AN EXAMINATION OF TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH THE MULTI-TIERED
SYSTEM OF SUPPORT PROCESS IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL SETTING

by

Martavious K. Johnson

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support systemic framework in a middle school setting. The problem was teachers’ lack of emotional and tangible support from their schools when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. The theory that guided this study was Revans’ action learning theory (ALT), which consisted of four components: (a) problems, (b) clients, (c) self-advisors, and (d) processes. The central research question that guided this study was: what are the experiences of teachers when it comes to selecting appropriate interventions for middle school students when working within the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting? I collected data from nine participants via semi-structured interviews and a focus group, and a document review of the schools’ policies and procedures that highlighted the MTSS framework. Three themes emerged as the findings from this study that included: (a) time constraints, (b) lack of training and support, and (c) processes that are not streamlined for the cohesive evaluation of students.

*Keywords*: transcendental phenomenological study, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, middle school setting, teachers’ experiences
Dedication

“Ain’t this what they been waitin’ for? You ready?”

I started elementary school in 1996, and since then I’ve been on a journey…a journey to this very pinnacle. For the past 26 years, I’ve achieved so many feats that lead me to this body of work. If it had not been for God, I’m more than certain that I would not be here today. God has been benevolent, ever present, and faithful. He chose me, my parents, and my village, my community to all guide and support me to this place.

This work is dedicated to:

My mother, my enforcer, my cheerleader, I am forever indebted to you for these 30 years of life. Even when I was resistant, you provided encouragement and love to get me to this point.

My father, while you’re a man of few words, your love speaks volumes and I thank you for supporting my decisions regardless of if you understand or agree with them.

My sister, I’m so proud of you. From the day you graced this Earth, you’ve been a light. A light of perspective and insight. Keep shining…I love you for loving me.

My village: Canita, Glen, Mo, LaRae, Jay, Bri, Sharda, Devin, Ciegi, Black, Jada, Shanara (Levi), Whitney, Noelle, Domonique, Alexis (Britany), Tae Tae, Brentia, AB, my therapist and everyone else…I’m sure I forgot someone, but charge it to my head, not
my heart. I love you all!

My love, I’m grateful for all that you have endured with me. I’m appreciative of our journey and all of the lessons we have learned, are learning, and will learn.

Martavious, YOU DID IT! With so many obstacles of mental health, procrastination, and just lack of will, you did this. You deserve all of the desires of your heart, and you will have them. I love you most for persevering and persisting regardless of disappointments. You ARE…Dr. Martavious Kendrell Johnson!

“I’m gone.”
Acknowledgments

Once again, I have to thank God for leading me and guiding me throughout this process. He has been a comforter, words when I did not have any more to give, a provider, a confidant, and the list goes on and on. I would also like to thank my colleagues, faculty and staff of my research site, and my committee. Dr. Hibbert and Dr. Park, you all have been so supportive throughout this process. I appreciate all of the feedback, words of encouragement and reassurance along the way.
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Learning Disabilities (LD)

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Response to Intervention (RTI)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is to provide early screening and targeted interventions to students who are struggling both behaviorally and academically (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). Schools adopt MTSS to identify struggling students to provide them with interventions that are evidenced-based (August et al., 2018). Because of the known and vast disproportionality of students of racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, there was a concern about the referral assessment and placement of students for services. Thus surfaced MTSS as a need to help identify students in need of academic and behavioral services (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). MTSS consists of three tiers that provide students with an umbrella continuum of support ranging from the whole school to individualized interventions based on the students’ responses to interventions (Fuchs et al., 2010). Many barriers have been identified when implementing MTSS in school systems, with research highlighting that many schools do not have a specific procedure to implement the framework effectively (Mason et al., 2019). Previous studies had highlighted the importance of school leadership when it comes to streamlining practices to properly implement MTSS (Clark & Dockweiler, 2019; Latimer, 2020; Massengale et al., 2020), yet little to no studies had explored the experiences of middle school teachers when it came to selecting interventions, discussing solutions, evaluating outcomes, and overcoming barriers. Therefore, the aim of this study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting.

Chapter 1 will introduce this study. This chapter will begin by discussing the background of the study, concentrating on the historical, social, and theoretical overviews. This chapter will also discuss the study’s the problem statement and the study’s purpose, while introducing the
research questions that will guide this study. This chapter will then conclude with a discussion on the study’s significance and defining commonly used terms.

**Background**

MTSS is a three-tiered system of support that provides early screening and targeted interventions to students who are struggling both behaviorally and academically (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). MTSS was first introduced into schools beginning in 2018, highlighting important historical, social, and theoretical aspects of supportive systems. Many aspects of these supports need to be examined because teachers, specialists, and administrators are encouraged to work together to assess students while planning the interventions.

**Historical**

The beginning of MTSS stemmed from Response to Intervention (RTI) and other problem-solving models that have been designed to assist students who were struggling academically and required special education services (Gersten et al., 2017). The aim of RTI was to aid in the early intervention and the identification of students with learning disabilities (Fuchs et al., 2010). According to Behan (2015), the overall purpose of RTI was to strengthen general education instruction, and this could only be achieved if students were supported on the general education side of instruction. Historically, students would have to wait for specific interventions or support until they were evaluated for special education services (Greenwood et al., 2011). Students who were needing special education services were supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA).

IDEA was originally known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act from 1975 to 1990. In 1990, congress changed the name to IDEA and continued reauthorizing the act to continuously provide children with disabilities the same opportunities for education as all
other students (Blanck, 2019). Under IDEA, different models were established that aided in identifying children in need of support, such as that of RTI and MTSS. From a historical aspect, the flaw of effective implementation of RTI has consistently been due to the lack of teacher expertise in prescribing students’ needs and creating the requirements that should be met to increase student achievement (Eberhardt & Hougen, 2017). Due to the hardships experienced with the implementation of RTI in 2018, several states exercised autonomy to increase services to students who required interventions. To increase services to students who required interventions, a more advanced system called MTSS (Burns et al., 2016). The two frameworks are similar in that the approaches necessitate a tiered process of identifying and petitioning the instructional needs of all learners; however, MTSS is a more comprehensive approach adopted to offer targeted support to learners of all categories (Mason, 2019).

Social

Eberhardt and Hougen (2017) highlighted that one major flaw of effective implementation of RTI has consistently been due to the lack of teacher expertise in prescribing students’ needs and creating the conditions of which should be met to increase student achievement. As with any academic initiative, teachers must feel comfortable and capable of executing the desires of administration and other educational stakeholders (Basim et al., 2013). Teachers with higher self-efficacies tend to deliver quality instructional practices, experience greater student performance, and receive positive student responses (Choi et al., 2019); therefore, the social outcomes and experiences of educational practitioners should be considered during any decision-making process (Herman et al., 2018). Lauermann and König (2016) researched the relationship between general pedagogical knowledge and teacher burnout. The authors found that general pedagogical knowledge negatively predicted teacher burnout, which supported the notion
that the effects of burnout are individualized and subjective to the educator’s level of professional capability. When teachers are exhausted, students’ learning and progression are stifled (Richardson, 2016).

As part of the MTSS framework, the teacher, who holds the key to the success of students in their learning, is required to include these research-based methods and techniques to create an interactive learning environment for all learners, which is a crucial focus in this research (McKinley, 2016). Teachers are professionally obligated to adjust instruction accommodating the ability-level of each student and implement research-based instructional practices following the needs of the learner while monitoring the learner's progress (Westwood, 2018; Wilson & Conyers, 2020). However, it is also important to focus on administration personnel when it comes to implementing MTSS in educational institutions. For example, research has indicated that school district leaders and administrators need to ensure strong leadership so that MTSS can be effectively implemented school-wide (Choi et al., 2019; Williamson, 2019). Choi et al. (2019) has purported that leadership is an important aspect of the implementation of MTSS, as it is statistically related to that of technical assistance and leadership quality. Many schools do not appear to have a strong implementation strategy, thereby highlighting leadership deficits. Additionally, a lack of teacher training and the offering of professional development opportunities have been discussed by Braun et al. (2020), which affect the implementation process in schools, demonstrating a problem when properly identifying students in need of academic services (Cruz & Rodl, 2018).

Theoretical

MTSS is a framework that not only supports academic growth and achievement, but also targets behavioral, social and emotional needs, and absenteeism (Sailor et al., 2020). The main
theoretical concept that is connected to MTSS is that of the whole child framework. The whole child framework is a teaching model that aims to view academic achievement as skills and knowledge that all children must develop to be successful over the course of long-term goals (Roche, 2017). The whole child framework is essential to MTSS, simply because it focuses on social, emotional, mental, physical, and cognitive development of children. MTSS purports that while all children should try to maintain academic rigor in general education classes whenever possible, there is also a need for individualized interventions for them to be successful, especially if they are experiencing any form of disabilities including that of learning disabilities (Kauffman et al., 2018). Therefore, MTSS and the whole child framework is essential in preparing all students to be future citizens while reaching their full potentials.

Revan’s (1980) action learning theory (ALT) guided this study as the theory was in alignment with many of the MTSS constructs and the whole child framework. For example, MTSS consists of four components: (1) problems; (2) clients; (3) self-advisors; and (4) processes (Revans, 1980). This theory was closely related to the problem-solving process necessary to determine individualized learning opportunities for students who were working within the MTSS interventions. For example, when developing training programs or offering support to teachers who were working within the MTSS framework, they could ensure that they were appropriately identifying the problem, working with the students, advising them appropriately, and completing processes that supported the theoretical underpinnings of the MTSS (Revans, 1980).

**Situation to Self**

As an MTSS Intervention Specialist, I am charged with maintaining and creating spaces for the intervention process to be implemented with fidelity. One of the main pitfalls of the intervention process is the lack of intervention delivery due to pedagogical knowledge and time
provided. By examining teachers’ experiences, I was able to examine this qualitative study from an epistemological vantage point to provide clarity of the needs associated with pedagogical development, effective implementation, and any barriers inhibiting intervention delivery in the middle school setting. Therefore, researchers who used epistemological assumptions were subjective in their understandings on their world view, as in their form of reality. Additionally, my main epistemological assumption was that there were different meanings that individuals attached to their world view based upon their experiences of communication and interactions with the world (Titchen et al., 2017).

I believed that this study would provide educational stakeholders with a greater understanding of how teachers experienced MTSS in their middle schools and districts. I sought to understand what was functional and dysfunctional within the MTSS process, as well as what supports could be implemented that increase the success of intervention-based learning. To achieve optimum implementation, educational stakeholders must intentionally plan and implement consistent procedures of the MTSS framework to remove barriers for educators and the students they serviced. It was my wholehearted hope that information obtained through this study could guide future practices.

**Problem Statement**

The problem was teachers’ lack of emotional and tangible support from their schools when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the MTSS framework (Braun et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2019; Wexler, 2017). This problem was highlighted by Braun et al. (2020), who purported that when working within the MTSS framework, teachers oftentimes were confused about the processes and the ability to intensify interventions to meet the needs of their students. The MTSS process is placed in danger
when teachers lack education or necessary skills as to how to properly implement interventions in their classrooms. This lack of education and necessary skills causes educational data collected by school evaluators to be skewed, causing special education evaluation irregularities (Wexler, 2017).

Braun et al. (2018) completed a study that focused on teachers working with MTSS and reported discrepancies that were caused by inflexibilities and inconsistencies in school wide MTSS procedures. The authors’ study found that the teachers lacked experience at intensifying interventions for students not making progress. Although MTSS was designed to find students who needed special education support; it was also designed to reduce the number of students that were inappropriately referred for special education (Hoover & Soltero- González, 2018). However, schools appeared to not provide adequate support in relation to teacher training when it came to working within an MTSS framework (Freeman et al., 2017).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting. Transcendental phenomenology allowed for participants of the study to describe their lived experiences of the explored phenomenon, allowing the researcher to gain a stronger understanding (Gros, 2017). In this study, MTSS was generally defined as the delivery of interventions through three tiers which included the entire classroom, small groups, and intensive, individualized support (Thomas et al., 2020). This definition was in alignment with the purpose of MTSS, which was to provide consistent educational and behavioral support throughout the intervention delivery process (Behan, 2015).
The theory guiding this study was Revans’ action learning theory (ALT), which consisted of four components: (a) problems, (b) clients, (c) self-advisors, and (d) processes (Revans, 1980). This theory was closely related to the problem-solving process necessary to determine individualized learning opportunities for students who were working within the MTSS process. Originally designed to support organizations in improving problem-solving processes, this theory was in alignment with this current study, simply because it allowed for the taking of action, the reflection of the results, and the simplification of solutions that had been developed by a team (Faller et al., 2020). Therefore, in this current study, the theory was closely related to the problem-solving process that was necessary to determine individualized learning opportunities for students in the MTSS process. For example, at the problem-solving meeting, teachers must be willing to learn and collaborate to determine the most effective intervention strategy (problem) for the student performance (client), through a line of inquiry necessary for the intervention specialist (set-advisor) to monitor effective intervention implementation (process).

**Significance of the Study**

The participants within the study are educational professionals working in a middle school with first-hand experience implementing MTSS interventions to low-achieving students in a middle school setting. All of the educational professionals had taught in a Title I learning environment for at least two years in the district under the same leadership prior to the study. There is limited qualitative research on the effectiveness of MTSS programs in middle school settings. Therefore, it is significant to hear and understand the voices of educators who have experienced MTSS in a middle school setting, and this study contributes to future research on the topic. When completing this study, there were some significances that could be experienced that touched on empirical, theoretical, and practical viewpoints.
Empirical

This study contributed to the existing literature as Eberhardt and Hougen (2017) highlighted that one major flaw of effective implementation of RTI had consistently been due to the lack of teacher expertise in prescribing students’ needs and creating the conditions of which should be met to increase student achievement (Eberhardt & Hougen 2017). Therefore, the results of this study could aid in better understanding the experiences of teachers who worked in a middle school setting and were implementing MTSS with their students. Previous research had highlighted several barriers when it came to implementing MTSS in educational environments, with studies concluding that barriers included lack of training (Braun et al., 2020), the lack of school-wide collaborative practices (Dillard, 2017), staff resistance, and school leadership (Mason et al., 2019). The results of this study could add to the literature by providing an in-depth understanding of middle school teachers when it came to implementing MTSS, as it addressed the gap in the literature that made this study viable.

Theoretical

There were also some theoretical significances of this study, as it was being guided by action learning theory. Action learning theory consisted of four components: (a) problems, (b) clients, (c) self-advisors, and (d) processes (Revans, 1980). This theory was closely related to the problem-solving process necessary to determine individualized learning opportunities for students who were working within the MTSS process. The results of this study could, therefore, be significant towards the theoretical framework, as it aided teachers and administrators to better understand MTSS by following the four components. Therefore, when developing training programs or offering support to teachers who were working with the MTSS framework, they could ensure that they were appropriately identifying the problem, working with the students,
advising them appropriately, and completing processes that supported the theoretical underpinnings of the MTSS, which was that of the whole child framework. Following the whole child framework ensured that teachers were using effective teaching strategies that aimed to view academic achievement as skills and knowledge that all children must develop to be successful over the course of long-term goals (Roche, 2017).

**Practical**

This study was also significant in many ways as there were many stakeholders involved when it came to the implementation of MTSS, including that of students, teachers, school administrators, school districts, and parents. It was important to better understand the experiences of teachers in middle school settings when implementing MTSS, as Ketterlin-Geller et al. (2019) have reported that middle school students exposed to MTSS could experience an increase in mathematics scores as they were exposed to differentiated instructional strategies that aided them in better understanding mathematical concepts. Additionally, teachers could benefit from the results of this study, as by examining their experiences, it could be better understood how to effectively implement MTSS within their classroom and curriculum. For example, Hoover and Soltero-Gonzalez (2018) had discussed how teachers benefited from MTSS as it aligned teaching practices with the evolving nature of the classroom. MTSS could provide teachers with a stronger development of culturally and linguistically teaching practices that supported student academic achievement.

When it came to the stakeholders of school administrators and school districts, MTSS had been researched in terms of benefits. For example, research indicated that school districts and administrators needed to ensure healthy leadership so that MTSS could be effectively implemented school-wide (Choi et al., 2019; Williamson, 2019). Choi et al. (2019) purported
that leadership was an important aspect of the implementation of MTSS, as it was statistically related to that of technical assistance and leadership quality. Therefore, the results of this study could be significant as it could allow administrators and school district officials to adjust their leadership styles to provide teachers with the technical assistance needed when properly implementing MTSS (Choi et al., 2019). Finally, this study as also significant to parents, as previous research had suggested that schools tended to lack a formal evaluation of how to implement MTSS as well as not involving parents in the planning and evaluation of MTSS when it came to teaching their children (Dillard, 2017). Additionally, Clarkson (2016) reported the benefits of including parents in MTSS procedures, as teachers and other school officials could communicate more effectively to better understand a student’s family history and what other interventions had been tried at home.

**Research Questions**

The problem that this was addressing includes teachers’ emotional and tangible support when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the MTSS framework (King et al., 2012). Therefore, with the purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study being to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting, the following research question and sub-research questions guided this study:

**Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of teachers when it comes to selecting appropriate interventions for middle school students when working within the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?
When selecting appropriate interventions, teachers must identify the needs and characteristics of the student while implementing appropriate interventions that maximize solutions (Forman & Crystal, 2015). Therefore, this research question was in alignment with both the problem and purpose statement as it allowed the researcher to better understand the experiences of teachers when selecting appropriate interventions in relation to the needs and characteristics of their students.

**Sub-Question 1**

What barriers do teachers experience when navigating throughout the different tiers of the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

This question aligned to the principle of the action learning theory requiring the learner to engage in the social activity in a questioning process designed to determine procedural steps at finding solutions (Revans, 1980). This sub-question was in alignment with the study as it allowed for a better understanding of the barriers that teachers experienced when navigating through the different tiers of support at finding solutions on how to specifically provide strong interventions to their students.

**Sub-Question 2**

What processes do teachers use to evaluate the outcomes of students when participating in the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

Because this study was being guided by action learning theory, there must be an assessment and analysis of a problem’s outcome to determine the effectiveness of a plan or how it can be revised (Revans, 1980). Therefore, this question was in alignment with the study’s problem, purpose, and theoretical framework, as it allowed to better understand the processes that teachers used when evaluating the outcome of their students when participating in the multi-
tiered systems of support. This was particularly important to this current study, simply because if teachers were not effectively evaluating student outcomes, it would be difficult to ensure that all students were being supported in an educational setting and if the multi-tiered system of support is effective in the manner that it was being implemented.

**Definitions**

The following terms were presented throughout this dissertation and were therefore defined as followed:

1. *Learning disabilities* - According to Alfonso and Flanagan (2018), a learning disability can be any type of condition that can make an individual have trouble in learning in a traditional classroom setting. Learning disabilities may interfere with the development of literacy skills, memory, and the ability to organize skills and focus on patterns. A learner with learning disabilities requires more time and attention to grasp content and finish assignments.

