

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS BY
AVAILABILITY OF STUDENT SUPPORT FACILITATORS

by

Marsha Fran Joyce-Tatum

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

Student support systems are designed to improve struggling students' performance and should be used by general and special education teachers. The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of student support system frameworks in a rural school district in a Mid-Atlantic state with a full-time or part-time student support facilitator. This study will provide educational leaders with information on teachers' perceptions concerning student support systems, in order to support creation of improved staff development efforts that will influence effective teacher use of student support systems. Teachers' perceptions of their training, special education eligibility, and framework weaknesses in student support systems, as well as familiarity of student support teams and response to interventions will be investigated. The researcher used a causal-comparative design to look at differences in teachers' perceptions of SSS frameworks with part-time and full-time student support facilitators. The sample consisted of 70 certified regular and special education teachers. The researcher used a web-based version of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey. Data analysis was conducted using a multivariate analysis of variance. The analysis determined there was a statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems, adequacy of training to implement student support systems, effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students, and a relationship between different student support systems in schools with either a full-time or a part-time SST facilitator.

Keywords: implementation, response to intervention, self-efficacy, special education, student support facilitators student support teams, teacher perceptions

Dedication

Habakkuk 2:2-3: “And the Lord answered me: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay” (KJV). This research is dedicated to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without Him, none of this would be possible. I also dedicate this to my husband, Xavier Tatum, my son, Xavier “Tate” Tatum, Jr., my daughter, Savannah Tatum, my granddaughter, Marsha Smith, and my five sisters, Mildred Joyce, Mary Reynolds, Eva Terry, Lula Joyce, and Lucheia “Toni” Graves, as well as my extended family. In addition, I thank my dedicated and loving parents, Mr. Garfield Joyce and Mrs. Savannah Joyce for all their encouragement, support, and prayers.

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List of Abbreviations

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHCA)

Individualized education program or plan (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Response to intervention (RtI)

Student support teams (SSTs)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This study examined the impact of teachers' perceptions of student support system frameworks in a rural school district in a Mid-Atlantic state with a full-time or part-time student support facilitator. This chapter begins with background information concerning student support systems, such as Response to Intervention (RtI) and Student Support Teams (SSTs). Chapter One includes a historical overview, problem statement, significance statement, research questions, and definition of terms.

Background

Educators are challenged to prepare students to be globally competitive lifelong learners (Denda & Hunter, 2016; Larson & Miller, 2011). Students must be flexible, creative, and prepared for success in the classroom and adulthood. Teachers have to create lesson plans and use strategies, so students meet these challenges while also complying with state and national standards (Clements, 2013). Each student brings different learning styles and ability levels to the classroom. Highly qualified teachers must have broad skills and access to support systems to meet students' varying academic needs (Kwok & Jones, 2011; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011).

Some students, however, have unique needs and meeting their needs may be outside the expertise of the general education classroom teacher. Students with continuing academic difficulties may need additional support. With the creation of educational legislative acts, such as the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), educators have been able to meet the needs of students using support systems, such as student support teams (SSTs).

SSTs identify struggling students who need additional support in the general education classroom or referral to special education using the response to intervention (RtI) frameworks. Student support systems are commonly used and accepted at the elementary school level; however, at the middle level, teachers have less acceptance and understanding (Reschly & Wood-Garnett, 2009). Teachers' perceptions of student support systems may be negatively affecting the success of students.

The EAHCA gave students with disabilities the right to due process and the same access to an education as students without disabilities (Ikeda, 2012; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). Although these students had a legal right to an education, they still needed academic assistance designed to fit their individualized needs. Since the enactment of the EAHCA in 1975, students were given assistance through pull-out or resource settings. However, in 2004, IDEIA included a new method for diagnosing students with disabilities, known as response to intervention (RtI).

Response to intervention (RtI) replaced the discrepancy model for special education identification, which used the student's intelligence quotient (IQ) achievement model. The IQ achievement model identified students as learning disabled if there was a significant discrepancy between IQ and student achievement. Although written in special education law, the RtI framework is consistent with NCLB as it promotes all students participating in instructional programs that support multifaceted learning (Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016).

RtI is a multitiered framework with a minimum of three tiers that teachers use to conduct assessments, problem solving, and instruction to address struggling students in the general education classroom (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Isbell & Szabo, 2015; Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016). RtI has developed into a more appropriate method in identifying students with a learning disability, as well as identifying students with academic difficulties and providing early

intervention (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2014). The RtI framework should not delay the special education referral as the discrepancy model's evaluation process that forced students to perform poorly before accumulating a sufficient discrepancy needed to be eligible for special education services (Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007). Since school districts have begun implementing the RtI framework, fewer students are identified with learning disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2014). In addition, school districts also use the RtI framework to address the over-identification as well as under-identification of minority students for special education and to promote student achievement and the integration of general and special education (Acherd, 2015).

The RtI framework consists of (a) implementation of research-based classroom instruction, (b) screening of students to determine education progress, (c) providing more intense or specialized instruction to students at risk for academic failure, (d) maintaining the quality of instruction, and (e) basing instructional decisions on student data (Bryant, 2014; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009). The RtI framework is designed as a general initiative with a goal to increase student academic ability (Bryant, 2014). It is also important to measure and determine the struggling students' responsiveness to RtI interventions. The referring general education teacher must assess the implemented interventions for effectiveness and student progress. Hauerwas, Brown, and Scott (2013) conducted a study concerning the RtI assessment process for the U.S. Department of Education. Their results did not provide a national consensus concerning RtI practices; however, best practices were identified.

Historical Context

Since the 1960s, federal laws have mandated equal educational opportunities for all students. Educational policies such as the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act and

the 1975 EAHCA provided educational opportunities and services to improve academic achievement for students at risk for failure. EAHCA also enacted an end to the segregation of students with disabilities in the public-school system and confirmed all students' rights to legal recourse, individualized education programs (IEPs), non-prejudicial evaluations, and education in the public sector at no cost.

When the reauthorization of IDEA mandated accountability for student achievement via NCLB, school districts were directed to reassess their special education identification process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). School districts began to use student support systems such as the RtI framework and SSTs, which provide meaningful identification of general and special education students at risk for failure. The RtI framework provides assessment that determines the instructional level needed by struggling students and monitors the progress of students to identify their needs (Hazelkorn, Bucholz, Goodman, Duffy, & Brady, 2010). School districts across the nation use RtI as a tool to identify struggling students and provide support needed to achieve success in the general education classroom (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011).

In the late 1970s, SSTs emerged to assist struggling students referred for special education (Chalfant, Pysh, & Moultrie, 1976; Graden, Casey, & Christenson, 1985) as school districts were being held more accountable for student achievement and had seen a greater need for interventions in the general education classroom. The student support systems process is an effective way to organize and implement interventions to help struggling students in the general education classroom (Rhodes, 2014). Student support systems also provide an individualized approach to meet the diverse needs of students, so they may become productive, self-sufficient citizens (Denda & Hunter, 2016; King, Lemons, & Hill, 2012; Wade, 2015).

Societal Context

Teachers from preschool to high school play an important role in student success. If teachers fail to make effective use of student support systems, struggling students have poor academic performance, may lose interest in school, and are likely to drop out (Rumberger, 2011). High school dropouts produce social and economic problems for communities (Jordan, Kostandini, & Mykerezi, 2012). Dropouts often have difficulty finding jobs and are forced to accept low-skills jobs (Jordan et al., 2012) and are more likely to commit crimes and become incarcerated (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, & Reno, 2013). Hence, early identification and intervention implemented through student support systems are crucial to identify and aid struggling students and decrease dropout rates (Fan & Walters, 2014; Ziomek-Daigle & Andrews 2009).

Student support systems can be an important first step in assisting struggling students. Teachers also play an important role in student support systems and are accountable for student achievement on state-mandated assessments. If teachers lack the knowledge, training, or experience to access student support systems, their perceptions of the utility and value of these services could be affected (Rhodes, 2014). Student support systems were first implemented in the early grades and are a relatively new framework in middle schools (Bailey, 2010; Gustafson, Svensson, & Fälth, 2014; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006). This causal-comparative study investigated the effect of full-time or part-time student support facilitators on teachers' perceptions of student support systems frameworks in the middle schools of a rural Mid-Atlantic state.

Theoretical Context

Teachers are held accountable for student achievement (Krolak-Schwerdt, Böhmer, & Gräsel, 2013). The way teachers perceive educational reform and their skill set is integral to their success, as well as the success of their students (Martini, 2014). As facilitators of learning, teachers must enhance their content knowledge, pedagogy and use of research-based interventions, such as RtI (Moyer, 2015). The learning processes for teachers are often complicated by behavioral, environmental, and personal factors. Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977, 2001, 2011) provides a theoretical context for analyzing teacher engagement in the implementation of RtI. Social cognitive theory holds that an individual's acquisition of knowledge can be obtained from observational learning and experiences. Social cognitive theory also involves a triadic reciprocal causation model in which learning is influenced by personal characteristics, behavioral patterns, and the environment (Bandura, 1977, 2001, 2011). Individuals' behaviors have the potential to inform or alter their personal characteristics, future behavioral patterns, and environment. Social cognitive theory acknowledges that personal characteristics, behavioral patterns, and environmental components are involved in educating as well as motivating teachers to refer students to student support systems such as SSTs. These components also affect teachers' ability to implement RtI. In addition, teachers come to understand RtI based on their knowledge, experiences, and self-efficacy. External factors such as educational policies, professional development, and school environment affect teachers' perceptions of RtI (Rhodes, 2014).

Problem Statement

Student support systems are vital to struggling students' success in the classroom. Student support systems provide different approaches to meet the diverse needs of students.

Clements (2013) related that teachers have a responsibility toward students to meet mandated state and national standards on standardized tests. Teachers therefore must seek and implement research-based interventions to ensure student success. This determination empowers teachers to make important decisions concerning the learning process. Additionally, student support facilitators and general and special education teachers need to work together using the student support systems to advance student achievement in the general education classroom or make needed referrals to special education services (Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015).

Previous studies have examined student support systems such as student support teams and response to intervention in elementary schools (Bailey, 2010; Lee-Tarver, 2006). Student support systems are spreading from elementary schools into middle schools (Dulaney, 2012; Prewett et al., 2012). Research around the implementation of RtI at middle schools is limited (Brozo, 2009; Shanklin, 2008; Shirley, 2012). Teachers also lack effective middle school RtI models to follow, which may hinder effective implementation (Shirley, 2012). As a result, struggling students may not receive needed assistance. This investigation may provide insight into teachers' perceptions of student support services at the middle school level. It also may provide school administrators with more information to use when designing professional development to ensure teachers have current and pertinent data needed concerning the implementation of student support systems. If teachers lack training or administrative support, they may not implement interventions or referrals for special education (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015). The problem is that teachers' perceptions of student support systems may be negatively impacting the success of students.

Purpose Statement

This causal-comparative study investigated the effect full-time or part-time student support facilitators (independent variable) have on teachers' perceptions of student support systems frameworks (dependent variable) in the middle schools of a rural Mid-Atlantic state. This descriptive study may provide information concerning teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems, adequacy of training to implement student support systems, effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students, and relationship between different student support systems in schools. The population for this study included general and special education teachers in rural middle schools located in a Mid-Atlantic state.

Significance of the Study

Educational leaders must take an active role in the implementation of RtI and should understand as well as assess the impact of RtI at their schools. Teachers, therefore, need on-going staff development and support (Harris & Sass, 2011). Teachers who feel they do not have adequate training or lack support from administrators may not implement needed RtI interventions (Donaldson, 2011; Gumus, 2013; Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2015). Educational leaders need information concerning the factors that affect teachers' perception of the RtI implementation (Murakami-Ramolho & Wilcox, 2012).

This study may be significant for all stakeholders because it will add to the limited quantitative data on teachers' perceptions of student support systems such as SSTs and RtI at the middle school level. Teachers' perceptions and their ability to implement SSTs and RtI is important in assessing student support systems (Luttenberg, Imants, & Veen, 2013; Spear-Swerling, & Cheesman, 2011). RtI implementation requires continued professional

development, clear expectations for implementation, buy-in from teachers, and integration into instructional practices (Donaldson, 2011; Gumus, 2013; Patton et al., 2015).

