Needs and Contradictions of a Changing Field: Evidence From a National Response to Intervention Implementation Study

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As a result of the Response to Intervention (RTI) mandate in schools across many states, school counselors are well-positioned to take a leadership role. The present research study examines how school counselors across the nation perceived their training and knowledge of RTI, as well as their confidence in its implementation. Results indicate that while the majority of school counselors reported positive beliefs about RTI, they had limited confidence in their preparedness to perform certain RTI-related responsibilities, including collecting and analyzing data to determine intervention effectiveness and collaboration through teamwork. These perceived areas of deficiency point to a significant discrepancy with the American School Counselor Association National Model's components and themes. Through building skills and capacity for leadership, school counselors can spearhead schoolwide teams to create and evaluate the effectiveness of culturally relevant and evidence-based interventions. School counselors and school counselor educators must use a multi-tiered system of supports as an opportunity to advance the field.

Keywords: **collaboration, multi-tiered system of supports, Response to Intervention, school counselors, school counselor educators**

The climate of accountability in today's public schools requires all professionals to utilize data to inform decisions in the context of their practice, and the school counselor is no exception. Broader, statewide mandates such as Response to Intervention (RTI) have put additional pressure on school professionals, raising questions regarding practitioners' preparedness to effectively utilize data to inform practice and collaborate with peers to support the needs of struggling students. The aim of this study is to examine school counselors' beliefs, perceived level of preparedness and practices regarding RTI nationwide, specifically in states where this model has been implemented.

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 and the subsequent 2008 regulations incentivized RTI, a multi-tiered system of academic and behavioral supports for struggling students (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). In each tier of instruction, student needs and interventions are determined through ongoing data collection and analysis. To explicate, the general education environment comprises Tier 1 of RTI, with the integration of research-based practices, universal screening and differentiated small group instruction. If a child is not successful in this environment, he or she is targeted for Tier 2 intervention, small group instruction paired with ongoing progress monitoring. A continued lack of responsiveness moves the student to Tier 3, a more intensive level of intervention and progress monitoring, with possible referral for special education services (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Thus, when determining whether a student has a specific learning disability (SLD) in an RTI framework, there should be a significant body of data in regards to a child's response to intervention to inform the eligibility process (Hauerwas, Brown, & Scott, 2013; Zirkel & Thomas, 2010).

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RTI has become increasingly commonplace in states across the nation since the 2004 IDEA reauthorization (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004). Review of the Web sites of 50 state departments of education indicated that 17 states require RTI in the process of identifying whether a student has an SLD, and 45 states have guidance documents to support the implementation of RTI (Hauerwas et al., 2013). In addition, Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, and Saunders (2009) found that 14 of 15 states required RTI to address both academic and behavioral domains. In a 2010 review of state laws and special education guidelines, Zirkel and Thomas noted that eight states required universal screening for academic and behavioral needs, while 23 recommended academic and behavioral screening. Thus, in some states the academic supports of RTI are specifically linked with the behavioral supports and interventions of Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS).

PBIS is a multi-tiered, data-based system of support for students with emotional and behavioral needs that incorporates ongoing assessments and data-based decision making, professional development in research-based practices, and provision of tiered intervention for students who need additional assistance (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Both RTI and PBIS share the premise that educational outcomes can be improved for all by integrating research-based practices in the general education environment (Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lathrop, 2007; Hollenbeck, 2007; Sadler & Sugai, 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2009), and thus they are commonly combined in schoolwide frameworks. A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is a comprehensive academic and behavioral model that integrates both RTI and PBIS (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011).

As with any significant educational reform, RTI/MTSS has a high likelihood to change professional practices. For example, social workers have been urged to recognize the importance of evidence-based decisions and data collection when working with the social-emotional concerns of students (Harrison & Harrison, 2014) and to increase their collaborative practices (Avant, 2014). General educators, special educators and reading specialists in Pennsylvania indicated an increase in collaborative practices after RTI implementation (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Sullivan and Long (2010) reported that a survey of school psychologists found those who were actively involved with RTI spent a higher percentage of time (25%) implementing academic interventions, in comparison to those practitioners who were not actively involved and reported less than 5% of their time spent on academic interventions. While there is an emerging body of research into the effects of RTI on the professional practice of school counselors within a handful of states (Betters-Bubon & Ratas, 2015; Luck & Webb, 2009; Miller, 2008; Ockerman, Patrikakou, & Hollenbeck, 2015; Ryan, Kaffenberger & Caroll, 2011), there has yet to be a study of school counselors' beliefs and perceptions of readiness to implement RTI across a national stage, or the impact of RTI upon school counselors' professional practice.

