struggling first-grade students' responses to varying amounts of time in reading interventions. They documented that while students in intervention groups demonstrated

accelerated learning over time, receiving the intervention once or with more frequency did not affect learning.

### **Assessment Meetings**

Three times a year, in the fall, winter, and spring, grade level teachers and support staff including Title 1 reading, ESL, and special education teachers came together after school for assessment meetings. Mrs. Dell, the school principal explained that the purpose of assessment meetings was to “talk about students as a team.” Using multiple data points that classroom teachers had gathered on each of their students-Kindergarten through second grade used the state mandated PALS (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2016) and/or the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016), and second through fourth grade used MAP (Northwest Testing Results, 2016) and/or the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016). A “data wall” was created with each student’s name and test scores written on a sticky note and then those sticky notes were categorized into advanced, proficient, beginning, and developing categories based on benchmarks for each grade level. Teachers focused on those students that fell into the lowest category to determine what additional services those children needed and how staff could service the largest number of students who had a similar need. Students in this lowest category often received special education, English as a Second Language, or Tier II reading intervention support during a 30-minute Intervention and Enrichment block during each school day. Teacher judgment was also used to reflect on the data. Mrs. Dell explained that a lot of conversation takes place during assessment meetings. For example, “if that’s a student

who might have bombed MAP because they spent ten minutes doing it but they're really showing that they have the skills in other areas" then that is taken into consideration.

While teachers had methods and criteria for identifying students in need of additional reading support, there remained some confusion about how best to support these students when they were also identified as English Language Learners. Mrs. Miller, the reading teacher explained, "there aren't criteria [for students that receive ELL services] and it is becoming kind of a concern. Not a concern, an issue when so many of our intervention students are ELL." She continued that again, professional opinion was very important and that the reading teachers and ESL teachers have conversations about who should provide additional support to the student. There were some tensions, though, as ESL services were not considered to be a Tier II intervention, because the ESL teacher was providing support so that English Language Learning students could access the core, Tier I classroom instruction. As a result, while the ESL teacher documented lesson plans and collected instructionally relevant information for herself, the ESL services and progress of ESL students in that setting were not officially documented. This became an issue when a fourth grade English Language Learning student might be struggling and there was no documentation of the additional instruction that the student received. Mrs. Miller, a Title 1 reading teacher, argued that she felt like, "we know these students a lot of times, by the time they're in intermediate, and we can make these choices out of what we know, our professional opinions." In contrast, Mrs. Garcia, an ESL teacher at Woodland Elementary, had voiced her concerns to the school district about the lack of required documentation was problematic because she often struggled to remember exactly what ESL support particular students received.

It must also be questioned how well teachers knew these English Language Learning students. That is, while communication between educators, parents, and communities is an important aspect of the Wisconsin RTI model, (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010) parent and teacher conferences twice a year remained the main source of communication between parents and teachers at Woodland Elementary. Teachers frequently asked me where the focal students for this study lived, with whom they lived with, and what languages were spoken at home. Connecting with families often involved bringing parents to school but not reaching out to build partnerships with families. In addition, deficit views of English Language Learners were commonly observed as speaking a language other than English was viewed as “a challenge” (Mrs. Dell). Mrs. Bailey commented:

I would say that each student is getting the individual support that they need and when you have kids coming from low income, you know, poor families in poverty, you know there’s research out there that shows that they clearly do not get the support that they need before coming to school so when they get to school they need a lot more support. The kids that we have tend to have more behaviors, tend to be lower, obviously they have more baggage, and they just need a lot more support overall.

Below I explore a shift in thinking that occurred at Woodland Elementary in response to RTI policy requirements of providing all students with access to the core, Tier I classroom instruction.

### **A Shift in Thinking**

Within RTI, it may only be determined that a child has a specific learning disability if the child does not make sufficient progress to meet age or grade-level standards when provided with appropriate instruction for the child's age or grade level or research-based interventions (Federal Register, 2006). Through this process, it must also be determined "that underachievement . . . is not due to lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math" (Federal Register, 2006, p. 46787). This requires that data is used to demonstrate that the child was provided appropriate instruction in regular education and intervention settings prior to the referral process and that data was used to document achievement and student progress over time (Federal Register, 2006). While states and school districts across the country have embraced RTI policy at different times since the language of the policy was first introduced into IDEA legislation, Woodland Elementary has only recently implemented changes in response to RTI including a literacy curriculum that is more balanced and comprehensive and a daily schedule that provided access to the general curriculum for all students. Below I explain the shift in thinking that has occurred at Woodland Elementary in response to RTI policy about the access all students have to the general classroom curriculum.

District-wide, all elementary schools, including Woodland, are in their third year of implementing a major RTI initiative called Intervention and Enrichment (IE) time. This IE time is a dedicated half-hour each day across grade levels for intervention and enrichment support. This is the time during each school day when students who qualify for Tier II, supplemental literacy instruction receive this additional instruction outside of the general classroom. Students who do not receive Tier II reading instruction remain in

the general classroom for this 30-minute block of time where they engage in various math or literacy review or enrichment activities planned by the classroom teacher. ESL students may also receive additional language and literacy support during this block of time from the ESL teacher. This dedicated time is meant to ensure that all students remain in the general classroom for the duration of reading and math blocks so that all students have access to core, Tier I classroom instruction as identified by RTI policy. Mrs. Dell commented that previously, “you could differentiate (in the classroom) but your couldn’t necessarily supplement. So adding that block allows [teachers] first, at that universal [tier I] level, to be able to give more.” It also guarantees that students needing supplemental instruction are receiving access to the general instruction in the classroom. No longer are students being pulled out of reading instruction in the general classroom for reading interventions. When asked how this new schedule has been working, Mrs. Dell responded, “Oh my gosh. It’s an amazingly different schedule. Love it, love it, love it.”

Mrs. Dell explained how she has also been working with her classroom teachers to monitor students’ progress in the classroom because RTI policy requires that classroom data be used to demonstrate that the child was provided appropriate instruction in regular education and intervention settings prior to the referral process and that data is used to document ongoing assessments of achievement that reflect student progress during instruction (Federal Register, 2006). She noted:

[Documenting] what that looks like and how it doesn’t have to be something really complicated because the fear is, ‘oh my gosh, how can I do that?’ And just working through and showing just in the normal lesson plans they do or the

normal grouping or conferencing records they've been doing in the workshop model now, how you can easily do that so if you have to look back. It doesn't have to be a separate kind of special form. So it's just trying to get classroom teachers to understand that first level and what their responsibility is in that.

Mrs. Dell supported teachers in thoughtful and purposeful ways as they learned how to incorporate RTI policy requirements into their daily teaching and planning. Mrs. Bailey explained that she had a notebook to keep track of students she had concerns about including times she worked with them and what she worked with them on. Mrs. Dell explained that, "as afraid as people (teachers) were of RTI when it first started, I feel like it serves a great purpose and makes people (teachers) more cognizant of what they're doing and more purposeful with what they're doing and just serves kids in a better way." She goes on to explain:

It's one of those things where as you're teaching and you get busy with everything and you're like, yeah, I did that, I did that, I did that. Kind of like, I didn't eat that, I didn't eat that, I didn't eat that, why am I not losing weight? But when you start looking at it and start really tracking and you realize, oh, I did eat that cookie and I did eat this at lunch and I did have those chips. Where when you started looking at kids' days and you saw that oh, they were pulled out during reading when the other kids got a chance to read and so they really didn't get that. When you started to really look at what kids were getting or weren't getting, it almost wasn't fair to the kids. And nobody was doing it intentionally-we didn't have the schedule that was built for it, we didn't have the systems in place for it, we didn't have the curriculum. That all kids were getting the equal things and it

was pockets of good but not consistently. So I feel like the changes that we've made have really helped provide services to kids that have some fidelity that give them a better chance to succeed.

### **Conclusion**

As discussed in Chapter 1, federal RTI policy leaves specific decisions regarding methods, frequency of instruction, and assessment up to states and local school districts (Johnston, 2010a). New Meadow School District took up that vision in purposeful and thoughtful ways that considered the types of readers and writers it wanted their students to become. That is, students who were eager to read and write across grade levels. In New Meadow School District, including at Woodland Elementary, a dedicated thirty minutes for each grade level to supplement general classroom curriculum, ensured that all students had access to the general classroom curriculum. In addition, assessments and progress monitoring of students' reading growth were balanced and comprehensive. Finally, professional development, conversations between teachers, and teacher reflection was encouraged and valued. These were important strengths of RTI in this space. If RTI is about preventing learning disabilities, then responsive teaching, assessment to guide instruction, and professional development and teacher expertise need to be emphasized (Johnston, 2011). There remained tensions and contradictions, though, as teachers worked with new policy requirements that were oftentimes vague and influenced by one's personal experiences. In addition, while adopting the current literacy program was progress toward a more cohesive and purposeful curriculum in this school, I argue that some of the literacy goals for students remained narrow and dated. In the following two

chapters I will explore children's reading experiences and their perspectives on these experiences within a core, Tier I classroom setting defined by RTI policy.

## **Chapter 5: Children's Voices and Reading Experiences in a Classroom Defined by RTI**

This chapter explores how four first-grade students in one elementary school classroom experienced the phenomenon of learning to read in a classroom defined by RTI policy. I used classroom observations and interviews to understand what reading practices children engaged in and how they described and conceptualized their experiences in the core, Tier I classroom setting. Observing children's reading experiences and talking to children about the meaning they made of those experiences revealed important ideas about the home and school settings that supported children's reading identities, interest, and motivation. By the end of the spring, I gained an understanding of how across case studies children's home and school reading practices built upon each other to support children's confidence, interest, and motivation in reading. In this chapter, I identify the practices and experiences that characterized the four children's reading experiences at home and school with a focus on children's narratives to answer my research questions: What reading practices and assessment practices are implemented in classrooms when schools implement RTI and how do children describe and conceptualize their reading experiences? Below I present children's early home reading experiences as well as parents' and the classroom teacher's similar reading goals for the first-graders. Parents acted in very deliberate ways to engage children in reading and to develop children's reading skills from an early age. Despite pressure for her first-grade students to demonstrate one year's growth in reading, Mrs. Bailey, the children's classroom teacher, shared parents' hopes of promoting a love of reading in her classroom. Next, I describe how children in this study experienced the

phenomenon of learning to read in a classroom defined by RTI: having time to read was valued, having a variety of books to choose from mattered, and children made comparisons between themselves and other students. All children, regardless of ability, had time to read independently and with others each day. Children described these practices as purposeful and were enthusiastic about reading. They had favorite and familiar texts and opportunities to make text choices they could read with success independently. A focus on reading leveled books resulted in better readers comparing themselves to others; however, all focal children of various abilities identified themselves as good readers and were motivated to read now and in the future. Throughout each section, I show the parallels between home and school reading practices. I argue for building on these home experiences to provide all children with opportunities to choose, read, and discuss real texts at school. These practices build on the authentic home reading practices many children have experienced across their young lives. I also argue that it is important for teachers to build strong partnerships with families and communities in order to recognize these parallels and avoid misconceptions and missed opportunities that marginalize working class and multi-lingual families.

