EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT IN A TITLE I SCHOOL: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Whitney Anita Wiggins

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) interventions on students' academic achievement and disruptive behavior, as well as their perceptions of barriers that may undermine the impact of these interventions. Despite the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and interventions known as response to intervention (RtI) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), students at the study site schools, a Title I elementary school and Title I high school in rural North Carolina, continued to demonstrate academic underachievement and behavioral problems. With the implementation of intensive interventions, academic and behavioral problems persisted. MTSS was defined as an evidence-based, tiered system of interventions and supports aimed at improving students' academic achievement and behaviors. The study was theoretically guided by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) and Skinner's operant conditioning theory. Data were gathered via questionnaires, participant journals, and open-ended interviews with 12 educators at two study site schools. All data were thematically analyzed. This study focuses on the following themes: perceived impact of MTSS, RTI, and PBIS; implementation fidelity is important; perceived barriers to implementation fidelity; and strategies to improve MTSS implementation fidelity. This study includes insights into educators' perceptions of the academic and behavioral impact MTSS has on students, as well as educators' implementation of the intervention.

Keywords: academic, behavior, interventions, supports, Title I

Copyright Page

Dedication

It is with all my heart and appreciation that I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved parents and my two greatest blessings in this life, my sons: Colby and Carter.

Acknowledgments

I would like to first thank Christ for His grace, His support, and unconditional love. Without Him, none of this would be possible.

To my chair, Dr. Linda Holcomb, and my methodologist, Dr. Pannone for agreeing to be part of my dissertation journey. The level of guidance, encouragement, and support I received from you both throughout this process has been incredible and made it possible for me to finish.

Mom and Dad, my entire life you both instilled in me a hard work ethic and encouraged me to pursue my dreams. You both made me believe that I could achieve anything I chose in life, and because of your continuous love and support, I have been able to do exactly that.

Colby and Carter, you both have been the reason I chose to continue my education and pursue my Ph.D. You both are the greatest blessings in my life, and I am incredibly proud of you two. Always remember you can accomplish anything with hard work, dedication, and prayer. This is for you both. I love you two more than you will ever know.

I would also like to thank my entire family (Colby, Carter, Chris, Will, Tiffany, Savanna, Logan, Layla, and Granny Jessie), for giving me some of the best times of my life. I love you all.

Mr. Mike and Dr. Regina Treadway, you both are very special to me. Your belief in me and what I could accomplish helped to drive me to not only pursue school administration but also to continue my education and complete my Ph.D.

Dr. Joseph Harris, thank you for being my cheerleader and for being supportive throughout this process. Without your love, support, and encouragement, this would not have been possible. 36° 18' 55.116" N, 82° 22' 8.4" W.

Dr. Susan Fouts, thank you for supporting and encouraging me in all my doctoral endeavors.

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List of Abbreviations

Differential Reinforcement of Alternative Behaviors (DRA)

Differential Reinforcement of Incompatible Behaviors (DRI)

Differential Reinforcement of Low Rates of Behaviors (DRL)

Differential Reinforcement of Other Behaviors (DRO)

Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA)

Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

End of Course Test (EOC)

End of Grade Test (EOG)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Improving America's Schools Act (IASA)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)

In-school Suspension (ISS)

Integrated Academic and Behavior Systems (IABS)

Local Education Agency (LEA)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)

North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS)

Out-of-school Suspension (OSS)

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Response to Intervention (RtI)

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

School-wide positive behavior interventions (SWPBIS)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Due to the increased number of U.S. Title I students not performing proficiently on standardized testing, and the growing rate of student drop-out, educators and administrators have continued to discuss approaches to resolve these areas of concern (United States Department of Education, 2018). To address these ongoing issues, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) developed and integrated academic and behavior systems (IABS), which function to support the sustained implementation of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) across the State of North Carolina. Despite the implementation of MTSS interventions, many students attending Title I schools in North Carolina continue to struggle, both academically and behaviorally. The ongoing academic and behavioral issues demonstrated by students at the two study sites located in two different counties and two different school districts. One site was a Title I primary school, and the other was a Title I high school in North Carolina, which suggests intervention problems that may be linked to program effectiveness or implementation fidelity (NCDPI, 2020).