In this article, we first review relevant literature focused on the changing role of the school counselor in relation to RTI/MTSS. Second, we present a nationwide study regarding school counselor perceptions, preparedness and professional practice in states mandating RTI or MTSS. Finally, we discuss implications for school counselor training and preparation and provide recommendations for future research and practice.

The Changing Role of the School Counselor in Multi-Tiered Frameworks

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recently revised its position statement on RTI, adding MTSS (2014). ASCA specifically outlined how all components of a comprehensive developmental school counseling program (foundation, delivery, management and accountability) align with

a multi-tiered continuum and underscored school counselors' pivotal role with data. To that end, school counselors must aid in data analysis to help identify students in need, evaluate counseling interventions to determine efficacy, and assist school staff in selecting evidence-based academic and behavioral strategies for students (ASCA, 2014; Ockerman, Mason, & Hollenbeck, 2012).

There were some notable efforts to promote school counselor involvement in this educational mandate prior to the publication of the ASCA MTSS position statement, including research conducted by the RTI Action Network (2009), which highlighted how innovative school counselors in three Western states (i.e., Colorado, Oklahoma and Wyoming) integrated their counseling services within an RTI framework. Zambrano, Castro-Villarreal, and Sullivan (2012) noted synergies between school counselors and school psychologists and called for increased collaboration to optimize services for students. Moreover, Ockerman and colleagues (2012) suggested the pairing of comprehensive developmental school counseling programs with RTI has the potential to effectively serve all students, particularly those historically underserved, and to advance the position of the school counselor as a transformational leader. Moreover, the authors called for more robust research regarding the role of the school counselor and evidence-based practices using MTSS.

As such, Ockerman et al. (2015) investigated how school counselors in a Midwestern state perceived their training and knowledge of RTI and thus their confidence in implementation. Results indicated that the majority of school counselors had little confidence in their ability to employ essential roles, including the following: increasing parental involvement, engaging in collaborative practices, and using data to make decisions about student interventions. Overall, having knowledgeable, positive building leaders such as school principal, assistant principals, and deans, in conjunction with a firm understanding of specific school counselor roles and responsibilities, predicted having favorable views of RTI as a means to improve students' academic and behavioral outcomes. Concomitant with these findings, Betters-Bubon and Ratas (2015) reported that school counselors in a neighboring Midwestern state experienced both positive outcomes (e.g., positive school climate, enhanced perception of the school counselor and increased teacher involvement) and barriers to success (e.g., increased record keeping, lack of training and buy-in, and lack of time to use data effectively) as a result of MTSS implementation. The authors also found that strong administrative support was associated with affirmative perceptions of MTSS, corroborating the findings of Ockerman et al. (2015). Finally, Bookard (2015) surveyed 35 elementary school counselors in North Carolina, all of whom were designated as RTI chairperson within their schools. School counselors reported a decreased amount of time to complete core school counseling responsibilities due to an increased demand to organize, communicate and coordinate logistics on behalf of the RTI team. However, these counselors reported increases in their self-efficacy to perform multiple counseling duties and perceived RTI as having a positive impact on student achievement.

While these efforts at understanding the impact of RTI/MTSS on the roles and responsibilities of school counselors should be lauded, they remain focused on the state level and therefore may be generalizable only to a particular state or region. Thus, there is an urgent need for research examining school counselors' preparedness and experiences with RTI/MTSS nationwide, especially in states where this model has been implemented. The present study investigates school counselors' beliefs, perceived level of preparedness, and practice regarding RTI. Specifically, the following research questions were investigated: (1) What are school counselors' beliefs regarding RTI? (2) How prepared do school counselors feel regarding their training on the various implementation aspects of RTI? (3) What roles and responsibilities of school counselors changed due to the RTI implementation? (4) Is attitude toward RTI predicted by factors including demographics, as well as perceived confidence with various aspects of RTI?