### **The Home and School Settings Supporting First Grade Readers**

*Ms. Gaines (John's mom):* "We are a reading family. We love books. We love to read."

Ms. Gaines' comments on her family's reading life illustrate the home reading experiences of the four case study child participants and why children engaged in consistent and authentic home reading practices from an early age. In these families, reading was not just a homework assignment. The focal children, including English Language Learning children experienced reading and being read to with various family

members throughout their young lives because parents understood the importance of these practices. Below I describe children's early reading experiences and how parents accessed resources to support their children's development and interest in reading. I show that Mrs. Bailey, the children's first grade teacher, also hoped to develop children's interest in reading despite pressure from the school district for first-graders to increase their reading by one grade level.

Mr. Akachi described the early reading experiences of his son, James, and how he, as a parent, utilized technology and short children's books to support James' interest and growth in reading.

*Mr. Akachi:* He (James) is a young boy from my country, Togo (in West Africa). He was 3 years old when I took him to the United States. He stayed home for one year. He started 4K. The first time at school he's okay, he don't have any problems. The only problem he has is we start training him at home for the reading. When we started his reading at home he don't really like it, he don't like to read. Every time I pick a book he don't really like and what I do I tried to figure out why. What can make him start liking a book and read? So I figure out to buy a tablet because he like some electronic stuff. So I buy a tablet and I download some book on it. The book will read and he will follow the book[s] on his tablet. So, the library they have a lot of book so I try to buy some book [to] put on it. So he starts liking it! Because there were image, he follow, it highlights every time. So he starts understanding the story in the book. I don't want him to be stick only on tablets. Reading on it. So I have to start a little bit, tablet with a

book, a small book. So we started a little bit, a little bit, a little bit. He start liking to read the book.

Mr. Akachi utilized a variety of resources to support James' reading development and was very involved in James' early reading experiences. This was not unique to James' case. Across the four case studies, parents spoke of the early home literacy experiences of their children and the ways in which they introduced reading into their children's lives to develop reading skills and an interest in reading.

Ms. Estrada shared that when her daughter Ana was younger she would read books such as *Brown Bear* [*Brown Bear, What Do You See?*] (Martin, 1992) and *Clifford* [*the Big Red Dog*] (Bridwell, 1963) with Ana in Spanish and in English, since, Ana was learning both languages. Ms. Estrada explained that she got these books in both languages from her sister-in-law who has older children and from someone that was giving books away for free in the park near their home. Like James' father, she wanted Ana to be interested in reading.

*Ms. Estrada:* I started reading with her so she would become interested in books so that she wouldn't become lazy when she got older and say, "I don't want to read." So it was really to start that motivation so she would start reading on her own and be interested in it.

John's mother, Ms. Gaines, talked about John's home reading experiences as the youngest of three children in the family. Following the lead of his older siblings, John took an interest in reading with others and independently.

*Ms. Gaines:* So John was the youngest of three so he was in a unique position as far as academic skills go because he is left to his own devices quite a bit but also

he absorbs a lot from the older two. So he's been read to since birth by myself and from everyone around him and Alana (John's sister) was starting to read at like four or five so she would practice on him a lot because he was one or two at that point. So he emulated them. When they would sit down with books, whether he would read or not, just to fit in.

John was motivated to read by watching his older siblings read. During the interview, I asked John if he remembered reading when he was younger and he quickly responded that, "Yeah. I read out loud and Alana would say, 'Stop, John, read in your head'." Ms. Gaines said that she forgot about that but, yes, in kindergarten when he was just starting to read and he had not yet learned how to read in his head, his brother and sister would get mad. "We'd all be reading on the couch. He hadn't figured out how to read in his head yet." Ms. Gaines ended her interview by recalling John reading with his grandma. She explained that when John would have a bottle when he was younger he would sit in a chair with his grandma and she would read to him. Grandma continues to read to John when they see each other a few times each year.

Laura's parents similarly shared that they exposed Laura to books since she was a baby and consistently read to her every night starting around the time she began talking. Whether they read little board books or storybooks they consistently read about three books a night to her. When asked about where those books were from they shared that their basement is full of bins and bookshelves of books, many from when they were children.

Mrs. Murray: I have a collection of Berenstain [Bears] books.

Mr. Murray: I had a big collection of Curious George books.

Mrs. Murray: Oh yeah, we have a ton of old Curious George books.

Mr. Murray: A ton of those and then just a smattering of every other kind of book for kids.

In addition, when Laura was first starting to read someone gave them a series of beginning readers that they believe really helped her with learning to read.

Children developed an early interest in reading by observing and emulating the authentic literacy practices of those around them at home. As Taylor (1998) explained about children who are not motivated to read, “it is entirely possible that many children . . . never have the opportunity to experience the diffuse, moment to moment uses of print . . . print is presented to them as some abstract decontextualized phenomenon unrelated to their everyday lives” (p. 92). This was not the case for the children in these families. Parents acquired books and utilized technology in purposeful ways to support children’s development and interest in reading. Early literacy experiences were a result of parents’ goals and values for their children’s reading lives. Parents shared that they believed reading well and having an interest in reading would help their children with their education and participation in society. James’ father explained:

The goal, we are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. No education is like-I don’t want that. I want him to be part of this world. To be somebody who will maybe do something to change a life for others. To do something and help others. Yeah. Yeah. All those things, when you want to be, you need for you a good education. You need to have education.

Similarly, Ms. Estrada wanted her daughter, Ana, “to learn about reading, to do a lot of reading, and to become somebody someday.” Laura’s parents were grateful that

reading had come easy to her because they felt like that would help the rest of her studies. “You know, she’s got that. Even if she doesn’t fully grasp like science, at least she can read about it.” They hope that she will “continue on this trajectory . . . stay ahead of the curve” so that she’ll have more options and opportunities. Mrs. Bailey, the students’ first-grade classroom teacher, had similar goals for her students as readers and learners that reflected both a development in reading skills and an interest in reading. Below I articulate her goals for the first-graders to show how they paralleled parent’s hopes and goals for the children.

Just as parents spoke of their desires and efforts for their children to be interested in reading, Mrs. Bailey, the children’s classroom teacher, described her hope that her students would develop a love of reading:

Well, my SLO (Student Learning Objectives) is that they increase their reading by one grade level, or whatever, but overall not really. I just want them to love reading. I want them to know that reading time is coming and I want them to be excited about it. I want them to be, when they’re sitting down reading, like John. He is so involved in those books and he just is scouring the pictures and you know, he just loves to read and I want that for all my kids. I want them all to be, you know, taken away in these books that they read. And I love to read and I want them to love to read as well.

Despite pressure for her students to demonstrate growth in reading levels throughout the school year, Mrs. Bailey is most interested in supporting her students’ engagement and interest in reading. As a result of her personal beliefs, expertise, and a curriculum that enabled her to give children ample time to read, all students in Mrs.

Bailey's classroom spent time reading independently and with each other each day. They had opportunities to choose books they were interested in reading. These school reading practices paralleled children's current home reading practices in many ways and children found these practices purposeful and engaging. As Johnston, Woodside-Jiron, & Day (2001) documented, children's epistemologies and literacy identities are shaped by teachers' epistemological stances and classroom literacy structures and discourses. Below I describe the home and school reading practices of children to illustrate their rich literate lives and the amazing parallels between home and school. I present data from children's narratives to focus on their perspectives of these reading experiences, specifically how they experienced the phenomenon of learning to read in Mrs. Bailey's classroom at Woodland.

### **Mrs. Bailey's First Grade Classroom**

Mrs. Bailey's first grade classroom is located just a few steps from the school office and next to the bathrooms. A friendly letter from Mrs. Bailey and her first graders is posted outside of the classroom door kindly reminding students at Woodland to be extra quiet going to and from the bathrooms as Mrs. Bailey's students "try our best to be learners all the time." Outside her classroom door students' coats and backpacks hang neatly from hooks in individual cubbies. Her classroom door remains open throughout the morning as staff and students move quickly and quietly throughout the carpeted halls.

Inside Mrs. Bailey's first grade classroom students are organized 3-4 at rectangular children's tables on one side of the room. In the middle of each table are colored trays with scissors, pencils, glue, and crayons for table members to share. Each student has a colored plastic book box that holds their personal subject notebooks and

folders and a large plastic bag for books to be read during independent reading time. The front of the classroom is organized for whole class lessons with a large rug on the tile floor in front of a Smartboard. Mrs. Bailey's rocking chair and a stand with chart paper, often displaying word patterns the class is currently learning, are off to the side. A variety of books, many on science topics the class is studying, are displayed on a bookcase and basket listening center books and supplies sits next to the rocking chair. The perimeter of the classroom contains student cubbies, a leveled classroom library, tables for working with small groups, a teacher desk, and cabinets holding extra books for listening centers and mini lessons. A set of iPads charge on a counter next to the sink while a few laptops, on their last leg, charge on top of a bookshelf. Teacher made anchor charts reminding students of classroom routines and expectations including partner reading and the morning routine, and a purchased number line and ABC chart are displayed on the walls along with a large word wall containing sight words and the students' names. This is an inviting, bright room as the sun peeks in through the window blinds and music plays softly on Mrs. Bailey's computer. Mrs. Bailey does not sit still throughout the morning. She is observed constantly interacting with her students and keeps the routines moving even on the final days of the school year.

### **Having Time to Read was Valued**

Both the classroom teacher and parents believed it was important to give children time to read by themselves and with others each day. Children were observed taking this time seriously at school and voiced the importance of independent reading time to their interest and development in reading. Below I show how and why this time was valued at home and school and how it supported children's interest and growth in reading.