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ2: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of training to implement student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ3: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ4: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the relationship between different student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

Definitions

The following definitions are important to the understanding of this research study:

1. *Academic achievement* – Academic achievement is performance outcomes that indicate a student has accomplished a goal on informal and formal assessments (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005).
2. *Implementation* – Implementation is the positioning of educational frameworks in the instructional routines to enhance the learning process (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015).

3. *Multi-tiered systems of support* – Multi-tiered systems of support incorporate instruction, research-based interventions, and assessments to address all students’ academic and behavior needs (Bouck & Cosby, 2017).
4. *Professional development* – Professional development is training to assist teachers with strategies needed to improve student achievement (Pruitt, 2014).
5. *Response to intervention (RtI)* – RtI is a multitiered framework that uses assessments, problem solving, and instruction to address struggling students in the general education classroom (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).
6. *Self-efficacy* – Self-efficacy is an individual’s belief in his or her capabilities to obtain a desired result (Rogers, 2010).
7. *Special education* – Special education addresses the individual needs of students with disabilities (Sullivan & Castro-Villarreal, 2013).
8. *Student support team* – A student support team is a committee composed of school administrators, student support facilitators, general education teachers, and special education teachers to assist struggling students by providing interventions or special education services (Stollar-Bolinger, 2008).
9. *Teacher perceptions* – Teacher perceptions are knowledge, understanding, or attitudes held by a teacher (Bailey, 2010).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two contains a synthesis of research on student support systems that help general and special education students at risk for failure in the regular education classroom. The historical background, studies of teachers' perceptions of student support systems, and the processes of SSTs and RtI are addressed. In addition, Bandura's social cognitive theory, collaborative problem solving, self-efficacy, and teacher self-efficacy are discussed. Chapter Two also includes a thorough review of literature.

Theoretical Framework

School districts across the United States are challenged to ensure that all students show growth and achieve on state-mandated assessments. Students, however, enter the classroom environment with varied ability levels and learning styles (Arum & Velez, 2012; Chingos, Whitehurst, & Gallaher, 2015). Some students are labeled academically or intellectually gifted, while others require an individualized education program to address their deficient academic skills. In addition, student achievement may also be hindered by family issues, peer relationships, poor attendance, and behavioral disorders (Vassiou, Mouratidis, Andreou, & Kafetsios, 2016). When combined, these differences in the classroom require teachers to seek research-based strategies to meet the diverse needs of their students (Pappas & Tucker, 2011).

Adapting instruction to meet students' diverse needs is not an easy task. The demands become critical if students do not respond to research-based strategies and continue to experience difficulty in the classroom (Mulvey, Cooper, Accurso, & Gagliardi, 2014). Teachers must then decide whether to refer general or special education students at risk for failure to student support systems, such as student support teams (Bailey, 2010; Wade, 2015). For many school districts

across the United States, student support teams (SSTs) serve as an effective way for teachers, parents, school administrators, guidance counselors, and student support facilitators to discuss struggling students' academic and/or behavioral concerns. SSTs also use an assessment and intervention approach, known as response to intervention (RtI), which provides research-based instructional methods to assist both special and general education students at risk for failure.

Educational reform has mandated teachers learn new research-based approaches, such as RtI to help both general and special education students at risk for failure. This learning process is complicated by behavioral, environmental, and personal factors. Bandura's social cognitive theory provides a theoretical basis for examining teacher motivation and engagement in the implementation of RtI and SSTs. Social cognitive theory includes a critical concept to learning, known as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and can be expanded to include teacher efficacy. These concepts are presented as components of the theoretical framework of the study.

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's social cognitive theory subscribes to an agency perspective where individuals play a role in their own development with the ability to make changes (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1989, 2001). Within the agency model, individuals have self-beliefs that allow them some control over their actions, thoughts, and feelings (Bandura, 1986). From Bandura's (1986) theoretical perspective, people believe their behavioral outcomes have the potential to alter personal factors, environment, and future behavior in bidirectional, causal, and reciprocal relationships. As such, individuals' beliefs and perception of capabilities are shaped through their experiences in the environment (Bandura, 1986; Schwarzer, 2014). Based on the social cognitive theory, individuals' views of their abilities determine what they hope to attempt and their effort to achieve it (Bandura, 1986; Schwarzer, 2014).

Social cognitive theory acknowledges that teachers' perceptions can be modified by personal, environmental, and behavioral factors that can be determinants in using SSTs and RtI (Kakascik, 2013; Rhodes, 2014; Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, & McKenna, 2012). Teachers have a responsibility to provide lesson plans that meet the individualized needs of students who vary in learning ability, behavior, and motivation during the RtI and SST process. Teachers' perceptions about learning and their ability to produce successful student outcomes are vital to the teaching process (Mellati, Khademi, & Shirzadeh, 2015; Tolbert, 2012). Therefore, teachers' perceptions influence their instructional practices and the successful implementation of RtI in the classroom.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy defines individuals' beliefs in their cognitive ability, motivation, and resources needed to complete tasks (Wood & Bandura, 1989). In addition, self-efficacy also influences individuals' expectations of success as well as the effort they will expend to complete a task (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1977) stated that, "Efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (p. 194). Accordingly, teachers will implement RtI based on their knowledge, experience, motivation, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Benjamin, 2011; Rhodes, 2014).

Donnell and Gettinger (2015) examined teacher beliefs, self-efficacy, and professional development in the RtI framework. The results revealed that these variables play an important role in the implementation of RtI. In essence, self-efficacy is paramount when implementing the RtI framework (Donnell & Gettinger, 2015; Wallace, 2014).

Teacher Efficacy

Teacher efficacy is defined as teachers' beliefs in their abilities to assist all students in the learning process (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Teacher efficacy is also

recognized as a predictor of meaningful educational outcomes such as teacher ability, confidence, persistence, and commitment to student achievement (Dibapile, 2012; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2000; Khan, 2012; Labone, 2004; Wheatley, 2005). Teachers' efficacy, whether high or low, affects their emotional or behavioral outcomes (Warren & Hale, 2016).

Cho and Shim (2013) found that teachers with high self-efficacy shape their achievement goals for teaching and personal motivational beliefs. Teachers with high self-efficacy believe in their ability and competence to enhance student achievement (Cantrell, Almasi, Carter, & Rintamaa, 2013; Kelm & McIntosh, 2012; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012; Muijs & Reynolds, 2015). Rajesh and Suganthi (2013) found that teacher self-efficacy is vital to teachers' ability to handle classroom difficulties successfully. Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, and Hardin (2014) found that teacher efficacy was necessary to implement differentiation of instruction successfully.

Teacher efficacy is also vital to implementation of the RtI framework (Cantrell et al., 2013; Kelm & McIntosh, 2012; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012; Muijs & Reynolds 2015). Studies have shown positive results for teachers with a high sense of efficacy when the RtI framework was implemented in their school. Nunn, Jantz, and Butikofer (2009) also examined the relationship between teacher efficacy, RtI perceptions, and RtI outcomes and found that teacher efficacy was associated with the effectiveness of RtI implementation.

Self-efficacy and teacher efficacy focus on personal, environmental, and behavior factors that influence teachers' beliefs in their ability and practices. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to use research-based strategies to increase student achievement, as well as persist in the face of educational reform. Therefore, teacher efficacy is influential in the effectiveness or failure of the RtI implementation.

Collaborative Problem Solving

Collaborative problem solving is a method that allows a variety of stakeholders to evaluate strategies and determine desired results for an agreed-upon problem (Griffin & Burns-Ardolino, 2013). SSTs used in U.S. school districts are based on the collaborative problem-solving method. Collaborative problem-solving teams, such as SSTs, may be composed of different stakeholders, but have the same goal to increase student achievement and eliminate needless special education referrals (Griffin & Burns-Ardolino, 2013).

Collaborative problem-solving teams are usually made up of school administrators, regular education teachers, special education teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, student support facilitators, and parents (Schwanz & Barbour, 2004). SSTs collaborate to determine struggling students' needs, use the RtI intervention model, and provide on-going progress monitoring and assessments (Burns, Vanderwood, & Ruby, 2005; Newton, Horner, Algozzine, Todd, & Algozzine, 2012).

Student Support Systems

With increased accountability demands, student support systems are being implemented in U.S. school districts. These systems are designed to support students and teachers through a collaborative approach with the intent of improving general and special education student performance (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). Student support systems incorporate an interdisciplinary team to address learning problems in K–12 students. In some instances, school support systems are referred to as comprehensive school support systems, student services, instructional support, and academic support, but have the same goal to increase student achievement. Student support systems contain resources, services and staff members whose primary purpose is to provide academic and behavioral support to all students at risk for failure (Rhodes, 2014; Tolbert, 2012).

Student Support Teams

Student support teams are designed to assist regular education teachers who need interventions to help students who exhibit academic or behavioral problems in the classroom (Papalia-Berardi & Hall, 2007). Names for student support teams vary, such as teacher assistance teams, response to intervention teams, teacher support teams, prereferral intervention teams, and problem-solving teams. School districts that use SSTs have a goal to improve student achievement. SSTs were originally created to assist with the special education referral process (Chalfant et al., 1976). In recent years, SSTs have become an effective model for organizing and implementing interventions for students functioning below grade level or those who exhibit emotional or behavioral difficulties in the general education classroom (Brendle, 2015; Ormsbee, 2001; Wade, 2015; Zipoli & Merritt, 2016).

SSTs meet at designated times monthly to discuss students' progress and to add new students based on general and special education teacher recommendations (Brendle, 2015). At this time, recommendations are made to continue using or revise interventions, as well as increase service time (Wade, 2015). SSTs can also determine if students should continue service in the general education classroom or receive services in a more restrictive environment, such as the special education resource classroom (Bailey, 2010; Holleran, 2013). The special education resource classroom is a remedial environment where students are given individualized instruction as well as academic remediation. If students continue to have difficulty and fail to make adequate progress with interventions or strategies, they are referred for special education services (Wade, 2015). A committee member of the SST and the student's classroom teacher schedule a meeting with parents to discuss lack of or limited student progress and an option for

referral to special education (Bethere, 2014; Stein & Sharkey, 2014). The parent has the right to approve or refuse testing for special education services (Stein & Sharkey, 2014).

Despite the goal of SSTs to assist students at risk for failure in the general education classroom, barriers to success exist. Failure to use SSTs is an area of concern (Lane, Kalberg, Bruhn, Mahoney, & Driscoll, 2008; Payne, 2013). Some teachers are overwhelmed with lesson planning, grading, difficult student behavior, and/or administrative activities. Many teachers have not received the necessary professional development and lack information and resources about how to implement the SST process. In addition, some researchers question the integrity of the RtI framework, based on teachers' lack of knowledge about student support systems (Lane, Mahdavi, & Borthwick-Duffy, 2003; Payne, 2013). School administrators must provide needed professional development and support to ensure successful implementation of the SST process (Adey, 2004; Dulaney, 2012; McDonagh, 2012; Payne, 2013). According to Nellis (2012), school-based teams such as SSTs play a critical role in the implementation of RtI. These teams must receive intensive, on-going, and systematic training to meet their responsibilities (Nellis, 2012).

Historically, SSTs emerged as teacher assistance teams in schools during the 1970s. Those problem-solving teams consisted of a group of teachers meeting to discuss and find solutions to help students with academic difficulty or behavioral concerns (Chalfant et al., 1976). Teachers needed assistance to support students with academic or behavioral concerns. In addition, teachers needed programs that provided support and strategies, as well as recommendations from special education teachers and/or specialists (Graden et al., 1985; Nelson, Smith, Taylor, Dodd, & Reavis, 1992; Rankin & Aksamit, 1994; Safran & Safran, 1996).

SSTs are linked to teacher prereferral or problem-solving teams in the 1980s (Graden et al., 1985). Regardless of the name, SSTs have a goal to improve student achievement and decrease the over-identification of students in special education (Sindelar, Griffin, Smith, & Watanabe, 1992). Such teams use a problem-solving approach that includes identification, data collection, interventions, and assessments (Cosden & Semmel, 1992; Flugum & Reschley, 1994).