Method

Participants

Members of ASCA participated in this study by completing a survey. Participants were randomly selected from each of the 15 states that were reported as implementing RTI fully or partly at the time of this study's construction (Zirkel, 2014). Specifically, participants were targeted in the following states: Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

In looking at the characteristics of survey respondents, 99% indicated they were currently practicing, with 96% employed full-time. Eighty-two percent were between 31 and 60 years old, and 85% were female. Ninety-two percent reported working in public school settings. Twenty-seven percent indicated working in an elementary setting, 14% in an elementary-middle school, 19% in a middle school, and 35% in a high school. A total of 81% indicated six years or more of practice as a school counselor, with 73% indicating six years or more since their last degree conferral (see Table 1 for demographic information).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

	Percent
Currently Practicing	99
Full-time employment	96
Age	
25 or under	1
26–30	8
31–40	33
41–60	49
Over 60	9
Sex	
Female	85
Male	15
School Setting	
Public	92
Charter	3
Private	5
School Population	
Elementary	27
Elementary/Middle	14
Middle School	19
Middle/High School	4
High School	35
K–12	1

Years in Practice	
1–5 years	19
6–10 years	36
11–15 years	19
16+ years	26
Years Since Final Degree	
1–5 years	27
6–10 years	34
11–15 years	17
16+ years	22

Measures

The survey was originally developed for a statewide investigation of school-based professionals in response to RTI (Hollenbeck & Patrikakou, 2014), which was then adapted specifically for school counselors and administered in the same Midwestern state (Ockerman et al., 2015). It is important to note that survey items align with the ASCA National Model (2003, 2005, 2012). Specifically, questions paralleled the four ASCA model quadrants (foundation, delivery, management and accountability) and their four surrounding themes (advocacy, collaboration, leadership and systemic change). For example, survey questions, such as perceived preparedness for counseling interventions at each tier, represented the delivery component, and items about data collection and data management systems were representative of the accountability component. Themes also were assessed through survey questions, including items addressing leadership responsibilities and effective teamwork within the RTI framework (see Table 2 for scales and specific ASCA quadrants and themes). The purpose of the survey was to illuminate school counselors' participation in RTI, as well as their underlying beliefs and attitudes, with the goal of providing insight into changing professional practices and future preparation needs.

The survey was comprised of five parts. The first section addressed demographics (e.g., *age, employment status, years in the field*). The second section involved questions regarding RTI training and implementation (e.g., *How many professional development sessions have you received in relation to RTI? What year did your school implement an RTI framework?*). The third section contained 14 Likert-type items asking participants about their perceived level of preparation toward specific aspects of RTI (e.g., *underlying rationale, counseling interventions for Tier 1, schoolwide data management systems for documentation and tier decision making*). The fourth part included 14 Likert-type questions measuring participants' beliefs and practices (e.g., *RTI is the best option to support struggling learners; RTI is a vehicle for promoting culturally responsive practices*). Lastly, the fifth section addressed changes to school counselors' responsibilities due to RTI via seven yes-no questions, such as *I am now involved in data collection and/or data management in support of RTI decisions.* In addition, an open-ended question encouraged participants to share any additional thoughts on RTI and its implementation.

Procedure

The authors obtained a list of members from ASCA who had noted that they wished to receive ASCA-approved, research-related mailings. Participants were then randomly selected from each of the 15 states that were reported as implementing RTI fully or partly (Zirkel, 2014). Surveys were mailed to those randomly selected participants along with a self-addressed, prepaid return envelope. No incentives were provided for returned surveys. From 2,477 surveys mailed, 528 were returned, for a 21.3% return rate, higher than other online surveys (Cochrane & Laux, 2008; Sullivan, Long, & Kucera, 2011).

Scales

For the purpose of this study's analyses, eight scales were used. These scales were constructed and tested in two previous research studies, and tests of internal consistency have yielded consistently robust results with high reliability coefficients (Hollenbeck & Patrikakou, 2014; Ockerman et al., 2015). The scales' original construction was based on an extensive literature review of RTI and its implementation to incorporate all pertinent aspects of MTSS. The survey underwent a piloting phase prior to being utilized in prior research studies to address construct and content validity. During the pilot phase, in addition to experts in the field, items also were reviewed by 80 school-based professionals who provided specific feedback (Hollenbeck & Patrikakou, 2014).