### **Children were Enthusiastic, Independent Readers**

At school, children were observed reading independently on a daily basis. In the beginning of the school year, first graders in Mrs. Bailey's classroom read independently at school for five minutes each day. This increased throughout the school year, and by the spring, when this study was conducted, children were spending 25 minutes every school day reading independently from books in their "book bag" that they had chosen from the classroom library and could read independently. Each day all children had this block of time to read regardless of reading ability. Mrs. Bailey believed it was important to give her students independent reading time to read books that they chose and could read without frustration because "you can't get better at something unless you're practicing it." She reiterated that, "kids aren't going to get better [at reading] unless they're actively reading." Mrs. Bailey would transition to this time by announcing, "Get ready to read!" Based on my field notes, the routines and expectations of this time were clear as well as students' valuing of this time:

All students are independently reading in whisper or silent voices from a variety of books in their book bags . . . As I look around the room I see heads focused in books.

Mrs. Bailey's personal belief in the importance of this time combined with the school's implementation of an RTI intervention schedule that required all students to be present in the general classroom for their grade level's reading block, and the school's implementation of a curriculum that integrated this independent reading time, meant that all students, regardless of ability, had this time to read each day.

Children explained that reading independently was a purposeful literacy practice. Laura explained that having this large amount of time to read independently at school was helping her become a better reader “because I’m not having to like be asked questions in the middle of the book.” John commented that he hoped to have all independent reading time next year. Independent reading time was important to James and Ana because they said it helped them learn.

Independent reading time at school was a valuable and familiar practice to children, mirroring the nightly reading they consistently engaged in at home. Ana’s mom explained, “she has to read 15 minutes a day for school and sometimes she’ll get another book after the 15 minutes are done and keep reading after that.” John’s mom said that John liked to read by himself. “In the car or at home before bed they always read for 20, 30 minutes.”

### **Children Consistently Read with Others**

Children were observed reading with their classmates, in small groups, and/or with a teacher at school each day and children spoke of the purpose of these practices.

Mrs. Garcia, the ESL teacher, read with Ana on a daily basis in the classroom to support her language and literacy development. Mrs. Garcia, explained what she did when she read with Ana:

It’s a rereading [of the books in her book bag] and just checking the comprehension. What I find is that because her books are getting a little harder now she often misses the gist of things. So it’s like then we kind of have to go back and do some of the Spanish explanations and then it’s like, ‘oh, okay, I get it.’

Ana reiterated this, commenting that she read with Mrs. Garcia because Mrs. Garcia helped her understand what was happening in her books.

Mrs. Bailey also read with students to support their reading development and to assess their independent reading. She met with each student at least once a week in a small group to read and discuss a text at the students' instructional levels. To check in on what they were reading independently, every few weeks she individually conferenced with each student and once each trimester she formally assessed students' reading using running records. Children explained that they read with Mrs. Bailey because she wanted to listen to them read and she helped them become better readers by helping them read bigger words. Children were observed eagerly going to read with Mrs. Bailey to complete the running record assessments.

Students also read with one another for the last five minutes of the reading block each day. The expectation for this partner reading time was that students would take turns sharing their reading responses and take turns reading books in their book bags. While there was not complete autonomy in the partner reading discussions, students were consistently observed reading and enjoying books with their reading partners:

John packs up his books and moves to the table to sit next to his reading partner. His partner shares the words she recorded on her sticky note. John chooses a funny Christmas book to read called *A Bad Kitty Christmas* (Bruei, 2011). His partner is excited because she likes those books too. John begins reading it aloud quietly with expression. He stops to ask something he wonders about.

James quickly moves with his reading partner and shares his sticky notes.

Engaged with his partner in sharing and reading together. James chooses a book. The boys laugh together over the title of the nonfiction book on slugs. They take turns reading and look at the pictures together. His partner asks him a question from the “partner reading talk” question sheet in James’ book bag. James listens while his partner reads.

Children communicated that partner reading was an opportunity to think about and share what they learned or what happened in their books.

Children and families explained that there were also opportunities to read with adults and siblings at home. Laura commented that she read with her mom and dad sometimes as well as her younger brother at home. Laura’s mom, Mrs. Murray, explained that Laura had gotten into the habit of reading to her younger brother in the morning when they are not quite ready to leave the house. John’s mom said that in addition to reading independently, “he also still likes being read to and even just like outgrown picture books like *Cat and the Hat*” (Seuss, 1957). Ana read with her mom to “help her speak English.” Ana’s mom explained that when Ana sits down to read she listens to her read and asks her questions about the book such as what color something is or what happened to the little dog in the book. So even though Mrs. Estrada is not fluent in English she says, “I’ll be there. I’ll be listening.” Ana also brought books in Spanish home from school, provided by her ESL teacher, so that mom could read to her in Spanish. James’ dad explained that “because he’s [James’] going to school, he’s very young, he has a better accent”[in English] but sometimes when James reads he and his wife will sit down with him and listen. Laura’s dad commented that sometimes when she’s reading with him, she’ll get ahead of herself so he’ll stop her and they will go back

and he will help her with the pronunciation of new words. Whether it was for the pleasure of snuggling up next to a parent or to enjoy a familiar picture book, to support the language learning of family members, or to have literacy development supported, reading with others was a consistent home literacy practice.

At home and school children had opportunities to read independently and with others each day. Children eagerly participated in these practices and voiced how important it was for them to have time to read at school. Below I describe how having texts that children often chose themselves from the classroom library was essential to supporting children's interest in reading.

### **Having Texts and Making Book Choices Mattered**

Independent reading time in this classroom was dependent on children having books they were interested in reading for the entire 25-minute block of independent reading time. Partner reading was also dependent on children having books of interest that they could share and discuss. Children spoke of the importance of being able to read real books by real authors and choose what books they wanted to read. Parents also spoke of accessing books for their children to read at home. Below I show that reading was engaging and motivating to children because they had opportunities to read and become familiar with a variety of texts.

### **Children had Opportunities to Choose Books**

At both home and school, children had opportunities to choose books to read. Mrs. Bailey believed that she was fostering a love of reading by giving students time to read and opportunities to make book choices. As Mrs. Bailey reported:

I think giving them choices and having them have their book bag and letting them choose those books is important. I want them to feel connected to the books and I want them to be excited to go and reread this book again because they just love the character so much.

Children were observed “book shopping” for new books during their designated day at the start of morning recess. Students carefully looked through the options in various book boxes in the classroom library and selected ones of interest. Conversations between the children frequently occurred during this time as they announced with excitement a book they found or suggested one they enjoyed to others. During independent reading time, children then browsed through their books in their book bags to make choices. For example in my field notes:

James finishes his book, stretches, and looks through his pile. He gets excited when he finds a book about dinosaurs. He goes, “Ohhh, this one,” and rubs his hands together, then laughs. He begins reading this familiar book in a whisper voice.

John is reading silently by himself sitting on the rug with his legs crossed. I go over and sit next to him. He is reading a *Ready Freddy* (Klein, 2004) chapter book. I ask him if he found any words (to complete his sticky note) and he says with excitement that he forgot! He packs up his books and moves to the table to sit next to his reading partner. He tells her right away with a smile, “I was so focused on my books I forgot to do my sticky.”

Laura tells Mrs. Bailey about a book she is reading, “That chapter book like catches my mind right away.”

These examples illustrate the importance of providing children opportunities to make book choices from a variety of texts that they can read. Children were interested in reading the books in their book bags for independent reading time because they had some choice in what they read. Laura explained that she hoped to choose books for independent reading time next year:

I really want to be in Mrs. Weber’s class (next year). I have a feeling that they get to pick their books and I know that they get to pick their books because they have like their own little library like we do.

Children spoke of the importance of choosing books to read at home and school from the classroom library:

*John:* “Some days, like one day a week, we change our books [at school] and I get really excited when I change my books because I can’t wait to umm . . . look at new adventures.”

*Author:* What do you like about reading at school?

*Laura:* I like to pick new books . . . every week.

Laura commented that, “with reading all of those different books (during independent reading), I always learn new facts.” John believed that being able to choose the books he read during independent reading helped him become a better reader because “if I read my favorite books it still can teach me how to read bigger and bigger words.”

Families also described how they accessed texts for their children to read. Ana's mom said that they ordered from the school's book orders in kindergarten and borrowed books including books based on the movie *Frozen* that Ana likes to read from the school library. Laura explained that she had books from the library and baby animal books from when she was three-years old, proclaiming, "We have too much books." Laura's mom added, "And you like reading your magazine . . . your Highlights magazine. It's a good car thing to read. And you get books as presents sometimes too." John's mom says that they buy some books and get books from the school library and public library. She explained that, "mostly for John, his classroom books [are what he reads]. He gets sent home with a new one just about every day." John has also shown an interest in his older brother's comic books. James' dad reported that they did not go to the public library to get books because, "every time he has to come back with a book [from school], which he has to read. He reads in the morning, in the afternoon, [and] before he goes to bed." While all four children and their families explained the variety of ways they accessed texts for their children to read, the books that their children spent the most time reading at home were the books from Mrs. Bailey's classroom library. This is understandable because the children were required to read at home each night and were reminded to bring their book bag back and forth each day. Having books that children often chose themselves from their classroom library was important in supporting children's interest in reading at home.

### **Children had Favorite and Familiar Texts**

Across the cases, children spoke of favorite books: *Junie B. Jones* (Park, 2001), *Magic Tree House* (Osborne, 2001), *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007), *Pete the Cat*

(Litwin, 2010), *The Little Red Hen* (Zemach, 1942), *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (Viorst, 1972), *Franklin in the Dark* (Bourgeois, 1986), *Princess Penelope* (Mack, 2003), books based on the movie *Frozen*, car and truck nonfiction books, and the list goes on. During my interviews, Laura and John laughed together remembering a page in the mixed up ABC book called *Alphaoops!: The Day Z Went First* (Kontis, 2006), James drew himself reading a sentence from a book he had been reading called *Just One Guinea Pig* (Giles, 2005), and Ana retrieved *David Se Mete en Lios* [*David Gets in Trouble*] (Shannon, 2002) and commented on how funny the Spanish books are that she brings home from school to read. John chose to read a book to me called *Inside a House that is Haunted* (Capucilli, 1998), telling me that it was a lot like the *Buzz Boy and Fly Guy* (Arnold, 2010) books. Laura liked reading “lots of Judy Moody books . . . like I have one right here from the library” she exclaimed as we sat on her couch. In addition, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007) she found to be pretty funny and explained, “I might get that book because another student got that and he said it was really, really interesting.” All four children knew books and characters from memory. Not only did they know the titles of favorite and familiar texts, many of the children had emotional connections to the characters in books, made connections between different books, and were observed laughing and sharing their excitement over a book with others. Knowing books and characters deeply engaged children in reading.