The study aimed to explore these potential issues through the perceptions and experiences of educators at the study site schools. This chapter provides an overview of MTSS, including the historical, social, and theoretical contexts from which the interventions were derived. Additionally, Chapter One includes a discussion of the researcher's positionality, the research questions, and statements about the research problem and purpose. The historical, theoretical, social, empirical, and practical significance of the research is also explained. Definitions of key terms are provided, and the chapter closes with a brief summary.

Background

To begin, it is important to understand the background of MTSS. This section provides a discussion of the historical, social, and theoretical contexts of MTSS. Historically, MTSS has yielded positive student academic and behavioral achievement, which has, in turn, increased students' college and career readiness (Morningstar, Lombardi, & Test, 2018). Student success from MTSS is largely attributed to the theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky (1978) and Skinner (1938).

Historical Context

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was enacted to protect the rights of students with disabilities and ensure their individual needs were met (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act later became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which was reauthorized in 1997 (Drasgow et al., 1999). Under the reauthorization, PBIS was introduced. The U.S. Department of Education recognized PBIS as a tiered framework, rather than a specific program or curriculum (Horner et al., 2015). In 2004, Congress updated IDEA to no longer require students to demonstrate severe discrepancies between intellect and academic achievement to receive special supports (Smith, 2005). When research-based interventions are used to determine eligibility for funding, schools do not have to use the discrepancy model for special education screening (IDEA Parent Guide, 2006). IDEA was later amended through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, which specifically mentioned the use of MTSS (About IDEA, 2020).

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2020) defined MTSS as an evidence-based, tiered framework that specifically targets academic and behavioral deficits, as well as social-emotional learning. Legislation such as IDEA and ESSA have served as platforms

to advocate for the procedural rights of students with disabilities. Prior to the passing of this legislation, students with severe disabilities were unable to be educated in free and public institutions (Lipkin et al., 2015). It was not until 1971 when the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) sued the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for failing to provide free, public education to students with mental retardation (The Public Interest Law Center, 2019). PARC v the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania later led to the passing of procedural precautions, which became known as Education for All Handicapped Children in 1975 (The Public Interest Law Center, 2019).

Under the "Child Find Requirement" of IDEA Part B, educational institutions have a legal obligation to identify students with learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). As of 2004, the use of intelligence quotient (IQ) testing was no longer required; response to intervention (RtI) became accepted as a reliable form of data collection for referring students to special education services (Gischler et al., 2019). The NCDPI considered MTSS to provide a more accurate evaluation of students in students in need of special education services, as it relies on levels of intervention and support students receive rather than complete reliance on IQ testing.

The signing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 made a direct reference to the use of MTSS (Martin, 2016). The passing of ESSA reenacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which provided equal educational opportunities to all students, regardless of ability (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). ESSA also protected the rights of disadvantaged students with much higher educational needs than their peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). With the endorsement of ESSA, MTSS quickly became a priority in education (McCart & Miller, 2019). The objective of MTSS is to proactively utilize interventions among general education students to more quickly identify and address academic

and behavioral deficiencies and identify students in need of special education services (Rosen, 2020).

The MTSS model functions as an umbrella for RtI and PBIS because both are tiered models of intervention. RtI addresses academic deficiencies, while PBIS addresses behavioral needs (Harn et al., 2015). All students participate in the universal first tier of MTSS, in which they receive strong educator-led instruction (Barrett & Newman, 2018). Students who do not respond to Tier 1 instruction then transition to Tier 2 to focus on targeted skills and access more individualized and intensive instruction. If students do not progress adequately in Tier 2, they transition to Tier 3, which is the most intensive level of instruction. Tier 3 may include a recommendation for special education services (Barrett & Newman, 2018).