As a measure of internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha (α) was computed for each of the eight scales (scale items and reliability coefficients are reported in Table 2). For scales with more than two items, Cronbach's α was calculated with and without each of the scale's items to determine whether dropping an item would increase the scale's internal consistency. There was no occasion in which the deletion of an item increased the α coefficient; therefore, no changes were made to the scales. Alpha coefficients ranged from .75 to .94. The use of a similar survey on a different population also obtained strong coefficients (Ockerman et al., 2015), indicating the robustness of the instrument across populations.

Table 2

Scale Items and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients

Variables	Items	Cronbach's α
RTI Background Information (2)*	- Historical overview - Underlying rationale	.80
Responsibilities and benefits (2)	- Anticipated benefits - Roles and responsibilities within the tiered model	.75
Tier service delivery model (2) (ASCA Model - Delivery Component)	- Tier service delivery model (general) - Tier service delivery model (specific to one's school)	.87
Counseling interventions (3) (ASCA Model - Delivery Component)	- for Tier 1 - for Tier 2 - for Tier 3	.94
Data collection, management, and implementation (3) (ASCA Model - Accountability Component)	- Collecting and analyzing outcome data to determine effectiveness of RTI interventions - Schoolwide data management systems for documentation and decision making about students who need supportive services within RTI - Assuming leadership in RTI implementation	.89
Collaborative practices (2) (ASCA Model - Collaboration Component)	- Effective teamwork in RTI implementation - Informing and involving parents within an RTI framework	.86

School building leadership and RTI competence (4) (ASCA Model - Leadership Theme)	- Principal describes RTI in a positive manner - Principal seems highly knowledgeable about RTI - Other building-level leaders highly knowledgeable about RTI - RTI concerns and challenges are addressed in a positive manner within my school	.86
RTI viewed as beneficial (7)	- RTI is the best option to support struggling learners and students with social-emotional concerns - RTI is the best option to support students with social-emotional concerns - RTI can improve the outcomes for all students - RTI can improve the behavior outcomes for all students - RTI can inform the process of identifying students with learning disabilities (LD) - RTI data are sufficient in determining whether or not a student has an LD - RTI is a vehicle of promoting culturally responsive practices within my school	.84

* *Number of items*

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated to address the first three research questions, while a simultaneous liner least squares regression model was tested to address the fourth question. Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were calculated to test for multicollinearity in relation to the regression model. All VIFs were under 4, well below the 10 threshold that is used as a rule of thumb to raise concerns regarding multicollinearity (O'Brien, 2007; Stevens, 1992). Additionally, White's (1980) heteroscedasticity test was performed to determine whether the error term in the regression model had constant variance, to avoid using biased standard errors that would lead to invalid inference. Since White's test indicated the existence of heteroscedasticity ($\chi^2 = 164.13$; $p < .01$), the regression model was estimated with White's correction for the standard errors.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Research question 1: What are school counselors' beliefs regarding RTI? Sixty-three percent of the respondents agreed and 13% strongly agreed with the statement that RTI can improve the academic outcomes of all students. Fewer participants indicated that RTI can improve the behavioral outcomes for all students (53% agreed and 9% strongly agreed). Seventy-five percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that RTI is the best option to support struggling learners, while only 49% agreed or strongly agreed that RTI is the best option to support students with social and emotional concerns. Only half of the respondents (54%) agreed or strongly agreed that RTI is a vehicle of promoting culturally responsive practices. The majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their school principal described RTI in a positive manner, but only 57% reported that they viewed their principal as highly knowledgeable about RTI. The same percentage of respondents (57%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that building leaders in general seemed knowledgeable,

whereas only 46% agreed with the statement that the majority of their colleagues were in favor of RTI. While the striking majority of participants viewed RTI as informing the process of identifying students with learning disabilities (88%), only 26% agreed with the statement that RTI data are sufficient in determining whether or not a student has a learning disability (see Table 3).