During my final interview with Laura I asked why she thought she was a good reader. She explained that she was a good reader because she read, “pretty much every single day” and while many other students in her class did as well, “some people don’t exactly like to read” and she did. Enjoying reading was an important aspect of being a

successful reader. When I asked John to tell me about himself, without hesitation the first thing he said was, “I love reading.” He later drew a picture of himself reading a book at school with a big grin across his face and told me that he gets really excited to change his books at school because he “can’t wait to look at new adventures.” I ended Ana’s final interview by asking her if there was anything else she wanted to tell me about herself as a reader. She nodded silently and then said with confidence, “I like reading.” James explained that he liked reading at school because he was able to read books and that he likes to read everything and gets excited to read. Children in this study engaged in reading real books by real authors and they enjoyed it.

### **Children Experienced Growth as Readers**

Children were observed and spoke of experiencing growth and success as readers. James was awarded a coveted “King of Books” award from the librarian for reading 100 books at home over the school year. He proudly wore his crown throughout the school day. John told me in our first interview that he did not really care for reading chapter books but one month later during our second interview he told me with confidence that, “Now I do [like chapter books] because I’m 7. I seriously do like chapter books. They’re more interesting and more longer.” Ana explained that good readers read, they read different books, and they can retell their stories. These were all practices and strategies that she believed she was successful with.

Children expressed their motivation to read more challenging books in the future and their desire to grow as readers. Laura believed that good readers read harder books including chapter books and more exciting books. “Good readers get to read more, like more, books that have excitement.” As a result, she wanted to read the whole series of

Junie B. Jones books the following year. Ana thought that she would be reading harder books, like more chapter books in the future and more exciting books. John thought that he would read “really big chapter books” as he grew older. James thought that he would read chapter books next year because “maybe when I’m big I’ll like long books.”

### **Children Made Comparisons**

Through my interviews with children, I learned that regardless of assessed reading levels, all four children voiced confidence in their reading abilities. In each case, children were eager to proclaim that they were good readers-in some cases, repeatedly. Grade level assessments also documented that the four students were growing as readers throughout the school year. Despite their documented growth and confidence, I observed that the highest readers in the class, including John and Laura, frequently compared themselves with others in the class to illustrate their abilities. For example, Laura commented that only a few students, including herself, can pick a chapter book “because we’re the best readers in the class.” John explained he was a good reader because he was the only one in the class that could read in his mind and that everyone else started talking aloud when they read. Parents of higher readers expressed concern that their children might brag at school about their reading abilities. After interviewing John’s mom, she mentioned that John shows off at school during reading. When asked what reading was like for Laura at school, mom responded, “um, egotistical.” Dad explained that based on what Laura says when she comes home they were concerned, “Yeah, we’ve gone into conferences wondering if there is some kind of showoffiness going on.” Below I describe how differentiation in the classroom in order to provide all students with access

to the classroom reading curriculum, a requirement of RTI policy, led to high achieving readers comparing themselves to others.

Woodland's implementation of an intervention schedule that addressed the state and district RTI policy meant that all students in Mrs. Bailey's classroom were present in the classroom for the reading block. This was meant to provide access to grade level curriculum for all students. Mrs. Bailey differentiated reading by providing a variety of books for students to read and opportunities to read by themselves and with others, as previously discussed. Children did not have complete autonomy in choosing the books they read during independent reading time, though. Mrs. Bailey explained that students' book bags contained mostly books that had been clearly labeled with a color according to the student's reading level. Students were required to read books they had chosen and that were at their independent reading levels and then 2-3 books that were chosen to reflect other dimensions such as a different level, topic, or genre (i.e. math books, poetry books, fairytales, nonfiction). When I asked students what kind of books they chose for their book bags, they consistently responded by naming the colors they were told to choose from Mrs. Bailey's classroom library or the letter levels they were assigned to on an iPad reading program. The highest readers in the class also used these leveling systems to compare themselves to others who were not reading the same level or type of book. For example:

*Laura:* Today I was on RazKids. I'm pretty sure you know what it is. It's a bunch of books that we have to read and I'm on level M. Some people are on level A.

Some people are even on double A-those have only like two words on a page.

*RC:* Your books have more words?

*Laura:* Lots and lots more words.

As Kontovourki (2012) documented in her study of students' experiences with leveling, this instructional obsession with the assessment of students' reading levels and having students reading books at their level results in students being fascinated with leveling and defining themselves and others as readers based on reading levels. Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) recommend that teachers need to provide children with a variety of reading materials that not only match their reading levels but also consider children's interests, motivations, experiences, and identities.

In addition to children comparing themselves with others based on reading levels, I also observed higher readers comparing themselves to others by observing classroom practices. That is, Mrs. Bailey explained that students who were below grade level, such as Ana, were meeting with her every day as she says, "[I am] trying to push my low guys." Ana also spent the last few minutes of the reading block reading with Mrs. Garcia, the ESL support teacher who would join the classroom. While Ana was observed enjoying, and even looking forward to, reading with Mrs. Garcia, it appeared that more accomplished readers again compared themselves to other readers by observing classroom practices. That is, Laura explained that she read with Mrs. Bailey because Mrs. Bailey wanted to see how good she was at reading and that "she [Mrs. Bailey] mostly reads with the kids that aren't as good of readers as I." It is important to consider that while Ana, may not have minded reading with a teacher in the classroom, she may begin to mind if this continues throughout her years in school as she may realize that she is behind despite extra help from teachers. In addition, while children had opportunities to read with each other in groups and with partners they were grouped or matched with

students that had similar reading abilities. It would be beneficial for students of various abilities in Mrs. Bailey's classroom to have opportunities to interact around reading.

### **Home and School Disconnections**

In addition to tensions caused by a focus on text reading levels, there were also disconnections between home and school. Parents in this study made a lot of assumptions about their children's school literacy experiences. Ms. Gaines, John's mom, commented that, "I'm not really sure what it [reading] is like this year." Mrs. Estrada, Ana's mom, responded with, "umm, not very well," when she was asked what she knew about Ana's school reading experiences. When James' dad, Mr. Akachi, was asked what reading was like for James at school he deferred to James. Mr. and Mrs. Murray, Laura's parents had a bit more information about reading at school, commenting that, "She's [Mrs. Bailey] shown us, you know, the reading charts with the letters that signify [levels] and explained well how getting to the next level now is a little more difficult." Laura has also told them how she gets to pick books from certain bins to bring home.

Teachers at Woodland also made many assumptions about children's home literacy experiences. Despite a school mission statement that promoted empowering students, valuing community, and embracing diversity, parent and teacher conferences three times a school year remained the main source of communication between home and school. Teachers frequently asked me where students lived, whom they lived with, and what languages were spoken at home. The rich language and literacy family life of James and his parents was not only unknown by the school because the parents did not check a box saying they spoke a language other than English, but incorrect assumptions were made about what country in Africa they were from, the occupation of James' dad, and the

languages James' parents spoke. John's cozy, quiet home was assumed to be filled with chaos because of his brother's ADHD diagnosis. It was not known that Ana's father and other family members spoke both English and Spanish and that in fact Ana had been exposed to both languages since she was young. Mrs. Bailey explained that while each child took at least one book home from her classroom library at their independent reading level to read each night for the required 15 minutes of nightly reading, she repeated:

[ I ] assume that they have, and most kids do have, more books at home. If I know that they are reading at home and they want more books I will allow them to take more books, but a lot of those kids who don't have the books are not reading the books [she sends home] anyway, and it's more of the, "oh, I don't want to lose my book."

It is not known who "those kids" is referring to, but from my home visits and conversations with children and families, all families had books and accessed texts for their children to read. In fact, while Mrs. Bailey described her desire to help students choose books that they could connect with and were interested in and she made a point to "pick out books that she thinks everybody will kind of like," there remained space to connect individual students with topics and books that they are interested in. Mrs. Bailey explained that because they really just started to learn to read in first grade, "I kind of let them just see and figure out kinda what books they like." Talking with families and children revealed that in fact even for these young children they had topics and books they were interested in because they had been experiencing books and reading for their entire young lives. Frequently, children commented that books they were interested in were not available in the classroom library.

For James and Ana, in particular, a stronger home and school partnership could have resulted in more learning opportunities. James' dad spoke of seeing the same comprehension struggles at home that Mrs. Bailey described seeing at school, "He [James] can read correctly but he don't understand fully, the story he's reading. If you ask him what the story is about . . . he tries to say the same thing or he tries to cover all the book. He can not summarize it, say what it's important in the book." Ana's mom did not consider reading a struggle for Ana even though Mrs. Bailey wished Ana had received a reading intervention during the school year. How beneficial it would have been if the teacher and parents shared their common observations. How important it is that teachers avoid assuming there are dis-alignments between home and school values, practices, and experiences. As Taylor (1998) writes, "we need to know more of the learning styles, coping strategies, and social support systems of the children we teach if instruction in reading and writing is to be a meaningful complement to their lives" (p.93).

### **Conclusion**

In Mrs. Bailey's classroom at Woodland Elementary, children had consistent opportunities to read books independently and with others. There were opportunities to choose from a variety of books in the classroom library. In addition to New Meadow School District implementing a curriculum and schedule that allowed for all students to engage in these regular reading practices in the general classroom, Mrs. Bailey believed strongly in providing children with a variety of texts to read in her classroom library. She collected books being given away by other teachers and bought many of her own. Children's reading experiences were not only a result of RTI policy, they were a result of a knowledgeable teacher that implemented reading curriculum and assessments in

thoughtful ways. The literacy practices first-graders participated in at school mirrored those they had consistently experienced at home since they were very young. Across case studies, children of various reading abilities identified as good readers, engaged in reading, and were motivated to read because of these authentic and shared home and school literacy experiences.

Despite the parallels between home and school reading practices, parents knew little about children's reading at school while teachers knew little about children's reading at home. This is problematic. Schools need to be strongly connected to the families they serve in order to avoid missed opportunities and to be responsive to the rich language and literacy home lives of children. How important it is that teachers talk to children and families instead of making assumptions about who they are and what they need. A strong partnership with families allows schools to learn about and support children's home reading experiences and the efforts and goals of parents.