Historical Perceptive of Response to Intervention

The Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (EAHCA) or P.L. 94-142 was signed into law in 1975. Salend and Duhaney (1999) summarized the major components of EAHCA that significantly affected the education of students with learning disabilities. EAHCA guaranteed a free appropriate public education, a least restrictive environment, an individualized education program, procedural due process, parent involvement, and access to technically adequate and nondiscriminatory evaluation procedures, and federal support for special education. Also part of EAHCA was the discrepancy model, which identifies disabilities by comparing intellectual ability and performance (O'Donnell & Miller, 2011). EAHCA gave students with disabilities the same access to an education as students without disabilities and the right to due process (Ikeda, 2012; Sumbera et al., 2014). Although these students had the legal rights to an education, they still needed individualized academic assistance that would enable them to be successful. Thus, students with disabilities were given special educational services in the least restrictive environment, such as in the regular education classroom, resource room, or in separate educational placements (Morningstar, Kurth, & Johnson, 2017). EAHCA also provided federal support for special education and formalized the definition of a learning disability as follows:

A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the

imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. [P.L. 94-142, 121a 5b (9)]

In 1990, EACHA was amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This law placed more emphasis on the individual than on the disability. IDEA also changed the terminology from *handicapped child* to *child with a disability* and the regular and special education classroom became a single system (Clearman, 1997). IDEA continued to use the discrepancy model to identify individuals with disabilities; however, it also emphasized transition services that integrated education and employment preparation systems (Sharpe, 1999).

In 2002, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education made a recommendation to move to a system, such as the RtI framework, that focuses on early identification and interventions, not on a *wait-to-fail* model (Sullivan & Castro-Villarreal, 2013). Despite these recommendations, the discrepancy model to identify students with specific learning disabilities is still permitted as an alternative approach (Sullivan & Castro-Villarreal, 2013). In 2004, Congress reauthorized IDEA, and changed its name to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA).

IDEIA addressed the concerns that the significant discrepancy formula to identify students with disabilities did not close achievement gaps (Steinberg, 2013). IDEIA also addressed the concern that struggling students had to *wait to fail* before receiving interventions and that school districts were allowed to adopt criteria to determine if a child had a specific learning disability. In addition, this amendment permitted states to adopt alternative frameworks, including the RtI framework, to determine special education eligibility, rather than the sole use of the discrepancy model (Steinberg, 2013). IDEA regulations were updated to mandate states to adopt criteria for determining if a child has a specific learning disability and

the state criteria must not use the discrepancy model to determine a specific learning disability. IDEA also mandated that states permit the use of a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention, and the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining a specific learning disability (Steinberg, 2013).

The IDEA reauthorization recognized the RtI framework as an acceptable method of identifying students for special educational services, enhancing general educational services, and reducing special educational referrals (Steinberg, 2013). RtI also merged special education into NCLB policies as it promotes all students participating in instructional programs that support clear standards, measurement, and multifaceted learning practices (Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016). This change provides the groundwork that enhances performance for students with and without disabilities through a common framework where school administrators, regular education teachers, special education teachers, and other specialists work as a team.

In 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a replacement for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), to govern public schools across the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). ESSA requires states to test students in Grades 3–8 and once in high school. ESSA also mandated that states should provide testing that aligns with the states' college and career-ready standards. The goals of ESSA include closing the achievement gap and expecting high standards for all students. It also promotes research-based educational frameworks, such as RtI to address struggling students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Response to Intervention

RtI is a comprehensive problem-solving framework that applies research-based instructional practices, universal screening, and targeted interventions delivered within a multitier approach based on students' individualized needs (Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2012;

Fuchs et al., 2006; Isbell & Szabo, 2015; Preston et al., 2016). Most RtI frameworks base decisions on student data (Dulaney, 2012). This approach is used in “almost 80% of schools” in school districts across the United States (Chard, 2012, p. 199). RtI is also considered an educational reform initiative that purposefully identifies students at-risk for academic failure for better academic and behavioral outcomes (Fuchs et al., 2012). RtI implementation involves role changes for professional staff, such as administrators and teachers (Nellis, 2012). RtI also consist of fundamental principles needed to implement with fidelity. Reschly (2014) identified four fundamental principles of RtI:

- Scientifically based academic instruction and behavior interventions matched to student needs and implemented with good fidelity over a period that is reasonable to expect gains to meet performance expectations.
- Progress monitoring that is sufficiently frequent and sensitive to match the degree of students' needs and the intensity of the intervention, with results used to compare progress and make changes in goals or instruction/intervention.
- Data-based decision making about the degree of students' needs and the intensity of educational services required to meet those needs based on student progress toward benchmark goals for performance.
- Multitiered or levels of intervention that vary in intervention intensity matched to students' needs.

In addition, universal screening provides data for teachers to identify students who are not making the expected level of growth and who may need interventions to address their academic difficulty (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2014).

RtI is also described as a multitiered system of support with a minimum of three tiers to address struggling students in the general education classroom (Isbell & Szabo, 2015; Preston et al., 2016). The use of the multitiered allows the early identification of students at risk for academic difficulties (Chard, 2012). This allows teachers to address the challenges at a much earlier stage while improving student performance or providing needed support for students identified as having a learning disability (Chard, 2012). The establishment of the RtI framework as an indicator of learning disabilities provides school districts with an approach to assist students with learning difficulties (Keller-Margulis, 2012). The RtI framework should not delay the special education referral, in contrast to the discrepancy model evaluation process that forced students to perform poorly before accumulating a sufficient discrepancy needed to be eligible for special education services (Richards et al., 2007).

Response to Intervention (RtI) Approaches

Since the emergence of RtI, schools have used two common approaches. The first approach, problem solving, is based on meeting the individualized needs of a student. The second approach, known as the standard treatment protocol, is for all students. Using the SST philosophy for RtI, schools may choose, based on student needs, the problem-solving approach, the standard treatment protocol, or a hybrid approach that, a combination of the two approaches.

Problem solving approach. The problem-solving approach is a research-based method used to make educational decisions and includes implementation of interventions and assessments to address each student's individualized needs (Preston et al., 2016). The problem-solving approach also involves working with SSTs to review performance data to identify if a discrepancy exists between the student's actual performance and desired performance as well as finding interventions based on the student's individualized needs (King & Coughlin, 2015).

After the interventions are implemented, SSTs along with a classroom teacher will continue to evaluate the student's progress to determine the interventions' effectiveness (King & Coughlin, 2015). If the student does not make adequate progress in Tier I, II, and III, the problem-solving approach is used to determine if a more intensive intervention is needed (Brown-Chidsey & Andren, 2012; King & Coughlin, 2015; Preston et al., 2016). Therefore, the problem-solving approach concentrates on early intervention and the unification of special and general education (Preston et al., 2016).

Standard treatment protocol. The standard treatment protocol focuses on a group of students with similar learning difficulties, not the individualized needs of each student (King & Coughlin, 2015). The standard treatment protocol involves predetermined interventions based on a limited analysis of skill deficits (Preston et al., 2016). This approach also includes universal screening, early interventions, and multiple tiers (King et al., 2015). The interventions consist of well-defined procedures, that when implemented with fidelity should produce positive outcomes in student performance. Progress monitoring is also used to make decisions concerning student needs (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; King & Coughlin, 2015).

RtI Implementation

School districts are tasked with the proper implementation of educational frameworks, such as RtI, at the classroom and school level. As with any educational framework, RtI should be implemented with an understanding of research-based practices, differentiation of instruction based on students' specific needs, assessment methods, interventions, and student academic progress monitoring. To implement the RtI framework effectively, school personnel, such as school administrators and teachers, must understand RtI components to support students who are struggling academically (Reschly, 2014). Regan, Berkeley, Hughes, and Brady (2015) reported

that, “In an RtI framework, all components (i.e., screening, progress monitoring, tiered interventions) should be implemented with a high degree of fidelity” (p. 235).

Professional development of staff and administrators, therefore, is critical for effective RtI implementation and positive student outcomes (Barrio & Combes, 2014; Compton et al., 2012; Fuchs & Bergeron, 2013). In addition, school districts should establish a system to ensure and monitor the processes associated with RtI implementation as well as collecting and evaluating performance results (Erickson, Noonan, & Jenson, 2012).

RtI Framework Components

The RtI framework must contain (a) multitiered interventions, (b) universal screening, (c) progress reporting, and (d) data-driven decision making (Center on Response to Intervention, n.d.). The RtI framework can consist of three tiers of instructional processes to assist general and special education students struggling academically or behaviorally in the general education classroom (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010; Hall & Mahoney, 2013). Some RtI frameworks consist of four tiers or the three tiers are divided into smaller units (Center on Response to Intervention, n.d.). Tiers are commonly referred to as Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III. Tiered instruction depends on the student’s individualized needs. Each tier consists of research-based instruction and evidenced-based interventions (Gustafson et al., 2014).

Tier I. Tier I consist of all students receiving high-quality research-based instruction in the general education classroom with on-going universal screening and progress monitoring with the use of curriculum-based measurement (Otaiba et al., 2014). Greenwood and Kim (2012) reported that, “80% of students should make expected progress” in Tier I” (p. 83). The Tier I process begins with data obtained from universal screening. Universal screening takes place at periodic times during the school year to establish an academic and/or behavioral baseline and to

identify struggling students who need additional support (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Students identified as *at risk* based on results from universal screenings receive differentiated instruction to target different ability levels. The general education teacher provides instruction based on the student's individualized needs using evidence-based strategies to determine if academic difficulties are not the result of poor or inappropriate instruction (Fuchs et al., 2014; Hughes & Dexter, 2011). During this time, student progress is closely monitored using validated measurement tools (Fuchs et al., 2014). At the end of this period, students who are unable to make adequate progress are moved to Tier II (Clark et al., 2014; Fuchs et al., 2014).

Tier II. Tier II is intended to assist students who are not demonstrating adequate progress in the general education classroom in Tier I (Ball & Trammell, 2011; Bryant, 2014; Graves, Brandon, Duesbery, McIntosh, & Pyle, 2011). At the Tier II level, general education teachers provide increasingly explicit instruction based on the at-risk student's level of performance and progression rates. Goss and Brown-Chidsey (2012) found that instructional experiences are improved when teachers group students into small groups, consistently monitor student progress, and implement research-based and explicit instruction. In addition, interventions are usually in math and/or reading and provided in small groups of three to six students who have similar needs outside the general education classroom. Interventions of targeted skills can last from 6 to 8 weeks (Brown-Chidsey, 2016; Bryant, 2014). These students also continue to receive instruction in the general curriculum. Students are given continuous, corrective feedback that provides encouragement and consistent progress monitoring, thus allowing modifications or adjustments to the intervention based on the student's academic needs (Kupzyk, Daly, Ihlo, & Young, 2012). Self-monitoring activities are also used at Tier II (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012; Werts, Carpenter, & Fewell, 2014).

Progress monitoring data continues to be critical during Tier II for assessing if students are responding sufficiently or to determine if current interventions should be modified based on their individualized needs (Mellard, McKnight, & Woods, 2009; Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008). Tier II interventions have been proven successful for some students (Fuchs et al., 2012). Bryant (2014) summarized research in the area of Tier II interventions with at-risk students identified as having mathematical difficulties who received effective instruction while showing growth on assessments. If students do not respond adequately and fail to make progress at Tier II, instructional changes will be made, or they will move to Tier III (Compton et al., 2012).

Tier III. Tier III provides struggling students who made minimal progress with Tier I and Tier II with the most intense level of intervention with highly specialized instruction (Wilson, Faggella-Luby, & Yan, 2013; Compton, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2012; Kupzyk et al., 2012). Sanchez and O'Connor (2015) found that struggling students who did not respond to Tier II showed strong growth in Tier III. Struggling students with severe learning gaps may be recommended to Tier III without completing Tiers I or II. Tier III interventions are held outside the general education classroom in a separate placement, such as the special education classroom.

The intensity level of the intervention session is generally increased to a full class period. Sessions are usually one-on-one or in a small group, allowing the teacher to provide more practice on deficient skills with feedback on progress. Special education teachers are usually responsible for intervention at Tier III. Compton, Fuchs, and Fuchs (2012) posited that Tier III interventions are intense and should be implemented by special education teachers in the special education classroom. Progress monitoring is also increased at this level.