2. *Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS)* - MTSS is a research-based policy and practices of monitoring learners' abilities and modifying instruction to satisfy the wants of all students following their responses. The process helps the students to receive the required educational assistance early enough before failure occurs (Thomas et al., 2020).

3. *Response to Intervention (RTI)* - RTI framework replaced traditional learning and identification models. RTI focuses on providing intense instructions based on scientific and non-scientific research to both responsive and non-responsive students (Fuchs et al., 2010).
Summary

The problem that this study addressed was teachers’ lack of emotional and tangible support from their schools when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the MTSS framework (King et al., 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting. Hermeneutic phenomenology allowed for participants of the study to identify and reflect upon their lived experiences of the explored phenomenon (Spence, 2017). In response to public demand for an improved instructional system, federal policymakers mandated the implementation of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), which was defined as a school-wide system that supported learners of all achievement levels (Freeman et al., 2017). MTSS groups the learners into three tiers, providing a continuous improvement framework for all students that focuses on creating positive learning experiences for all (Braun et al., 2018). MTSS assists schools and other educational institutions to identify and group resources through responsive alignment while monitoring the curriculum standards and behavioral expectations of the students.

Implementation of MTSS requires well-trained personnel and staff (Poole & Kemp, 2018). Since teachers are a vital factor in improving academic performance and schools, the MTSS model requires full cooperation and inclusion of teachers in its implementation. Full cooperation and inclusion begin with teachers having an excellent knowledge of the system and its processes as designed to implement interventions effectively and attain improvement in academic assessment (Al Otaiba et al., 2019). Teachers should be equipped to analyze all students' learning patterns and monitor their social, educational, and emotional trends closely.
These practices help teachers determine how to modify their teaching instructions to satisfy the wants of all students (McKinley, 2016).

This research study was guided by action learning theory and focused on the experiences that teachers encountered in their line of work with MTSS. Understanding the experiences would assist teachers in organizations willing to implement the MTSS model to identify what challenges and experiences could be expected. With an increased knowledge of the MTSS model, effectiveness and efficiency in implementing the system should improve (Charlton et al., 2020). Understanding this model and its expected experiences could assist teachers in the future by aiding them in avoiding mistakes when implementing this important educational intervention.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting. The MTSS process is individualized learning, subjective to each individual learning setting; therefore, this study examined the perceptions and experiences of middle school teachers with implementing the MTSS process regarding the levels of support, the fidelity of implementation, and improvement of student learning outcomes in the middle school setting.

Chapter two introduces the theoretical framework used as a lens to understand how the application of MTSS systemic process could possibly affect teachers’ experiences. A synopsis of the critical components of MTSS will be provided, as well as the intended outcomes of the process with an emphasis on the responsibility of all educational stakeholders. The review of the literature will include relevant research that has been conducted in the field of MTSS, including criticisms and support for the overall implementation. Because the study sought to examine teachers’ experiences with implementation, a review of relevant information regarding perceptions of professional development in MTSS and implications regarding student performance, and finally, a summary of the entire chapter will also be included.

Theoretical Framework

Action learning was introduced in the 1940s when Reg Revans implemented action learning in the coal mines of Wales (Revans, 1982). Therefore, he can be considered the proponent of this theory even though it was not immediately applied in the arena of formal education. Action learning refers to an experiential learning theory where participants learn by doing. After doing and learning, participants also reflect on what they have done. Revans (1998)
asserted that there were two major components of this method. The first part was that of programmed instruction. Programmed instruction refers to having a teacher or instructor providing information to the learner. The second component is that of questioning. Under this theory, the questioning method is considered a key to understanding. Learners ask each other questions to deeply assess the learning experiences or situations they are going through; hence, action learning.

Reg Revans was credited with implementing the first action learning setup through the National Association of Colliery Managers in 1952 (Pedler, 2011; Pedler et al., 2005; Revans, 1982, Willis, 2004). This program was participated by 22 managers from different coal mining operations across the United Kingdom and Northern Island. They met five times with the intention of resolving four main operational problems, which were machinery maintenance, inventory control, underground hauling, and employee deployment (Pedler, 2011; Pedler et al., 2005; Revans, 1982, Willis, 2004). These four problems were being experienced by all the participants in their respective firms. The sets of managers met at each other’s places of work and then shared with each other what they thought of each workplace. The participants also gave practical suggestions for improvement, which the recipient of the recommendations tried out (Revans, 1982).

Revans (1978) had provided very specific real-life problems that participants had to focus on. First, it had to be a familiar problem in a familiar setting. Usually, this meant assessing some aspect of the other party's jobs in relation to one's own. Second, it had to be a familiar problem in an unfamiliar setting. The third was an unfamiliar problem in a familiar setting, and the fourth was an unfamiliar problem in a similarly unfamiliar setting (Revans, 1978). The action learning procedure that Revan specifically implemented was quite specific. The strategy involved having
each of the managers explain to other managers within the set what they were trying to do, what was stopping them from doing it, and what they, in conjunction with the firm could about it (Revans, 1978). The purpose of answering these questions and sharing these responses to others in the group was to know exactly what they were doing and what they should do next so that the goals they stated could be actually attained (Revans, 1978).

Revans (1978) explained that this was meant to derive very specific learnings from each other. He claimed that such a method was necessary because nothing was ever truly proven in advance. All was discovered when the manager was already on the task itself and not before it. For example, if a manager is matched with three or four others, who then work together and discuss among themselves first sans any experts until they are specifically asked for, the experts can learn for themselves what pertinent problems there are, what they can do about them, why they still cannot do anything about them given their present circumstances, and what results they can expect from certain actions (Revans, 1978). Within the set itself, each manager is able to contribute to mutual support, advice, and criticism. In summary of the action learning method proposed by Revans (1982), the role of the participant was maximized, and that of the expert or teacher was minimized.

Action learning was offered as a developmental theory through initiatives applicable in individual, organizational settings (Pedler, 2011). Action learning theory is not considered a specific entity—in that, Revans refused to provide the theory with one, singular definition (Pedler, 2011). With the innovation of new ideas and processes, Revans created a holistic and abstract methodology to approaching the consumption and learning of innovation through action (Pedler, 2011). Revans offered action learning as a problem-attack theory rooted in uncertainty of approaching problems that individuals and collective units are faced with through the
integration of past or previous concepts mastered with new and innovative ways to seek out a solution to an issue (Gold, 2014). Action learning is not the conquering of rudimentary concepts such as puzzles and problems, but for the attack of problems with multiple solutions where no single course of action is appropriate (Pedler, 2011). Revans' learning equation, $L = P + Q$ suggests learning is a combination of knowledge acquired through traditional means and inquiry questioning (Pedler, 2011).

Action learning is a social process, which suggests individuals must collectively not know an answer or solution to a problem but commit to finding individual solutions and presenting them to one another for further discovery (Pedler, 2011). When an answer is unknown, there is a learning dynamic created in common ignorance because questions are posed in conditions of risk and confusion, when no party has an idea of how to proceed (Pedler, 2011). This is critical in the action learning model because individuals' acquisition of knowledge bases and skills are just as monumental to arriving at the solution to the issue being presented.

Teams, with varying composition structures, mirror the action learning sets of Revans' action learning theory. Action learning sets are encouraged to meet frequently to explore solutions to problems and determine the most appropriate solution (Dilworth, 1998). Much like action learning sets, the problem-solving teams regularly convene to determine individual student needs using a guide consisting of the following: problem identification, problem analysis, intervention plan implementation, and evaluation of the problem (Bahr & Kovaleski, 2006; Fuchs et al., 2003). During the problem-solving meeting, there is an intense focus on the instructional appropriateness of the intervention designed to increase student achievement (Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996).
Revans' action learning theory was used in the current study, given the importance of problem-solving to the MTSS process. MTSS was created, not only as an alternative to the over and under-identification of students with learning disabilities, but to identify students' individualized learning needs and to maximize instructional outcomes for teachers through the meeting of the problem-solving team (Kovaleski et al., 2013). The problem-solving team convenes at the early stages of the identification of students for increased intensities of support in the MTSS process (Kovaleski & Black, 2010).

For this current study, the framework guided how the questions were formed to gather data, as well as how responses to the questions were analyzed. ALT provided insight as to why it was important to ask teachers the barriers that they experienced when navigating throughout the different tiers of the MTSS strategy in the middle school setting. The first question aligned to the principle of ALT requiring the learner to engage in the social activity in a questioning process designed to determine procedural steps at finding solutions (Revans, 1980). This sub-question was in alignment with the study as it allowed for a better understanding of how teachers navigated through the different tiers of support at finding solutions on how to specifically provide strong interventions to their students when facing barriers. The theory also aligned with the second question.

Because this study was being guided by ALT, that there must be an assessment and analysis of a problem’s outcome to determine the effectiveness of a plan or how it could be revised (Revans, 1980). Answers to these questions were analyzed using this theory as well. When it came to reviewing the results and discussing the theoretical implications in the concluding chapters of this study, this theory also provided significant insights. For example, the theoretical framework being used was able to challenge and extend existing research regarding
the MTSS framework. This provided deeper levels of understanding while drawing connections in the results to that of prior literature that had been completed.

**Review of Related Literature**

In 2019, the State of Georgia re-introduced its version of a tiered intervention and prevention framework designed to support all learners in the teaching and learning process (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). As researchers have described this MTSS framework, driven by data and assessment, can effectively identify students not only of academic deficits, but those of behavior, social, and emotional support that proved to be at-risk of inhibiting favorable learning outcomes (Braun et al., 2020; Freeman et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2109; Weingarten et al., 2020). Georgia, unlike other states, has a three-level pyramid of prevention (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). The state proposes that all students receive support at all levels, depending on their individualized areas of deficit.

The MTSS framework consists of five sublevels designed to provide quality instruction and intervention: Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Response to Intervention (RTI), Student Support Team (SST), Student Mental Health (SMH), and Wrap Around Services (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). Each of these interventions and preventative services support all students, regardless of present levels of performance, include a problem-solving team, and is driven by data, while being considered some of the best teaching practices for learning to occur in any environment. (Braun et al., 2020; Freeman et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2109; Weingarten et al., 2020). With the whole child considered, the MTSS framework seeks to decrease the number of students expelled for behavior concerns and sustained academic improvement, with an emphasis on graduation success rates.
Through the years of school reforms and educational innovations, two major approaches have been introduced in the schools nationwide to help at-risk or struggling students. These are the Response to Intervention and School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (Alahamari, 2019; Castillo et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2016; Maeir et al., 2016). These two methods are specifically designed to address the deficiencies of students in relation to social and academic outcomes. Both methods utilize the tiered approach, wherein all students are addressed by giving them a maximum level of support, so they can experience optimum learning experiences. The main focus of RTI is to enhance the support of all students in the area of academics (Alahamari, 2019; Castillo et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2016).

On the other hand, School-Wide Positive Behavior Support is mainly preventative support while at the same time, also offering students the chance to improve their social skills and behaviors (Freeman, et al., 2015). Based on the findings published, various researchers, both academic and behavior, cover four key components. First, it is crucial that evidence-based curricular or instructional practices are utilized in the classroom (Differ & Are, 2018; Lane et al., 2020; Lyon & Bruns, 2019). Second, it is critical that in the classroom, data-based decision making is implemented at all levels of support. Third, a problem-solving procedure must be set up; fourth, team-based approaches should be carried out (Hawken et al., 2008).

In particular, MTSS describes a student support system that mixes the clearest and greatest components of the RTI and School-Wide Positive Behavior Support together, and then builds to create a new and much more robust program that can improve the learning outcomes and experiences of students by no bounds (Belser et al., 2016; Dillard, 2017; Meaux et al., 2016; Pierce & Mueller, 2018; Sink, 2016). Belser et al. (2016), Dillard (2017), and Meaux et al. (2016) have asserted that RTI, School-Wide Positive Behavior Support, and MTSS could all be
perceived as being one system. Whereas Pierce and Mueller (2018) and Sink (2016) believed that these terms could be utilized interchangeably. The power of MTSS starts and ends with teams composed of teachers, as they will be the ones to determine the factors in the data-driven decision. The main mission of MTSS is to enable all students to receive the most effective and efficient level of instruction as possible (Belser et al., 2016; Dillard, 2017; Meaux et al., 2016; Pierce & Mueller, 2018; Sink, 2016). MTSS, like RTI, provides students with adequate and strong support to attain mastery at a high level based on their personal and individual needs. The power of MTSS is that it offers students the benefits of targeted instruction at the time of need instead of waiting until the student already falls so far behind that catching up becomes virtually impossible that they cannot even apply for special education. This is why MTSS is unique from other need-based interventions. (Belser et al., 2016; Dillard, 2017; Meaux et al., 2016; Pierce & Mueller, 2018; Sink, 2016).

According to the Iowa Department of Education, the MTSS framework is comprised of five major components. First, there must be an evidence-based curriculum and instruction administered to students of all levels (Ford et al., 2018; Shute, 2017). Second, there must be an individual screening of students for all their individual needs, not just academically but also emotionally and socially, because unaddressed needs on these facets can have an impact on academic achievement (Ford et al., 2018; Shute, 2017). Evidence-based instructional interventions must be offered at the targeted audience and at the appropriate intensive level of thoroughness and rigor. These instructional interventions are not applied like a blanket to all students (Ford et al., 2018; Shute, 2017). The goal is to make sure everyone learns, and everyone achieves academic gains by offering differentiated instruction and support according to individualized student needs (Ford et al., 2018; Shute, 2017). Students that receive targeted
instruction are monitored continuously to make sure that they are all learning under the best instructional and targeted practices. Finally, it is crucial that all decisions are databased, and best serve the need of each and every student (Iowa Department of Education, 2016).

**Response to Intervention**

There are several components to RTI: universal screening, consistent progress monitoring, high-leverage classroom teaching practices, research-based interventions, and consistent and reliable delivery of interventions (Hall & Mahoney, 2013). Schools use data to determine students at-risk for less than favorable learning outcomes, monitor response to interventions and instruction, and provide research-based interventions, which essentially means more intense, individualized instruction that meets students' learning needs (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2010). Should students not respond to interventions, RTI allows the student to be evaluated for possible learning disabilities (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015).

The most commonly known framework for the RTI model is a three-tiered level approach, which is aesthetically viewed in the shape of a pyramid. At Tier I, or the bottom of the pyramid, is general, basic evidentiary teaching practices (Armendariz & Jung, 2016; Berkeley et al., 2020; Gischlar et al., 2019; Johnson, 2020). At this Tier, it is suggested that 80% of students are able to thrive in the classroom with successful Tier I instruction. Should students have difficulty meeting learning goals while receiving Tier I instruction, there is a problem-solving meeting held with educational stakeholders to review student data to determine if there is a need for students to receive Tier II instruction (Armendariz & Jung, 2016; Berkeley et al., 2020; Gischlar et al., 2019; Johnson, 2020). At Tier II, students receive more individualized learning in small groups of no more than eight students with the utilization of more specified teaching strategies to meet the needs of the group. It is recommended that approximately 20% of students
will require Tier II instruction. In a fully balanced pyramid, approximately 15% of students will be successful while receiving research-based interventions (Armendariz & Jung, 2016; Berkeley et al., 2020; Gischlar et al., 2019; Johnson, 2020). For the remaining 5% of students unsuccessful with the Tier II interventions, they will be moved to more intensive interventions at Tier III. Students placed at Tier III receive one-on-one interventions, as well as, Tier II and Tier I support. Should these students not respond to these interventions, other evaluations may be necessary to determine whether the student has a specific learning disability or meets the criteria for additional services (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2010).

In recent years, Response to Intervention has been adopted by many school districts as a way to alleviate the influx of students into special education. With the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, and the legislation of No Child Left Behind in 2001, the answer to both of these federal mandates was Response to Intervention (RTI) (Cummings et al., 2008). Both pieces of legislation required that decisions to be made on data and evidence, and that instruction is grounded in research. RTI is a set of procedural decision-making strategies that have set criteria for each. There are variations in how the levels of RTI are operationalized, and thus no single model is currently accepted as the gold standard (Bradley et al., 2005). However, these core features of RTI have been identified: (a) high quality, research-based classroom instruction, (b) universal screening, (c) continuous progress monitoring, (d) research-based secondary or tertiary interventions, (e) progress monitoring during inventions, and (f) fidelity measures (p. 486).

The interventions of RTI are based on research, and decisions are based on evidence and data. The decisions ultimately come for the team of experts and professionals, which consist of administrators, special education specialists, and general education teachers. Despite this framework, the implementation of the RTI process in schools and school districts does not
resemble this model. Essentially, the basic premise of RTI is that when children are provided with effective interventions, educators can determine whether they have responded or not responded to the intervention, which in turn can guide service delivery decisions (VanDerHeyden, 2006). When determining whether students have responded appropriately to an intervention or not, data is presented at an RTI meeting. Therefore, the decisions that are made will be based on data. One of the outcomes with RTI is that a student who is placed in special education would be receiving those services. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the U.S. Department of Education does financially support some RTI programs, where evidence-based interventions and assessments are utilized (Berkeley et al., 2020). The funded support includes professional development on the use of RTI, as well as certain intervention strategies that may be implemented. RTI is based on the tenets that students are receiving evidence-based instruction in their general education classrooms, as well as when they are recommended for interventions; that their interventions are evidence-based as well (Pullen & Kennedy, 2018). It is important to understand that current research on RTI is limited when looking at students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. For RTI to an effective tool, the deficiencies in the data need to be addressed. The ideal of RTI is that decisions for entering special education are made based upon databased problem-solving strategies, where the delivery is flexible and regular monitoring occurs (Danielson et al., 2007). “

**Validity and Response to Intervention**

Students are identified for their potential in the RTI process by entering a subgroup called at-risk students. After the at-risk student group emerges early in the school year, approximately the first month, which is based on current school performance and the high-stakes testing scores from the previous year, these students are monitored continually on their academic performance
The monitoring portion of the RTI process begins for the at-risk student group. Here, the students' responsiveness is monitored for roughly eight weeks of general education instruction. The monitoring phase often ends with a standardized achievement test of the at-risk group (Tan, 2018). Afterwards, interventions are implemented following the first Tier, with monitoring, and if need be, secondary and tertiary tiers (Buffum et al., 2018). It is important to note that practitioners of RTI who rely on an assortment of assessment procedures within the framework could produce a somewhat unreliable diagnosis of the student (Morrison & Harms, 2018). Therefore, it is essential to develop a common approach to define and assess students’ non-responsiveness (Fusch & Fusch, 2006). Also in terms of reading, it is important that there is an appropriate instrument that is valid for identifying decoding skill errors versus reading comprehension. For this reason, there is an inconsistency in how students are identified for the RTI process, and the following interventions that proceed once the student begins the process. (Wenzel, 2017).