Table 3

RTI Beliefs and Practices

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	Percent			
RTI is the best option to support struggling learners	3	22	66	9
RTI is the best option to support students with social-emotional concerns	6	45	44	5
RTI can improve academic outcomes for all students	2	22	63	13
RTI can improve behavioral outcomes for all students	3	35	53	9
RTI can inform the process of identifying students with learning disabilities	3	9	71	17
RTI data are sufficient in determining whether or not a student has a learning disability	16	58	23	3
RTI is a vehicle for promoting culturally responsive practices	5	41	49	5
My principal describes RTI in a positive manner	5	18	62	15
My principal seems highly knowledgeable about RTI	12	31	43	14
Our building-level leaders seem highly knowledgeable about RTI	10	33	45	12
RTI concerns and challenges are addressed in a positive manner	8	30	55	7
The majority of colleagues are in favor of an RTI framework	9	45	43	3
RTI is viewed as a collaborative endeavor among school professionals in my school	8	33	51	8
There are building-wide supports for collaboration within my school (e.g., common planning time, teams, etc.)	11	21	51	17

Research question 2: How prepared do school counselors feel regarding their training on the various implementation aspects of RTI? The top three aspects in which participants felt either adequately or expertly prepared are as follows: understanding the tiered service delivery model in general (69%), counseling interventions for Tier 1 (68%), and the anticipated benefits of RTI (66%). The bottom three aspects of RTI in which respondents felt adequately or expertly prepared include the following: the historical background of RTI (29%), schoolwide data management systems for documentation and decisions (36%), and collecting and analyzing data to determine effectiveness of RTI interventions (42%; see Table 4 for detailed percentages).

Table 4

Perceived Preparedness on Different Aspects of RTI

	Not Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Adequately Prepared	Expertly Prepared
Historical overview of RTI	36	35	26	3
Underlying rationale of RTI	9	30	53	8
Anticipated benefits of RTI	8	27	56	10
Tiered service delivery model - general	6	25	54	15
Tiered service delivery model – school specific	11	30	44	15
Role and responsibilities within the tiered model	14	29	41	16
Counseling interventions for Tier 1	12	20	44	24
Counseling interventions for Tier 2	13	25	43	19
Counseling interventions for Tier 3	13	26	41	21
Collecting and analyzing data to determine effectiveness of RTI interventions	23	35	34	8
Schoolwide data management systems for documentation & decision making	26	38	27	9
Informing and involving parents within an RTI framework	21	34	34	11
Effective teamwork in RTI framework	16	33	38	13
Assuming leadership in RTI implementation	27	30	30	13

Research question 3: What roles and responsibilities of school counselors changed due to the RTI implementation? The majority of respondents (55%) reported that their responsibilities have changed due to RTI. The top two new roles and responsibilities in which respondents identified as now being directly involved are as follows: collaborate with colleagues as part of an RTI team (52%) and involvement in data collection and data management in support of RTI (41%). The two responsibilities reported as least changed were directly providing Tier 1 academic services (14%) and assuming increased special education responsibilities (3%; Table 5 includes reported changes in various roles and responsibilities).

Table 5

Changes in Roles and Responsibilities

	Percent
Directly provide Tier 1 academic services	14
Directly provide Tier 1 behavioral services	23
Directly provide Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 academic interventions	19
Directly provide Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 behavioral interventions	30
Involved in data collection and/or data management in support of RTI	41
Collaborate with colleagues as part of an RTI team	52
Train others about RTI practices within my school or district	21
Increased special education responsibilities	3

Regression Analysis

Research question 4: Is attitude toward RTI predicted by factors including demographics, as well as perceived confidence with various aspects of RTI? The full regression model accounted for 26% of the variance in perception of RTI as a beneficial change. In order to estimate the effect size for this analysis, Cohen's f^2 was calculated $f^2 = \frac{R^2}{1 - R^2}$. The effect size was found to be equal to Cohen's (1988) convention for a large effect ($f^2 = .35$). As Cohen (1988) noted, effect size indicates "the degree to which the phenomenon is present in the population" (p. 9). In addition to the effect size, the Precision Efficacy Analysis for Regression method was used to test the appropriateness of the sample size, since regression analysis is used for prediction (Brooks & Barcikowski, 1999). The minimum size required was calculated at 101; therefore, with 528 observations, the sample size is appropriate for this analysis.

Two variables were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level: perceived leadership competence ($\beta = .26$) and understanding the specific roles, responsibilities and benefits of RTI ($\beta = .25$). In other

words, if school counselors (a) perceived building-level leaders as knowledgeable and positively predisposed to RTI, and (b) were confident about understanding their roles and responsibilities within an RTI model, as well as the anticipated benefits of the RTI framework, they were more likely to view RTI as a vehicle to drive improvements in academic and behavioral outcomes for all students. Table 6 includes standardized coefficients (β), unstandardized coefficients (B), and standard errors (SE) for all variables in the model.