Students with limited progress in Tier III are referred to special education. States are also required to identify, locate, and evaluate all students who need special education services (Zirkel,

2015). Students that are referred for special education services must qualify through an evaluation process (Lo, 2014; Zirel, 2015). Parents are asked for permission to evaluate their child for placement (Hartman, 2016). Before the evaluation can take place, the school district must have a signed consent for testing which lists the assessments that will be administered to the student (Hartman, 2016). Students will be tested by school psychologists using assessments such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (Richerson, Watkins, & Beaujean, 2014). Eligibility is based on defined IDEA requirements (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). According to the IDEA, students can be declared eligible for special education and related services if the student has one or more specific disabilities or impairments (Aron & Loprest, 2012),

The specific impairments and disabilities listed in the law are mental retardation (also known as intellectual disabilities); hearing impairments, including deafness, speech or language impairments, visual impairments, including blindness, serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism; traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, specific learning disabilities, deaf-blindness, and multiple disabilities requiring special education and related services. (p. 99)

A school representative, usually a special education teacher, is assigned as case manager to schedule a meeting to discuss the testing results and eligibility for special educational services (Spiel, Evans, & Langberg, 2014). This meeting includes local education agency representatives (i.e., school administrator, special education director, school psychologist, or special education teacher) and a general education teacher who serves on the IEP team (Spiel et al., 2014). Parents are also part of the IEP team. The IEP team may hold meetings without parental or guardian attendance, but this practice is not an acceptable practice (Hartman, 2015; Spessard, 2016; Yell, Katsiyannis, Ennis & Losinski 2013). The special education case manager must document

attempts to secure parental participation (Spessard, 2016). Parents or legal guardians have legal rights to agree to or deny special education services (Spiel et al., 2014).

Upon approval of special education services, the student is provided an individualized education plan (IEP). An IEP is a legal document that addresses the individualized needs of a student with a learning disability (Hartmann, 2016; Lo, 2014). IDEA mandates the following IEP components:

- An assessment of the child's present level of performance (PLAPF);
- A list of measurable goals and objectives for the coming year;
- A schedule of when the child's progress toward meeting the annual goals will be measured and a specification of what assessments will be used to assess progress;
- A prescription of specially designed instruction and related services deemed necessary to meet the goals. (Musyoka & Clark, 2015, p. 6)

A transition plan is also included in the IEP for students 14 years and older. This information is reviewed annually and updated based on student academic or behavioral needs and/or performance (Speil et al., 2014). Determining educational placement is also addressed in the IEP (Yell et al., 2013). Students' individualized needs drive placement decisions as outlined in IDEIA. Hence, students receiving special educational services may continue to receive RtI interventions with a special education teacher in the regular, resource, or separate educational placement (Cooley, 2013).

Progress monitoring. Progress monitoring is a curriculum-based measurement system used to track and evaluate the progress of students at risk for academic difficulties (Bosch, Espin, Chung, & Saab, 2017). Progress monitoring is vital to the implementation of RtI (Saddler & Asaro-Saddler, 2013). Within the RtI framework, progress monitoring provides the regular

education and special education teachers with needed information concerning the students' actual rate of learning compared to their expected rate of learning. Progress monitoring should take place in Tier I after the universal screening indicates a student is at risk.

Teachers should monitor the student's progress once or twice per week for approximately 8 to 10 weeks (Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Otaiba et al., 2014). These data should be used to gauge the effectiveness of interventions and to adjust instructional strategies to meet the individualized needs of the student (Saddler et al., 2013). This information allows teachers to identify the performance patterns that may require re-teaching individual students. Additionally, teachers can also use the data in the progress monitoring process to determine if students at risk need more intense instruction, such as moving from Tier I to Tier II.

Universal screening. With increased attention given to educational reform, school districts are becoming more accountable for student achievement on district assessments and state-mandated tests (Lewis & Young, 2013; López, Huling, & Resta, 2013). Consequently, school districts are using the RtI framework to provide prevention-focused service delivery and universal screening to determine students' individualized needs before special education referral (Kettler, Glover, & Albers, 2015). Universal screening is defined as a process or measurement such as standardized assessments designed to identify students at risk for academic failure (Salinger, 2016). Universal screening should take place at least three times during the beginning, middle, and end of school year (National Center on RTI, 2013). As evidenced in the literature, universal screening measures are effective in the identification of students at risk for academic difficulties or learning disabilities (Salinger, 2016; VanDerHeyden, 2013).

Universal screening is also an essential component of the RtI framework and can be helpful when developing reports at the grade and building levels. Such reports include data that

compare school and student information to national grade-level norms (Kettler et al., 2015). By having access to these reports, teachers can determine if at-risk students are making progress with the interventions; thus, allowing teachers to meet the individualized instructional needs of student involved in the RtI process. Universal screening also allows teachers to compare skill levels of students with learning disabilities with their non-disabled peers (VanDerHeyden, Jimerson, & Burns, 2016).

Data-based decision making. Murphy (2016) defined data-based decision making as “a process of systematic collection and analysis of student performance data to make and implement instructional decisions for improved learning outcomes” (p. 21). Within the educational process, regular and special education teachers make instructional decisions at any given time. Data-based decision making is aimed at improving student achievement (Ball & Christ, 2012; Murphy, 2016). Hence, regular and special education teachers also should base their decisions on student learning through research-based assessments to enhance student achievement (López et al., 2013; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015). They can use this student performance data to develop their instructional practices, differentiate instruction, evaluate instruction effectiveness, and determine if students at risk should be referred to student support teams to receive interventions within the RtI framework (Kupzyk et al., 2012; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Murphy, 2016; Prasse et al., 2012). Data-based decision making is also critical to each level of the RtI implementation. SSTs make decisions with data from universal screening and progress monitoring to determine if students should or should not move within the RtI levels (Nellis, 2012). This information is also used to decide if special education referral is needed for at-risk students.

RtI Advantages

The RtI framework can offer potential benefits to school districts in that students at-risk are identified and provided with appropriate interventions based on their ability level as well as progress monitoring (Ball & Christ, 2012). Swanson et al. (2012) reported that special education teachers cited early identification and targeted services as RtI benefits. RtI also provides quality instruction based on struggling students' individualized needs (Werts et al., 2014). Chard (2012) stated the multitier approach of the RtI framework better meets the needs as well as improves the chances of school success for students at-risk. In addition, the RtI framework is a beneficial tool to use with students at risk for failure to assist with accountability measures and achievement gaps (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015).

Sansosti, Goss, and Noltemeyer (2011) reported a need for a change in roles and attitudes among teachers, parents, and community members for successful implementation of RtI. All participants discussed the need for teachers to take responsibility for student achievement. In addition, a barrier between general and special education teachers affected the participants' attitudes (Sansoti et al., 2011). Sansoti et al. (2011) concluded that teachers' perceptions and understanding of the RtI framework determined the success of RtI implementation.

Meester (2012) conducted a study about elementary teachers' perceptions of response to intervention. Each participant agreed to an interview, was observed, and completed a questionnaire. The data were used to learn about first and second-grade teachers' perceptions of the RtI framework. The teachers viewed RtI as beneficial to students, but noted concerns about budget cuts that limited staff support. Meester (2012) found teachers' perceptions did affect the implementation of RtI and student achievement.

Otaiba et al. (2014) conducted a study at 10 elementary schools with 34 first-grade classrooms to determine the effectiveness of typical and dynamic RtI frameworks. Typical RtI reviews student screening and provides interventions based on the Tier I. Dynamic RtI also reviews the student's initial screening results and provides interventions in Tier II or III. The researchers found that students who participated in dynamic RtI ended the study with higher reading levels than those who used typical RtI.

Collectively, Mellard, Frey, and Woods (2012) examined the implementation of RtI in five elementary schools using effect size analysis. One of the five schools started the school year with below-average skills, while the other four schools began the school year with above-average skills. This research revealed four schools with above average skills improved school-wide student gains in reading with the application of tier interventions. In addition, the school with below norm skills closed the reading performance gap with tier intervention.

Martinez and Young (2011) used a descriptive study to determine how school personnel implement and perceive the RtI process for early identification of students. The study was conducted in rural and urban schools in southeastern Texas. An online survey was used to ask school personnel about their opinions concerning the RtI process at their school. The data revealed that school personnel had positive opinions concerning the implementation of RtI. Results indicated that the RtI process was used by teachers before the school system mandated it. Additionally, the use of the RtI process, along with standardized assessment, is vital in determining if a student needs special education services.

RtI Disadvantages

School districts that use RtI have a desire to implement practices that will result in academic success for all students. Some researchers argue that the cost of RtI implementation is

inconsistent across school districts, such as funds needed for professional development (Castillo et al., 2012; Fuchs et al., 2012). Some researchers challenge the efficiency of the assessments (Hahn, 2013; Little & Box, 2012). Other researchers express concerns about SST member roles and responsibilities (Hazelkorn et al., 2011).

Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, and Moore (2014) studied 97 urban teachers' perceptions about RtI. The participants responded to a survey and open-ended questions to determine their knowledge and perceived barriers to RtI implementation. Castro-Villarreal et al. concluded that the majority of teachers had poor understanding of RtI and key concepts needed for implementation. Castro-Villarreal et al. found barriers such as lack of training in RtI interventions and progress monitoring. Time to plan lessons and the amount of paperwork needed for documentation were also barriers. Castro-Villarreal et al. concluded that the lack of preservice and in-service training was a hindrance to teacher understanding of RtI concepts. Bineham, Shelby, Pazey, and Yates (2014) also found that a lack of professional development training for general and special education teachers was a barrier to RtI implementation. Hernandez's (2012) study agreed that general education teachers lack training and need information to implement RtI with expertise.

Chard (2012) addressed the common features of RtI multitier model of delivery and a concern about time allotted for differentiation in the tiers. Many schools discussed in this article have a standardized amount of time for students to receive interventions within the tier system. At the end of this time, data from a universal screener and progress monitoring is reviewed to determine if the student is responsive to instruction and interventions at the highest tier. If the student fails to make expected progress, he or she will be referred for special education services. This method gives all students the same amount of time to make expected progress instead of

being responsive to their individualized needs. In addition, Chard (2012) discussed other barriers to RtI such as colleague resistance and financial limitations.

Swanson et al. (2012) examined Grade 3 through 5 special education teachers' perceptions of RtI in their school district. The teachers participated in focus groups and interviews. Swanson et al. found that special education teachers felt unable to complete RtI documentation throughout the school day, because it added additional paperwork to their student caseload. Hence, special education teachers viewed RtI documentation as a barrier. Special education teachers also identified an increase in students and need for additional staff as challenges to RtI implementation.

Regan et al. (2015) found that general education teachers also identified scheduling time to complete RtI documentation as a challenge. The general education teachers felt they did not have enough time to complete needed intervention and teach core instruction (Regan et al., 2015). Wilcox, Murakami-Ramalho, and Urick (2013) reported a need for professional development in their investigation of teachers' perspectives of the RtI framework and implementation in schools located in Michigan and Texas. Wilcox et al. (2013) also found a need to collaborate on instructional strategies.

Some researchers question if faster services given by RtI while withholding special education services may limit student achievement (Acherd, 2015). Feifer (2008) noted that RtI was difficult to implement across grade levels. Feifer (2008) also criticized the lack of evidence-based instruction and time guidelines needed at each tier. Browns and Doolittle (2008) also expressed concerns that RtI policies ignore cultural differences.

Student Support Team Facilitators

SSTs usually consist of the school administrators, SST facilitators, school psychologists, regular education teachers, special education teachers, literacy/reading specialist, speech-language therapist, guardian counselors, and parents (Brendle, 2015; Rhodes, 2014; Walls, 2005; Zins, Graden, & Ponti, 1989). Each member has an integral role in RtI implementation. SST facilitators also known as SST chairpersons or RtI coordinators, play a pivotal role in RtI implementation and maintenance. Each school district has at least one designated SST facilitator (Procedures and Guidelines for the Moore County Student Support Team manual, 2012). This position may be assigned to a school on a full-time basis with no additional duties. A SST facilitator with a part-time assignment is assigned additional duties. For example, a school psychologist may also be a part-time SST facilitators based on their knowledge of special education referral. This position also fills a variety roles that vary significantly based on student population, organizational frameworks, and educational leadership expectation. Based on Moore County procedures and guidelines for the student support team (2012), job duties are as follows:

- Ensures procedural safeguards are maintained.
- Reviews and accepts initial referrals, establishes and maintains individual files.
- Establishes and maintains case logs necessary to meet timelines/respond to any administrative tasking.
- Assists teachers and parents in understanding and participating in the intervention process
- Schedules all meetings, develops meeting agendas, and ensures all necessary timelines are met and appropriate individuals are invited or notified in a timely manner

- Develops team processes such as team notification of meetings, notification of needed attendance to members not routinely in attendance, etc.
- Delegates data gathering or data management functions or tasks, such as recorder, observations or screenings, completion of social/health histories, etc., while ensuring that such tasks are shared equally and no one SST member is too heavily burdened
Intervention is a team effort, requiring collaboration, communication, and effort from all those involved
- Serves as the facilitator to guide the problem solving and decision-making process during meetings, ensuring that data needed for decision-making is presented during meetings so that discussion does not stray from the task
- Ensures that SST documentation, whether action is pending, started, or completed, follows a student to the receiving school if a child transfers to another school
- Ensures that information forwarded to other school-based committees for action (IEP or 504 teams) is valid, reliable, accurate, and complete
- Ensures that cumulative records, the PEP and/or SST intervention documents and other critical educational documents are annotated and maintained relative to SST actions
- Surveys staff as to the effectiveness of SST actions
- Participates in school-based SST Annual Reviews (pp. 9–10)

Educational reform policies, such as NCLB and IDEIA, have changed the role of all teachers in the classroom environment. This legislation also emphasizes the unification of general and special education. Consequently, school districts depend on general and special education teachers to not only instruct, but also motivate students to develop their ability and

aspiration to learn. All teachers must also ensure their students are making adequate progress on district assessments and state-mandated tests. Hence, traditional educational practices are no longer effective, as students have different ability levels and learning styles. Teachers are now facilitators and must use evidence-based practices to address students' individualized needs (Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, & Konrad, 2014).