**Fallacies with Response to Intervention**

One of the problems with special education and the RTI process is the assessment process, the inconsistent interventions and monitoring, and the referral process, which results in the disproportionality of African American males in special education phenomenon. In the study conducted by Seaberry (2014), several of the teachers surveyed and subsequently interviewed lacked a general knowledge of the RTI processes. Five of the six research participants indicated that they did not fully understand the RTI process. Through the RTI process, teachers felt they were being told something different each time a team had a meeting regarding students and their unresponsiveness to interventions. One of the key outcomes of the RTI initiative is to identify struggling readers and provide services through the general education population. In this case,
reading teams are established to refer students to the RTI process rather than refer them to special education. According to Cummings et al. (2008), before the implementation of the research-based reading project, many students were referred and identified for special education who lacked exposure to effective instruction under the curriculum of general education.

**Fidelity of Response to Intervention**

Understanding the consistency of implementation of RTI is critical to this research study. Inconsistencies are not only present at the state level, but also at that of the federal level (Keller-Margulis, 2012; March et al. 2016; Mellard, 2010; Saenz, 2008). The variation of interpretation of the RTI framework was examined in national reviews by Hoover et al. (2008) with an examination of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) usage of interventions as it relates to its intended purpose. Researchers of this study surveyed state directors of special education, specialists, and other educational professionals. Results of this study yielded 16 states were in the early implementation stages of RTI, and the remaining 28 states were in the actual implementation phase.

For the purpose of this study, there had to be an examination of the variation because it impacted the daily operations of the framework in different learning settings. Hoover et al. (2008) reported that over 50% of states were using RTI for databased decision-making processes and to determine any students eligible for special education services. With varying understandings of the RTI process, present concerns of lack of definitive guidance regarding sufficient implementation. Zirkel and Thomas (2010a) determined many states have insubstantial procedures, which creates leniency and subjectivity in implementation. Although this had created flexibility, it has also added confusion and discrepancy to be interpreted by LEA of how RTI should be implemented with definitions and criteria (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010a).
With an expended scope of the implementation of RTI, Zirkel and Thomas (2010b) determined that states were able to be meticulousness of RTI implementation. The authors' investigation determined each state's core components were different. Some states required core components of RTI what others recommended, but the important aspects such as research-based strategies and universal screening were consistently implored in a majority of the 50 states reviewed. There was ambiguity in the degree of definitions and accountability (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010b). According to Hauerwas et al. (2013), increased autonomy of LEAs implementing RTI led to an overall lack of continuity of data use and contextual application of RTI.

**Legislative Support of MTSS**

MTSS has a legal basis; it is legally supported. RTI and MTSS was developed in response to two pieces of massive pieces of legislation that have transformed the educational sector: The No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education and Improvement Act (Braun et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2020; Williamson, 2019; Zirkel, 2017). In 2002, The No Child Left Behind Act was passed and enacted to inject a higher dose of accountability on all school districts. Most people linked this law with a requirement for standardized testing and an aim for 100% proficiency, which led to certain negative perspectives (Braun et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2020; Williamson, 2019; Zirkel, 2017). Although, in a way standardized testing is quite problematic, especially for non-core subjects, the Act is much more in its entirety. In particular, the law is an expansion of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (Greenwood et al., 2019; Miller, Taylor, & Ryder, 2019; Wexler, 2018). The original and main purpose was to ensure a high-quality education for each and every student. At the time, only one in five students with disabilities were educated and they lacked protection
under laws that could ensure they could have quality and effective learning experiences like their peers without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The pressure to achieve the goals provided and called for by the lawmakers was quite high. However, goals were not that easy to accomplish, as they were all abstract and ambitious (Haycock & Hanushek, 2010; McGuinn, 2016; Reese, 2011; Simpson et al., 2004). For example, every student would attain proficiency or better in reading and mathematics by 2013-2014, each English language learner (ELLs) would attain proficiency in the targeted language, every teacher would become qualified by 2006, and all students would have their education attained in a safe and drug-free environment (Haycock & Hanushek, 2010; McGuinn, 2016; Reese, 2011; Simpson et al., 2004). One of the goals also included that all students would graduate from high school (McCann, 2017). Even though these were all great goals, they were too ambitious.

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education and Improvement Act (IDEA) was passed to give more focus on the needs of the children with disabilities. Even though the No Child Left Behind Act had great goals, the attention was placed more on getting the students without disabilities to perform well on high-stakes and standardized testing, and less on the children without disabilities (Haycock & Hanushek, 2010; McGuinn, 2016; Reese, 2011; Simpson et al., 2004). The new act was to improve classroom rigor and identification of students with very specific needs. One particular and unique aspect of the act was placed on the methodology allowing schools to utilize a guide to pinpoint children in need of extra support because of special learning as well as behavioral issues and needs (Haycock & Hanushek, 2010; McGuinn, 2016; Reese, 2011; Simpson et al., 2004)

Section 1414(B)(6) of the IDEIA states, "in determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child
responds to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation process" (IDEA, 2004, p.5). This specific part of the IDEA led to the development of RTI. This new model eliminated or set aside traditional I.Q. testing in favor of a more precise and individualized technique. All these important legislative milestones were critical for progression toward the development of MTSS to occur. Without these, MTSS would not have happened (Briesch, et al., 2020; Braun et al., 2020; Ruedel et al., 2018; Weignarten et al., 2020).

Schools and districts across the United States are presently adopting MTSS to address the range of needs of their students, not from an academic perspective, but also from a behavioral and socio-emotional perspective (Briesch, et al., 2020; Braun et al., 2020; Ruedel et al., 2018; Weignarten et al., 2020). MTSS includes obtaining and organizing educators' assessment, instruction, and databased decision-making practices into different tiers of services that intensify per tier. In other words, MTSS revolves around a range of services, from very basic ones to more complicated, all aimed to serve the range of needs of the students. It includes primary prevention and supplements as well as tertiary intervention strategies to help students be well-rounded academic achievers (Briesch, et al., 2020; Braun et al., 2020; Ruedel et al., 2018; Weignarten et al., 2020).

Under MTSS, all students are categorized into at least one of the three tiers of the MTSS system (Briesch, et al., 2020; Braun et al., 2020; Ruedel et al., 2018; Weignarten et al., 2020). This MTSS system is described as a dynamic pyramid system. Tier one refers to high-quality instruction comprising of a heterogeneous mixture of students who made up as high as 80% of the student population (McGuinn, 2016; Reese, 2011; Haycock & Hanushek, 2010; Simpson et al., 2004). The students in Tier I are anticipated to demonstrate mastery of the core content as well as exhibit sound social, emotional, and behavioral development.
Various research-based instructional techniques are utilized to assist students in attaining optimal mastery of the content they are aiming to learn, including but not limited to project-based learning, differentiation, workshop model, guided inquiry, as well as self-paced learning (McGuinn, 2016; Reese, 2011; Haycock & Hanushek, 2010; Simpson et al., 2004). In an effective implemented MTSS strategy, students are given research-based instruction founded on data and aligned with their respective students' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning styles so the students' opportunities for growth can be expanded (McGuinn, 2016; Reese, 2011; Haycock & Hanushek, 2010; Simpson et al., 2004). The goal of all districts that used this program is to see the teachers part of their jurisdiction being properly trained to be proactive in managing academics and monitoring social behaviors at the same time.

MTSS is expected to not only produce higher-achieving students, but also reduce the need to enact disciplinary interventions in the classrooms (Sugai et al., 2008). Students who are not responsive or did not respond as they were expected at Tier I, are moved to Tier II so they can receive more focus and attention. They will be placed in small or large groups to receive re-teaching or supplemental instructional support. It is suggested that around 10% to 15% of the student population should be placed in Tier 2 at any particular point in time (Vermeer, 2017). Students placed on this tier are then referred to specialized teams that address their specific needs, one of which is the problem-solving team, encompassing of a multidisciplinary approach designed towards improving the students' chances of learning success (Vermeer, 2017).

MTSS is described as a public health approach to enhancing the overall effectiveness of the educational sector, which through the years, was the target of criticisms and disappointment (Averill, 2011; Forman & Crysal, 2015; Rinald, n.d). Researchers claimed that its public health approach to propel higher level of effectiveness into the educational system makes ultimate sense.
because it purports to address the needs of students in a variety of domains (Averill, 2011; Forman & Crysal, 2015; Rinald, n.d). There is a sense of practicality to assume that students all have individual needs and that they are not necessarily academic needs. It makes sense to address all needs as opposed to just focusing on one single area (Averill, 2011; Forman & Crysal, 2015; Rinald, n.d ). This allows the approach to have universal access to the children and youth in school settings. This is the reason why pieces of U.S. legislation, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2004 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2014 all contain provisions for the support of school districts in implementing MTSS as an approach to achieve the desired level of student outcomes (Mandlawitz & Director, 2016; Sylvan, 2018).

Empirical Support for MTSS

Apart from laws and policy, MTSS has also found empirical support. Studies have been covered by systemic reviews of MTSS that have concluded it is a good approach to enhance the academic achievement and learning experiences of students (Braun et al., 2020; Freeman et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2109; Weingarten et al., 2020). Previous systematic reviews of MTSS completed in the USA have included studies that have focused on the implementation and effects of methods such as RTI and PBI models, showed that MTSS has a significant link to student outcomes (Berkeley et al., 2020; Porter, 2019; Thurlow, 2020).

Thurlow (2020) asserted that MTSS has universal benefits on students, despite their racial backgrounds, their special abilities, and their learning capacities. IRIS (2019) provided a more solid definition of MTSS. According to IRIS, MTSS is a model or approach to instruction that enables provides students with increasingly intensive as well as individualized levels of support for academics as well as for behavior, essentially mixing the methods of RTI and PBIS.
Under the legislation of the Every Student Succeeds Act, MTSS is an approach that has promise in increasing student achievement as well as teacher effectiveness. Under Section 2103 of this legislation, this method was specifically specified as recommended for use. Funds should be devoted to developing programs and activities that can improve the ability of the students to effectively teach children with disabilities, including children with severe cognitive disabilities. ESSA also provided one of the key definitions of MTSS to understand it better (Mandlawitz, & Director, 2016; Meibaum, 2016). According to Section 8101 of this legislation, MTSS refers to a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' wide range of needs, through the implementation of regular observation as well as evidence-based instructional decision-making (Mandlawitz & Director, 2016; Meibaum, 2016).

Originally, MTSS was conceived as a school-wide framework targeted at general education students who were not identified as needing special education services. Some students not identified as qualifying for special education services still require focused attention to have better educational learning experiences, and MTSS was designed to recognize their needs (Phillipo et al., 2017; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2016). Researchers agreed that the beginnings of MTSS emerged from RTI and problem-solving models that were established both to offer interventions to students at risk for failure in at least one subject area, [re-referral information for students who might require special education services and learning disabilities, as well as to determine the interventions that might meet personal needs of the students (Lynch et al., n.d.; Ticha & Abery, 2018).

There are many different MTSS models today. Typically, MTSS frameworks cover a three-tier triangular model of support. Researchers claimed that with a three-tier triangular model of support, the focus is more massive on primary prevention as asserted by the National Center
on Response to Intervention. The next smaller area tier focuses of secondary prevention, while
the third smallest tier is targeted on tertiary prevention. However, this conceptualization of the
MTSS is not really the same in practice. There are slight differences between theory and practice
(Brown & Sanford, 2011; Carta et al., n.d).

MTSS reflects more of an instruction and intervention approach wherein students who do
poorly on screening measures and other regular checks on performance can get their needed
interventions at additionally intensified levels (Gibbons et al., 2018). If there are continued
concerns after the additional intervention levels are enacted, students are referred to a special
education evaluation. Even though some misconceive Tier 3 as a special education tier, this in
reality, is a tier made for any student who requires a more intensive intervention; not just those
with special learning disabilities (Rogers et al., 2020). Across all of the definitions provided on
MTSS, the premise is that the tiers are additive in reality, while it is only three in theory (Buffum
et al., 2018). This is a positive deviation from theory. Most reforms appear to look good in
theory, but not in practice but researchers claimed MTSS is the opposite. For example, if a
student requires additional interventions for reading, these supports can already be provided in
addition to Tier 1 instruction, with most just in place of Tier 1 (Lloyd & Wehby, 2019).

Researchers have shown that students at various levels can receive so many interventions
depending on their needs, all to make sure that their learning experiences in various subjects can
improve and their learning needs can be addressed. In general, based on all the definitions made
of MTSS, two critical elements are embedded in this approach, which is a strong and effective
screening method and a continuous and consistent progress monitoring process (Brown &
Sanford, 2011; Carta et al., 2020; Thurlow, 2020). Both can lead to the provision of timely
information on whether students are responsive to instructional supports. Both also lead to the
utilization of evidence-based instructional supports. Procedurally, MTSS and RTI includes a screening process at the minimum, which cannot be defined as important (Brown & Sanford, 2011; Carta et al., 2020; Thurlow, 2020). Universal screening is carried out the start of the school year, or more often throughout the year depending on the perceived school needs to determine who among the wider student population are performing and scoring poorly. A second screening is then conducted once more for those students found to be scoring poorly on the first test to obtain a more precise indication of which among them are urgently at-risk of poor learning outcomes and what the best interventions should be implemented to address these needs of the individual students (Brown & Sanford, 2011; Carta et al., 2020; Thurlow, 2020).

Studies have shown that MTSS involves a key screening process that can reveal who, among the students, need specialized help, and the key to reveal what methods and interventions can help them (Bradley et al., 2005; Thurlow, 2020). According to Bradley et al. (2005), students who had been identified as having a learning disability had increased more than 200% since 1977. This figure cannot have an increase of this magnitude by better understanding learning disabilities, a larger population, or more awareness of the importance of identifying learning disabilities (Bradley et al., 2005). This enormous increase has large in part to do with the misidentification of students. IDEA in 1977 and Child Find, were established so that students would be correctly identified and receive the services necessary to be successful in school (Bradley et al., 2005).

For over three decades, the disproportionality of ethnically and linguistically diverse students in special education has been an issue (Counts et al., 2018; Coutinho & Oswald, 2004; Cruz & Rodl, 2018). Often, these students are identified as being mentally retarded, having learning disabilities, or being emotionally disturbed. Court cases have been litigated, and two
National Research Council (NCR) reports had been issued; despite this, current research has not been sufficient to reduce this problem significantly (Thurlow, 2020).

Out of the civil rights movement came special education. One of the concerns out of the formation of the first legislation was racial inequity as well as ESL students. With the legislation, IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) approved by Congress in 1975 as a way to pay a debt brought to light by the Civil Rights movement (Thurlow, 2020). However, despite the intention of this legislation, there are racial disparities in rates of special education services, which today is one of several inequalities of the educational system. Some of the other inequalities include exclusionary discipline, the Free and Reduced Lunch Program, and attendance (Skiba et al., 2008).

To ensure the issue of disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, IDEA was reauthorized in 1997. The reauthorization of IDEA stressed the importance of efforts to preclude the mislabeling and high school dropout rates of minority children with disabilities (Klingner et al., 2005). Measures were also taken when IDEA was amended in 2004 to prevent a disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, especially of African American male students (Skiba et al., 2008). Although there are interventions in place that prevent the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, they have not adequately addressed the issue (Barrio, 2017).

Frequently, the tools utilized for screening and progress monitoring are not designed specifically for students with the most significant of cognitive disabilities or are focused mainly or primarily on basic academic skills such as number or letter identification, number order, number factors or checklists (Barrio, 2017). However, these have already been improved through the more recently developed computer-adaptive tools, designed more effectively for universal
screening as well as progress monitoring. Some students with the most severe of cognitive disabilities are said to be able to take part in these assessments because there are testing accommodations (Thurlow, 2020). Several evidence-based practices have revealed positive and increased academic gains for students with critical cognitive disabilities (Barrio, 2017; Thurlow, 2020). Several of these practices have truly led to positive academic gains in general education settings (Saunders et al., 2020; Thurlow, 2020). Apart from screening methods used to pinpoint students and interventions, MTSS also involves a range of instructional approaches.

According to Thurlow (2020), MTSS had to meet certain criteria to make sure it would have universal application. To realize an MTSS framework that meets the needs of all students in a school, including those with the most critical of cognitive deficiencies. First, the MTSS approach should align general education and special education delivery systems with each other. The supplemental special education is designed to support, simplify, magnify as well as modify if necessary what is being taught in general education. Second, the MTSS framework should also be geared towards social-emotional as well as positive behavioral interventions so that students also learn and benefit from normal school routines (Thurlow, 2020). In time, if MTSS is effective, special education supplementary supports could be lessened piecemeal as students already acquire patterns, recognize rituals, and learn routines that would work in their respective classes and the overall school (Thurlow, 2020).

Even though there remained limited literature conducted on evidence-based academic practices used in general education classroom for students with the most critical of cognitive disabilities, some practices had been identified, which were worth discussing to see why MTSS was effective and praised (Saunders et al., 2019; Saunders et al. 2020). Many of the most researched and discussed methods of MTSS however has one common pitfall as found by the
researchers (Spooner et al., 2012; Spooner et al., 2019). This is the fact that they are not easy to implement for general education teachers without the necessary background and training. As a result, there is a need for a more collaborative effort to be made between general education and special education teachers so that these best practices can still be manifested in general education classrooms.

**Barriers to MTSS Implementation**

Apart from educators, studies have shown that school leaders are considered change agents in making sure MTSS is implemented. Studies have also demonstrated that in the course of doing so, school leaders' beliefs and skills can affect how they implement this framework and the different challenges in doing so (Braun et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2109; Weingarten et al., 2020). Additionally, researchers have concluded that even with over 30 years of criticisms against IQ-discrepancy model to determine and help student with a specific learning disability, the traditional model is still being used widely (Philippakos & FitzPatrick, 2018; Young & Johnson, 2019). Even though IDEA (2004) already encouraged the use of the MTSS, which is historically and more commonly referred as RTI, as an alternative to the IQ-discrepancy model, the use of these newer methods is so much less frequent than the use of the I.Q. discrepancy model that is already criticized heavily (Aspiranti et al., 2019; Stanovich, 2005).

One of the key barriers is the lack of a blueprint on how to implement the chance (Leonard et al., 2019). Although legislation supports the use of MTSS, they never discussed how to implement the chance and schools as well as educators are mostly at loss of what to do. The school districts are left to their own devices in determining what to change and hat to adopt, and also how to implement the innovation (Aspiranti et al., 2019; Leonard et al., 2019). It is not surprising, therefore that most of the MTSS innovations engaged in by schools became largely
unsuccessful. Sometimes, even though school districts have a good idea of what MTSS is, they do not do enough for a paradigm shift and cultural change to take place (Leonard et al., 2019).

Years of implementing the IQ-discrepancy model showed that it is not effective at all. Many individual experts within the field of education has consensually expressed disapproval of the use of this model, especially when this model is not supplemented with other indicators for quality of instruction (Aspiranti et al., 2019; Stanovich, 2005).