Table 6

Estimated Coefficients of Full Model With White's Correction for Standard Errors

Variable Name	*B*	*SE B*	β
Age	-.081	.033	-.138
Sex	-.064	.058	-.052
Ethnicity	-.133	.063	-.096
Total years in practice	-.020	.029	-.046
Years since final degree conferral	.219	.026	.045
Number of RTI trainings received	-.029	.026	-.061
Year of RTI implementation	-.044	.035	-.060
Leadership competence	.183	.035	.261**
RTI background information	.012	.023	.028
Data collection and management	.080	.050	.145
Tier service model delivery	-.069	.050	-.107
Counseling interventions	-.006	.034	-.012
Collaborative practices	.042	.050	.075
Responsibilities and benefits	.165	.056	.253*
F	9.056**		
R^2	.26		
Adjusted R^2	.23		

* p < .01; ** p < .001

These results provided a descriptive picture of school counselors' beliefs and practices regarding RTI/MTSS, as well as their level of perceived preparedness to complete tasks inherent in a multi-tiered framework of student support. For example, school counselors indicated they were directly

involved in schoolwide data management systems for documentation and decisions; however, the majority (64%) reported they were either not prepared or somewhat prepared (26% and 38%, respectively) to fulfill such a role. Likewise, although 52% of practitioners reported that they are now required to collaborate with colleagues as part of an RTI team, 49% of them indicated that they were either not prepared (16%) or somewhat prepared (33%) to engage in effective teamwork within an RTI model. In addition, results from the regression analysis indicated the importance of role clarity and educational leadership, with school counselors having a more positive view of RTI if they themselves had a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the RTI framework, and also when they considered school leaders to be positive and knowledgeable about this initiative.

Discussion

The integration of RTI into districts and schools has influenced professional practices, including the work of the school counselor. Study participants indicated the ways in which their roles and responsibilities have changed under RTI, as well as their beliefs and perceptions of preparedness to work in a multi-tiered framework. Data analysis highlights a number of needs and incongruities for the field of school counseling. We address these contradictions and highlight their represented needs in relation to pre-service and in-service preparation.

Contradictions: Disability Identification

The results of this study suggest noteworthy contradictions that merit further exploration. First, many school counselors believe that RTI is the best option to support struggling learners and that RTI is a vehicle for identifying students with SLD. Yet, only a quarter of participants agreed that data garnered through RTI is *sufficient* for learning disability determination. We postulate this incongruence may be the result of an ongoing debate between school professionals regarding the process of identifying students with SLD (McKenzie, 2009; Reschly, 2003; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002). Historically, the process of SLD identification involved standardized testing to determine if there was a significant discrepancy between a student's intelligence (as measured by standardized IQ tests) and levels of achievement (as measured by standardized achievement tests). However, many researchers and practitioners have objected to this method, citing the rapid increase in the identification of SLD since 1975 (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003) and the cultural and racial biases still inherent in IQ testing, leading to the over-representation of minorities in special education classrooms (Francis, Fletcher, & Morris, 2003). In addition, this method is perceived as "wait to fail" diagnostics, since a significant discrepancy between IQ and achievement is not typically established until grade three or higher, past the crucial early intervention window (Mellard, Deshler, & Barth, 2004). This contentious discourse is reflected in varying state regulations, with some allowing for discrepancy testing (e.g., Illinois and Idaho) while others legally forbid its use (e.g., Colorado and Indiana; Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Thus, participants' responses might be reflective of the lack of consensus in relation to best practice in identifying students with SLD.

Furthermore, the majority of surveyed school counselors believed RTI can improve academic outcomes, but were less inclined to believe that RTI can improve behavioral outcomes, and were even less convinced that RTI is the best option to support students with social-emotional concerns. When RTI was originally referenced in the 2004 IDEA reauthorization (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004), it was promoted with an academic focus as an alternative or supportive means of identifying students with learning disabilities. There was no reference in the law to identifying students with emotional or behavioral disabilities, nor was there reference to a system of supports for social-emotional and behavioral needs. However, the natural alignment of the tiered frameworks of RTI with PBIS encouraged some states to mandate a multi-tiered system of supports

(Averill & Rinaldi, 2011). It is important to note that while some states, such as Wisconsin, require a comprehensive MTSS framework, this is not true of all states (Berkeley et al., 2009). Therefore, school counselors' unease with the use of RTI in support of students with social-emotional concerns is again reflective of a greater debate in the field in regards to the role of RTI or MTSS in supporting all students and informing disability identification. These contradictions point to a need for increased awareness and dialogue about the processes of disability identification within the profession of school counseling. With clear understanding and background knowledge, school counselors will be better prepared to advocate for fair and unbiased methods of disability identification, thereby helping to reduce the disproportionate disability identification of students of color.