Because of NCLB and IDEIA, RtI has emerged as a framework to improve student achievement. NCLB and IDEIA emphasize the unification of general and special education. The RtI framework is a general education initiative that reflects the concepts of special education. Under RtI, general education teachers must assess student needs, identify targeted goals, and monitor progress. In addition, general education teachers collaborate with SSTs to determine needed RtI interventions as well as referrals for special education placement.

Special education teachers also have a role in the RtI framework. Special education teachers with vast experience differentiating instruction, assessment knowledge, and providing individualized interventions are positioned to assist with the implementation of the RtI framework. In addition, special education teachers can provide support for general education teachers. In Tier 2, special education teachers facilitate small-group instruction for at-risk students and collaborate with SSTs to determine special education eligibility for at-risk students.

Professional Development and Teacher Preparation for RtI

Providing high-quality professional development for general and special education teachers is imperative in making effective research-based educational practices, including RtI (Fishman et al., 2013; Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012). The RtI framework proposes changes in assessments, supporting students based on their individualized needs, and collaboration among school faculty that is different from traditional educational practices (Fuchs

et al., 2006; Fuchs et al., 2012; Isbell et al., 2015; Preston et al., 2016). This educational practice shift has implications for teacher preparation and need for on-going professional development (Spear-Swerling et al., 2012). Educational leaders therefore are tasked to implement professional development training to provide teachers with research-based strategies that allow them to close the learning gaps (Avido-Ungar, 2016). Burns et al. (2013) reported that school-based personnel, such as teachers should be involved in training that includes excellent RtI models, research-based interventions, and resources. Burns et al. also stressed the importance of professional learning communities (PLCs) that allow teachers to collaborate to improve educational practices to enhance student performance.

Spear-Swerling and Cheesman (2012) conducted a study with 142 elementary teachers to examine their knowledge of the RtI framework in reading. Each participant was given a questionnaire to determine teaching background and familiarity of the RtI framework including assessments, instructional models, and interventions. Many of these, participants had a familiarity of basic RtI features. These participants however were unfamiliar with instructional models and interventions. Findings from this study also suggested that professional development is critical to the effective implementation of RtI. Dulaney's (2012) study examined RtI implementation intervention efforts. This study revealed the importance of professional development to prepare teachers for RtI implementation.

Teacher Perceptions of SSTs and RtI

There is limited research on teachers' perceptions of student support systems such as SSTs and RtI despite the implementation at schools across the United States. Lee-Tarver (2006) conducted a study to identify elementary teachers' perceptions of Student Support Team function and purpose. This study examined teachers' training, participation, and relationship between the

SST function and special educational services. Parental and school administration support data was also included in this study. The findings revealed teachers received training after being selected to serve on teams. Findings also indicated that only teachers that referred students were involved in the SST process. In addition, the majority of teachers did not believe a referral to SST was cause for a special education evaluation. This study also revealed the need for teacher training within the SST process.

Bailey (2010) conducted a study on SSTs and RtI based on the research conducted by Lee-Tarver (2006). A survey created by Bailey and Lee-Tarver was administered to teachers in Georgia. Bailey examined teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with SST and RtI, adequacy of training, qualifications to implement, effectiveness of SST and RtI, eligibility requirements for special education, weaknesses of the framework, and reasons for non-referral. Study results indicated that teachers used SSTs to avoid the over-representation of minority students identified as having disabilities. In addition, teachers learned to use RtI to help struggling students.

Tolbert (2012) investigated teachers' perceptions of SST and RtI in Grades K–12 in a school system in northwest Georgia. Tolbert used the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey with participants and focused on grade level taught (preschool, elementary, middle, and high school) and whether differences existed in teacher perceptions of familiarity with SST and RtI, adequacy of professional development, effectiveness of SST and RtI, and the perceived relationship between SST, RtI, and special education. Results indicated a significant difference existed between teachers' perceptions of SST and RtI based on grade level taught. Elementary teachers did not feel as adequately trained as middle and high school teachers. Tolbert also noted major differences in teachers' perceptions of the RtI model and adequacy of professional development. Many studies related to teacher perceptions focus on RtI implementation (Prasse et al., 2012),

problem-solving teams to assist teachers in decision making (Newton et al., 2012), and prereferral teams to assist with struggling students (Yetter, 2010). Although these factors are important, literature is limited concerning SSTs.

The implementation of RtI has changed the role and responsibilities of teachers (Barrera & Bryant, 2009). Teachers play an important role in the educational initiatives, but their perceptions are seldom considered when discussing the impact of educational framework (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Teacher perceptions, however, are influential in the success or failure of program implementation (Brendle, 2015; Nellis, 2012). Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, and Cardarelli (2010) found that teachers view the RtI reform method in a positive manner as a method to use instructional planning and progress monitoring to measure instruction. Teachers, however, had concerns about RtI implementation. Further supporting this viewpoint, Griggs (2013) found that a lack of teacher involvement affected RtI implementation. It is important for school leadership to listen to teachers' perceptions of SSTs and RtI to ensure successful implementation (Castro et al., 2014; Coonce, 2015; Donnell, 2015; Werts et al., 2014).

Summary

Mandated by NCLB and IDEA legislation, school districts across the United States are tasked to provide a high-quality education for all students. SSTs are supporting both general and special education teachers with RtI frameworks to assist all students at risk for failure. General and special education teachers' perceptions are dependent on their prior knowledge and experiences in the school environment (Kakascik, 2013). Teachers' perceptions of student support systems will affect their adeptness to try interventions and offer referrals for specialized instruction. Teachers, however, must be willing to do whatever is necessary to ensure student success in the classroom. Teachers' perceptions, therefore, are also essential to the future RtI

implementation. It must be also kept in mind that literature is clear concerning the implementation of student support systems at the middle school grade levels.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Chapter Three begins with a description of the methodology and design used for this study. The researcher sought to investigate teachers' perceptions of student support system frameworks in a rural school district in a Mid-Atlantic state with a full-time or part-time student support facilitator. A description of the instrument, setting of the study, procedures used to conduct the study, and data analysis plan are presented in this chapter.

Design

This causal-comparative study investigated the effect of full-time or part-time student support facilitators on teachers' perceptions of student support systems in 11 middle schools in two rural school districts in a Mid-Atlantic state. This research design was selected because the researcher wished to compare two educational phenomena: the presence of either a full-time or part-time student support facilitator and teachers' perceptions of student support systems. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) defined causal comparative research as a "type of non-experimental investigation in which researchers seek to identify cause-and-effect relationships by forming groups of individuals in whom the independent variable is present or absent" (p. 306). The independent variable was the presence of either a full-time or a part-time student support facilitator. The dependent variables were teacher perceptions on four scales of the Bailey/Tarver SST/RtI Survey.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ2: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of training to implement student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ3: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ4: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the relationship between different student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

Null Hypotheses

H₀1: There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators.

H₀2: There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of training to implement student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators.

H₀3: There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators.

H₀4: There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of the relationship between different student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators.

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study were a convenience sample of certified general and special education teachers located in 15 rural middle schools in five rural school districts in a Mid-Atlantic state during the 2017–2018 school year. The population of middle school teachers was 422 general education teachers and 70 special education teachers. Below is a description of the five school districts.

School District A has 15 elementary schools, four middle schools, four high schools, one early college, and one alternative school. The total student population is 13,141 students, taught by 828 teachers. The four middle schools have an enrollment of 3,087 students taught by 135 certified general education and 16 special education teachers. The ethnic breakdown of the district's students includes 62% Caucasian, 19% African-American, 12% Hispanic, < 1% Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American, and 5% multiracial. Most students (99%) attending School District A are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. Currently, this school district has many students that are living in homes with income below the poverty level with average incomes of \$21,000, while the remaining students live in homes with an average income of \$40,000.

School District B has one pre-k school, one middle school, and one high school. The school district employs 156 teachers and serves 2,186 students. The middle school has an enrollment of 600 students taught by 32 certified general education and 6 special education teachers. The ethnic breakdown of students in the district includes 27% Caucasian, 60% African-American, 9% Hispanic, 1% Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American, and 4% multiracial. Most students (83%) attending School District B are eligible for the free and

reduced lunch program and live in homes with a median income of \$33,682. The average household income for other students attending School District B is \$45,394.

School District C is composed of two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The total student population is 1,864 students taught by 144 teachers. The single middle school has an enrollment of 540 students taught by 28 certified general education and 6 special education teachers. The ethnic breakdown of the district's students includes 42% Caucasian, 36% African-American, 9% Hispanic, 9% Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American, and 4% multiracial. Only 10% of students are eligible for free lunch, while 14% is eligible for reduced lunch. Although located in a rural county, the median salary is \$54,000, with many students living in middle class homes.

School District D has 18 elementary schools, 7 middle schools, 8 high schools, and 2 alternative schools. The district's enrollment is 22,651, who are taught by 990 teachers. The seven middle schools enroll 6,977 students taught by 177 certified general education and 32 special education teachers. The ethnic breakdown of the district's students includes 87% Caucasian, 9% African-American, 2% Hispanic, 1% Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American, and 1% multiracial. Fewer than half of students (46%) attending School District D are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program and live in homes with a median income of \$44,469.

School District E has 6 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and 2 high schools. The district's enrollment of 4,354 students is taught by 294 teachers. The enrollment at the two middle schools is 970. The middle school students are taught by 50 certified general education and 10 special education teachers. The ethnic breakdown of the district's students includes 37% Caucasian, 23% African-American, 23% Hispanic, 15% Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native

American, and 2% multiracial. More than half of students (54%) in School District E are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program and live in homes with a median income of \$34,819.

Instrumentation

The instrument for this research study is the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey (Appendix B). Permission to use and modify this survey was obtained from Bailey (Appendix C). The purpose of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey is to determine teachers' perceptions of SSTs and RtI. This survey was developed by Bailey to replicate previous research conducted by Lee-Tarver (2006) and Rankin and Aksamit (1994). The researchers used a questionnaire to obtain data on teachers' perceptions of SST and RtI framework surrounding the perceived weaknesses of SST/RtI implementation in Georgia's school districts (Bailey, 2010). The instrument contains 21 items about teachers' perceptions and uses a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The researcher calculated a mean that describes the teachers' perceptions, ranging from lower to greater agreement. A mean score of 3 was considered a neutral stance of *no opinion*. The Tarver SST/RtI and the modified Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI surveys have been used in other studies (Bailey, 2010; Hernandez, 2012; Lee-Tarver, 2006; Rankin & Aksamit, 1994; Rhodes, 2014; Tolbert, 2012). The items that make up each scale are presented in Table 1.

Bailey (2010) used a field test at two elementary schools to certify the validity of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey questions. A team of 13 career teachers was chosen to both proofread and answer questionnaire items for both errors and clarity (Bailey, 2010). The career teachers had experience with SSTs and RtI. A Cronbach's alpha test yielded a reliability value of .81; thus, the questionnaire was deemed reliable (Bailey, 2010; Ikeda, 2012).