Under this model, educators rely on standard scores on intellectual ability assessment to determine who are in at-risk students. However, it was clear that this is not an accurate method. If the discrepancy between the scores of the students based on I.Q. tests are lower than the pre-established criteria set forth by the student, the student is said to have met the criterion of SLD and therefore treated as a special education student. Some students with low I.Q. are not necessarily students with learning stabilities (Aspiranti et al., 2019; Stanovich, 2005). Low I.Q. scores can also be contributed by so many factors - memory, background, present circumstances at home, etc…. At the same time, relying on the IQ-discrepancy model also makes sure that those with real learning disabilities are undetected just they scored highly on the I.Q. tests. If they are undetected, then they cannot be given interventions to help them improve their performance (Aspiranti et al., 2019; Stanovich, 2005).

Researchers claimed that the IQ-discrepancy model's use leads to many students never receiving special education services even if they require it (Braun et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2109; Weingarten et al., 2020). This is said to be not only negligent but also just wrong. Students without disabilities may be placed in special education programs while children with a learning disability may be plead in general education settings, left to struggle on their own and not be able to catch up with their peers (Aspiranti et al., 2019; Stanovich, 2005).
The RTI model is hailed not only as an effective alternative of the IQ-discrepancy model, but is a step up from the old method by providing a unified system of studying student difficulties. Knowing these difficulties firsthand not based on I.Q. scores, provide for the opportunity to engage in intervention before they can even be referred to special education services (Aspiranti et al., 2019; Stanovich, 2005).

The underlying principle of MTSS and RTI is that schools should not be waiting for students to become so far behind before they act and provide them with special education services. The longer schools wait to ascertain their students’ disabilities, the more they would struggle to catch students up (Braun et al., 2020; Mason, et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2109; Weingarten et al., 2020). Instead, as RTI proponents would argue, schools should provide targeted interventions to all students as soon as a need arises or discovered (Buffin, et al., 2010).

According to Scanlon (2013), an RTI implementation has led to significant gains among students with reading difficulties. Scanlon cited research conducted by the International Reading Association, in which IRA members were surveyed in the bid to gather evidence of how RTI is progressing and how it is beneficial. Their findings showed that as high as 43% of respondents reported fewer children being classified as having learning and reading disabilities after the RTI had been implemented in their schools (Scanlon, 2013). Among the teachers who reported the reduction in numbers, as high as 75% attributed to the positive change to the fact that the struggling leaders were receiving more timely and more effective instruction (Scanlon, 2013). As high as 70% of these teachers also asserted that RTI had something to do with the positive change directly, indicating that because of this strategy or framework, it resulted in so much more collaboration among the students (Scanlon, 2013). The researchers concluded that these findings were quite positive and encouraging. The goal of the RTI is not just improve learning
outcomes, but also instructional methods and outcomes. Both teachers and students should benefit (Scanlon, 2013).

One more factor that can affect the effectiveness of MTSS or RTI models is the involvement of school leaders (Fuchs & Deschler, 2007; Mellard et al., 2012). According to researchers, principals and administrators who opted to just delegate the task of overseeing the implementation of the MTSS is making sure the whole strategy or approach would not be successful. For instance, Fuchs and Deschler (2007) have early on found that RTI models driven by districts in a top-down approach have lower chances of survival. The researchers claimed that the type of leadership needed for RTI to work is certainly one that is detached. It requires strict involvement of the leaders and of the other stakeholders in the process. This is the case because RTI is not a process that can be implemented by a select few people. It would not work with the school leader just authorizing it to be done. The implementation of an RTI model is said to need the skillset of more than one person (Fuchs & Deschler, 2007). Naturally, it would also necessitate the efforts of more than just one person or one department (Fuchs & Deschler, 2007). Student learning outcomes are too important to be relied mainly on one person or school body. Instead, school leaders should feel empowered to not just set the vision of this intervention method, but to also align others part of the learning process to this vision (Fuchs & Deschler, 2007). Additionally, according to Mellard et al. (2012), effective leaders set the premise for the successful implementation of MTSS, in all parts of the school and for different levels of education. Further substantiating this finding and perspective is a study completed Feuerborn et al. (2011). According to these researchers, establishing staff member buy-ins is crucial for MTSS or RTI to work. Staff should not be just tasked to carry out specific activities for the success of the RTI, but to be aware of why they need to do these activities in the first place. They must be
completely convinced so that they can pour substantial efforts in seeing the strategy through. The researchers claimed that these student-oriented tiered services are unlikely to work if there is no commitment to the initiative. A buy-in is a requirement for commitment to the success of any educational reform, including that of MTSS or RTI.

Researchers in their attempt to acquire deeper understanding of the effectiveness of RTI implementation in a secondary school and understand the processes behind the implementation and what possible factors an affect its success found that the most critical factors behind successful RTI implementation is the high levels of district and principal leadership (Billingsley et al., 2019; Charlton et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2019). The higher the level of RTI implementation, the higher the participation of the school leaders. The researchers also interviewed the staff of these schools and found that their involvement was also crucial to the successful RTI implementation. The more successful of RTI implementation among the schools focused on, the more invested the staff are. The staff also mentioned seeing their principals being fully involved in the process and exert fidelity to RTI implementation (Billingsley et al., 2019; Charlton et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2019).

**Professional Development of MTSS**

Effective implementation of MTSS necessities significant changes from the perspectives of educators. Educators' practices require substantial changes, some to the point of an overhaul (Hoever & Soltero-Gonzalez, 2018; Mason et al., 2019; Mullan, 2015; Leonard et al., 2019). Some researchers have questioned whether students could truly implement the critical components of MTSS with fidelity, which included assessment, instruction, and evidence-based decision making across multiple tiers (Hoever & Soltero-Gonzalez, 2018; Mson et al., 2019; Mullan, 2015; Leonard et al., 2019).
On the other hand, staunch supporters of MTSS are quite positive. They argued that schools and district leaders are the ones responsible to make sure that educators would meet these components with efficiency and success by providing numerous and effective professional learning opportunities (Blackburn & Witzel, 2018; Leonard et al., 2019; Sailor et al., 2020). These supports believe that through training, educators are unlikely to miss out on implementing any components of the MTSS. Alternatively, there are also MTSS supporters who claimed training and professional opportunities were not enough in ensuring educators effectively and properly carry out the public health approach with fidelity (Blackburn & Witzel, 2018; Leonard et al., 2019; Sailor et al., 2020).

The literature on professional learning in the arena of MTSS necessitates leadership, sustained and focused collaboration, proper allocation of educational resources to boost learning, systematic implementation, and evidence-based designs for teachers to be more aware of delivering content (Morrison & Harms, 2018; Williams & Ryan, 2013). Professional learning also requires consistent use of data to monitor and improve professional learning efforts. Literature has also demonstrated that there were many methods of professional learning at the disposal of school districts and district leaders, including but not limited to the professional learning communities, study groups, technical training, workshops, and coaching (Morrison & Harms, 2018; Williams & Ryan, 2013). The literature also specifically pointed to a range of practices found to lead to positive results of changes in knowledge, changes in skills and dispositions, and changes in practices. One of the greatest effects of professional learning on MTSS is the chance of teachers to engage in problem-solving oriented towards student learning as well as engagement (Morrison & Harms, 2018; Williams & Ryan, 2013).
Problem-solving activities set the stage for increased future learning, if teachers remain willing to be coached and get feedback on their skills and implementation of MTSS programming in their classroom (Morrison & Harms, 2018; Williams & Ryan, 2013). The moment the willingness vanishes, professional learning methods would most likely not work. Other researchers have also praised continuous professional learning methods, and the ongoing of teachers willingness to implement MTSS to effectively designed and delivered content. This in turn can lead to the willingness and discovery of new practices and improved student outcomes (Morrison & Harms, 2018; Williams & Ryan, 2013).

Although there was a robust body of literature on professional learning and MTSS, most studies were rather conceptual instead of empirical until 2018 (Morrison & Harms, 2018). It was only recently, therefore, where it became a little clearer on how professional learning made educators more capable in implementing MTSS (Morrison & Harms, 2018). Reports from training and technical assistance projects designed to offer professional learning to schools and districts in the American schools implementing MTSS showed that professional learning services are perfectly capable of transforming educators' beliefs and actions. They became more amenable to the MTSS' benefits, knowledge, and skills, as well as the actual implementation of the MTSS (Ferns, 2017; Henry, 2020).

**Summary**

The MTSS framework consists of five sublevels designed to provide quality instruction and intervention: Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Response to Intervention (RTI), Student Support Team (SST), Student Mental Health (SMH), and Wrap Around Services (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). Each of these interventions and preventative services support all students, regardless of present levels of performance, include a problem-solving team,
and is driven by data, while being considered some of the best teaching practices for learning to occur in any environment. (Braun et al., 2020; Freeman et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2109; Weingarten et al., 2020). In particular, MTSS describes a student support system that mixes the clearest and greatest components of the RTI and School-Wide Positive Behavior Support together, and then builds to create a new and much more robust program that can improve the learning outcomes and experiences of students by no bounds (Belser et al., 2016; Dillard, 2017; Meaux et al., 2016; Pierce & Mueller, 2018; Sink, 2016).

One of the problems with special education and the RTI process is the assessment process, the inconsistent interventions and monitoring, and the referral process, which results in the disproportionality of African American males in special education phenomenon. Therefore, effective implementation of MTSS necessities significant changes from the perspectives of educators. Educators' practices require substantial changes, some to the point of an overhaul (Hooever & Soltero-Gonzalez, 2018; Mason et al., 2019; Mullan, 2015; Leonard et al., 2019). Some researchers have questioned whether students could truly implement the critical components of MTSS with fidelity, which included assessment, instruction, and evidence-based decision making across multiple tiers (Hooever & Soltero-Gonzalez, 2018; Mason et al., 2019; Mullan, 2015; Leonard et al., 2019).

The MTSS process is cyclical; it continues in a circular model until adjustments or removal is necessary. The MTSS implementation operates under a tiered intervention model with progress monitoring, data-driven decisions, and universal screening. At the appropriate tier of intervention delivery, progress monitoring data is collected to determine the effectiveness of the Intervention, which relates to the process component of the action learning theory (Daye, 2019; Harlacher et al., 2014; Oliver, 2017; Williams & Mohan, 2006). The four key components of
action learning theory suggest each action learning set begins with a problem (Coghlan & Coughlan, 2010).

Throughout the problem-solving process, an evaluation of the problem, combined with intentional reflection, are consistently implored to determine a possible solution or hypothesis (Coghlan & Coughlan, 2010). Much like the problem-solving process associated with the MTSS process, the problem-solving team uses universal screener data to analyze the students' present performance level to determine appropriate research-based interventions to integrate into the students' learning trajectory (Coghlan & Coughlan, 2010). After six to eight weeks, Tiers 2 and 3, students' progress should be evaluated by the problem-solving team. This frequent meeting solves problems, which also directly mirrors Revans' action learning theory.

Despite all that has been written regarding MTSS, there was a general sense that the side of educators were not as researched when they were a key partner to student learning. As such, the problem this study addressed was teachers’ emotional and tangible support when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the MTSS framework (King et al., 2012).
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting. Therefore, the problem that this study addressed included teachers’ emotional and tangible support when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the MTSS framework (King et al., 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting. At this stage in the research, experiences with MTSS were generally defined as the consistency of delivering of interventions, increasing intensities at each tier, and consistent provision of educational support throughout the intervention delivery process. This chapter will present the procedures, research design, and explain the method of analysis for this research study. Information will also be discussed surrounding the participants, setting, and ways to promote the trustworthiness of the study.

Design

This study followed a qualitative phenomenological design. To effectively explore the experiences of teachers implementing MTSS in one middle school located in a metropolitan area in Georgia, a qualitative methodology was selected to better understand the perceptions and lived experiences of teachers who are implementing the MTSS framework. In research, qualitative studies allow researchers to explore and examine a phenomenon of participants in their natural environment, to interpret the meanings of individuals while gaging their world views (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Although quantitative and qualitative methodologies contain similar components,
a qualitative approach was the approach being used in this current study because of my interest in the opinions, perceptions, and lived experiences of the MTSS process (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative studies present findings through the junction of data and triangulation of the types of data collected, which will influence the validity of the data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Qualitative research is one of the most frequent designs utilized in studies within the field of education, because it will provide me with tangible and appropriate information, while explaining a phenomenon. Alternatively, a quantitative methodology was considered but ultimately rejected for this study, as a quantitative methodology aims to investigate a phenomenon through statistical, mathematical, and computational techniques. Therefore, a qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study as it allowed the participants to provide information of their perceptions and lived experiences regarding the MTSS process in their own words. The goal of this study was to not determine statistical relationships or significance via the collection of quantitative data on the processes of MTSS used in a middle school setting, rather, a qualitative approach allowed participants to provide data that was semi-structured and non-numerical in nature (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Additionally, this study utilized a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design that allowed me to focus on the commonality of the lived experiences within a particular group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using a phenomenological design, I was able to better understand a universal meaning of a phenomenon, as the data collected resulted in a more profound understanding of an experience. Phenomenological studies may be broken into several types: hermeneutic phenomenology empirical, transcendental, and psychological phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, transcendental phenomenology is a philosophical approach to qualitative research that allows a researcher to
improve their understanding of a human experience. In transcendental phenomenology, this occurred in several ways: firstly, it allowed me to study the world of the participants as they know it, while focusing on how participants immediately experience a phenomenon (Husserl, 1999). Secondly, transcendental phenomenology allowed me to gain an improved understanding of the meaning of a particular experience, seeking to understand what the experience was like and how individuals and groups experienced a phenomenon (Husserl, 1999). The transcendental approach was best for the purpose of this study because it afforded me the opportunity to conduct the research while setting aside my personal experiences to develop a fresh outlook towards the phenomenon under examination (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Once deciding on the use of a phenomenological research design, I had to determine broad philosophical assumptions. When the research commenced, data had to be collected from participants who had first-hand experiences with the Multi-Tier Systems of Support (MTSS) using several interviews, observations, and examination of field notes. After analyzing the data, themes were generated from the investigation of statements; at the conclusion of the research, findings were written and disseminated to the educational community through graduate level writing and research.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of teachers when it comes to selecting appropriate interventions for middle school students when working within the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

Sub-Question 1
What barriers do teachers experience when navigating throughout the different tiers of the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

**Sub-Question 2**

What processes do teachers use to evaluate the outcomes of students when participating in the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

**Setting**

The setting being used for this qualitative study was a middle school located in a metropolitan city in Georgia. This urban area was located off a major interstate and offered elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. The research setting, as of the 2019-2020 school year, had an enrollment of about 800 students. The middle school under study was a Title I school with all the school’s population qualifying for the Free or Reduced Lunch program. The race and ethnicity of the middle school under study proved to lack diversity as 91.9% students identify as Black or African American, 7.8% students identify as Hispanic, 0.1% students identify as American Indian or Native Alaskan, 0.1% students identify as Asian, and 0.1% of students identify as Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander (CCRPI, n.d.).

The setting had 86 members of the faculty and staff. The middle school under study had an organizational structure consisting of a principal and three assistant principals. The support staff consisted of three instructional coaches and an MTSS Intervention Specialist who oversaw and supported the teachers and students. The middle school under study, according to Statewide Longitudinal Data System (n.d.) provided but the Georgia Department of Education, had 50% of their students achieving in the beginning learning achievement level on the Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS)—the state standardized assessment. With such an alarming number of students performing below grade level, the middle school under study proved to be a prime
location to conduct this research study. Although there was an established MTSS framework in
the building, it lacked implementation of fidelity, which could be reflected in the school’s results
on the standardized assessment system.

Participants

Educational professionals working in a middle school located in a metropolitan city in
Georgia were the targeted population for this study. For the purposes of this qualitative study, I
utilized purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling allowed me to select
participants to the study based upon my own judgment and strict criteria. Each of the participants
in this study met certain criteria of first-hand experience implementing MTSS interventions to
low achieving students in a middle school setting. Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated a narrower
range of sampling strategies to be used for phenomenological studies because it was necessary
all participants had experienced the phenomenon. It is imperative all the participants of this study
had similar educational backgrounds, experiences, and demographic characteristics.

A total of 55 people were contacted to participate in the study; however, I aimed to
interview only 10 to 15 individuals. The final number of participants was dependent on data
saturation. Data saturation occurred when I experienced redundancy in the data collection
process; I gleaned no new information from the data collected from the participants (Faulkner &
Trotter, 2017). Potential participants were individuals who had experience teaching students in
the MTSS process for behavior and academic purposes. I attempted to have equity in gender
within the sample. The teachers who were included in this study were all considered veteran
teachers—in that, they had taught in a Title I learning environment for at least two years before
participating in the study. In addition, the teachers were all general education teachers with
experience teaching special education students in a co-taught environment. Each of the
participating teachers had worked in the district and worked at the site under the same leadership for at least two years prior to the study. This ensured that each of the teachers experienced a continuity of administrative presence. Participants of the study were notified via writing of the IRB and/or ethical concerns before signing a consent to participate. Signing the consent afforded the participants the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time. The voluntary participants were adults, certified by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC), and educators. All volunteer participants were not compensated for their participation in this research study.

Procedures

After I obtained permission from the superintendent’s office, I also acquired permission from the school site principal to conduct the study. Once permission was granted, I completed the application for the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), as is required by Liberty University for research studies. Only after receiving permission from the IRB I began contacting potential participants and collect the data. To recruit individuals to this study, I received email addresses of teachers who met the criteria for this study from the school’s administration. After receiving email addresses, I then sent emails to the teachers that included the overview of the study, what was expected of the teachers, and the criteria needed to be accepted as a participant into the study. Teachers interested in participating in this study replied to my email, and after ensuring that everyone met the study’s criteria, I recruited the teachers on a first-come-first-served basis. Teachers who met the criteria were accepted into the study and were asked to participate in a face-to-face interview in their individual classrooms to provide them with optimum comfort for freedom of expression. The interview consisted of 18 questions and lasted between 30 to 45 minutes on average. In this study, there were six participants all who had at
least two years of teaching experience in a Title I setting. The teachers were of both genders, male and female, and were considered general education teachers. The subjects also had taught or were currently teaching students in the MTSS framework.

I began all email and telephone correspondence by introducing myself and providing my background. I explained the purpose of the study, the role of the participant of the study, and the intended outcomes of the research study. I provided each participant with an informed consent form via email following their agreement to participate in the research study. Each of the participants reviewed the consent form with the researcher in person, before the semi-structured interviews began, where they then signed the consent form before beginning the interviews. I was available to answer all questions that the participants had, and I informed them that they could refuse to answer any question and additionally remove themselves from the study at any time without any repercussions.