## **Chapter 6: An English Language Learner’s Reading Experiences in a Classroom**

### **Defined by RTI: Ana’s Story**

This chapter explores the specific reading experiences of Ana, a first-grade English Language Learner in Mrs. Bailey’s classroom at Woodland Elementary. As discussed in Chapter 1, RTI is a major intervention policy that typically targets early reading problems and provides early interventions for children who are underperforming in school. It is a method for identifying children with learning disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). When applying an RTI framework with English Language Learners teachers must have a strong understanding of “the interaction between linguistic, cognitive, and academic development” as well as “the unique cultural and linguistic abilities” of each of their English Language Learners so that “evaluation of ELLs can be applied equitably and appropriately to produce the development, growth, and high achievement desired for ELLs” (NCRTI, 2010b, p.1).

This chapter describes the reading experiences of Ana, a first grade student in Mrs. Bailey’s classroom-a classroom defined by RTI policy-to understand how the implementation of RTI and ESL services created opportunities for Ana to access the same literature based reading curriculum as her English speaking peers. While Ana was not provided with a Tier II reading intervention services in first grade, there were concerns about her language and literacy growth. She did receive language and literacy support from an ESL teacher, Mrs. Garcia, during the school’s intervention and enrichment time block and remained in the general classroom for the first grade reading block. Ana identified herself as a good reader and was observed engaged in reading books in the classroom and at home. This chapter explores some of the tensions that

existed in a school that served a large population of English Language Learning students within an RTI model. While Ana had access to the same core, Tier I reading curriculum as her English speaking peers and increased opportunities to develop her English language and literacy skills without missing classroom instruction, there were missed opportunities to provide Ana with a “culturally and linguistically responsive” learning environment that viewed “cultural and linguistic diversity as assets” (Klingner et al., 2010, p.157). That is, the classroom teacher held deficit views of Ana and lacked a deep understanding of the relationships between language and reading resulting in a lack of opportunities for Ana to develop her oral language skills in the classroom. There was not a strong partnership with Ana’s family. Instead, many assumptions were made about Ana’s previous schooling experiences, her home language and literacy experiences, and the community in which she lived. Ana was often observed struggling with completing class word work tasks that were independent, silent, and did not build on her native language. Ana’s mom was not aware that Ana was considered a struggling reader at school.

Ana’s story illustrates what might be possible for English Language Learning students in an RTI model that is implemented by professional educators alongside the risk of relying on RTI policy with English Language Learning students when classroom teachers lack a strong understanding of “the interaction between linguistic, cognitive, and academic development” and when little is known about “the unique cultural and linguistic abilities” of each ELL (NCRTI, 2010b, p.1). I propose the need for a deeper understanding of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), particularly the relationship

between language and reading and a stronger partnership between school and Ana's family would have increased learning opportunities for Ana.

### **Ana's Story**

Ana was seven years old and in the first-grade. She is of Hispanic descent and speaks Spanish at home. A happy, soft-spoken child, she often had a smile on her face and a hand raised in the classroom to ask or answer a question. Her long, dark hair was often pulled back into a ponytail or braid and she wore gold butterfly earrings and a gold necklace with the Virgin Mary pendant on it each day. Ana lived with her parents and three-year old sister in an apartment building near school. An aunt, uncle, and older cousins lived nearby and Ana's aunt occasionally watched Ana after school. The two-story brick apartment building was one of a handful of similar buildings organized around a large parking lot and surrounded by oak trees and picnic tables. The entire apartment complex area was quiet and clean with a scattering of cars parked in the lot. "No parking" signs in Spanish and English confirmed the large population of Spanish speaking families that resided in these apartments. Down the block from these apartments was a large public park with a new play structure and soccer fields.

Ana's apartment was located towards one end of the parking lot and was shaded by large trees. Each time I arrived with a translator to interview Ana and her mother, Mrs. Estrada, we waited to be buzzed into the building and then made our way down the quiet, carpeted hallway to Ana's first floor apartment. Mrs. Estrada and her daughters eagerly anticipated our arrival and Mrs. Estrada greeted us each warmly with a hug and a kiss on the cheek before leading us into her apartment. Each time we met at the dining room table. Four pretty gold placemats were set at each table spot with a plastic tablecloth

keeping them safe from the many markers and paints Ana and her younger sister, Olivia frequently used. A portrait of the Virgin Mary hung over the table and recent school pictures of Ana and Olivia hung on the wall near the kitchen entrance. In the living room, the TV was quietly turned to a Spanish channel. Curtains framed a large window and three tan coaches were dispersed around the room with a family portrait positioned above one couch. Ana's school artwork was taped on a wall alongside a framed baby picture of one of the girls beneath an image of an angel. A Spanish version of *David* (Shannon, 2002) and an English version of *The Cat in the Hat* (Dr. Seuss, 1957) lay on a small end table.

At home Ana and her family spoke Spanish, although Ana's father and uncle also spoke English. Ana's dad also studied English to learn it. Ana mentioned that her uncle sometimes spoke English with her. During our first interview I noted how Ana's little sister quietly talked to herself in both Spanish and English as she kept herself busy on the family's iPad and coloring projects at the dining table. Ana sat quietly at the head of the table and listened while I used a translator to ask her mother, Mrs. Estrada, questions in Spanish about Ana's reading experiences at home and school. Ana's mom described her as "a good girl, responsible." She explained that sometimes she will leave Ana and Olivia with her sister-in-law and Ana always completes her homework before she goes to the park. When Mrs. Estrada tells Ana to read, Mrs. Estrada says, that Ana "sits down and reads." Ana also responds to Mrs. Estrada's questions about what she reads. So even though Mrs. Estrada is not fluent in English she says, "I'll be there. I'll be listening." Her mother has read to her in both Spanish and English from an early age to engage her in reading so that she would be motivated to read and learn in the future.

*Ms. Estrada:* I started reading with her so she would become interested in books so that she wouldn't become lazy when she got older and say, "I don't want to read." So it was really to start that motivation so she would start reading on her own and be interested in it.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Ms. Estrada explained that she read books such as *Brown Bear* [*Brown Bear, What Do You See?*] (Martin, 1992) and *Clifford* [*the Big Red Dog*] (Bridwell, 1963) with Ana in Spanish and in English. Ana also brought books in Spanish home from school, provided by her ESL teacher, so that mom could read to her in Spanish.

When I interviewed Ana, she was soft-spoken and focused. Ana told me that she would rather speak in Spanish during her interviews but her mother encouraged her to speak in English. Throughout the interviews Ana spoke mostly in English but occasionally used her Spanish to clarify her answers or a question she was asked. As discussed in Chapter 5, Ana identified as a good reader, enjoyed reading, and liked school in general. She commented that good readers, including herself, read and they read different books. They can also retell the stories they read. Ana explained that she had become a better reader in first grade and that the books she read at school were fun for her. Her favorite books included *Frozen* (Disney, 2013), *Pete the Cat* (Litwin, 2010), nonfiction animal books, and books that teach her something. She recalled specific titles she read including *The Little Red Hen* (Zemach, 1942), *Daisy and Bella* (Dufresne, n.d.a), and *Sleeptight Spaceboy* (Dufresne, n.d.a.). During our second interview Ana pulled out her book bag from school and showed that it contained one book in English from her guided reading lesson with Mrs. Bailey that day and two picture books in

Spanish from Mrs. Garcia. She liked bringing home the books in Spanish because they were funny. During our second interview Ana chose to keep a *Pete the Cat* (Litwin, 2010) and a *Pinklicious* (Kann, 2015) book. Ana's sister helped herself to a *Frozen* (Disney, 2013) book from my pile and both girls were focused on reading their books as the translator and I said our goodbyes to Mrs. Estrada. While the other child participants were anxious to be done with the final interview and did not have anything else to add when I asked, Ana spoke with confidence as she told me she did have something else to say—"I like reading."

Ana enjoyed reading and viewed herself as a reader. She had favorite books and experienced reading independently and with her mother from an early age. Ana was more comfortable speaking in Spanish but was gaining confidence in her English language and literacy skills. Below I describe Ana's school language and literacy experiences in detail to understand how a thoughtful implementation of RTI and ESL services created opportunities for Ana to access classroom curriculum while giving her time to develop her academic English. I also describe spaces at school where there are tensions and contradictions about Ana's language and reading experiences.

### **Opportunities versus Deficits**

Following the first interview with Ana and her mother, as the translator and I got up to leave Mrs. Estrada pointed out the mom certificate that her three-year-old daughter, Olivia, brought home for Mother's Day from school. This started a conversation about how Ana's sister already knew a lot of letters, numbers, and colors in English. Mrs. Estrada explained that Olivia attended preschool two days a week and her teacher came to their house every Thursday. These three and four-year-old preschool programs were

not housed at Woodland Elementary but it was common for students who attended Woodland for five-year old kindergarten to attend these preschool programs. Ana did not attend three-year old kindergarten because when Mrs. Estrada tried to sign her up, she never heard back from the school. It is not known if Ana attended four-year old kindergarten but Mrs. Bailey, Ana's first grade teacher, commented that "Ana wasn't hardly even speaking English last year." In fact because Ana only spoke Spanish last year, Mrs. Estrada explained that Woodland Elementary purposely placed her in a classroom with a teacher who spoke only English even though one of the kindergarten teachers was bilingual in Spanish and English. Mrs. Estrada explained that she was nervous about sending Ana to Kindergarten because Ana did not speak English and she was placed in a Kindergarten classroom with a teacher that did not speak Spanish. Ironically, according to Mrs. Estrada, students that spoke more Spanish were placed with the teacher that didn't speak Spanish and the students that spoke more English were placed with the Spanish-speaking teacher. The school wanted Ana to be in an English-speaking environment. Mom says Ana was also nervous when she entered the school because "she was like what am I going to do if I need something, like to go to the bathroom?" Mom repeated that Ana was eventually able to learn enough English to get by in school but at home she only spoke Spanish and with her friends she only spoke Spanish.

While Ana's current struggle with speaking English was consistently viewed as a deficit by her teachers, it is evident that Ana lacked access to critical early language and literacy opportunities that Olivia had access to. As I will explain below, teachers knew little about Ana's early reading experiences. In applying an RTI framework with ELLs,

“it is important for teachers to investigate students’ formal educational experiences to understand what they have had the opportunity to learn in L1 in terms of both skills and experiences” (NCRTI, 2010b, p. 6). Wisconsin’s model of RTI requires evidence of culturally relevant practices, defined as, practices that “account for and adapt to the broad diversity of race, language, and culture” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 5). Teachers who are culturally responsive have an understanding of the role of culture and language in learning and as a result draw on these understandings to better meet the diverse needs of their students (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). This requires that teachers understand the background experiences children bring to school.