Table 1

Items in Each Scale of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey

Scale	Item
Familiarity with student support systems	
	1. I am familiar with the tiered intervention model that provides more intensive interventions for students based on responses to previous interventions (RtI).
	5. I understand the purpose and operation of Student Support Team (SST).
	6. I consider the paperwork and documentation required for the Student Support Team as part of my intervention on behalf of the student.
	20. The Response to Intervention (RtI) framework prolongs the Student Support Team process unnecessarily
Adequacy of training to implement student support systems	
	2. I received adequate training prior to serving on the Student Support Team.
	3. I received adequate training prior to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI)
	11. It is my responsibility to provide the interventions for students in SST.
	12. It should be the responsibility of others to provide the interventions and document the Response to Interventions (RtI).
Effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students	
	7. I remain actively involved in the SST process when I refer a struggling student.
	8. Research-based interventions and progress monitoring are common classroom practices for struggling learners in the general education setting.
	9. Careful attention to paperwork and documentation are critical parts of the intervention process.
	10. The SST meetings are useful to me as I seek to help the student.
	13. The SST meeting is vital for bringing parental input into the intervention plan.
	14. The SST meeting should produce ideas for research-based interventions for struggling learners.
	15. My input at SST meetings is both valued and desired.
	16. Most general education teachers are supportive of the SST process and the RtI framework.
	21. I am supportive of the SST process and the RtI framework and believe it to be effective for helping struggling students.
Relationship between different student support systems	
	4. I understand the basic eligibility criteria for special education.
	17. The SST'S primary purpose is to move students toward special education.
	18. When I refer a student to SST, I expect that he/she will be evaluated for special education.
	19. The SST is valuable for monitoring the transition from Special Education back to the general education classroom.

Barge (2012) conducted a study to examine the impact of teacher empowerment on RtI implementation. The researcher used the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey to conduct interviews with six general education teachers. The data from the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey were used to make a comparison between teachers in School A and School B. Study data supported the

researcher's hypothesis that teacher empowerment improves RtI implementation as well as student achievement (Barge, 2012).

Rhodes (2014) used the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey to investigate how teachers' perceptions of RtI and teacher support teams affect implementation at elementary schools located in a Mississippi Gulf Coast school district. The participants included 83 elementary general and special education teachers. The results of the data analysis of the survey responses suggested that teachers perceived RtI and teacher support teams as effective in their school district (Rhodes, 2014). Hernandez (2012) also used the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey to obtain data for analysis of kindergarten through 8th-grade teachers' perceptions of the RtI model effectiveness. Tolbert (2012) used the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey to examine teachers' perceptions of RtI at the secondary school level.

Procedures

The researcher submitted an application to the university's institutional review board for permission to complete the study. Permission was granted to use Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey for this research study. After permission to conduct the study was granted by the university, the researcher met with the superintendents of the Mid-Atlantic school districts and sought permission to conduct research at the middle schools. After receiving approval from the superintendents, the researcher sent an email invitation (Appendix D) explaining the study and a link to the web-based Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey to almost 500 ($n = 492$) general education and special education teachers. Although the original version of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey was administered by paper and pencil, the researcher used a web-based version of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey created on Survey Monkey. The questionnaire, with a consent form (Appendix E) was sent to participants via e-mail. The researcher included directions for

completion, as well as definitions of specialized student support systems terminology used in the school districts. Participants were instructed to select the link and respond to survey. The data were immediately posted to a spreadsheet at the Survey Monkey online server. Reminder emails were sent to teachers 4, 8, and 12 days after the initial email invitation.

After all attempts were made to receive responses from the teachers, the data were downloaded and saved on a password-protected computer. No URLs or other identifying information was saved with the responses. The data were also printed and placed in locked file cabinet with other documents related to the study.

Data Analysis

Data from the respondents were downloaded from the online server and imported into SPSS (v. 25) for analysis. Reliability of the instrument's scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the sample using the participants' responses to the demographic questions. Means and standard deviations were used to describe the participants' responses to each item on the Bailey-Tarver SST/RTI Survey. Tables were used to present the results by type of support facilitator.

The analysis of differences in teachers' perceptions on the four scales was evaluated using an alpha of .05. The researcher conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to determine if there were statistically significant differences in teachers' perceptions of student support systems when working with either a full-time or part-time support facilitator. The independent variable was a type of support facilitator (full-time or part-time). The dependent variables were the teachers' responses to items on the four scales of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RTI Survey. Assumptions of the MANOVA were tested before the analysis was completed. All assumptions were met.

Instead of using four *t* tests to assess the differences between the independent variable (type of support facilitator) on four separate dependent variables, a MANOVA was selected. The MANOVA statistical procedure provides greater statistical power by limiting the joint error rate, which can increase the chance of rejecting a true null hypothesis if separate tests are conducted for each dependent variable. In addition, the relationship between the dependent variables is better assessed using a multivariate analysis of variance than with separate tests of the dependent variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

A G*Power (v.3.1.9.2) analysis determined that conducting a MANOVA with two groups and four dependent variables requires 98 participants in each group to achieve a desired power of .80, using an effect size of .50 at the .05 alpha level. However, after four emails were sent to the teachers to solicit their participation in the study, only 111 teachers replied. A discussion of the implications of the small response rate is in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This study investigated the effect full-time or part-time student support facilitators had on teachers' perceptions of student support systems frameworks in the middle schools of a rural Mid-Atlantic state. The population included general and special education teachers. This chapter contains a description of the data and the results of the analysis of the research questions.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ2: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of training to implement student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ3: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ4: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the relationship between different student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

Null Hypotheses

H₀1: There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators.

H₀2: There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of training to implement student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators.

H₀3: There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators.

H₀4: There is no statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of the relationship between different student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators.

Descriptive Statistics

Email invitations were sent to approximately 500 teachers in five school districts. More than 100 ($n = 111$) teachers clicked on the link to the survey. However, only 70 teachers provided enough responses to be included in the analysis. Twenty-three teachers indicated that their school had a designated full-time contact whose sole responsibility was to facilitate SST and/or RtI frameworks. The remaining 47 teachers reported that their school had a part-time contact for SST and/or RtI, who also has numerous other assigned duties. Seventy teachers constituted the two groups—teachers with full-time contacts ($n = 23$) and teachers with part-time contacts ($n = 47$).

Demographic Description of the Sample

Table 2 contains a description of the sample. Teachers with a full-time contact ($n = 23$) were more experienced (61% had more than 12 years), more educated (52% held postgraduate degrees), and taught in general education classrooms (91%). The group that reported a part-time contact ($n = 47$) were less experienced (50% had fewer than 12 years of experience), had fewer

postgraduate degrees (55% held bachelor's degree), and included fewer general education teachers (81%).

Table 2

Demographic Description of the Sample

Characteristic	Teachers with designated full-time contact (<i>n</i> = 23)		Teachers with part-time contact (<i>n</i> = 47)		All teachers (<i>n</i> = 70)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Years of teaching experience						
0–5	2	8.7	14	29.8	16	22.9
6–12	7	30.4	9	19.1	16	22.9
13–19	6	26.1	14	29.8	20	28.6
20 or more	8	34.8	10	21.3	18	25.7
Highest earned degree						
BA	11	47.8	26	55.3	37	52.9
MA	8	34.8	20	42.6	28	40.0
Specialist	4	17.4	1	2.1	5	7.1
Type of teacher						
General education	21	91.3	38	80.9	59	84.3
Special education	2	8.7	9	19.1	11	15.7

Item Analysis of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey

The instrument used in the study contains 21 items and used a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The researcher calculated a mean that described the teachers' perceptions, ranging from lower to greater agreement. A mean score of 3 was considered a neutral stance of *no opinion*. Four scales were created from the 21 items. These four scale scores were the dependent variables (response variables) used in the analysis of the research questions. Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 contain the means and standard deviations of each item in the instrument by the type of contact the teachers reported in their schools.

Familiarity with student support systems. The two groups of teachers were similar in agreement that they were familiar with the tiered intervention model (See Table 3). The teachers

were also similar in their responses of *no opinion* to *agree* that they considered paperwork and documentation a part of the SST process and that they understood the purpose and operation of the SST. Teachers with a part-time contact were more likely to disagree ($M = 2.91$) the RtI framework prolongs the SST process unnecessarily than did teachers with a full-time contact, who were more likely to have had no opinion ($M = 3.22$).

Table 3

Teachers' Responses to Items on the Familiarity with Student Support Systems Scale

Item	Teachers with designated full-time contact ($n = 23$)		Teachers with part-time contact ($n = 47$)		All teachers ($n = 70$)	
	M^*	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1. I am familiar with the tiered intervention model that provides more intensive interventions for students based on responses to previous interventions (RtI).	4.00	0.60	4.02	0.77	4.01	0.71
5. I understand the purpose and operation of Student Support Team (SST).	3.82	0.85	3.91	0.83	3.88	0.83
6. I consider the paperwork and documentation required for the Student Support Team as part of my intervention on behalf of the student.	3.65	0.83	3.67	0.94	3.67	0.90
20. The Response to Intervention (RtI) framework prolongs the Student Support Team process unnecessarily	3.22	0.95	2.91	0.88	3.01	0.91

* Means range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) through 3 (*no opinion*) to 5 (*strongly agree*)

Adequacy of training to implement student support systems. Teachers with a part-time contact (See Table 4) were more likely to disagree that they received adequate training prior to serving on the SSTs ($M = 2.79$) or implementing RtI ($M = 2.81$) than did teachers with a full-time contact ($M = 3.65$ and 3.74 , respectively). Both groups of teachers were more likely to have

had no opinion or agree ($M \sim 3.80$) that it is their responsibility to provide the RtI interventions for students. Although both groups' means were in the no opinion range, those with full-time contacts were more likely to agree ($M = 3.70$) that it should be the responsibility of others to provide interventions and document the RtI process than were teachers with a part-time contact ($M = 3.11$), who tended toward disagreement.

Table 4

Teachers' Responses to Items on the Adequacy of Training to Implement Student Support Systems

Item	Teachers with designated full-time contact ($n = 23$)		Teachers with part-time contact ($n = 47$)		All teachers ($n = 70$)	
	M^*	SD	M	SD	M	SD
2. I received adequate training prior to serving on the Student Support Team.	3.65	0.89	2.79	0.91	3.07	0.98
3. I received adequate training prior to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI)	3.74	0.75	2.81	0.97	3.11	1.00
11. It is my responsibility to provide the interventions for students in SST.	3.78	0.60	3.81	0.85	3.80	0.77
12. It should be the responsibility of others to provide the interventions and document the Response to Interventions (RtI).	3.70	0.93	3.11	0.98	3.30	1.00

* Means range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) through 3 (*no opinion*) to 5 (*strongly agree*)

Effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students. Teachers in both groups were similar in their levels of agreement on the nine items that made up this scale (See Table 5). Both groups agreed that research-based interventions and progress monitoring are common classroom practices, that attention to paperwork and documentation are critical parts of the intervention process, and the SST meeting should produce research-based interventions for

Table 5

Teachers' Responses to Items on the Effectiveness of Student Support Systems for Struggling Students Scale

Item	Teachers with designated full-time contact (<i>n</i> = 23)		Teachers with part-time contact (<i>n</i> = 47)		All teachers (<i>n</i> = 70)	
	<i>M</i> *	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
7. I remain actively involved in the SST process when I refer a struggling student.	3.70	0.97	3.36	1.03	3.47	1.02
8. Research-based interventions and progress monitoring are common classroom practices for struggling learners in the general education setting.	4.00	0.80	3.96	0.78	3.97	0.78
9. Careful attention to paperwork and documentation are critical parts of the intervention process.	4.04	0.56	4.11	0.76	4.09	0.70
10. The SST meetings are useful to me as I seek to help the student.	3.61	0.94	3.34	1.11	3.43	1.06
13. The SST meeting is vital for bringing parental input into the intervention plan.	3.96	0.64	3.51	1.02	3.66	0.93
14. The SST meeting should produce ideas for research-based interventions for struggling learners.	4.09	0.52	4.06	0.79	4.07	0.71
15. My input at SST meetings is both valued and desired.	3.74	0.75	3.40	1.01	3.51	0.94
16. Most general education teachers are supportive of the SST process and the RtI framework.	3.52	0.73	3.28	0.99	3.36	0.92
21. I am supportive of the SST process and the RtI framework and believe it to be effective for helping struggling students.	3.70	0.88	3.59	0.72	3.62	0.77

* Means range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) through 3 (*no opinion*) to 5 (*strongly agree*)

struggling learners. Teachers in both groups were similar in their no opinion that they remain actively involved in the SST process, the SST meetings are useful to them, that their input is valued and desired at SST meetings, that most general education teachers are supportive of the SST process, and that they personally believe the SST/RtI framework is effective. Those teachers who had a full-time contact in their school were more likely to agree ($M = 3.96$) that parent input is vital at SST meeting than teachers with a part-time contact ($M = 3.51$).