During each of the semi-structured interviews, I asked each of the participants the same open-ended questions in the same manner as I followed an interview protocol. I was allowed to ask any follow-up questions to increase clarity of any answer that the participants provided. Each of the semi-structured interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis. After each of the interviews had been completed and I had completed the transcriptions, I then met with each of the participants again to complete member checking. Member checking was a process where the participants reviewed the transcripts and provided me with feedback as to the accuracy of the information. If the participants reported any instances of inaccuracy within the transcripts, I adjusted them to reflect exactly what the participants said. Only I knew the identity of each participant to protect their confidentiality because I was responsible for collecting the informed consent forms and conducting the interviews. To
maintain privacy and confidentiality, I referred to each participant in a numerical order (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) to the participants, and in alphabetical order (e.g., Middle School A) the middle school under study.

After completing the semi-structured interviews, I then recruited an additional three individuals to participate in a focus group. The individuals who participated in the focus group did not participate in the semi-structured interviews. I recruited individuals to the focus group by completing the following steps as listed above when recruiting individuals for the semi-structured interviews. That is, I sent emails to teachers and they responded to my email demonstrating their interest in my study. After checking to make sure that everyone met the criteria for my study, I recruited them on a first-come-first-served basis. I then scheduled the focus group session using a scheduling software program that could ensure that the time for the focus group was convenient to all participants.

I asked each of the focus group participants the same open-ended questions in the same manner as I followed the interview protocol. I was allowed to ask any follow-up questions to increase clarity of any answer that the participants provide. Each participant of the focus group had an opportunity to respond to other participants’ answers during the focus group, which in turn generated a strong group discussion. The focus group was electronically recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis. After the focus group had been completed and I had completed the transcriptions, I then met with the focus group again to complete member checking.

After receiving permission from the school district to complete the study, I contacted the school’s principal and requested copies of policies and procedures of the MTSS framework. I reviewed each of the policies and procedures regarding the MTSS framework. By reviewing the
school’s policies and procedures of the MTSS framework, I then completed a content analysis to provide additional information regarding how the MTSS framework was supported through their policies and procedures.

The Researcher's Role

As an MTSS Intervention Specialist, it was imperative that I would be able to thoroughly complete this study and report findings as clearly and concisely as possible without any bias. According to Maxwell (2005), bias is defined as the distortion of collected or analyzed data by a researcher. While completing the study, I aimed to consistently assess for potential bias through an establishment of a relationship and recurrent debriefing opportunities with participants of the study.

Professionally, I had worked in education for seven years. Throughout this professional tenure, I had acquired both a master’s degree and educational specialist degree in curriculum and instruction. I was certified in the state of Georgia in the teaching field of grades four through eight in mathematics and in the service field of curriculum and instruction. I had taught, primarily, in the middle school arena with limited experience in the elementary school setting. Prior to beginning this doctoral degree, I completed a capstone projected within the topic of MTSS. I may have known some of the participants that participated in this study and, therefore, worked to ensure that researcher bias was limited. To address any instances of researcher bias, I created and developed an interview protocol that ensured that all the interview questions were aligned with the study’s purpose, as well as all the participants were asked the same open-ended questions. When developing the interview protocol, I recruited three individuals who acted as a panel of experts and had similar educational and professional experiences as myself to review the interview questions and ensure that they were aligned with the study’s purpose, problem,
research questions, theoretical framework, and methodology. The members of the panel of experts were not participants of the study, as they provided feedback to me on how to ensure that the interview questions were in alignment with the study. I considered the panel’s feedback and then made any adjustments as needed.

Lastly, I had completed the human subjects training, which promoted the safety of the participants of this study and echoed the voluntary participation of the subjects of this study. During the study, access to the data collected was limited to only the participants and myself. It was important to note that during the study, I had no authority or control over the participants.

**Data Collection**

Because I was completing a qualitative phenomenological study, I used semi-structured interviews as the main form of data collection method. The semi-structured interviews allowed me to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants regarding how they approached and worked within the MTSS framework.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

Interviews are a primary source of data collection in phenomenological studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the primary data collecting technique was that of semi-structured interviews that would be conducted by myself during the participants’ planning periods or after school. The interviews were conducted via Zoom video conferencing. Zoom video conferencing will be used as it was in alignment with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) response to the social distancing guidelines of COVID-19.

**Semi-Structured Open-Ended Interview Questions**

1. Please introduce yourself to me.
2. What is your gender?

4. What is your level of education?

5. What grade or grades do you typically teach?

6. How long have you worked in education?

7. Please walk me through your teaching philosophy.

   This question was important to ask the participants because Williamson (2019) reported that understanding one’s teaching philosophy is crucial when implanting MTSS, because for MTSS to be effective, it was important for schools to ensure that there was appropriate leadership, teaching structures, professional development opportunities, and communication, all of which are crucial in a teaching philosophy.

8. What is your knowledge of the Multi-Tier Systems of Support (MTSS)?

   Braun et al. (2020) reported that it was important for both teachers and administrators to have a strong knowledge of MTSS, simply because without strong knowledge, teachers would find it difficult to implement, as well as appropriately progress students through the different tiers when necessary. This question aimed to understand the teachers’ levels of knowledge on MTSS and the different tiers.

9. Since working, describe any professional learning or pedagogical support you have received surrounding the MTSS framework.

   Mason et al. (2019) purported that it was important for both teachers and administrators to experience professional development opportunities that focus on MTSS. The authors reported that for JMTSS to be appropriately implemented in a school, every teacher and administrator must be on the same page. This ensured that knowledge was gained in relation to how the framework and its associated tiers can be effectively provided to the students.
10. Tell me about the struggles you’ve experience with implementing interventions aligned to the MTSS framework.

Mason et al. (2019) discussed that it was important to identify barriers experienced when implementing the MTSS framework, as many schools struggled to appropriately implement the framework as they lack the knowledge of concrete strategies and tools that supported their instruction. Therefore, by asking participants the struggles that they had experienced, it provided me with information on how they could be better supported by both professional development and school-wide support.

11. Describe any successes you’ve experienced with implementing interventions aligned to the MTSS framework.

Successes in implementing interventions aligned to the MTSS framework demonstrated that there as appropriate knowledge and that the framework was effective in assisting struggling students. Poole and Kemp (2018) purported that when understanding the successes that had been experienced with implementing the MTSS framework, it demonstrated that there was appropriate collaboration between all stakeholders involved in assisting struggling students.

12. Discuss some barriers that your school has when it comes to implementing interventions aligned to the MTSS framework.

School-wide barriers were important to understand as Poole and Kemp (2018) discussed that both professional development and collaboration of all stakeholders was important when implementing the MTSS framework. Therefore, asking participants this question aided me in better understanding what specific barriers had been identified within the school system.

13. How could your school better support you throughout the implementation and the utilization of the MTSS framework?
Freeman et al. (2017) have discussed the importance of schools supporting their teachers when implementing and utilizing the MTSS framework. The authors discussed that for schools to demonstrate support to their teachers they must provide adequate training and professional development programs, as well as providing coaching to ensure that interventions are being appropriately administered in the classrooms.

14. Discuss how school leadership could better support your experiences and utilization of the MTSS framework?

Freeman et al. (2017) have discussed how school leadership should provide appropriate training and professional development opportunities to their teachers to ensure that they could utilize the MTSS framework adequately with their struggling students. Additionally, the authors also highlighted that school leadership could better support teachers by ensuring that the MTSS interventions were appropriately conceptualized described, and operationalized, as this signifies not only support but also a strong understanding of the framework.

15. Discuss how policies and procedures at your school support the utilization of the MTSS framework.

Williamson (2019) had reported that it was important for school policies and procedures to appropriately reflect the MTSS framework as this highlighted not only the school’s level of support, but also how their leadership had incorporated the framework into the school culture. Therefore, this question was helpful in better understanding how the participants perceived school support through clear and direct policies and procedures.

16. How could your school adapt their policies and procedures to better support you when implementing interventions and utilizing the MTSS framework.
Williamson (2019) reported that policies and procedures highlighting the MTSS framework in schools should be clear and direct. Therefore, participants in this study were able to discuss their perceptions of how policies and procedures could be improved or adapted to meet the needs of all stakeholders in relation to the MTSS framework.

17. Imagine you’re being interviewed at a conference, in front of thousands of your peers. What would you want to tell them to expect to experience as they implement intervention-based learning in their classrooms?

This question asked the participants their experiences of implementing intervention-based learning within their classrooms. This aided me in understanding how the implementation was currently completed in relation to the previous questions that discussed their successes, barriers, and perceptions of school support.

18. What else do you think would be important for me to know about your experience with MTSS?

This question was the final question that was asked to each of the participants. This allowed the participants to openly provide any other information that they perceived as being useful in relation to their perceptions and experiences of the MTSS framework.

These questions were reviewed by a panel of experts that included three individuals who had similar professional and educational experiences as myself. The panel of experts reviewed the interview questions in conjunction with the study’s problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, theoretical framework, and methodology. If any members of the panel recommended any changes to be made to ensure of stronger alignment, I made these changes accordingly.
When conducting each of the semi-structured interviews, I asked each of the participants the same questions to collect both demographic information and a better understanding of their lived experiences and perceptions regarding the MTSS framework. Each of the interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis. A follow-up interview was also completed with each of the participants after the transcriptions had been completed, to complete member checking. Member checking was a process where the participants reviewed the transcriptions to highlight any inaccuracies (Birt et al., 2016). If the participants reported any inaccuracies throughout the transcriptions, I made the adjustments as recommended to reflect exactly what the participants said.

**Focus Group**

The second form of data collection was that of a focus group that interviewed three individuals in a group format. A focus group allowed me to ask different participants open-ended questions in which they could answer in any manner that they saw fit, while also providing responses to other group members’ answers (Carey & Asbury, 2016). It was important to note that participants who were recruited to complete the semi-structured interviews were not allowed to participate in the focus group. That is, I recruited three new participants to complete the focus group. Like that of the semi-structured interview questions, I conducted the focus group via Zoom video conferencing, to remain in alignment with the CDC’s social distancing guidelines in response to COVID-19. During the focus group, each participant was provided with the link to the Zoom video conferencing meeting room where they answered the following five demographic questions and six open-ended questions:

1. What is your gender?
3. What is your level of education?

4. What grade or grades do you typically teach?

5. How long have you worked in education?

6. What is your knowledge of the Multi-Tier Systems of Support (MTSS)?

   Braun et al. (2020) reported that it was important for both teachers and administrators to have a strong knowledge of MTSS, simply because without strong knowledge, teachers would find it difficult to implement, as well as appropriately progress students through the different tiers when necessary. This question aimed to understand the teachers’ levels of knowledge on MTSS and the different tiers.

7. Discuss how policies and procedures at your school support the utilization of the MTSS framework.

   Williamson (2019) has reported that it was important for school policies and procedures to appropriately reflect the MTSS framework as this highlighted not only the school’s level of support, but also how their leadership had incorporated the framework into the school culture. Therefore, this question was helpful in better understanding how the participants perceived school support through clear and direct policies and procedures.

8. Tell me about the struggles you’ve experience with implementing interventions aligned to the MTSS framework.

   Mason et al. (2019) discussed that it was important to identify barriers experienced when implementing the MTSS framework, as many schools struggled to appropriately implement the framework as they lacked the knowledge of concrete strategies and tools that supported their instruction. Therefore, by asking participants the struggles that they had experienced provided
me with information on how they could better be supported by both professional development and school-wide support.

9. Discuss how school leadership could better support your experiences and utilization of the MTSS framework?

Freeman et al. (2017) have discussed how school leadership should provide appropriate training and professional development opportunities to their teachers to ensure that they can utilized the MTSS framework adequately with their struggling students. Additionally, the authors also highlighted that school leadership could better support teachers by ensuring that the MTSS interventions were appropriately conceptualized described, and operationalized, as this signified not only support but also a strong understanding of the framework.

10. How could your school adapt their policies and procedures to better support you when implementing interventions and utilizing the MTSS framework?

Williamson (2019) reported that policies and procedures highlighting the MTSS framework in schools should be clear and direct. Therefore, participants in this study were able to discuss their perceptions of how policies and procedures could be improved or adapted to meet the needs of all stakeholders in relation to the MTSS framework.

Like conducting the semi-structured interviews, I asked each of the participants of the focus group the same questions to collect both demographic information and a better understanding of their lived experiences and perceptions regarding the MTSS framework. The participants of the focus group had an opportunity to respond to other focus group members’ responses, allowing for a strong group discussion. Each of the interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis. A follow-up interview was also completed with each of the participants after the transcriptions had been completed, to complete
member checking. If the participants reported any inaccuracies throughout the transcriptions, I adjusted them as recommended to reflect exactly what the participants said.

**Document Review**

The third data collection method for this study included that of a document review. After receiving permission from the school district to complete the study, I contacted the school’s principal and requested copies of policies and procedures of the MTSS framework. I was able to review each of the policies and procedures regarding the MTSS framework and could then complete a content analysis to provide additional information regarding how the MTSS framework was supported through policies and procedures.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data using both NVivo 12.0 and a qualitative codebook. NVivo is a qualitative software program that assisted in coding the data collected from the interviews and is used at most research universities. Additionally, a qualitative codebook allowed me to highlight common words and phrases used by the participants while demonstrating exact quotations that the participants stated that support the findings of the research. To complete the data analysis for this study, I followed a qualitative analysis that follows Moustakas’s approach to analysis through transcendental phenomenology. When completing an analysis through transcendental phenomenology, it was important to note that it was important for me to focus on the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Before beginning the analysis, Moustakas reports that it was essential for researchers to understand their role. Therefore, when completing this, I practiced epoché. Epoché occurred where I described my own experiences (Butler, 2016). This aided in limiting bias towards the findings of the study. After practicing epoché, I then completed
Transcendental phenomenological reduction. Transcendental phenomenological reduction was where I aimed to describe the essences of the phenomenon being explored (Husserl, 2019).

The next step in the data analysis involved me synthesizing the data. When synthesizing the data, I combined textual and structural descriptions that the participants had reported on the phenomenon (Husserl, 2019). When synthesizing the data, I identified any patterns of words, sentences, or ideas that the participants had reported in their interviews and focus group (Soilemezi & Linceviciute, 2018). I completed this qualitative analysis with the assistance of NVivo 12.0 and the use of a qualitative codebook. NVivo is a qualitative data management system that assisted me in coding large amounts of data. The use of a qualitative codebook highlighted the themes that emerged from the dataset, while also providing direct participant quotations that supported and contributed to each theme (Roberts et al., 2019). I then completed this for each of the participants of the focus group and the semi-structured interviews. After the synthesis of the data, I combined both the textural and structural descriptions of each participant to reflect the entire group of participants (Husserl, 2019). This allowed me to identify themes that emerged from the dataset. Themes were defined as features of participants’ accounts and were in reflection of the research questions that guided the study (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). After identifying the themes, I then reported the study’s findings and answered the research questions (Husserl, 2019).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness, according to Connelly (2016), is defined as the extent of sureness in the data collected, interpreted and the methodology used to collect data. Trustworthiness adds value to the study and, essentially, requires transparency on the behalf of the researching conducting the study. Researchers should ensure measures are taken to ensure the data collected and
disseminated is worthy of consideration by readers (Amankwaa, 2016). To account for trustworthiness, I accounted for credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

**Credibility**

The confidence in the honesty of a study conducted, or credibility, is one of the most pertinent criteria (Connelly, 2016). To ensure credibility, prolonged engagement, or the extensive time spent with participants (Driessen et al. (2005). In this study, to account for credibility, I completed member checking. Member checking is a process where I completed a follow-up interview with all the participants where they reviewed the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the information collected (Birt et al., 2016). During the follow-up interview, I allowed the participants to report any instances of inaccuracies, where I then made changes to reflect exactly what the participants had said.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

The solidity of the data over time and over the conditions of the study was considered the dependability of the study (Connelly, 2016). Therefore, to account for dependability in this research, I provided a step-by-step procedure where the study could be replicated in other populations and geographical areas. Additionally, dependability occurred in this research, where I employed a panel of experts that reviewed the semi-structured questions to ensure that they were in alignment with the study’s problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the methodology. The panel of experts included three individuals who had similar education and professional experiences as myself. I did not know any members of the panel of experts personally.

Confirmability was also addressed in this study, as I ensured that the findings were based upon the participants words not that of myself (Amankwaa, 2016). Therefore, I employed
researcher epoché to understand my experiences and biases to the research. To ensure that my epoché was robust, I kept a reflexive journal of his experiences of the research process. Additionally, both confirmability and dependability could be addressed through rich, thick descriptions of themes and member checking. Therefore, in this study I completed member checking. When completing member checking, I provided a transcript of the interviews to each participant of the semi-structured interviews, as well as each participant of the focus group. The participants were able to review the transcripts for accuracy, and if any inaccuracies were identified by the participants, I made changes to reflect exactly what each participant said (Birt et al., 2016).

**Transferability**

Transferability was considered the ability for the study to be applicable to persons in other settings (Connelly, 2016). While conducting this study, I ensured to focus on the specifics of each participant’s story. A complete description of the context, location, and people being studied through transparency and openness. This is also important when it comes to completing other studies. Because in qualitative research the results may not be generalized to other populations or geographical areas, the results may also be transferable to other populations. Therefore, future research would be required for other populations and geographical regions to understand how teachers in a middle school perceived the MTSS process. Additionally, to improve transferability of this study, a rich, thick description and discussion of the site and setting where the study was being completed will occur. This was because it allowed future researchers to conduct the same research on similar setting, population, or geographical region, and thereby reaching similar conclusions (Daniel, 2019).
Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were considered while conducting this research study. The identifiable information that would identify the school district, school setting, or participants were removed from the data collected. As part of the data collection process, I applied and received consent to complete the study from the IRB as well as the school district of where this study was being completed. Before completing the semi-structured interviews and the focus group, the participants were required to review and sign a consent form. The consent form highlighted the study’s purpose as well as providing participants with an overview of what was expected of them. The consent form also addressed how confidentiality would be maintained, as well as how participants could remove themselves from the study at any time and without any repercussion and the level of risk associated with the participation of this study. It should be noted that the level of risk of participating in this study was minimal.

While completing the study, I ensured complete ethical implementation by upholding Liberty University and IRB standards compliance measure, which included voluntary participation and confidentiality. Data were collected and stored on a personal computer that was password-protected and participants were referred to in a numerical fashion (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.), and the participants’ school were referred to in an alphabetical order (e.g., School A, School B, etc.). All data will be destroyed after a period of five years, which follows Liberty University’s IRB procedures.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting. Therefore, the problem that this study addressed included teachers’ emotional and tangible
support when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the MTSS framework (King et al., 2012). This study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design to better understand the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants. Using a purposive sampling method, I collected data from a total of nine participants. This chapter highlighted the research questions that guided this study, the procedures, research design, and an explanation of the method of analysis that were used throughout the research. Information was also discussed surrounding the participants, setting, and ways to promote the trustworthiness of the study. The next chapter is that of Chapter 4, which will present an overview of this study’s findings.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting. Therefore, the problem that this study addressed included teachers’ emotional and tangible support when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the MTSS framework (King et al., 2012). Therefore, this study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design to better understand the participants' perceptions and lived experiences. Using a purposive sampling method, I collected data from a total of nine participants. This chapter will report the study results while identifying the participants' demographic characteristics, the theme development and subsequent results, and the answering of the research questions.