Social Context

Leaders of the NCDPI (2020) envisioned the implementation of MTSS as preparing students to become college- and career-ready. The implementation of MTSS in Title I North Carolina Schools is essential to students' college and career preparedness. Addressing academic deficiencies at an early age can help students become academically and socially-emotionally college- and career-ready (Guilfoyle, 2012). For students attending Title I schools or living in generational poverty, the implementation of MTSS could increase post-secondary preparation (Hines & Kritsonis, 2010). Additionally, students who receive appropriate MTSS interventions are more likely to progress academically and behaviorally, become college-career ready, and positively contribute to their communities (Morningstar et al., 2018). Among students who fall behind without appropriate MTSS interventions, academic regression, social-emotional challenges, or mental health symptoms are more likely to emerge (Cook et al., 2015). Ennis and Gonsoulin (2015) found implementation of MTSS in juvenile justice settings yielded positive

results, both academically and behaviorally, which positively impacted the community and resulted in decreased juvenile delinquency.

According to Cook et al.'s (2015) investigation, PBIS interventions resulted in fewer behavioral disruptions in the classroom. After the implementation of PBIS, Cook et al. also found reduced reporting of student mental health symptoms. When academic challenges go unnoticed or unaddressed, students often begin to experience reductions in academic self-efficacy and behavioral engagement (Olivier et al., 2018). The reduction in self-efficacy may manifest as irritation and misbehavior associated with academic failure (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). Thus, providing students with tiered behavioral interventions is as important as the provision of academic interventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). Through MTSS, students are provided with opportunities to improve their academic and behavioral outcomes. Tiers 2 and 3 allow students to experience a social context that is more individualized, while still allowing them to interact with their peers and receive targeted core instruction in academic or behavioral skills (Rosen, 2020).

Theoretical Context

The theoretical context for the present study relied on the guiding theories of cognitivist, Vygotsky (1978), and his theory, zone of proximal development, and behaviorist, Skinner (1938), and his operant conditioning theory. MTSS uses cognitive and social-emotional theoretical frameworks to strengthen students' skills by providing targeted and individualized core instruction (August et al., 2018). Students in Title I schools often lack proficiency in reading and math; targeted interventions through the implementation of MTSS provide them with opportunities to succeed at their rate while receiving support from peers and school supports (Cook et al., 2015; Rosen, 2020).

The zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) reveals how scaffolding can improve student learning at various stages, while operant conditioning demonstrates how positive reinforcement can be used to modify behaviors (Skinner, 1938). Selecting two theorists for this study was essential, as their theoretical frameworks combine to provide a cohesive lens for examining the phenomenon under investigation. For example, by implementing MTSS, educators often assess and monitor students' progress to determine the level of intervention needed, based on their current abilities (Rosen, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). A student's ability level also referred to as the zone of proximal development, represents their current abilities and needed supports to promote academic growth and development, as part of the MTSS framework (Cook et al., 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition to promoting academic growth and development, MTSS is associated with behavioral improvements, social-emotional development, and reduced mental health symptoms (Cook et al., 2015; Rosen, 2020). Skinner's theoretical framework is valuable for exploring behavioral elements of the MTSS interventions (Rachlin, 2018; Skinner, 1938).

Recognizing the correlation to behavior and the impact of the implementation of MTSS on behavioral progress, Skinner's (1938) operant conditioning theory was also integral to the conceptual framework of MTSS. Skinner emphasized the importance of reinforcements to establish positive behavior modifications (Rachlin, 2018). While the academic success of students is an ongoing concern among Title I educators, behavioral and social-emotional success is equally important (Armstrong, 2020). Operant conditioning utilizes positive reinforcement to encourage positive behaviors and motivate behavioral changes (Rachlin, 2018). Operant conditioning, also known as behavioral modification in PBIS, is fostered through incentives rather than consequences. Skinner found behavioral change occurred through positive responses

provided and proposed achievements should be followed with positive reinforcers rather than negative consequences.

Situation to Self

My inspiration for conducting this study was derived from my personal experiences as an educator and parent of a son with a learning disability. I am an educator with 21 years of experience and presently work in a Title I district. My professional background includes working in middle school, high school, and alternative learning contexts. I have observed students struggling academically and behaviorally, which often results in them being placed in alternative learning programs with me. I believe the implementation of appropriate early interventions, such as MTSS in Title I school districts, may reduce alternative learning program placements, increase academic achievement, and decrease discipline referrals. Research indicates when students are provided with early interventions, it is possible to prevent some learning disabilities from manifesting (Harn et al., 2015).