Contradictions: Changing Responsibilities and Levels of Preparation

Two significant gaps were apparent in relation to school counselors' RTI-related roles and their levels of confidence in regards to these changing responsibilities: School counselors felt underprepared to foster collaboration, as well as to use data to inform their practices and make decisions about students.

Collaborative practices. Beginning with collaboration, as aligned with Ockerman and colleagues' (2015) statewide findings, an overwhelming majority of participants reported they are now required to engage more in collaborative practices as a result of RTI implementation. However, many respondents did not believe other school professionals viewed RTI as favorable or as a collaborative endeavor, and over a third of respondents believed there were not building-wide supports for collaborative efforts (e.g., common planning time, teams). Additionally, about half of the respondents reported that they were not adequately prepared for teamwork. Yet, collaboration is at the core of the school counseling profession. Specifically, the ASCA National Model (2012) emphasized the importance of collaboration by including it as one of its four main themes, and several components of the ASCA National Model (e.g., advisory council, annual agreements) are only achievable through collaborative relationships. Moreover, the Transformed School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) cited teaming and collaboration as necessary components for a school counselor's ability to create sustained systemic change (Martin, 2002; Sears, 1999). Thus, school counselors need to find pathways to build community and create a culture of shared responsibility, not only to benefit students but to be efficient and effective in their jobs.

This finding also signals counselor educators to better prepare pre-service school counselors to work in school climates viewed as divisive or individualistic and to cultivate the requisite skill sets to do so. Bolstering communication, facilitation and conflict-resolution skills, school counselors can be trained to help school teams unite around the broader goals of ensuring the academic, emotional and behavioral success of all students. Leveraging these unique skill sets, they can improve the efficacy of RTI teams and ensure they remain integral to the process.

Schoolwide data management systems for documentation and decision making. Although scholars within the school counseling profession have emphasized the importance of evidence-based research for over a decade (Dimmitt, Carey & Hatch, 2007; Whiston, 2001, 2002) and the need for school counselor accountability was discussed as early as the 1920s (Gysbers, 2004), school counselors still indicated they felt inadequately prepared to work with data to drive decisions or analyze data in meaningful ways. Similarly, an overwhelming majority of respondents in this survey indicated a lack of preparedness for schoolwide data management and reported not feeling adequately trained to analyze outcome data to determine effectiveness of RTI interventions. Yet, many reported that their roles have changed to involve data collection and data management in support of RTI. This discrepancy points to an urgent need for both pre-service and in-service professional training around the use of

data, as it is central to RTI and many educational reforms. School counselors must be well-prepared to understand the utility of data rather than be stymied by it. If school counselors are to play a pivotal role in dismantling the achievement gap, which is now an ethical obligation (ASCA, 2010) rather than a laudable goal, they must be able to critically analyze data to ensure all students are served equitably. Moreover, if school counselors are active members of the RTI team, as many indicated in this survey that they are, they must be able to determine how their efforts are helping or thwarting a young person's ability to succeed. While RTI may or may not be a welcome mandate in schools, school counselors can leverage its emphasis on data collection and management to ensure students are receiving evidence-based interventions (Ockerman et al., 2012). The inability to do so not only jeopardizes school counselors' job security, but also shortchanges their students.

Fortunately, there are several resources that school counselors and counselor educators can employ to meet this dire need. Hatch's recent text, *The Use of Data in School Counseling* (2014), centers on this subject and complements other publications including Kaffenberger and Young's *Making Data Work* (2013), and Dimmitt et al.'s seminal text, *Evidence-Based School Counseling: Making a Difference With Data-Driven Practices* (2007). School counselors also can advocate for evidence-based small and large group counseling interventions, including *Second Step: Skills for Social and Academic Success* (Committee for Children, 2010) and *Student Success Skills* (Brigman & Webb, 2007). School counselors and counselor educators can hone and refine their data skills by attending the annual Evidence-Based National School Counseling Conference and becoming familiar with the burgeoning research conducted at the Ronald H. Frederickson Center for School Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation. Moreover, counselor educators need to ensure this topic is discussed and evaluated in both their core school counseling and clinical courses so as to best prepare future school counselors to be accountable and data savvy (Hatch, 2014; Studer & Diambra, 2016).