Participants

Six participants for the semi-structured interviews and three participants for the focus group participated in this study. Each participant presented to the study with various demographic characteristics, as highlighted in Table 1 below.
Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Grades Taught</th>
<th>Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30-40 years</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40-65 years</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41-45 years</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>17 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31 to 35 years</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>6th-8th</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30-35 years</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>6th, 7th, 8th</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30-35 years</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriella</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31 to 35 years</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>All grades</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25 years and less</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>6th, 7th, 8th</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivanna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31 to 35 years</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>6th, 7th, 8th</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants were able to introduce themselves to the researcher as follows:

**Anne**

The first participant reported that she was a female and was within the age range of 30 to 40 years. The participant reported that she had earned a specialist degree as the highest level of education and reports that she teaches the 7th grade. The participant stated that she had 12 years of experience.

**Brenda**

Participant 2 presented to the study as a female and within the age range of 40 to 65 years. She reported that she has a doctoral degree as her highest level of education and states that she currently is in administration, although she has taught all grades within her 15 and more years of experience.

**Caleb**
The third participant reported that he was a male and was within the 41-to-45-year age range. The participant reported that his highest level of education was a doctorate and stated that he has primarily taught the seventh grade over his 17 years of experience.

**Donna**

Participant 4 stated that she identified as a female and was within the age range of 31 to 35 years. The participant reported that her highest level of education was a specialist degree and that she taught within the 6th to 8th-grade levels. The participant reported that she had 12 years of experience.

**Emma**

The fifth participant reported that she was a female within the 30-to-35-year age range. The participant reported that her highest level of education is a specialist degree and that she has primarily taught in the 6th, 7th, and 9th-grade levels over her nine years of experience.

**Francine**

Participant 6 reported that she is a female and is within the 30 to 35-year age range. The participant reported that her highest level of education is a specialist degree and that she primarily teaches within the 7th grade. The participant stated that she has 13 years of experience.

**Gabriella**

The first participant of the focus group reported that she is a female within the 31-to-35-year age range. The participant reported that the highest level of education is a specialist degree and that she has experience teaching in all grade levels; however, she currently is teaching middle school. The participant reported that she has 12 years of experience.

**Henry**
Focus Group Participant 2 reported that he is a male and is younger than 25 years of age. The focus group participant reports a master's degree and primarily teaches within the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. The participant reported that he has three years of experience.

Ivanna

The third focus group participant reported that she is a female and is within the 30-to-35-year age range. The participant reported that her highest level of education is a master's degree and that she primarily teaches 6th, 7th, and 8th-grade students. The participant reported that she has six years of experience.

Results

This section of the chapter will present the study's findings and results. The first part of this section will discuss theme development, discussing the steps of the data analysis process. After I have discussed theme development, I will then organize the results into each research question. When completing this study's analyses, the following research questions guided my study:

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of teachers when it comes to selecting appropriate interventions for middle school students when working within the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

Sub-Question 1

What barriers do teachers experience when navigating throughout the different tiers of the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

Sub-Question 2
What processes do teachers use to evaluate the outcomes of students when participating in the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

**Theme Development**

I analyzed the data using both NVivo 12.0 and a qualitative codebook. To complete the data analysis for this study, I followed a qualitative analysis that follows Moustakas’s approach to analysis through transcendental phenomenology. Before beginning the analysis, Moustakas reports that it was essential for researchers to understand their role. Therefore, when completing this, I practiced epoché. Epoché occurred where I described my own experiences in a notebook, highlighting both professional and personal thoughts, values, and opinions regarding the phenomenon being explored. This aided in limiting any instances of researcher bias. After practicing epoché, I then completed transcendental phenomenological reduction. Transcendental phenomenological reduction was where I aimed to describe the essences of the phenomenon being explored. Therefore, transcendental phenomenological reduction aimed to describe the results of the study in relation to the essence of the phenomenon being explored (Husserl, 2019).

The next step in the data analysis involved synthesizing the data. When synthesizing the data, I combined textual and structural descriptions that the participants had reported on the phenomenon (Husserl, 2019). Synthesis of the data included identifying any patterns of words, sentences, or ideas that the participants had reported in their interviews and focus group (Soilemezi & Linceviciute, 2018). For example, within the first theme, participants used a variety of words, sentences, and ideas that included: “time,” “having time,” “finding time,” “time constraints,” “enough time,” “time in the schedule,” “allotted time,” and “time and caseload.” These words, phrases, and ideas were synthesized and combined to include a thematic label as
time constraints. This was because the participants identified the textual and structural
descriptions as experiencing restraints in time to appropriate complete their duties.

At this stage of the analysis, a qualitative codebook highlighted the themes under each
research question that emerged from the dataset while also providing direct participant
quotations and the structural and textural descriptions that supported and contributed to each
theme (Roberts et al., 2019). I then completed transcendental phenomenological reduction for
each of the participants of the focus group and the semi-structured interviews. After synthesizing
the data, I combined both the textural and structural descriptions of each participant to reflect the
entire group of participants, which allowed me to identify themes that emerged from the dataset
(Husserl, 2019). Themes were defined as features of participants’ accounts and reflected the
research questions that guided the study (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). After identifying the
themes, I reported the study’s findings and answered the research questions (Husserl, 2019). This
was completed for each of the research questions.

**Theme 1: Time Constraints**

The first theme that emerged from the dataset was that of time constraints. Table 2 and
Table 3 below demonstrate the participants who contributed to this theme and codes derived
from the data.

| Table 2. Participant Contribution for Theme 1 |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|
| P1   | P2   | P3   | P4   | P5   | P6   | FGP1  | FGP2  | FGP3  | Total | Percent |
| Theme 1: Time Constraints | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     | 7     | 78%    |
Table 3. *Codes for Theme 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1: Time Constraints</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enough time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in the schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allotted time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and caseload</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As depicted in Table 2, 78% of the semi-structured interviews and the focus group participants contributed to this theme. All participant contributions focused on the time constraints related to implementing the MTSS process. Anne, Donna, and Emma discussed their struggles with time when it came to implementing the MTSS process with efficacy and fidelity. Each participant discussed the lack of time needed to meet the state requirements for students at each tier sufficiently. Anne stated there was not enough time to pull those students, work with them, and provide them with strategies assigned to their individual learning needs. Furthermore, Donna discussed time constraints when attempting to implement each MTSS strategy for their students. Donna reported, “The struggle was trying to make sure that I had enough time to implement the actual strategy for getting the student where they needed to be.” Emma was able to discuss how there was not enough time in the day to complete all her duties when it came to working within an MTSS system. Emma reported:

> Time is a significant barrier. When you are thinking about instruction, we ask the teachers to do a lot, and then you must differentiate instruction and meet all the students' needs. Sometimes, it is just not enough time in the day; it seems like.
Individuals within the focus group also were able to identify time constraints related to large caseloads of students in the MTSS process as being a barrier to implementation. For example, Francine stated, “I would say my individual struggles come from the heavy caseload—having so many kids who need support with so many different aspects of readings.” Another participant, Caleb, discussed how a high caseload of students that required interventions created a time constraint, mainly due to learning what strategy works best for each student. Caleb stated that in addition to providing time to work individually with students, it is challenging to select and appropriate the intervention strategy to meet their individual needs.

Participants reported that they experienced both classroom and administrative time constraints with how they had to implement processes of MTSS to their students. Henry reported that time constraints occurred from both classroom and administrative reactions. Henry stated:

The biggest struggle has been the time constraints. They tend to place activities or assignments for a whole-school initiative in my subject area. That takes away a lot of time that I could have to do those 30-minute implementations, but I feel like I must choose between priorities.

Brenda discussed how she also experienced time constraints due to the different levels of learners in their classroom. Brenda stated, “I think teachers struggle with time constraints with many different levels of learners in their class. Then we ask teachers to progress monitor, which, in turn, they see that as an additional layer of work.”

**Theme 2: Lack of Training and Support**
The second theme that emerged from the dataset was that the participants perceived a lack of training and support. Table 4 and Table 5 below demonstrate the participants who contributed to this theme, as well as codes derived from the data.

Table 4. Participant Contribution for Theme 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2: Lack of Training and Support</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>P6</th>
<th>FGP1</th>
<th>FGP2</th>
<th>FGP3</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Codes for Theme 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Theme 2: Lack of Training and Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Received support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Needed support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As depicted in Table 4, 56% of the participants contributed to this theme. Within this theme, participants discussed how lack of training and support acted as a barrier when working within an MTSS framework. Some participants reported being supported while lacking professional development or learning, whereas others reported a lack of support and some professional development or learning. For example, Caleb stated, “I have received support, not as much professional learning as I feel necessary, but I receive support within the building.”
When discussing how they increased their knowledge regarding MTSS, Donna stated that it was an additional task communicated to her and other faculty by the administration without additional professional learning. Emma reported that lack of training was evident throughout the school system; however, she identified that school counselors tended to be better trained and more informed than teachers. Emma stated:

As a school counselor, having worked with the school psychologist and special education teachers, I typically help with giving the professional development for the MTSS framework. That is a part of my experience with it, but also sitting in on those in-services, learning more about that process and then how teachers, admins, and school counselors can better implement that program.

Francine discussed that although she had received training, it was not ongoing to the point where teachers’ knowledge is current or complete. For example, Francine stated:

I think in the beginning, not actually knowing the different interventions or fully understanding the tiers, it is hard to identify what the student needs or how often they need it, besides with whatever the counselor or the RTI person told you to do. That is how you, of course, with experience, gain more knowledge about it.

Finally, Henry discussed that as a new teacher, he needed support much like his students:

I think one of the struggles I personally have as being a newer teacher is understanding what the implementation looks like, and because I have not had that as much as others, it's a lot of trying to figure it out somewhat on my own.

As depicted within this theme, the participants reported that a lack of training and a lack of support acted as barriers when implementing MTSS. Participants reported that it was essential to provide knowledge and support to students and the teachers. Many participants reported that
this was an area in which schools needed to ensure that MTSS services were solid and streamlined.

**Theme 3: Processes not Streamlined for the Cohesive Evaluation of Students**

The third theme that emerged from the dataset included how processes were not streamlined for the cohesive evaluation of students. Table 6 and Table 7 below demonstrate the participants who contributed to this theme, as well as codes derived from the data.

**Table 6. Participant Contribution for Theme 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>P6</th>
<th>FGP1</th>
<th>FGP2</th>
<th>FGP3</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Processes do not Streamline for the Cohesive Evaluation of Students</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7. Codes for Theme 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 3: Processes not Streamlined for Cohesive Evaluation of Students</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor designs interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTSS is not supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chain of command protocol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTSS person not on leadership team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make the MTSS process a 30-minute block</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As depicted in Table 6, 89% of the participants contributed to this theme. The participants' responses from the interviews highlighted how they did not always perceive the
processes were not streamlined when it came to a cohesive evaluation of the students. For example, Anne reported how the counselor was responsible for the MTSS processes at the school. She stated that the counselor designed the interventions, and teachers were responsible for the implementation. Anne further reported that the teachers were provided with students and proposed meeting dates. All contact with parents was through the counselors leaving the teachers to show up for meetings at the scheduled time and place.

Brenda reported that she did not feel that MTSS was fully supported because teachers saw very few responses to students' poor performances. Brenda stated:

I do not truly think that MTSS is supported because teachers see very little being done when it relates to students performing at a low level or acting out. Their perception is they want to see kids moved or removed out the school or put in an intervention class, and that's not what the MTSS is about.

When discussing how he processes the outcomes of MTSS, Caleb stated, “I know we must do the checks, the quick checks, and whatnot to access their improvement, but that's about it. My knowledge is not where it should be, honestly.” Donna reported that she had the knowledge and discussed the process used to evaluate students. Donna reported:

Students were placed into the RTI process if they had some type of deficit. So based on their deficit, a goal was established, and you were to work with the students depending on if they were in tier two or tier three. If they were tier two, they received 20 minutes, and I want to say, two to three times a week. And if they are tier three, it was at least 30 minutes for at least three times a week. The students had some type of assessment at the end of the week to check their progress.
Emma highlighted their school's policies and procedures, stating that when it came to the processes used to evaluate students, she could refer to the manual to find how to assess if a child is underperforming or having behavior challenges. The manual Emma received provided her with what to look for and how to complete documentation. While Francine tied together how she was trained to properly evaluate the students’ progress:

So, every year at the beginning of the school year, we get trained on how to identify the interventions that the students need and how to input their monitoring into the system. That's the system that we use to track the interventions and the monitoring of the students.

Henry was able to discuss how the process was not streamlined at his school by highlighting how the MTSS person was not on the leadership team:

I think I will start by saying the MTSS person isn't on the leadership team. So, I will start by suggesting that representative be placed on the leadership team and then give them leeway to make decisions necessary to work.

Finally, Ivanna discussed how they could better streamline evaluations and processes at their school. Ivanna reported:

I feel like this will be a great time to make the MTSS process like a 30-minute block, like it's intended to be. I feel like our school just needs to truly come up with a plan, the same way that everyone else’s school does that I talked to, more so in elementary schools, or if that can't be done, I feel like the pull-out method will be really, good.

In summary, this theme concentrated on the participants discussing how they did not feel that the processes were streamlined at their school for evaluating student outcomes. Many were able to discuss how lack of training played a role and how MTSS was set up. These experiences
were reported to hinder or misalign how teachers and schools could effectively use robust processes to evaluate student outcomes.

**Document Analysis**

To complete the document analysis, there were several documents retrieved and analyzed. I collected policies and procedures from the school district under which School A was guided. The documents included grading expectations and student behavior codes.

**Student Behavior Codes**

The policies and procedures set forth by the school district of School A was able to highlight specific student behavior codes in relation to MTSS. The policies and procedure manual states that:

Students in Pre-K through 3rd grade will not be expelled or suspended from school for more than five consecutive or cumulative days during a school year without first receiving a multi-tiered system of supports, such as response to intervention. 'Multi-tiered system of supports or 'MTSS' also may include a systemic, continuous-improvement framework in which data-based problem-solving and decision making is practiced across all levels of the educational system for supporting students at multiple levels of intervention (Atlanta Public Schools, 2021, 20-2-742).

The policy that focuses on MTSS demonstrates that in relation to behaviors, students are provided extra support and guidance through MTSS before stricter levels of punishment or consequences are provided.

**Grading Expectations**

Through the policy and procedure manual, when reviewing grading practices, there was no data in there that highlighted MTSS specifically. However, the grading expectations were
able to discuss different techniques that could be used by teachers when working with students who are demonstrating some levels of difficulties. For example, the grading expectations states:

Students who have not yet provided evidence of mastery should have opportunities to receive reteaching and be reassessed prior to final grades being entered. This may occur during regular instructional time, during “lunch and learn” sessions, or at other times when students are able to attend that are not disruptive to required instruction (Atlanta Public Schools, 2021, IHA-R (1)).

Additionally, the grading expectations demonstrate and provide five steps for teachers on what to do when working with a struggling student:

a) Teachers shall hold individual conferences in person or by telephone with the parents/legal guardians of students in danger of not meeting expectations to discuss a plan for student remediation.

b) Students taking courses with required End-of-Course Tests (EOCT) whose numerical grades may drop below 70 based on the student’s score on the EOCT are also considered in danger of not meeting expectations.

c) Response to Intervention (RTI) protocols should be implemented for students in danger of not meeting expectations based on the needs of the individual student.

d) A social work referral should be completed if the teacher cannot establish contact with the parent/legal guardian via telephone, email, or US mail.

e) If a student earns a “Not Yet Meeting Expectations” or a numerical grade below 70 on a final report card and the teacher has not conducted a parent/guardian conference, the student shall temporarily receive an incomplete (I) and the opportunity to have mastery of
the standards reassessed via a performance plan (See Section 4. Incompletes) (Atlanta Public Schools, 2021, IHA-R (1)).

As highlighted, there appeared to be no specific steps when it comes to teachers to follow when working with the MTSS framework. The policies and procedure manual states that RTI protocols should be implemented without providing specific information.

**Research Question Responses**

This section will answer both the research question and sub-research questions that guided this study. Within this section, I will go through and ensure that the central research question and sub-research questions are answered by providing specific information from the participants in conjunction with the themes that were identified. I will complete this by discussing specific participant responses in relation to the research questions.

Central Research Question: What are the experiences of teachers when it comes to selecting appropriate interventions for middle school students when working within the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

The central research question of this study was to discuss the experiences of teachers when it came to selecting appropriate interventions for middle school students when working within the MTSS framework in a middle school setting. For the most part, the participants appeared passionate about their positions and how they would like to assist their students; however, they reported that working within MTSS was difficult due to time constraints in conjunction with the lack of training and/or support that they received from their schools. Many teachers reported that they experience high caseloads of students, both in the classroom and within the multi-tiered systems of support. The experiences of time constraints made it difficult for the participants to be efficient within their duties. In addition to time constraints, the
participants also reported that they had to complete other duties as well, decreasing the amount of time spent with students completing MTSS interventions. When being presented with other duties, the participants reported that they then had to choose between priorities, making it difficult to complete their job duties effectively. These reported and experienced barriers influenced the participants to find it difficult to select appropriate interventions to use with their students. Some participants reported that they were not involved in selecting appropriate interventions for their students as that was the role of the school counselor. These participants reported that they were solely responsible for implementing them. Additionally, other participants reported that they had no choice but to follow a chain of command, as they had to involved different individuals when evaluating MTSS interventions; some participants reported having to contact the school counselor, the coordinator, the parents, and the students to arrange a meeting, which increased the time spent on evaluations. These experiences, combined with a lack of time, lack of training, and a lack of support made evaluating students difficult and not efficient.

Sub-Question 1: What barriers do teachers experience when navigating throughout the different tiers of the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

The first research question aimed to understand the specific barriers that teachers experienced when navigating through the different tiers of MTSS in a middle school setting. Within this sub-research question, the participants were able to discuss how time constraints, lack of training, and a lack of support acted as main barriers. For example, when it came to time constraints, the participants were able to report that both finding time and having time was difficult due to their high caseloads and the allotted time provided to them by administration. Additionally, the participants reported that because of the lack of time, it was almost impossible
to work with students and appropriately apply the interventions used in MTSS. Not only were the participants experiencing high caseloads, but they also had to complete other duties. This was commented by one participant who reported that they were responsible for inputting collected data from progress monitoring probes, making their time inefficient. The participants reported that with the high number of students requiring MTSS interventions, they simply did not have the time to be efficient in their duties. Finally, another participant reported that because of time constraints, they had to choose between priorities. For example, another participant reported that due to the subject that they teach, they were unable to ensure that they could meet the 30-minute MTSS requirements when it came to implementing interventions.