Relationship between different student support systems. The teachers were similar in their level of agreement (*no opinion*) that they understood basic eligibility criteria for special education and that SST is valuable for monitoring the transition from special education back to the general classroom (See Table 6). They were in less agreement about the primary purpose of the SST process. Teachers with a part-time contact in their buildings were more likely to disagree that the purpose of SST is to move students toward special education ($M = 2.53$) or that students referred to SST would be evaluated for special education ($M = 2.94$) than were teachers with a full-time contact in their buildings ($M = 3.13$ and 3.48 , respectively).

Table 6

Teachers' Responses to Items on the Relationship Between Different Student Support Systems Scale

Item	Teachers with designated full-time contact (n = 23)		Teachers with part-time contact (n = 47)		All teachers (n = 70)	
	M*	SD	M	SD	M	SD
4. I understand the basic eligibility criteria for special education.	3.70	0.97	3.94	0.90	3.86	0.92
17. The SST's primary purpose is to move students toward special education.	3.13	1.18	2.53	1.06	2.73	1.13
18. When I refer a student to SST, I expect that he/she will be evaluated for special education.	3.48	0.90	2.94	0.92	3.11	0.94
19. The SST is valuable for monitoring the transition from Special Education back to the general education classroom.	3.48	0.79	3.28	0.95	3.34	0.90

* Means range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) through 3 (*no opinion*) to 5 (*strongly agree*)

Modifications to Increase Effectiveness of Student Support Teams

Table 7 contains the frequency and percentage of teachers in each group who indicated modifications to increase the effectiveness of the SST/RtI framework. Teachers in schools with full-time contacts requested more time to meet (52%) and in-service for intervention strategies (39%). Teachers in schools with a part-time contact asked for in-service for intervention strategies (53%), trained facilitators (49%), and less paperwork (38%).

Table 7

Modifications Requested by Teachers to Increase Effectiveness of the SST Process

Modification	Teachers with designated full-time contact (<i>n</i> = 23)		Teachers with part-time contact (<i>n</i> = 47)		All teachers (<i>n</i> = 70)	
	<i>n</i> *	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
More time to meet	12	52.2	10	21.3	22	31.4
Less paperwork	6	26.1	18	38.3	24	34.3
Accelerated process	3	13.0	12	25.5	15	21.4
SST/RtI staff in-service	5	21.7	13	27.7	18	25.7
In-service for intervention strategies	9	39.1	25	53.2	34	48.6
More input from specialists	6	26.1	8	17.0	14	20.0
Trained facilitators of the process	3	13.0	23	48.8	26	37.1
Better team communication	6	26.1	11	23.4	17	24.3
Observations of the learner by others	4	17.4	5	10.6	9	12.9

* Multiple responses possible

Referral of Student to SST/RtI in Past Three Months

More teachers (22%) in schools with a designated contact person referred students to SST/RtI in the past 3 months than did teachers (17%) in schools with a part-time contact (See Table 8). Those who indicated that they had not referred a student to SST/RtI in the past 3 months were asked to indicate why they had not done so (See Table 9). The top three reasons both groups of teachers indicated were (a) no students experienced problems, (b) they (the teachers) had been able to deal with concerns, and (c) the problem with student was not serious enough.

Table 8

Number of Teachers Referring Students to SST/RtI in Past Three Months

Referral	Teachers with designated full-time contact (<i>n</i> = 23)		Teachers with part-time contact (<i>n</i> = 47)		All teachers (<i>n</i> = 70)	
	<i>n</i> *	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	5	21.7	8	17.0	13	18.6
No	18	78.3	39	83.0	57	81.4

Table 9

Why Teachers Did Not Refer Students to SST/RtI in Past Three Months

Reason	Teachers with designated full-time contact (<i>n</i> = 23)		Teachers with part-time contact (<i>n</i> = 47)		All teachers (<i>n</i> = 57)	
	<i>n</i> *	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
No students experiencing problems	6	33.3	12	30.8	18	31.6
Have been able to deal with concerns	6	33.3	17	43.6	23	40.4
Do not know enough about process	3	16.7	8	20.5	11	19.3
Not aware of how/when to facilitate	2	11.1	9	23.1	11	19.3
Process is too time consuming	2	11.1	4	10.3	6	10.5
Results may negatively affect expectations for students	0	0.0	2	5.1	2	3.5
Problem is not serious enough	5	27.8	11	28.2	16	28.1
SST/RtI often produces little improvement	2	11.1	6	15.4	8	14.0

* Multiple responses possible

Reliability of Scales

Cronbach's alpha values were calculated for the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey's four scales (See Table 10). Also included in the table is the reliability value for the entire instrument.

Bailey (2010) found a reliability value of .81 for the 21 items. The 21 items in this sample obtained an alpha of .87. Bailey did not report the reliability values of the four scales she created from the 21 items. In this study's sample, two of the four scales obtained acceptable to good reliability values of .70 or above. However, the reliability of two scales was unacceptable (< .50).

Table 10

Reliability of Scales

Scale	# of items	Cronbach's alpha
Familiarity with student support systems	4	.36*
Adequacy of training to implement student support systems	4	.70
Effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students	9	.86
Relationship between different student support systems	4	.43‡
Total survey	21	.87

* Remove Item 20 and alpha increases to .61 (reversing item does not increase reliability)

‡ Remove Item 4 and alpha increases to .49

Analysis of Research Questions

The researcher conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to determine if there were statistically significant differences in teachers' perceptions of student support systems on four scales of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey when working with either a full-time or part-time support facilitator. Four assumptions of the MANOVA were tested before the analysis was completed: (a) absence of multivariate outliers, (b) linearity, (c) absence of multicollinearity, and (d) equality of covariance matrices.

Mahalanobis Distance was used to detect multivariate outliers. No participant had a Mahalanobis Distance value greater than the χ^2 critical value of 18.47. Equality of covariance matrices is an assumption checked using Box's *M*. The value obtained was not significant ($M =$

4.16, $p = .95$). The dependent variables were not highly correlated ($r > .80$), indicating a lack of multicollinearity (See Table 11). Linearity assumes that all the dependent variables are linearly related to each other. This was checked by conducting a scatterplot matrix between the dependent variables for each group (See Figure 1). The scatterplots show approximately linear relationships.

Table 11

Correlation of Dependent Variables

	Adequacy of training to implement student support systems	Effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students	Relationship between different student support systems
Familiarity with student support systems	.508	.535	.237
Adequacy of training to implement student support systems		.685	.382
Effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students			.384

Four research questions were analyzed:

RQ1: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ2: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of training to implement student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

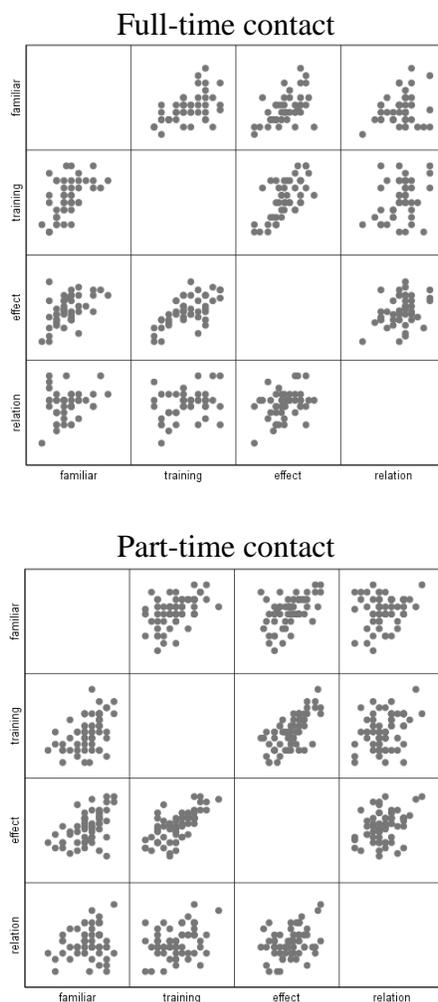


Figure 1. Scatterplots showing linearity among dependent variables by group.

Note: Familiar = Familiarity with student support systems;
 Training = Adequacy of training to implement student support systems;
 Effect = Effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students;
 Relation = Relationship between different student support systems

RQ3: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ4: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the relationship between different student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

A MANOVA was conducted using the means and standard deviations of the four scales of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey (See Table 12). The independent variable was a type of support facilitator (full-time or part-time). The dependent variables were the teachers' perceptions of the four scales of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey. A significant multivariate difference was found between the two groups, $F_{(4, 65)} = 4.96, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .234$.

Table 12

Means and Standard Deviations of the Dependent Variables

Variable	Teachers with designated full-time contact ($n = 23$)		Teachers with part-time contact ($n = 47$)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
RQ1. Familiarity with student support systems	3.66	0.48	3.63	0.49
RQ2. Adequacy of training to implement student support systems	3.71	0.58	3.13	0.64
RQ3. Effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students	3.82	0.55	3.62	0.89
RQ4. Relationship between different student support systems	3.45	0.61	3.26	0.60

The tests of between-subjects effects found a significant difference in the adequacy of training to implement student support systems (RQ2: See Table 13). Teachers in schools with a full-time contact were more likely to agree ($M = 3.71, SD = .58$) about the adequacy of their training than were teachers who had a part-time contact ($M = 3.13, SD = .64$). Therefore, the null hypothesis for Research Question 2 was rejected. There was a statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of training to implement student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators, $F_{(1, 68)} = 13.77, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .168$. The null hypotheses for Research Questions 1, 3, and 4 were not rejected. There were no significant differences in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with

student support systems (RQ1), teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students (RQ3), and teachers' perceptions of the relationship between different student support systems (RQ4).

Table 13

Between-Subjects Differences of the Dependent Variables

Dependent variable	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	<i>Observed power</i>
RQ1. Familiarity with student support systems	0.07	.80	.001	.057
RQ2. Adequacy of training to implement student support systems	13.77	< .01	.168	.955
RQ3. Effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students	1.73	.19	.025	.254
RQ4. Relationship between different student support systems	3.41	.07	.048	.444

Partial eta squared is often cited in educational research as a measure of effect size. A partial eta squared value of .168 (See Table 13) is considered a large effect size (Richardson, 2010). An additional calculation was made to determine Cohen's *d* effect size. The obtained value ($d = .95$) is considered a large effect size (Cohen, 1992). Although the survey response rate was lower than anticipated and the resultant sample size ($n = 70$) was substantially smaller than that proposed in the power analysis described in Chapter Three, the analysis found a significant difference between the two groups of teachers on one of the dependent variables.

Summary

Responses from 70 teachers were used to analyze four research questions. The results of the MANOVA found a statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of training to implement student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators. Teachers in schools with a full-time contact were more likely to agree about the adequacy of their training than were teachers who had a part-time

contact. No other differences were found in the SST/RtI perceptions of the two groups of middle school teachers. A discussion of the results, implications of the findings, and recommendations for practice and future research are in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of student support system frameworks, such as response to intervention (RtI) and student support teams (SSTs) in a rural school district in a Mid-Atlantic state with a full-time or part-time student support facilitator. This chapter contains a discussion of the results of the study, implications to be considered, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This causal-comparative study was to determine the effect of full-time or part-time student support facilitators on teachers' perceptions of student support systems. The participants were a convenience sample of certified general and special education teachers located in 15 rural middle schools located in five rural school districts in a Mid-Atlantic state during the 2017–2018 school year. The Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey was used to collect data from 498 certified general and special education teachers via SurveyMonkey. The purpose of the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey was to determine teachers' perceptions of student support systems, such as RtI and SSTs. The following questions guided this research study:

RQ1: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ2: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of training to implement student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ3: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

RQ4: Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of the relationship between different student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators?