### **Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Assessment and Instruction**

As discussed in Chapter 3, 15.5% of Woodland Elementary’s 414 students were identified as English Language Learners (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction School Report Card, 2013-2014). Statewide, all students who are identified as speaking a language other than English are given the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) test once a year to monitor their progress in acquiring academic English (WIDA, 2014). At Woodland Elementary, teachers used students’ scores on the ACCESS (WIDA, 2014) along with grade level classroom assessments such as the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmarks System (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016) to determine which students that would benefit from ESL language and literacy support. This was often a discussion between Title I reading teachers and ESL teachers often tried to determine whether a student would benefit from more language support or whether they had the necessary language and needed explicit instruction in reading. As Klinger et al. (2010) explained, assessment within an RTI model should include a

comprehensive assessment system that includes measures of oral language and vocabulary that can be reviewed by teachers who have knowledge of second-language acquisition and how it relates to literacy learning. Mrs. Garcia, the ESL teacher for primary grades at Woodland Elementary, often provided this expertise and classroom teachers and Title I reading teachers trusted, and depended on her professional opinion.

Ana's low scores on the ACCESS (WIDA, 2014) in kindergarten resulted in her receiving ESL language and literacy support from Mrs. Garcia. Mrs. Garcia explained that Ana started off the year pretty strong in kindergarten and then all of a sudden she started to struggle, "so we brought mom and dad in, told them the importance of reading [and] we found out she wasn't reading her little books that she was taking home." Ana continued to receive ESL support from Mrs. Garcia throughout first grade because of her low scores on the ACCESS test (WIDA, 2014) in first grade and her below grade level benchmark reading scores on running records from the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016). On the ACCESS test (WIDA, 2014) in first grade, Ana scored the 2<sup>nd</sup> lowest out of all the English Language Learning students in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade although it is important to note that her strongest scores are in reading and listening:

Speaking 2.6

Reading 3.6

Writing 2.8

Listening 4.0

Cumulative 3.1

Ana struggled with speaking and often relied on her Spanish when working with Mrs. Garcia. Mrs. Garcia explained that Ana needed to build her English oral language, specifically the English language structure. She explained, “[Ana’s] having a really hard time with the English structure and vocabulary.” She’s struggling with “retrieving vocabulary, retrieving words, retrieving how to say something in order.”

On the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010) running records Ana showed growth as a reader but remained below grade level throughout the year:

Fall: Independent at A (Benchmark DE)

Winter: Independent at D (Benchmark G)

Spring: Independent at G (Benchmarks IJK)

Based on Ana’s ACCESS (WIDA, 2014) and running records from the Benchmark Assessment System (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010) as well as Mrs. Garcia’s knowledge of Ana’s abilities based on her experiences working with her in kindergarten, it was determined that Ana would receive ESL support during the daily 30-minute intervention and enrichment block of time instead of receiving a reading intervention by a Title 1 teacher. Mrs. Bailey commented she would have preferred Ana had been placed in a reading intervention. It is not known why Mrs. Bailey felt this way but perhaps Mrs. Bailey felt Ana would have made more reading progress throughout the school year. As a result, during the 30-minute intervention and enrichment block of time set aside each day, Mrs. Garcia pulled out Ana and two other English Language Learning students from the classroom to work on language and literacy skills in a small group setting. Mrs. Bailey explained that the girls Mrs. Garcia worked with were “ELL students, who just, language

is difficult for them. Mrs. Garcia does a lot of preteaching and reteaching of skills that are coming up in the classroom which really prepares them to be an active participant in the classroom.” Mrs. Garcia saw her role as supporting ELLs in the classroom with the general curriculum, as ESL work was considered part of Tier I, core classroom instruction. The intervention and enrichment block of time was a good time for her to pull Ana and her classmates because they would not miss any new classroom instruction, a requirement of RTI.

Ana, along with the other two ELL girls in the classroom, was observed eagerly leaving the classroom with Mrs. Garcia each day. It was easy to see why Ana described this time as “fun”. This small group of girls met at a kidney shaped table in a quiet room at the end of the hallway. Mrs. Garcia led the girls through various writing, vocabulary, and reading activities that paralleled the work they were doing in Mrs. Bailey’s classroom but also supplemented the classroom curriculum as Mrs. Garcia focused on developing vocabulary, oral language, reading, and writing skills. The girls laughed often together and shared stories of their families in Spanish and English. They helped each other and were encouraged, but also held accountable, by Mrs. Garcia. Ana was confident and talkative during this time in Spanish and English.

Because Mrs. Garcia was of Hispanic decent and bilingual in Spanish and English she was able to support Ana through her use of Spanish and connect with the girls’ cultural and linguistic experiences. She explained to the girls that when she was in school she did not like reading aloud and her teachers made her practice so that she would become more confident. She explained that this was why she has them practice reading aloud. After that particular lesson, Mrs. Garcia explained to me that the

classroom teachers at Woodland often complain that the English Language Learning students are so quiet when speaking aloud it is hard to hear and understand them. Mrs. Garcia explained that she is working with the girls on speaking louder but that this was a cultural difference noting that they were just quieter. Mrs. Garcia explained that she does not know if it is effective to keep telling the English Language Learning students to “speak louder, speak louder,” because this is just not something that is done. Finally, every Friday Ana was able to choose a book in Spanish from Mrs. Garcia’s collection to bring home and read with her family.

Mrs. Garcia not only supported Ana’s language and literacy development but she also supported her identity as a Spanish speaker. While Mrs. Bailey expressed her desire for Ana to have been placed in a reading intervention, Mrs. Garcia recognized Ana’s need for language support. As discussed in Chapter 6, while teachers had methods and criteria for identifying students in need of a reading intervention, there remained some confusion about how best to support students who were identified as English Language Learners. Mrs. Miller, the reading teacher explained, “there aren’t criteria [for students that receive ESL services] and it is becoming kind of a concern. Not a concern, an issue when so many of our intervention students are ESL.” She explained that again, teachers’ professional opinions were very important in making these decisions. As a result, the Title 1 teachers and ESL teachers had conversations about who should provide additional support to struggling readers also identified as English Language Learners. Mrs. Miller expressed that teachers were able to make these decisions because “we know these students.”

It must be questioned, though, how well teachers really knew Ana. Mrs. Garcia wondered if Ana had attended 3-year old kindergarten and if anyone at home helped her with her homework. Mrs. Bailey was unsure of where Ana lived. Ana's mom, Mrs. Estrada, was unaware there were even concerns about Ana's reading, as she expressed that the only real difficulty for Ana at school was math. Wisconsin's model of RTI requires "collaboration between educators, families, and communities" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p.5), furthermore, it is well documented that family involvement of all students is linked with students' higher academic achievement (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010, p. 93). Creating strong partnerships between parents, the community, and school is beneficial to English Language Learners' success (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010). Below I explore Ana's experiences in the core, Tier I classroom to describe Ana's access to the core, Tier I reading curriculum as well as differentiated support in the classroom. I also document how Mrs. Bailey's lack of understanding about the relationship between language and reading resulted in missed opportunities for Ana to develop her oral language and build on her Spanish literacy skills.

### **Differentiation and Teacher Collaboration in the Tier I Classroom**

As a result of RTI policy, Ana remained in the classroom for the entire reading block. This is important because Ana had access to the same reading instruction and curriculum as her peers. Ana's interest in reading at home and school, her discussion of favorite books, and her ability to explain why she grew as a reader are not a coincidence, they are a result of a school reading curriculum that was thoughtfully chosen and implemented to provide all students, regardless of ability, opportunities to read and discuss real books each day.

Each day at school Ana had time to read independently and at times with her peers. She was able to choose and change books. In addition, Mrs. Garcia's presence in the classroom for the last 15 minutes of the reading block provided Ana with additional language and reading support in Spanish and English to help her access the classroom curriculum. As discussed in Chapter 6, Mrs. Garcia, explained what she did when she read with Ana:

It's a rereading [of the books in her book bag] and just checking the comprehension. What I find is that because her books are getting a little harder now she often misses the gist of things. So it's like then we kind of have to go back and do some of the Spanish explanations and then it's like, 'oh, okay, I get it.'

Ana echoed Mrs. Garcia, commenting that she read with Mrs. Garcia because Mrs. Garcia helped her understand what was happening in her books.

Mrs. Garcia also felt that this time in the classroom helped Ana feel part of the classroom community and gave Mrs. Garcia the opportunity to observe the teaching and learning in the classroom so that she could build on those same strategies and skills. As she worked with Ana in the classroom, Mrs. Garcia explained that other students often listened in, which supported their learning as well. Klinger et al. (2010) emphasized this as well, explaining that there are strategies and activities teachers can incorporate in Tier I literacy instruction that benefit all students but specifically address the oral language and literacy needs of English Language Learning students. Mrs. Bailey and Mrs. Garcia also collaborated every few weeks to discuss the upcoming curriculum to provide

consistency in instruction. Pacheco (2010) emphasized the importance of collaboration among colleagues to enhance the academic potential of English Language Learners.

Each day Mrs. Bailey began the reading lesson by announcing with excitement, “Get ready to read!” Ana grabbed her large plastic Ziploc bag that contained her books for independent reading and quickly placed it on the edge of the rug, the spot she chose for independent reading. She then sat directly in front of Mrs. Bailey’s rocking chair for the morning’s reading mini lesson. She was focused and quiet as Mrs. Bailey read from a picture book and consistently had her hand up to answer Mrs. Bailey’s questions, although she did not always have an answer when she was called on. When students were asked to turn and talk with a partner, Mrs. Bailey paired up with Ana to support her comprehension.

Following the mini lesson, students found their reading places around the room to independently read from their book bags. When I asked Ana about reading in Mrs. Bailey’s classroom she explained that she had time to read and that she liked being able to choose books. Ana’s book bag contained books Ana had chosen from the classroom library that were at her independent reading level. Many of the books at Ana’s reading level in the classroom library were leveled books from the Rigby PM Books (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015) or Pioneer Valley Books. Book titles included, *The Flood* (Giles, 2004), *Daisy’s Bell* (Dufresne, n.d.a.), and *Sleeptight Spaceboy* (Dufresne, n.d.a.). While these books provided Ana with the experience of reading books, the language was often contrived to practice particular sight words and linguistic patterns and the content was often unrelatable to Ana. Mrs. Garcia often spent time reviewing the content of these stories, clarifying vocabulary and providing background knowledge. While Ana enjoyed

independent reading time and was observed carefully “book shopping” for the books in her book bag, having a larger variety of real books by real authors at Ana’s independent reading level may have allowed her to more easily understand the content and vocabulary in her books. In addition, it would be important for Ana to have access to books that accurately represented her linguistic and cultural diversity. Ana may have had a deeper connection to books, as the other focal students did if careful consideration had been paid to her book options. This would have supported Ana’s language and literacy development, her identity as a multilingual student, and could have increased her interest and motivation in reading.