Many of the participants also discussed how they have experienced a lack of training within the MTSS interventions and how they are implemented. For example, the participants reported that they were not really offered professional development opportunities when it came to both understanding MTSS and its implementations. Some participants reported that they were provided with knowledge about MTSS from their school’s administration; however, this knowledge appeared baseline and they found it difficult in implementing it appropriately in the classroom. This highlighted many perceptions from the participants that included: (a) their knowledge is not ongoing, (b) their knowledge is not complete or current, and (c) they do not understand how to appropriately implement this into the classroom due to the lack of knowledge and time constraints.

Finally, the participants also reported that they perceived a lack of support from the school’s administration when it came to the MTSS process and implementation. For example, one of the focus group participants reported that although they were provided with basic knowledge regarding MTSS and how it should be implemented, they are left in the classroom to
“figure it out” on their own. Participants perceived the importance of a community-based approach to working within an MTSS process, as that can aid in an increase of support. Either way, it appears that the participants perceived that it would behoove the school to provide more training and support on the MTSS processes, as well as more time to navigate through different processes.

Sub-Question 2: What processes do teachers use to evaluate the outcomes of students when participating in the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

The second sub-research question aimed to understand the processes that teachers used to evaluate the outcomes of students when participating in MTSS in a middle school setting. Within this sub-research question, the participants were able to discuss that there really was not one way to evaluate the outcomes of students who are in MTSS. Therefore, the processes that are highlighted do not appear to be streamlined that allows for a cohesive evaluation of students. For example, some participants reported that the student counselor was responsible for the MTSS process, whereas the teachers just delivered the content. The participants reported that not being involved throughout the entire process inhibited their ability to understand and implement strong evaluations. For example, the teachers reported that they are on the ones on the frontline working with the students; therefore, they should be involved at the beginning, working with the school counselor to appropriately select, and set up any required interventions. In many ways, the answer to this sub-research question is aligned with sub-research question one, where there is a lack of training and support. This is seen within this current research question, as participants reported that their knowledge is simply not where it should be when it comes to both implementation and evaluation.
Additionally, some participants reported that they must follow a chain of command when evaluating students. For example, some teachers must contact the school counselor, the SST coordinator, the parents, and the student to appropriately address any evaluation concerns. The participants reported that this could be quite timely, as it involves a lot of back-and-forth with different individuals, while simultaneously continuously documenting levels of success and cycling back to ensure that the right evaluation is being conducted. Similarly, to sub-research question one, this ties into time constraints and training; without either, participants reported that they struggle to properly implement strong evaluation levels within MTSS in middle school settings.

Finally, other participants reported that the MTSS process to evaluate student outcomes is not in alignment because the school is using MTSS in a different manner than what it was designed for. For example, a participant reported that their school would rather place their students in an intervention class or try to eventually remove them from the school, which they report is not the aim of MTSS. Rather, schools should be able to provide strategies to increase the students' performance. Additionally, when completing the analysis on the documents collected from the policy and procedure manual of School A, the data appeared in alignment with the participants' perceptions. There appeared limited information about MTSS and did not include much verbiage on MTSS when discussing both grading and student behavior expectations. Therefore, there appears to be a gap when it comes to a strong alignment of evaluating student outcomes, as teachers struggle to understand the expectations of both student behavior and grading under MTSS policies and procedures.
Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting. Therefore, the problem that this study addressed included teachers’ emotional and tangible support when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the MTSS framework (King et al., 2012). This study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design to better understand the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants. Using a purposive sampling method, I collected data from a total of nine participants. This chapter reported the results of the study while identifying the participants' demographic characteristics, the theme development and subsequent results, and the answering of the research questions. Three themes emerged as the findings from this study that included: (a) time constraints, (b) lack of training and support, and (c) processes that are not streamlined for the cohesive evaluation of students. The next chapter is that of Chapter 5 that will conclude this study by discussing the results and highlighting the study's implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The problem being studied was teachers’ lack of emotional and tangible support from their schools when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting. This chapter will discuss the interpretation of findings, the implications for policy and practice, and the theoretical and methodological implications. This dissertation will then conclude by identifying the study’s limitations and delimitations and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This section will provide a discussion on the study’s findings. Within this section, the researcher will discuss the interpretation of findings, where the researcher will discuss the findings of this study in relation to previous literature. This section will then discuss the implications for policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

This section discusses the interpretation of the findings from this study. In this study, data were collected from a total of nine participants. Three themes emerged as the findings from this study that included: (a) time constraints, (b) lack of training and support, and (c) processes that are not streamlined for the cohesive evaluation of students. This section will provide a comprehensive discussion of the study’s results in relation to previous literature.
Teachers experience time constraints. Within this study, the participants reported that they experience time constraints when implementing the MTSS framework. Most participants were able to discuss that they experienced both classroom and administrative time constraints with the way they had to implement processes of MTSS to their students. Additionally, many participants reported that having a high caseload of students was aligned with their lack of time to prepare and work with them adequately.

Previous literature has highlighted how time constraints can be experienced by teachers when working with MTSS, its implementations, and evaluations. For example, Lown (2020) reported that MTSS is not always implemented efficiently due to time constraints. Within her study, the author collected. Similarly, Verlenden et al. (2021) also noted time constraints within their study, that focused on screening methods of MTSS. The time constraints noted within their study included teachers’ burden of paperwork and “concerns over students found that time constraints, such as the end of the year, data points were not always whose emotional and behavioral needs they were not able to meet” (Verlenden et al., 2021, p. 15).

Lack of training and support. Many of the participants reported that they experienced a lack of training and support to implement MTSS properly. This finding appears in alignment with previous literature, as participants highlighted that both lack of training and lack of support acted as barriers when implementing MTSS. Participants reported that it was important for schools to provide knowledge and support to students and teachers. Many participants reported that this was an area that schools needed to work on to ensure that MTSS services were solid and streamlined.

Concerning previous literature, this finding is in alignment. For example, Leonard et al. (2019) reported that in schools, one of the key barriers is the lack of a blueprint on how to
implement MTSS appropriately. Additionally, Aspiranti et al. (2019) purported that although from a legislative perspective, MTSS is supported, frequently, school districts and schools are left to their own devices in determining what to change, how to adapt, and how to do so to implement MTSS tiers.

A lack of training can signify a lack of support from the administration, and this finding has been aligned with previous research. Principals and administrators who have opted to delegate the task of overseeing the implementation of MTSS ensure the strategy will be unsuccessful. For instance, Fuchs and Deschler (2007) have found that RTI models driven by districts in a top-down approach have lower chances of survival. The researchers claimed that the type of leadership needed for RTI to work is undoubtedly detached. It requires the strict involvement of the leaders and the other stakeholders, which is essential because RTI is not a process that a select few people can implement. It would not work with the school leader, just authorizing it to be done. The implementation of an RTI model needs more than one person (Fuchs & Deschler, 2007). Fuchs and Deschler stated that school leaders should feel empowered to set the vision of this intervention method and align other parts of the learning process to this vision.

Feuerborn et al. (2011) reported that establishing staff member buy-ins is crucial for implementing MTSS appropriately. The authors argued that staff should not be just tasked to carry out specific activities for the success of the RTI, but to be aware of why they need to do these activities in the first place, which highlights the need for both appropriate training and increased support. Finally, both Saunders et al. (2019) and Saunders et al. (2020) purported that there is one common pitfall when it comes to MTSS implementation. The researchers reported that this pitfall includes MTSS not being easy to implement for general education teachers.
without the necessary background and training. As a result, there is a need for a more collaborate effort to be made between general education and special education teachers so that these best practices can still be manifested in general education classrooms. The lack of training identified in this current study highlights the need for stronger collaborative education and training throughout the school and its environment.

**Lack of cohesive evaluation of students.** The third theme highlighted that the participants perceived the MTSS framework as offering a lack of cohesive evaluation of students. This finding concentrated on the participants discussing how they did not feel that the processes were streamlined at their school for the processes used to evaluate student outcomes. Many were able to discuss how lack of training played a role and how MTSS was implemented. These experiences were reported to hinder or misalign how teachers and schools could effectively use robust processes to evaluate student outcomes.

This finding is also in alignment with previous literature. For example, according to Thurlow (2020), MTSS had to meet specific criteria to ensure universal application. It is important to note that MTSS is a framework that should meet the needs of all students in a school, including those with the most critical of cognitive deficiencies. First, the MTSS approach should align general education and unique education delivery systems with each other. The supplemental special education is designed to support, simplify, magnify, and modify, if necessary, what is being taught in general education. Second, the MTSS framework should also be geared towards social-emotional and positive behavioral interventions so that students learn and benefit from everyday school routines (Thurlow, 2020). In time, if MTSS is adequate, special education supplementary supports could be lessened piecemeal as students already acquire patterns, recognize rituals, and learn routines that would work in their respective classes.
and the overall school (Thurlow, 2020). However, previous research has also highlighted that MTSS is not always streamlined, lacking a cohesive evaluation of students.

Leonard et al. (2019) argued that most of the MTSS innovations engaged in by schools became largely unsuccessful. Even though school districts have a good idea of MTSS, they do not do enough for a paradigm shift and cultural change. This lack of action highlights how streamlined processes and the evaluation of students can be affected. Aspiranti et al. (2019) provided an example of a weak evaluation of students that sets up schools to fail through an IQ-discrepancy model. Years of implementing the IQ-discrepancy model showed that it is not effective at all. Many individual experts within the field of education have consensually expressed disapproval of the use of this model, especially when this model is not supplemented with other indicators for quality of instruction (Aspiranti et al., 2019; Stanovich, 2005).

Under the IQ-discrepancy model, educators rely on standard scores on intellectual ability assessment to determine at-risk students. However, it was clear that this is not an accurate method. If the discrepancy between the scores of the students based on I.Q. Tests are lower than the pre-established criteria set forth by the student. The student is said to have met the criterion of SLD and therefore treated as a special education student. Some students with low I.Q. are not necessarily students with learning stabilities (Aspiranti et al., 2019; Stanovich, 2005). Low I.Q. Scores can also be contributed by many factors - memory, background, present circumstances at home. At the same time, relying on the IQ-discrepancy model also ensures that those with actual learning disabilities are undetected just they scored highly on the I.Q. Tests. If they are undetected, they cannot be given interventions to help them improve their performance (Aspiranti et al., 2019; Stanovich, 2005). Nevertheless, even though these changes have been identified through a replacement of MTSS, it appears there are still barriers to evaluating
students. One of the problems with special education and the RTI process is the assessment process, the inconsistent interventions and monitoring, and the referral process, which results in the disproportionality of African American males in special education phenomenon (However & Soltero-Gonzalez, 2018; Mason et al., 2019; Mullan, 2015; Leonard et al., 2019. Therefore, effective implementation of MTSS necessitates significant changes from the perspectives of educators and all stakeholders involved.

Finally, within this study, some of the participants reported that there is a chain of command that must be followed when evaluating students. Coghlan and Coughlan (2010) reported that throughout the problem-solving process, an evaluation of the problem, combined with intentional reflection, are consistently implored to determine a possible solution or hypothesis. The authors reported that therefore it is imperative that schools have a problem-solving team where they can meet to evaluate data and examine student performance. Much like the problem-solving process associated with the MTSS process, the problem-solving team should use universal screener data to analyze the students' present performance level to determine appropriate research-based interventions to integrate into the students' learning trajectory or to determine if they have been improving under the current interventions (Coghlan & Coughlan, 2010). Therefore, after six to eight weeks, Tiers 2 and 3, students' progress should be further evaluated by the problem-solving team. This frequent meeting solves problems, which also directly mirrors Revans' action learning theory. However, in this current study, the participants reported that this can be a timely process for teachers, having to coordinate with school counselors, MTSS coordinators, the parents, and students.

Implications for Policy or Practice
This section will discuss the implications of stakeholders concerning policy and practice. Implications for policies can help ensure that the MTSS process is streamlined throughout a school district, school, and culture. The implications for practice section will also include the teachers in the field and their students.

**Implications for Policy**

Although the laws that highlight and support the MTSS framework are clear and school districts have a good idea of MTSS, they do not do enough for a paradigm shift and cultural change within a school setting. This lack of action highlights how streamlined processes and evaluation of students can be affected (Leonard et al., 2019). Therefore, it is recommended that school districts implement clear policies for streamlining the process in middle schools. For example, many participants in this study discussed that the processes were not streamlined at their school when evaluating student outcomes. Many were able to discuss how lack of training played a role and how MTSS was implemented. These experiences were reported to hinder or misalign how teachers and schools could effectively use vital processes to evaluate student outcomes. It is recommended for school districts to appropriately outline the MTSS framework while providing training to their teachers so that everyone is trained, supported, and ready to work with the students and their families within the MTSS model.

**Implications for Practice**

There are also implications for practice that must be discussed. After school districts have set up appropriate policies that can allow for an appropriate streamlining of the MTSS framework, teachers and administrators can follow some recommendations. For example, administrators must make a more hands-on approach to leading and managing MTSS within their schools or districts. Previous research has indicated that many schools fail at implementing
MTSS because of the lack of leadership. Therefore, it is recommended that a top-down approach from an administration standpoint can provide increased support to the teachers and allow them to understand the school's policies. In addition, because MTSS is designed to be implemented as a group versus individually, administrators should provide a contact person or mentor to each teacher working within the MTSS framework. This mentor or a contact person can mentor the teacher through MTSS difficulties, providing training and professional development.

For teachers, it is essential to continuously reach out to communicate with other stakeholders regarding their experiences or barriers with the MTSS framework. For example, teachers need to communicate more effectively with administrators, principals, other teachers, and school counselors to be on board with the MTSS framework and their students faring within the different tiers. In addition, it is recommended that outside of offering training and supportive services to their teachers, administrators must also acknowledge how to appropriately handle middle school teachers' caseloads so that they have appropriate time to implement MTSS and work with the students.

**Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This section will provide an overview of both theoretical and empirical implications. Both theoretical and empirical implications will be discussed in relation to the findings of this study. The findings of this study will include the three themes that emerged from the dataset, including: (a) time constraints, (b) lack of training and support, (c) lack of cohesive evaluation of students.

**Theoretical Implications**

This study was guided by Revans’ (1982) action learning theory. Action learning refers to an experiential learning theory where participants learn by doing. After doing and learning,
participants also reflect on what they have done. Revans (1998) asserted that there were two major components of this method (a) programmed instruction, and (b) questioning. Programmed instruction refers to having a teacher or instructor providing information to the learner, while questioning refers to learners asking each other questions to deeply assess the learning experiences or situations they are going through; hence, action learning.

Revans' action learning theory was used in the current study, given the importance of problem-solving to the MTSS process. MTSS was created, not only as an alternative to the over and under-identification of students with learning disabilities, but to identify students' individualized learning needs and to maximize instructional outcomes for teachers through the meeting of the problem-solving team (Kovaleski et al., 2013). The problem-solving team convenes at the early stages of the identification of students for increased intensities of support in the MTSS process (Kovaleski & Black, 2010).

For this current study, the framework guided how the questions were formed to gather data, as well as how responses to the questions were analyzed. ALT provided insight as to why it was important to ask teachers the barriers that they experienced when navigating throughout the different tiers of the MTSS strategy in the middle school setting. The first question aligned to the principle of ALT requiring the learner to engage in the social activity in a questioning process designed to determine procedural steps at finding solutions (Revans, 1980). This sub-question was in alignment with the study as it allowed for a better understanding of how teachers navigated through the different tiers of support at finding solutions on how to specifically provide strong interventions to their students when facing barriers. The theory also aligned with the second question.
Therefore, this theory has several implications. It is apparent from the findings of this current study that the participants perceived some obstacles when it came to action learning: (a) time constraints, (b) lack of training and support, and (c) lack of cohesive evaluation of students. The findings of this study demonstrate that action learning is blocked for teachers in their middle school settings, simply because they experienced barriers that were not in alignment with the purpose of MTSS. For example, the participants of this study reported that they experienced time constraints. Time constraints make it difficult for teachers to follow the basic tenants of ALT-programmed instruction and questioning. Proper instruction could not take place if teachers do not experience sufficient time as it does not allow them effectively work with the students, evaluate their needs, and adjust interventions to align with academic success.

Additionally, the participants reported that they experienced a lack of training and support, including a lack of cohesive evaluation of their students. Within action learning theory, the goal is to prepare teachers to be able to effectively problem solve (Revans, 1988). However, this is difficult for the participants in this study, simply because a combination of time constraints, lack of training and support, and a lack of cohesive evaluation methods make it difficult for them to effectively work within an MTSS system. Therefore, it is imperative that schools address these issues and encourage their teachers to be problem solvers. By assisting their teachers with finding the time to effectively work with their students, and by providing them with adequate training and professional development opportunities, teachers will be able to work more successfully within an MTSS framework. Therefore, ALT has several implications. Implications can include allowing teachers to become more educated with the MTSS framework, so that they can better understand effective evaluation processes of their students. With this
knowledge, they will be more apt to ask questions to the school that can, in turn, increase the implementation and effectiveness of MTSS.

**Empirical Implications**

There are also empirical implications that must be addressed. Although the literature has aligned with the findings of this study, they do not necessarily promote that of a middle school environment. For example, previous empirical research has supported the findings that while working within the MTSS framework teachers experience time constraints, a lack of training and support, and a lack of cohesive evaluation of students. Yet, most of these studies were conducted in different settings. For example, when discussing time constraints, Lown (2020) reported that MTSS is not always implemented efficiently due to time constraints. Within her study, the author found that time constraints, such as the end of the year, data points were not always collected. However, Lown conducted her study throughout a variety of settings as she based her research on previous research; therefore, not all studies reflected a middle school environment. Yet, it would behoove middle schools to begin addressing these issues so that their students could experience a strong MTSS experience.

Similarly, Verlenden et al. (2021) also noted time constraints within their study, that focused on screening methods of MTSS. The time constraints noted within their study included teachers’ burden of paperwork and “concerns over students whose emotional and behavioral needs they were not able to meet” (Verlenden et al., 2021, p. 15). However, although their research focused on a middle school environment, it was included in a study with kindergartners.

A lack of training and support has also been addressed through the literature. Feuerborn et al. (2011) reported that establishing staff member buy-ins is crucial for implementing MTSS appropriately, while Fuchs and Deschler (2007) found that RTI models driven by districts in a
top-down approach have lower chances of survival. This has some important implications to
discuss. First, it is imperative that middle schools provide their teachers with adequate training 
and professional development programs so that they can play a more active role in the MTSS 
process. However, it is important to note that by offering training and professional development, 
it can transition middle schools out of a top-down approach; therefore, being experiencing a 
more effective MTSS program (Fuchs & Deschler, 2007). For example, with adequate training, 
teachers can become more involved, thereby changing the alignment of how MTSS is not only 
viewed but implemented within a middle school setting.