Needs: Defining Roles and Leadership Opportunities

School counselors were most likely to view RTI as a means of positively impacting academic and behavioral outcomes for all students when they (a) had leaders who were knowledgeable and positive about RTI; and (b) were clear about their own roles and responsibilities, as well as the anticipated benefits of the model. These results support findings from state-level surveys of RTI preparedness and beliefs across both school counselors and school psychologists (Hollenbeck & Patrikakou, 2014; Ockerman et al., 2015). Thus, school counselors should work to ensure role clarity and consider how best to utilize their skills and knowledge in support of change.

There are several ways in which school counselors can leverage their unique skill sets to optimize their collaborative relationships with school administration and staff. This may involve meeting with the principal to discuss roles and responsibilities, advocating for a leadership role in relation to collaborative practices or data-based decision making, and working with parents to ensure they are engaged and informed. School counselors also can better define their roles in relation to RTI by documenting these duties in their annual agreement (ASCA, 2012). By working collaboratively with school personnel to harness their strengths and create common goals, school counselors can build capacity and thereby increase their ability to reach more students. Additionally, school counselors should work with their building leaders to create professional development aimed at increasing staff knowledge about RTI in positive, proactive ways. As such, school staff can begin to view school counselors as leaders within this area and collaborative partners for creating systemic change.

School counselor educators also must infuse leadership competence and role clarity within their coursework and evaluate pre-service students' understanding and aptitudes as requisites for advancing into the profession (Chen-Hayes, Ockerman, & Mason, 2014). Introductory and foundational

school counseling courses should emphasize the school counselors' role, including appropriate and inappropriate tasks (ASCA, 2012). Moreover, field-based practicum and internship courses should require practically-based experiential activities that build leadership and advocacy capacity through data collection and analysis. All graduating school counselors should be required to measure the impact of their work and its contributions to the betterment of students, schools and communities. In such, state standards for the preparation of school counselors should reflect an emphasis on this pivotal skill set.

Limitations and Future Directions

The aim of the present study was to examine school counselors' beliefs, perceived levels of preparedness and practices regarding RTI in states where this model has been implemented. Inherent in the self-reporting through survey research is the credibility of such reports. As Paulhus and Vazire (2007) noted, "even when respondents are doing their best to be forthright and insightful, their self-reports are subject to various sources of inaccuracy" (p. 228). Participants may have exaggerated or under-reported their lack of preparedness and confidence. In addition, respondents also might have inaccurately remembered their trainings and preparation, therefore imprecisely reporting it in their responses.

While results provided a descriptive picture of perceived preparedness and its impact on the degree to which school counselors viewed RTI as beneficial, this study did not investigate possible indirect and total effects that can offer a fuller picture of influences. Future studies should apply structural equation modeling to explore direct, indirect and total effects, and therefore provide further implications for practice. Additionally, given the developmental differences between elementary, middle and high school students, the focus of school counselors' involvement in RTI implementation may vary at the different grades. Future studies should examine whether differences exist in the way RTI is viewed by practitioners serving at various school levels so that training can be customized based on specific needs. Lastly, data for this study were collected by surveying school counselors in the 15 states that were reported as implementing RTI fully or partly. It would be beneficial to survey practitioners in states where future implementation of MTSS has been planned so that proactive and well-informed steps can be taken to better prepare school counselors for the effective implementation of such frameworks.

There are significant areas of opportunity in MTSS for school counselors. School counselors have the cultivated abilities to lead, advocate and partner with their peers, which can be foundational in the design, implementation and evaluation of MTSS systems. The school counselor is positioned to lead with a vision of creating culturally relevant and evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing the achievement gap. Therefore, school counselor educators must be producers (not just consumers) of data to assist their students in making informed, culturally responsive decisions to support academic, social and emotional learning for all students. Major educational reforms such as RTI should serve as a welcome motivation for improved practice and professional advancement. Politically aware and comprehensively trained school counselors can leverage such educational mandates to access necessary resources and become the innovators and path-charters of their profession.

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