As Ana read from the books in her book bag she was observed occasionally rereading to self correct when a sentence did not make sense. She used the pictures to help her as she read and she attempted to sound out the initial letters in new words. Mrs. Garcia often helped Ana record an idea from a book on a sticky note to later share with a partner during partner reading, an assignment Mrs. Bailey gave all students to encourage conversations about books. In Mrs. Bailey’s classroom Ana was responsible for the same work as her peers but was provided with additional support by Mrs. Garcia and differentiated support from Mrs. Bailey.

During the independent reading time, Mrs. Bailey pulled students to the back of the room for small group guided reading or one on one reading conferences. She explained that students who were below grade level, such as Ana, were meeting with her every day as she says, “[I am] trying to push my low guys.” This meant that Ana was often pulled from independent reading or partner reading to read with Mrs. Bailey. While it is important that struggling readers are provided increased reading instruction by

qualified personnel (Allington, 2013), Ana was observed eagerly waiting to share her sticky note with her partner, written with Mrs. Garcia's help, only to be pulled by Mrs. Bailey for a guided reading lesson as students transitioned to partner reading. This happened on more than one occasion. In addition, as Mrs. Bailey tried to "push" Ana to make additional reading growth by reading books with her at her instructional level, Ana was often told to take the book from the guided reading lesson that day home at night as her book to read at home. While all students were required to take home a book from their book bag to read at night, which were at students' independent reading levels and that they had chosen from the classroom library. While Mrs. Bailey explained that they had worked through it together, Ana was observed at home struggling to comprehend the leveled Rigby book, *No Dinner for Black Cat* (Eggleton, 2004), from the guided reading lesson that she was required to take home that day. Ana confidently began reading the book with expression and fluency. When she got stuck on words she tried decoding the words using the beginning letters and sounds as well as the pictures. Ana struggled to understand the story, explaining that the cat was funny because he did not want his food when the cat in the story did not want to eat at the end because throughout the story he had secretly eaten. It is important for Ana's reading development that she is provided with books that interest her and that she can read independently with success (Allington, 2002) as well as opportunities to read and discuss books with her peers.

RTI policy requires that all students have access to the general classroom curriculum and Woodland created a schedule that supported this policy. Ana received language and literacy support from Mrs. Garcia, her ESL teacher, in the classroom as well as differentiated and increased instructional support within a balanced literacy

framework from her classroom teacher, Mrs. Bailey. Mrs. Garcia and Mrs. Bailey regularly collaborated to provide consistency in their instruction. Increased opportunities for Ana to read multicultural books at her independent reading level at home and with her peers would have further supported her language and literacy growth, and perhaps her interest and motivation to read.

### **Oral Language and Academic Achievement**

Being a part of the general classroom for Tier I, core classroom instruction provided Ana with access to the classroom's reading curriculum, with consistent support by the ESL teacher. Being a part of the classroom, though, meant that while Ana may have been exposed to important reading opportunities, she was subject to the same classroom routines and expectations as her peers. In the case of Mrs. Bailey's classroom this meant a large amount of independent, silent work time that did not take into account the importance of providing English Language Learning students with a language-rich environment (Klingner et al., 2010). This proved especially challenging during the 30-minute word work time when students received phonics instruction through word study using *Words Their Way: Word Sorts for Within Word Pattern Spellers* (Invernizzi, Johnston, Bear & Templeton, 2004).

During the word work mini lesson Ana again sat on the very front of the rug by Mrs. Bailey. She quietly followed along with the lesson, writing words with similar letter and sound patterns that Mrs. Bailey dictated. Ana was often observed writing and then checking her work with a student near her. For example, during one lesson she wrote "nise" and "tri" for the words "nice" and "try." When Ana's answer did not match the other student's, Ana quickly erased her writing and corrected it before raising her hand to

share the spelling of the word. When students transitioned to their desks to independently cut, sort, and glue words with similar patterns in their word work notebooks, Ana successfully sorted words with the same letter patterns (i.e. various ways to write the long a sound) but struggled to read the words. She switched between long a and short a as she read the words. Ana was often presented with words with unfamiliar meanings to cut, sort, and glue such as “sigh”, “quite”, and “since”, which made it difficult for her to correctly read, sort, and glue her words. Cross-language connections were not made to help Ana to identify similarities and differences between Spanish and English cognates that she could apply to her word work (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Klingner et al., 2010). Ana often spent a portion of her recess time finishing her word work.

In addition to helping Ana make cross-language connections, having opportunities to work and talk with others may have helped Ana develop her English oral language and experience academic success. Hawkins (2010) writes that, “if learning occurs through social interaction, then classrooms must be explicitly organized to optimize opportunities for scaffolded social interactions through which learning may occur” (p. 99). Based on my observations, Ana benefits from opportunities to work and talk with others. For example, when Ana read the words she had sorted during word work with another ELL student in the classroom, she asked her partner how to read a few words and she sounded out the sounds of the others. She had a smile on her face and was able to read through her words quickly. When students were put in pairs to read books on science topics, Ana and her partner eagerly chose a book about butterflies and read it together efficiently and fluently. All students benefit from having opportunities to use language in the classroom

but this is truly a need of English Language Learning students if they are to experience academic success.

### **Conclusion**

There are a number of aspects to be celebrated in the ways Woodland Elementary and Ana's teachers have worked to provide Ana and other English Language Learning students with access to classroom curriculum and language and literacy support. Teacher professional judgment is valued alongside data when determining support for students, and a district-wide schedule in response to RTI provides time for English Language Learning students to build their language and literacy skills without missing core, Tier I classroom instruction.

There are, however, a number of tensions, contradictions, and concerns about Ana's school reading experiences. Over and over again, teachers were quick to comment on the lack of English Ana heard and spoke at home. There were, though, many missed opportunities in the classroom for Ana to develop her oral language when Mrs. Garcia was not in the classroom. In addition, when Ana used language with her peers-Ana commented that she liked to talk with her friends at lunch that also speak Spanish- her teachers viewed this as a problem and explained that they want this group of English Language Learning students to "branch out more" and that placement for the following year will be carefully considered so that they are not all together. It is essential for all teachers, including classroom teachers of English Language Learners to have a deep knowledge of ESL teaching methods and the language acquisition process (Klingner & Edwards, 2010). While the school boasts a mission statement centered on "embracing diversity," there was little value placed on Ana's native language. While teachers were

quick to question the lack of language support Ana has at home, a focus on working silently and independently meant Ana had little time to practice her English in the general classroom. The only opportunities Ana had to use her first language were when she needed to clarify her thoughts or questions to Mrs. Garcia. Ana's classroom teacher was quick to assume Ana needed to be placed in a reading intervention without knowledge of her previous school experiences or how language and reading are related. The classroom teacher knew little about language and its relationship to reading. There are a number of questions and assumptions about Ana's home reading and language experiences because of a lack of a strong partnership between home and school. It is entirely acceptable at Woodland Elementary for deficit views of English Language Learning students and their families to persist.

If RTI is to be an effective model for English Language Learning students then careful consideration needs to be paid to "the unique cultural and linguistic abilities" of each English Language Learner (NCRTI, 2010b). This means that core, Tier I classroom curriculum and access to that curriculum alone will not provide English Language Learning students with the opportunities they need to experience success. English Language Learning students need ample opportunities to use language. Strong partnerships with families and communities must be developed and maintained. Teachers must have a deep knowledge of language and respect for multilingual students and families. Finally, English Language Learning students' native languages must be viewed as an asset and, if possible, maintained.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

Response to Intervention (RTI) has now become a major intervention policy implemented in North American schools as a means of providing early intervention for children who are underperforming in school as well as a method for identifying children with learning disabilities. RTI requires regular progress monitoring, data to inform instructional decisions, and data to determine the effectiveness of interventions. It also mandates the use of scientific, research-based interventions and access to appropriate instruction in the regular classroom by qualified personnel (Federal Reserve, 2006). It does not specify the nature and frequency of assessments nor the nature of instruction or interventions (Johnston, 2011).

If RTI is understood as a policy meant to identify how to improve instruction in order to reduce the number of children identified as having reading difficulties then assessments need to be formative, valid, and reliable and instruction needs to be comprehensive and responsive to the individual needs of students. Reading Recovery and the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993), the Interactive Strategies Approach, and a knowledgeable implementation of Leveled Literacy Intervention (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010) are examples of widely used programs that meet these criteria. Furthermore, it is recommended that schools adopt a systemic approach to intervention. Effective systemic approaches emphasize teacher collaboration, professional development, responsive teaching, data-driven decision-making, and alignment between classroom and intervention curricula. Studies on the rich literacy experiences that children bring to the general classroom also reveal important ideas about literacy learning that need to be considered when designing instruction in RTI settings.

That is, reading and writing tasks need to be authentic and purposeful for the child (Doake, 1985; Falchi & Siegel, 2014; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Taylor, 1993). This requires that teachers learn about their students, develop partnerships with families and implement curriculum grounded in equitable practices.

Case studies informed by phenomenology of individual children in the core, Tier I RTI setting allowed me to position children as the subjects to explore their reading experiences and perspectives. Hermeneutic phenomenology provided the framework for exploring how children experienced the phenomenon of learning to read in a classroom that defined its curricula, assessments, supports, and schedule by RTI policy. I applied the following dimensions of phenomenology to my research: exploring and bracketing of preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs; investigating the lived meaning of experience; and describing participants' experiences in writing through insightful, evocative descriptions. Focusing on the perspectives and experiences of children in the core, Tier I classroom setting fills a gap in the current research on RTI and the associated literacy practices and assessments that tend to be experimental in nature, focus on a narrow view of literacy learning, and provide summary measures of performance. In addition, it is important to know the teaching and learning that occurs in the core, Tier I RTI setting because a child's measured success in this setting determines whether they will qualify for a Tier II reading intervention. Qualitative research methods including interviews, observations, and field notes were used to systematically gather data on the reading experiences and perspectives of four children and their teachers in one first-grade classroom. These children were the focus of my research. The perspectives of the principal, teachers, and parents provided context for the words and experiences of the

children. This research is an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of children's reading experiences and how those experiences impacted their perspectives and identities as readers in a school that has reorganized its schedule, curricula, assessments, and supplemental supports to adapt to RTI policy requirements.