With improved training and professional development opportunities also comes an
improved cohesive evaluation of students. Coghlan and Coughlan (2010) reported that it is
important for schools to create a problem-solving team, where there is a strong collaborative
effort in evaluation processes. The authors reported that throughout the problem-solving process,
an evaluation of the problem, combined with intentional reflection, are consistently implored to
determine a possible solution or hypothesis. Therefore, if teachers are provided with sufficient
time and appropriate caseloads, in conjunction with increased training and professional
development opportunities, they can play a stronger role in evaluation processes of their
students.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Some limitations were experienced within this study. The first limitation includes the
population and geographical region in which this study took place. This study focused on
teachers of one middle school located in a metropolitan city in Georgia, all of whom had a
minimum teaching experience of two years at a Title-1 learning environment and who were
general education teachers with experience teaching special education students in a co-taught
environment. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other populations and geographical regions, prompting future research to focus on other populations and geographical regions. In addition, the school understudy had 800 students and 85 staff members as of 2019, affecting the findings. For example, differing numbers of students and staff members could provide different findings; therefore, future research would be needed to understand teachers' perceptions in schools with different populations.

Another limitation is the sample size. Although this study was qualitative and required a sample size determined upon data saturation, I only interviewed six participants for the semi-structured interviews and three for the focus group. Therefore, larger sample sizes may provide different results, which should be researched in future studies.

A final limitation is the data collection methods. Because I had known of some of the participants in this study, it could have affected the results. However, in this study, I aimed to reduce any instances of researcher bias and negative positionality. For example, I constructed an interview protocol that I followed to ensure that I asked each participant the same question in the same manner and had a panel of experts review the interview and focus group questions to ensure alignment. Although it was assumed that the participants would be truthful when answering the questions in this study, a limitation could have been experienced within the focus group. The participants were asked questions in front of other teachers whom they may have known, which could have impacted the truthfulness of the questions that were asked to them in a group format.

Certain delimitations must be discussed within this study. Delimitations are defined as decisions that I made to define the study's boundaries (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). One of the first delimitations included that of the sample that was recruited for this study. Participants of
this study were individuals who had experience teaching students in the MTSS process for behavior and academic purposes. I attempted to have equity in gender within the sample to represent variety. The teachers included in this study were all considered veteran teachers—in that they had taught in a Title I learning environment for a minimum of two years before participating in the study. In addition, the teachers were all general education teachers with experience teaching special education students in a co-taught environment. Finally, each teacher had worked in the district and the site under the same leadership for at least two years. This consistency of experience ensured that each of the teachers experienced a continuity of administrative presence and would provide higher levels of information when answering either the semi-structured interview or focus group questions. Therefore, individuals that did not meet this criterion were unable to participate in this study.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

It is recommended that future research continue to focus on MTSS and how it is implemented within middle schools and other levels of education. For example, future research should focus on different types and levels (e.g., urban versus suburban schools, high school versus middle school) and different populations. In addition, instead of continuing research on teacher perceptions, it would behoove future researchers to focus on other stakeholders, including administrators, school counselors, principals, assistant principals, and parents, to understand their perceptions of the MTSS process. Variability of all stakeholder responses will provide additional information on how all stakeholders of an educational institution perceive MTSS processes and implementations and could assist school districts and schools in developing more robust policies and procedures and training programs for their staff.
Another recommendation is to complete quantitative studies that follow a survey research design, allowing future research to focus on larger sample sizes or multiple schools within a district to understand better how streamlined processes are for implementing MTSS and their evaluation methods. A final recommendation is that future research could include a longitudinal study to determine how MTSS implementation occurs and is perceived over time. Because this study only focused on the perceptions of MTSS implementation over a snapshot in time, future studies could uncover information regarding how MTSS is aligned and developed over the years.

**Conclusion**

The problem being studied was teachers’ lack of emotional and tangible support from their schools when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting. This chapter discussed the interpretation of findings, the implications for policy and practice, and the theoretical and methodological implications. This dissertation then concluded by identifying the study’s limitations and delimitations and recommendations for future research.

This study’s purpose was met, as the participants were able to provide their experiences regarding the implementation of the MTSS framework in a middle school setting. In this study, data were collected from a total of nine participants. Three themes emerged as the findings from this study that included: (a) time constraints, (b) lack of training and support, and (c) processes that are not streamlined for the cohesive evaluation of students. These key themes identified the importance for school districts and schools to be mindful of teacher time constraints, including their caseloads to be provided with higher levels of support and training. Additionally, this study
demonstrated that the participants perceived that schools needed to do better when streamlining the MTSS process and providing clear and cohesive student evaluation methods. Previous research purported that schools that are not clear in their policies and procedures and the support of teachers tend to be largely unsuccessful. By addressing the three key findings of this study, teachers will be better supported in implementing and evaluating their students involved in an MTSS process and begin to work on any disproportionalities that different student groups experience.
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Freeman, R., Miller, D., & Newcomer, L. (2015). Integration of academic and behavioral


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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

June 29, 2021
Martavious Johnson
Tamika Hibbert

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-874 An Examination of Teachers’ Experiences with the Multi-Tiered System of Support Process in a Middle School Setting: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Martavious Johnson, Tamika Hibbert:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) 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 the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications 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
Research Ethics Office
Appendix B

School Approval Letter

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**Local School Research Request Form**

This form should be completed by APS employees who plan to conduct research at their assigned school only. Employees should complete this form and gain approval by the school principal prior to starting research activities at the school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION A: RESEARCHER INFORMATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of Researcher: Martavious K. Johnson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliated University: Liberty University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position at School (Official title and grade taught): MTSS Intervention Specialist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION B: RESEARCH PROJECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title of Research Project / Study: An Examination of Teachers’ Experiences with the Multi-Tiered System of Support Process in a Middle School Setting: A Phenomenological Study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Have you received IRB approval from your institution? ☐ Yes ☒ No

Statement of problem and research question(s):

Statement of Problem: The problem is teachers' lack of emotional and tangible support from their schools when exerting time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the MTSS framework.

Research Questions: What are teachers' experiences in selecting appropriate interventions for middle school students when working within the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

Sub-Question 1: What barriers do teachers experience when navigating throughout the different tiers of the multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

Sub-Question 2: What processes do teachers use to evaluate students' outcomes when participating in multi-tiered systems of support in a middle school setting?

Subjects or population for the study (example: students in 4th grade; students completing STAR assessment during SY2016): Teachers working in a middle school located in a metropolitan city in Georgia were the targeted population for this study. Teachers who will be included in this study will all considered veteran teachers—in that they have taught in a Title I learning environment for at least two years before participating in the study. Also, the teachers must all be general education teachers with experience teaching special education students in a co-taught environment. Additionally, each of the participating teachers has worked in the district and worked at the site under the same leadership for at least 2 years before the study.

Projected Start Date (05/2021): [Date]

Projected Completion Date (05/2022): [Date]

The research is related to:

☑ Doctoral Study ☐ Masters Study ☐ Class Project

☐ Professional Project: Please describe:

All researchers must a) adhere to District policies and applicable laws, such as PERPA, which govern the privacy and confidentiality of students’ records, b) adequately inform study participants, including students and/or parents, and school staff of the purpose of the study and clearly articulate that participation is voluntary, and c) protect the rights and welfare of all human subjects. Researchers must have their institution’s IRB approval and must get approval from their principal.

Researcher Signature: [Signature]

Principal Signature: [Signature] Date of Approval: [Date]

A completed scanned copy should be emailed to research.screening@atlanta.k12.ga.us for documentation and filing. Once approval is received from the principal no further approval is necessary.

Page 1 | Updated: 8/2017
Appendix C

Email Recruitment Letter to Participants

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to understand teachers’ experiences when implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school setting, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study. Participants must have experience teaching students in the MTSS process for behavior and academic purposes, considered veteran teachers—in that they have taught in a Title I learning environment for at least two years before participating in the study, and general education teachers with experience teaching special education students in a co-taught environment. Additionally, each of the participants must have worked in the district and worked at the site under the same leadership for at least 2 years before the study. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a Zoom interview or focus group and member checking. It should take approximately 50 minutes to complete the procedures listed. Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

To participate, please contact me at [redacted] via email at [redacted] to schedule an interview. A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview/focus group.

Sincerely,
Martavious K. Johnson
Doctoral Candidate
Appendix D

Consent Form for Participants

Consent

Title of the Project: An Examination of Teachers’ Experiences with the Multi-Tiered System of Support Process in a Middle School Setting: A Phenomenological Study
Principal Investigator: Martavious K. Johnson, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a general education teacher with experience teaching special education students in a co-taught environment and experience teaching students in the MTSS process for behavior and academic purposes. Participants must have taught for at least two years in a Title I learning environment. Lastly, participants must have worked in the same district at the site, under the same leadership for at least 2 years prior to the study. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?
The purpose of the study is to discover teachers’ experiences implementing the MTSS systemic framework in a middle school learning setting. This study will address teachers’ emotional and tangible support when exerting the time, energy, and resources necessary for successful implementation of the components of the MTSS framework.

What will happen if you take part in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Engage in an audio-recorded interview of about 45 minutes one-on-one (up to 15 participants).
2. Engage in an audio-recorded interview with a focus group consisting of your peers of about 45 minutes (up to 6 participants).
3. Member checking of the interviews for accuracy for 10 minutes (all participants).

How could you or others benefit from this study?
With an increased knowledge of the MTSS model, effectiveness and efficiency in implementing the system should improve. Understanding this model and its expected experiences will assist teachers in the future by aiding them in avoiding mistakes when implementing this important educational intervention.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?
The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?
The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any
information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

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

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you apart from focus group data will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Martavious K. Johnson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [number] or [email]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Tomeka Hibbert, Ed.D., at [number].

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

_I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study._
☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date
Appendix E

Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Participants

1. Please introduce yourself to me.

2. What is your gender?


4. What is your level of education?

5. What grade or grades do you typically teach?

6. How long have you worked in education?

7. Please walk me through your teaching philosophy.

8. What is your knowledge of the Multi-Tier Systems of Support (MTSS)?

9. Since working, describe any professional learning or pedagogical support you have received surrounding the MTSS framework.

10. Tell me about the struggles you’ve experienced with implementing interventions aligned to the MTSS framework.

11. Describe any successes you’ve experienced with implementing interventions aligned to the MTSS framework.

12. Discuss some barriers that your school has as a whole when it comes to implementing interventions aligned to the MTSS framework.

13. How could your school better support you throughout the implementation and the utilization of the MTSS framework?

14. Discuss how school leadership could better support your experiences and utilization of the MTSS framework?
15. Discuss how policies and procedures at your school support the utilization of the MTSS framework.

16. How could your school adapt its policies and procedures to better support you when implementing interventions and utilizing the MTSS framework?

17. Imagine you’re being interviewed at a conference, in front of thousands of your peers. What would you want to tell them to expect to experience as they implement intervention-based learning in their classrooms?

18. What else do you think would be important for me to know about your experience with MTSS?
Appendix F

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions for Participants

1. What is your gender?
3. What is your level of education?
4. What grade or grades do you typically teach?
5. How long have you worked in education?
6. What is your knowledge of the Multi-Tier Systems of Support (MTSS)?
7. Discuss how policies and procedures at your school support the utilization of the MTSS framework.
8. Tell me about the struggles you’ve experienced with implementing interventions aligned to the MTSS framework.
9. Discuss how school leadership could better support your experiences and utilization of the MTSS framework.
10. How could your school adapt its policies and procedures to better support you when implementing interventions and utilizing the MTSS framework?
## Appendix G

### Themes Related to Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Content Description</th>
<th>Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SQ1: Barriers of MTSS</td>
<td>Time Constraints</td>
<td>P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, FGP1, FGP3</td>
<td>P1: The main struggle is having time to implement the process with efficacy and fidelity, having a set out time to pull those students and work with them and work with those different strategies and interventions that we have decided upon that would be necessary for those students. So, finding time to work with those students, to include those interventions, and the actual logistical parts of the process can sometimes be tedious. So, I've noticed that when I had to be the one responsible for inputting the data, inputting the probes, not me personally, but I've heard other teachers say that it made them less likely to be efficient because of the extra added stress from the logistical part of the RTI process in general.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>P2: I think teachers struggle with time constraints with so many levels of learners in their class. Then we ask them to progress monitor, which, in turn, they see that as an additional layer of work. I don't know that it is more challenging, but it seems to be more challenging in middle school with the students because the students even fight against the teachers when being pulled aside to deliver.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>P3: Some of the struggles is learning what strategy works for each kid, having a time to work individually with the kids who may have special needs.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>P3: Having an abundant number of students who need it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P4: The struggle was trying to make sure that I had enough time to implement the actual strategy for getting the student where they needed to be.</td>
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P5: Really time, time is a major barrier. When you're thinking about instruction, we're really asking the teachers to do a lot and then you must differentiate instruction and meet all the students' needs. Like sometimes it's just not enough time in the day it seems like. Then just the number of responsibilities that school staff are responsible for. It's just hard to fit it in and do it with fidelity.

FGP1: we were asking for a time in the schedule or there is time in the schedule, but you take the time away to do whatever it is you want to do, or you cut into the allotted time, or you remove classes that were in place to support the students who are in the program. And yet you eliminate classes and then expect the classroom teachers to have the time to teach their general ed students and service the MTSS students and like participant two said, everybody needs something different.

FGP1: I would say my individual struggles come from the caseload, like just having so many kids who need support with so many different aspects of readings. So, like it might be a child who has comprehension issues, it might be another kid with vocabulary issues, it might be a kid who is strongly informational textbooks cannot process literary, and then having the time in that class periods to teach them grade level standards and to address their deficiencies at the grade level that they're currently functioning on and just having the time to do it.

FGP3: The biggest struggle has been the time constraints. And they come from inside of my classroom and from higher up because of the subject that I teach, they tend to place activities or assignments for the whole school level in my subject area. So that takes away a lot of time that I could have to do those 30-minute implementations because it's like you
must choose. And then when you do have time and you do start to get a rhythm, something happens, we must test, we must do something.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of Training and support</th>
<th>P3, P4, P5, P6, FGP2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P3: I've received support, not as much professional learning as I feel necessary, but I receive support within the building.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P4: It was told to me. There was no formal meeting or a formal training behind that.</td>
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<td>P5: As a school counselor, having worked with the school psychologist and special education teachers, typically I help with giving the professional development for the MTSS system. That's a part of my experience with that, but also sitting in on those in services, learning more about that process and then how teachers, admins and, excuse me, school counselors can better implement that program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P6: So, every year at the beginning of the school year, we get trained on how to identify the interventions that the students need and how to input their monitoring into action. That's the system that we use to track the interventions and the monitoring of the students. Other than that, PBIS, we usually PBIS meetings where the PBIS team may tell us about any upcoming events or something that's going on in the school to increase the use of PBIS.</td>
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<td>P6: I think in the beginning, not actually knowing the different interventions or fully understanding the tiers, it's hard to identify what the student needs or how often they need it, besides with whatever the counselor or the RTI person told you to do. That's how you, of course, with experience you gain more knowledge about it.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>RQ2: Processes Teachers Use to Evaluate Students</strong></td>
<td><strong>Processes not streamlined for cohesive evaluations of students</strong></td>
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| FGP2: I think one of the struggles I personally has as being a newer teacher, not only do the children need the support, but as a new teacher needed support, I have the what the implementation looks like. And because I haven't had that as much other than the MTSS representative and my mentor teacher is not... The community effort is needed on both sides for the children and for the teachers, putting these strategies in. And so, seeing as not having had that, it's a lot of trying to figure it out somewhat on my own. And that's not beneficial for children to be in a trial-and-error type of situation. | **P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, FGP2, FGP3** | **P1:** The counselor designs the interventions and so pretty much the teachers are just responsible for delivering. At the beginning of school, the counselor already has a list of the students. She has a list of their meeting dates. She sends the contact out to the parents. All the teachers, we just show up.  

**P2:** I do not truly think that MTSS is supported because the teachers see very little being done when it relates to students performing the low level or acting out. Their perception is they want to see kids moved or removed out the school or put in an intervention class. And that's not what the MTSS is about. It's about providing them with strategies to increase the student's performance. Once the perception changes, they may go the extra mile. But right now, I just know, even when I was serving in your situation, I had to reiterate to teachers it does not mean that the kid was going to be removed from your class and put in special ed.  

**P3:** I know we must do like the checks, the quick checks and what not to access their improvement, but that's ... My knowledge is not where it should be, honestly. |
P4: Students were placed into the RTI process if they had some type of deficit. So based on their deficit, a goal was established, and you were to work with the students depending on if they were in tier two or tier three. If there were tier two, they did 20 minutes for, I want to say two to three times a week. And if it's tier three, it was at least 30 minutes for at least three times a week. And the students had some type of assessment at the end of the week to check their progress.

P5: Policies and procedures? I mean, it is laid out how to utilize the system, so how to assess the if a child is underperforming, or having some behavioral struggles? It's laid out what to look for, how to document it? How to do some... like the first line of defense, how to make some just initial changes within the classroom to accommodate that under-performance or whatnot?

P5: Then the next steps in terms of the chain of command protocol, excuse me, like in terms of who to contact next? So, you identify a student who is maybe underperforming, having some challenges or whatnot. Then okay, the next step might be to contact the school counselor and then the school counselor can... Or the SST coordinator, whomever, and then that individual can coordinate a meeting or whatever. In that meeting you explain those concerns, add the parent into the mix, coming up with a plan of action, trying to implement that plan of action for a specific amount of time. And then documenting and assessing the levels of success with the implementation of interventions and then cycling it back, if necessary, or elevating the level of care, right, the implementation, interventions, or whatnot.

P6: So, every year at the beginning of the school year, we get trained on how to identify the interventions that the students need and
how to input their monitoring into [inaudible 00:02:53]. That's the system that we use to track the interventions and the monitoring of the students.

FGP2: I think it was in my first year when we're using the individual groups in the morning time. I had students who came to me on a fourth, fifth grade reading level. And they were able to grow to at least be in middle school, to sixth and seventh grade. So, I think those are some of the highlights that I was able to see with the MTSS.

FGP2: I think I will start by putting... Because at our school, the MTSS person isn't on the leadership team. So, I will start by doing like I wouldn't form a whole separate team. I think I will put our representative on the leadership team and then give them leeway. Give that person the leeway to make decisions necessary to work. But our MTSS person, right, our leadership team, and then with that, they will be in conjunction with the instructional coaches. So that way they could come together and see how they will be their own team, as far as instruction and curriculum designed for our children. And see how the MTSS framework can be interwoven as I spoke earlier like into the curriculum, in order for doing what's best for our children.

FGP3: I feel like this will be a great time to make the MTSS process like a 30-minute block, like it's intended to be. But when I think of it, I think of it as each child has a special location that they go to. So, the same way we move around, we switched classes. I'm seeing that they switch classes so that the person who truly specialized in the area that they're lacking in can give it to them. I feel like our school just needs to truly come up with a plan, the same way that everybody else school does that I talked to, more so in elementary schools, or if that can't be done, I
feel like the pull-out method will be really, good.