The first research question investigated if a significant difference existed in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems (such as RtI and SSTs) in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators. Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey statements 1, 5, 6, and 20 addressed the teachers' perceptions of student support systems. Question One results indicated no significant differences in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems. The teachers were also similar in their responses of *no opinion* to *agree* that they considered paperwork and documentation a part of the SST process and that they understood the purpose and operation of the SST. In addition, general and special education teachers with part-time support facilitators were more likely to disagree that the RtI framework prolongs the SST process unnecessarily than did teachers with a full-time support facilitator, who were more likely to have had no opinion. In contrast, studies by Rhodes (2014) and Bailey (2014) found teachers agree with the familiarity with RtI and the purpose of SSTs as well as paperwork and documentation as being vital to student support systems.

Research Question Two focused on the adequacy of training to implement student support systems and related to survey statements 2, 3, 11, and 12. Burns et al. (2013) reported that school-based personnel, such as teachers should be involved in training that includes excellent RtI models, research-based interventions, and resources. Research Question 2 results

found a statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of training to implement student support systems in rural middle schools with full-time or part-time student support facilitators. This current study also found general and special education teachers with a part-time support facilitator were more likely to disagree that they received adequate training prior to serving on the SSTs or implementing RtI than did general and special education teachers with a full-time contact. In comparison, Castro-Villarreal et al. (2014) studied teachers' perceptions about RtI and found the majority of teachers had a poor understanding of RtI implementation. Bineham et al. (2014) also found barriers such as lack of training in RtI. In addition, general and special education teachers were more likely to have had no opinion or agree that it is their responsibility to provide the RtI interventions for students.

The third research question sought to determine the effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students in survey statements 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 21. Question Three results indicated no significant differences in teachers' perceptions of their familiarity with student support systems teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of student support systems for struggling students. The general and special education teachers were similar in their levels of agreement on these statements. General and special education teachers agreed that research-based interventions and progress monitoring are common classroom practices and that attention to paperwork and documentation are critical parts of the intervention process. The teachers also agreed the SST meeting should provide research-based interventions for struggling learners. General and special education teachers in this study were similar in their no opinion response that they remain actively involved in the SST process, as well as their input was valued in the SST meetings. Results also yielded belief in the effectiveness of the SST/RtI framework. General and special education teachers with full-time support facilitators were more likely to

agree to the importance of parental input at SST meetings than did teachers with part-time support facilitators. In comparison, earlier studies found school-based teams such as SSTs play a critical role in the implementation of RtI (Bailey, 2010; Nellis, 2012; Rhodes, 2014).

The fourth research question focused on survey statements 4, 17, 18, and 19 on the relationship between different student support systems. Question Four results indicated no significant differences in teachers' perceptions of the relationship between different student support systems. Overall, both general and special education teachers in this study were similar in their level of agreement that they understood basic eligibility criteria for special education and that SST is valuable for monitoring the transition from special education back to the general education classroom. A study conducted by Rhodes (2014) also confirmed teachers' understanding of the basic eligibility criteria for special education. Teachers were in less agreement about the primary purpose of the SST process.

Implications

Teacher's perceptions of student support systems, such as response to intervention (RtI) and student support teams (SSTs) are grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory and collaborative problem solving. General and special education teachers are tasked to ensure all students show and achieve proficiency on state-mandated assessments. Students, however, enter the classroom environment with varied ability levels and learning styles (Arum & Velez, 2012; Chingos et al., 2015). Some students are labeled academically or intellectually gifted, while others require an individualized education program to address their deficient academic skills. Consequently, teachers should review studies and find research-based interventions to meet the diverse needs of students.

Due to a lack in studies that investigate the effect full-time or part-time student support facilitators have on teachers' perceptions of student support systems frameworks in the middle schools of a rural Mid-Atlantic state, this study will increase the knowledge base of student support systems. Findings in this study indicated the need for in-service or staff development activities to ensure teachers are properly trained to implement student support systems. Teachers' perceptions and their ability to implement SSTs and RtI are important in assessing student support systems (Luttenberg et al., 2013; Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2011). Still further, school leaders can review this study concerning the importance of having a full-time or part-time facilitator for support.

Limitations

This study embodies several limitations to consider. The small sample size was one limitation. Almost 500 certified general and special education were asked to participate; however, only 111 teachers responded to survey. However, this study was subject to a sampling error since only 70 participants responded to the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey in its entirety. Participation in this survey was also voluntary. Participation was only limited to middle schools in five rural school districts in a Mid-Atlantic state. Elementary and high school general and special education teachers were not invited to participate in this study. Participants who chose *no opinion* as a survey response or did not complete survey in its entirety was also a limitation.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study provided insight into the effect full-time or part-time student support facilitators have on teachers' perceptions of student support systems frameworks in the middle schools of a rural Mid-Atlantic state. Future recommendations for research are as follows:

1. Future research studies could include high school teachers' perceptions of student support system frameworks in the high school of a rural Mid-Atlantic state with a full-time or part-time facilitator. This study was limited to middle schools. A study of teachers' perceptions could be beneficial at the high school level.
2. Future research studies could replicate this study in a larger region. This study only included middle schools in a rural Mid-Atlantic state. This study also had a small sample. I would suggest the future researcher conduct a paper/pencil survey with a contact person at each school to collect surveys as well as coordinate with school administrators to complete the survey during a faculty meeting to receive a larger response. I would also suggest using an online survey but increase the number to a minimum of 1,000 participants to receive a larger sample size.
3. Future research studies could include school administrator's perceptions of student support system frameworks in the middle schools of a rural Mid-Atlantic state with a full-time or part-time facilitator. This study was limited to certified general and special education teachers' perceptions. School administrators are not only responsible for discipline but are considered instructional leaders. A research study of school administrators' perceptions could provide information needed to implement school support systems, such as RtI and SSTs with fidelity.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 2, 2018

Marsha Joyce-Tatum

IRB Exemption 3155.030218: Teachers' Perceptions of Effective Student Support Systems by Availability of Student Support Facilitators

Dear Marsha Joyce-Tatum,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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APPENDIX B: SURVEY

Your school has...

_____ A designated person whose sole responsibility is to carry out or facilitate SST and/or RtI frameworks (i.e., student support specialists or RtI coach or leader).

_____ A contact person for SST and/or RtI who has numerous other duties assigned (i.e., assistant principal, ILT, counselor, and/or grade level lead teacher).

Use the following scale to respond to the following statements.

	1	2	3	4	5
	Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I am familiar with the tiered intervention model that provides more intensive interventions for students based on responses to previous interventions (RtI).	1	2	3	4	5
2. I received adequate training prior to serving on the Student Support Team (SST).	1	2	3	4	5
3. I received adequate training prior to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI)	1	2	3	4	5
4. I understand the basic eligibility criteria for special education.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I understand the purpose and operation of Student Support Team (SST).	1	2	3	4	5
6. I consider the paperwork and documentation required for the Student Support Team (SST) as part of my intervention on behalf of the student.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I remain actively involved in the SST process when I refer a struggling student.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Research-based interventions and progress monitoring are common classroom practices for struggling learners in the general education setting.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Careful attention to paperwork and documentation are critical parts of the intervention process.	1	2	3	4	5
10. The Student Support Team (SST) meetings are useful to me as I seek to help the student.	1	2	3	4	5
11. It is my responsibility to provide the interventions for students in Student Support Team (SST).	1	2	3	4	5
12. It should be the responsibility of others to provide the interventions and document the Response to Interventions (RtI).	1	2	3	4	5
13. The Student Support Team (SST) meeting is vital for bringing parental input into the intervention plan.	1	2	3	4	5
14. The Student Support Team (SST) meeting should produce ideas for research-based interventions for struggling learners.	1	2	3	4	5
15. My input at Student Support Team (SST) meetings is both valued and desired.	1	2	3	4	5
16. Most general education teachers are supportive of the SST process and the RtI framework.	1	2	3	4	5
17. The Student Support Team's (SST) primary purpose is to move students toward special education.	1	2	3	4	5
18. When I refer a student to Student Support Team (SST), I expect that he/she will be evaluated for special education.	1	2	3	4	5
19. The Student Support Team (SST) is valuable for monitoring the transition from Special Education back to the general education classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
20. The Response to Intervention (RtI) framework prolongs the Student Support Team (SST) process unnecessarily.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I am supportive of the SST process and the RtI framework and believe it to be effective for helping struggling students.	1	2	3	4	5

In your opinion, what modifications, if any, could be made to increase the effectiveness of the Support Team (SST) and/or Response to Intervention (RtI) framework? (*Select all that apply*)

- More time to meet
- Less paperwork
- Accelerated process
- SST/RtI staff inservice
- Inservice for intervention strategies
- More input from specialists
- Specially trained facilitators of the process
- Better team communication
- Observations of the learner by others

Have you referred a student for SST/RtI in the past 3 months?

- Yes
- No

If you have NOT referred a student, please explain your reasons and/or concerns. (*Select all that apply*)

- No students experiencing problems
- Have been able to deal with concerns on my own
- Do not know enough about SST/RtI
- Not aware of how/when to facilitate SST/RtI
- Process is too time consuming
- Results may negatively affect expectations for students
- Problem is not serious enough to document RtI and meet with SST
- SST/RtI often produces little improvement

How many years of teaching experience do you have? _____ years

What is your highest earned degree?

- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Specialist's degree
- Doctorate

In what area do you currently teach?

- General education
- Special education

APPENDIX C: PERMISSION TO USE AND PUBLISH SURVEY

-Original Message-----

From: Bailey, Lynn <Lynn.Bailey@henry.k12.ga.us>
To: Marsha Tatum <mdec2164@aol.com>
Sent: Mon, Jan 25, 2016 2:36 pm
Subject: RE: Liberty Dissertation- Consent Letter
Ms. Tatum ~

Thank you for your interest in using the Bailey-Tarver survey for your upcoming study. You may consider this email permission to use my survey from my published dissertation. I would appreciate very much you sharing your finished results with me. All the best to you in your research and in your educational endeavors! lb

Dr. Lynn Bailey

-----Original Message-----

From: Lynn Bailey [redacted]
To: Marsha Tatum [redacted]
Sent: Tue, Jul 10, 2018 10:50 pm
Subject: RE: Survey

You may consider this email permission to publish the Bailey-Tarver survey in your dissertation.

Lynn Bailey, Ed.D.

APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Secondary Teacher:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as a requirement for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this research is to examine middle teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of response to intervention (RtI)/ Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and student support teams (SSTs). I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

Student support systems can be an important first step in assisting struggling students. Student support facilitators and general and special education teachers need to work together using the student support systems to advance student achievement in the general education classroom or make needed referrals to special education services using the RtI frameworks. Although student support systems have been implemented in the early grades, the framework is relatively new in middle schools. The results of this study will provide school administrators with information to consider when designing professional development to ensure teachers have current and pertinent data needed concerning the implementation of RtI/MTSS at the middle school level.

As a middle school general or special education teacher, I value your perceptions of RtI and SSTs. Would you take 5-10 minutes to respond to the online survey? Clicking on the link below will take you to the questionnaire. If you are unable to complete the questionnaire in one sitting, exit and use the link to return to it later. Your responses will be saved for you.

Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

To participate, please click on the link provided below. A consent document is provided as the first page you will see after you click on the survey link. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please click on the survey link at the end of the consent information to indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the survey.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have questions about the research or would like a copy of the results of the study, please contact me at [REDACTED]. I eagerly await your response.

Sincerely,

Marsha Joyce-Tatum

[Click here for the survey](#)

APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORM

Teacher's Perceptions of Effective Student Support Systems by Availability of Student Support

Facilitators

Marsha Joyce-Tatum

Liberty University

School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study examining middle school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of response to intervention (RtI)/ Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and student support teams (SSTs). You were selected as a possible participant because of your position as a general or special education teacher. Please read this form and ask any question you may have before agreeing to be in the study. This study is being conducted by Marsha Joyce-Tatum, a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to examine teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of response to intervention (RtI)/MTSS and student support teams (SSTs).

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete the anonymous web-based Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey. This survey will take 5-10 minutes to complete.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, benefits to society include gaining information about teachers' perceptions of student support systems and how such systems can improve student academic performance. Improved academic performance will afford students with positive opportunities in life, which in turn strengthens the community.

Compensation: You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your school district. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

Contacts and Questions: Marsha Joyce-Tatum is the researcher conducting this study. If you have questions, you are encouraged to contact her at [REDACTED] and/or [REDACTED]

You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, [REDACTED]