While many school districts have responded to RTI policy requirements of regular progress monitoring and instructional practices that are scientific and research-based by investing in pre-packaged intervention programs (Johnston, 2010b), Woodland Elementary is in its second year of implementing a reading curriculum that aligns with a balanced literacy approach (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) and is designed to build children's stamina and interest in reading. The school district, school, and Mrs. Bailey, the focal students' first grade teacher, took up RTI policy in ways that considered the types of readers and writers they wanted students to become. In New Meadow School District, including at Woodland Elementary, a dedicated 30 minutes for each grade level to supplement general classroom curriculum, ensured that all students had access to the core, Tier I literacy curriculum. In addition, assessments and progress monitoring of students' reading growth were balanced and comprehensive. Professional development, conversations among teachers, and teacher reflection was encouraged and valued. Mrs. Bailey, the classroom teacher, also hoped to promote a love of reading for the students in her classroom. There were opportunities for children to read independently and with others each day and choose books of interest.

Conducting interviews with parents and children revealed the rich literate lives of these first-grade children and notable parallels between home and observed school literacy practices. The classroom teacher's literacy practices echoed home literacy

practices just as home practices mirrored the literacy practices children experienced at school. Most importantly, within the home and school contexts, children identified themselves as good readers. They explained that they were good readers because they liked reading and they experienced success and growth as readers. This resulted in the focal children being motivated to read and developing future goals for themselves as readers. Parallels between home and school remained largely unrecognized by the classroom teacher and parents knew very little about reading at school. There remained spaces for creating stronger alignments, increased support for parents, challenging teachers' deficit assumptions about children, and recognizing the limits of the current balanced literacy pedagogy.

The main findings for this study are:

- Children had rich reading home lives that paralleled school reading practices. Families had goals for their children as readers and learners and made early efforts to teach and motivate their children.
- Within RTI policy, there were spaces to implement reading curricula that considered the unique interests and abilities of students and the types of readers the school wanted students to become.
- Having time to read independently and with others each day and books of interest to choose from were found to be motivating and purposeful literacy practices to children.
- A thoughtful implementation of RTI and ESL services created opportunities for Ana to access the same literature based reading curriculum as her English-speaking peers.

- While Ana had access to the core, Tier I reading curriculum and increased opportunities to develop her English language and literacy skills without missing classroom instruction, there were missed opportunities for Ana and other students to organize the classroom in ways that would have further supported language and literacy growth.
- A strong partnership with families could have challenged teachers' deficit views of children and increased learning opportunities.

### **Implications for Practitioners**

The hope is that this research will offer a more humanistic vision of children that, in education, will lead to more reflective and higher quality teaching and learning (Danaher & Briod, 2005). For practitioners implementing RTI policy in diverse communities, it is important for teachers to find space within policy for thoughtful implementations of curricula and assessments that consider the types of readers and writers they want their students to become. Providing a large variety of texts that match students' interests and accurately represent their diverse backgrounds as well as providing students with opportunities to read independently and with others each day parallel the authentic reading practices many children experience at home. These practices are purposeful and motivating to children. Teachers need to be part of a school community that values their professional expertise, provides quality professional development, and encourages collaboration among colleagues in order for RTI policy to be implemented in thoughtful ways that reduces the number of children identified as struggling readers.

For RTI to be effective for English Language Learners, careful consideration needs to be paid to “the unique cultural and linguistic abilities” of each English Language Learner (NCRTI, 2010b, p.1). This means that the core, Tier I classroom curriculum and access to that curriculum alone, even with differentiated instruction, will not provide English Language Learners with the opportunities they need to experience success. That is, reorganizing schools around RTI policy solves some problems but not others, especially for children from diverse backgrounds. Language differences matter even when working with a student in a small group or individually. English Language Learning students need ample opportunities to use language. Strong partnerships with families and communities must be developed and maintained. All teachers that work with English Language Learning students, including the general classroom teacher, need to have a deep knowledge of students’ home language, culture, and community. Finally, English Language Learners’ native language must be viewed as an asset and maintained.

Schools need to be strongly connected to the families they serve in order to avoid missed opportunities and to be responsive to the rich language and literacy home lives of children. How important it is that teachers talk to children and families to avoid making assumptions about who they are and what they need. Strong partnership with families allows educators to learn about and support children’s home reading experiences and the efforts and goals of parents. If we believe we are entitled to make professional decisions about our students without the constraint of a state or district policy, then we need to reassess how well we know our students and their families. That is, we can not in one breath say we don’t need a district policy to tell us how to support students we know and in the next breath say we don’t know if anyone at home speaks English. Knowing where

students live, the occupations of their parents, and the languages spoken at home are just the basics. It is time we start talking and visiting with our students and their families to challenge our own deficit views by learning about the many resources and hopes they have for their children. This is not something extra. This is a requirement of teachers and staff, and needs to be supported by school districts and principals, if we are going to be effective in supporting the diverse abilities of our students.

### **Implications for Research**

Greene and Hill (2005) explain, children are often valued for their potential and who they may become but are not valued for their present perspectives and experiences. Researchers who are interested in studying children need to see their present perspectives and experiences as valuable. Danaher and Briod (2005) write that researchers need to explore the life experiences of children and invite more adults to take “longer and deeper looks at what being a child means” (p.233). This research has begun to scratch the surface of how children experience reading within an RTI setting. There is much to be learned from researching the classrooms of teachers that implement literacy with expertise and thoughtfulness within policy requirements. The classrooms of more teachers and the experiences of children within those classrooms need to be studied to provide school districts, schools, and teachers with possibilities amid what oftentimes feels like strict requirements and constraints. There also remains a lack of qualitative research on the experiences of children, especially minority students, in RTI reading intervention settings. Finally, more research needs to be done to complicate commonly held ideas on children’s reading motivation. These are areas that I hope to research following this study.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this research point to the school setting in which this study was conducted. That is, Woodland Elementary is a Title 1 school that receives federal funding used to fund Title 1 teachers and reading and math resources. In addition, as a Title 1 school, class sizes are smaller than average elementary school classrooms. This school is not a reflection of all schools that take up RTI policy, as resources affect the way schools implement RTI. In addition, this study did not include the perspectives of special education teachers, who are under pressure to provide data that students referred for special education received access to core curriculum and reading interventions that adhere to RTI. Additional limitations were that this study used a small sample of students over a short period of time in only one classroom setting. Focal children were offered free children's books as a thank you for their participation and it is not known how the offer of free books influenced those children and their families who chose to participate. Finally, while the focus of this study was intended to be children's voices, their voices were not always at the center. Parents and teachers were often more vocal during interviews than children, making it difficult to keep children's perspectives at the center of this research.

### **Researcher Reflection**

As a researcher I am grateful to learn from the principal, teachers, parents, and children in this school. I genuinely enjoyed the home visits with children and their families and my time spent in Mrs. Bailey's classroom each week. I can still picture Laura and John laughing over the title of a favorite book, Ana and her sister reading at the dining room table, and James carefully drawing a picture of himself during reading

time at school. Conducting this research study has confirmed my interest in continuing to work with children, parents, and teachers. Finally, it is not easy for a school district, school, and teachers to open their doors to a researcher who is looking to observe and interview. I remain impressed by the hard work and dedication of those at Woodland Elementary and while I am optimistic about the possibilities of reading instruction and assessment as a result of conducting this study, I remain concerned about the missed opportunities and deficit views surrounding English Language Learning students. That is, while RTI is a response to an equity issue, equity issues continue to operate in schools and classrooms. It is so important for educators to continue collaborating, reflecting, and responding to the unique needs and abilities of students in order to improve instruction and learning for all students.

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Appendix A  
Observation Protocol

Date:

Time:

Location:

# of Participants:

Purpose:

Field Notes:

Time/Subject Area

Observations

Time/Subject Area	Observations

Appendix B  
Close Observation Protocol

Time	Observations

Reflection

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## Appendix C

## Child Interview

## Interview One:

- Draw me a picture of yourself. Tell me about your picture.
- Tell me about yourself.
- Tell me about yourself as a reader.
- What did you do when you were little to help you become a reader? What did you like to read growing up? Who helped you with your reading?

## Interview Two:

- Tell me about school. What do you like/dislike?
- Tell me about reading at school (in the classroom and in interventions).
- Draw me a picture of yourself during reading time at school. Tell me about the picture.
- Tell me a story about working with (classroom teacher, reading teacher).
- What do you like to read? What do you read at home? At school? (Have them bring me books from home and school and tell me about them. Is there a favorite?).
- Can you pick a book you would like to read with me? (Listen as the child reads and discuss the book with the child after. Reflect on the meaning of that experience for the child).

## Interview Three:

- What does it mean to be a good reader? Are you? What would help you?
- How do you explain your reading experience?

- How do you see yourself as a reader in the future?

## Appendix D:

## Parent Interview Protocol

- Tell me about your child.
- Tell me about your child as a reader.
- Does your child need help with reading?
- What do you do at home to encourage and support reading?
- What is reading like for your child at school?
- What do you hope for your child as a reader?
- What else would you like to tell me about your child.

## Appendix E

### Classroom Teacher Interview Protocol

- Tell me about your teaching background.
- Tell me about your students.
- How do you understand RTI policy?
- Tell me about the district's literacy assessments and curriculum.
- How do you teach and assess literacy in your classroom? Why?
- How are students identified that need additional reading support? How is this support provided? How is this communicated to parents/caregivers?
- Tell me about (case study participants). Why do they need to be in a reading intervention? What are your goals for them as readers?

## Appendix F

## Reading Support Teacher (Title I and ESL Teachers) Interview Protocol

- Tell me about your teaching background.
- What are your responsibilities in your current position?
- Tell me about (case study participants).
- How is RTI implemented in your school? How are students identified? How is their progress monitored and documented?
- What curriculum and interventions are you expected to use? Do you do anything differently? Why/why not?
- Do you communicate with the families of your students? When? How?

## Appendix G

### Principal Interview Protocol

- Tell me about RTI in this school district/school.
- Tell me about the literacy curriculum you use district-wide and/or at this school.
- Tell me about the literacy assessments you use district-wide and/or at this school.
- How do you identify students in need of reading interventions? How is their progress assessed and documented?
- How are parents/caregivers informed that their child is in need of a reading intervention?
- What types of interventions do you provide? Who provides these? When? How?  
Is there a specific literacy curriculum for interventions?