My philosophical assumptions for the study were based on the qualitative nature of the research, which embraced reality as reported by participants. As a veteran educator, I appreciate the value of participants' lived experiences. Ontological assumptions relate to the nature of phenomena under investigation (Bahari, 2010). According to Creswell (2007), qualitative researchers accept that reality is subjective. Accordingly, the ontological assumption for this study was subjectivist, based on the idea that reality is subjectively created by people (Saunders et al., 2007), and that multiple realities may exist depending on the ways individuals experience and interpret phenomena. Epistemological assumptions relate to theories of knowledge. According to Saunders et al. (2007), epistemological assumptions center on what is regarded as knowledge within a particular discipline. The epistemological assumption for this research was

interpretivism, which argues that knowledge is relative to the meaning individuals assign to phenomena. Information may differ from person to person, based on how they interpret and make sense of information.

Finally, axiological assumptions relate to what is important and valued in research (Mertens, 2007). Following my interpretivist and subjectivist assumptions, my axiological assumption was constructivist. This perspective values the researcher's subjective intuition and background, which informs the construction of study findings from the data generated. The interactions between myself the and participants during interviews provided rich data that embraced the knowledge constructed by all parties, based on their unique experiences and backgrounds.

As an educator who has implemented MTSS in a Title I school district, I understand educators' perspectives. I have observed, interacted with, and assisted students who were academically, behaviorally, and developmentally delayed, and needed interventions and additional supports. My lived experiences implementing MTSS provided insight for me to identify students in need of additional support.

Data from participant interviews, questionnaires, and journals provided information from their lived experiences (Yeboah et al., 2016). Because of my personal background, it was important for me to implement strategies to prevent my ideas, biases, and opinions from influencing data collection and analysis. Accordingly, I used epoché to minimize the impact of my own biases and experiences with MTSS. To ensure neutrality, I maintained a reflexive journal and utilized bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing helped me to refrain from judgment while focusing on participants' voices. My overarching goal for this research was to better understand educators' implementation of MTSS in Title I school districts in rural North

Carolina.

Problem Statement

The study site schools continue to experience poor performance and behavioral issues within the classroom, despite the implementation of MTSS interventions which are designed to curtail these behaviors (Gagnon et al., 2020). While the federal government provides Title I funding and initiatives to increase student academic achievement and social-emotional development (Harn et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2018; Wexler, 2018), academic achievement gaps and behavioral problems persist in many Title I school districts (Berkowitz et al., 2017). The 2018-2019 NCDPI data accountability report designated the study site school district in North Carolina as consistently low-performing ("NCDPI," 2020). Previous researchers examined the relationships between MTSS and students' academic and behavioral outcomes in other school districts, but little related investigation has been conducted in Title I North Carolina Schools (Freeman et al., 2016; Krach et al., 2016).

Despite the implementation of MTSS interventions (RtI and PBIS), students at the study site schools continue to demonstrate academic underachievement and behavioral problems. To improve student success, it is essential to understand why academic and behavioral problems persist, despite the implementation of these focused interventions. Research indicates educators' perceptions can be a valuable tool for exploring the impact of academic and behavioral interventions (McGoey et al., 2014). Past studies also indicate the effectiveness of academic and behavioral interventions can be undermined by poor implementation fidelity (Kim et al., 2018). Accordingly, to improve the effectiveness of the MTSS interventions implemented at the study site schools, it is essential to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of these

interventions, as well as their perceptions of implementation fidelity barriers that may undermine the effectiveness of the interventions.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of MTSS interventions (RtI and PBSS) on students' academic achievement and disruptive behavior, as well as their perceptions of barriers that may undermine the impact of these interventions. At this stage in the research, MTSS is defined as an evidence-based, tiered system of interventions and supports aimed at improving students' academic achievement and behaviors (Wexler, 2018). The theories guiding this study are Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) and Skinner's (1961) operant conditioning theory, as they conceptualize the tiered model upon which MTSS was built.

Significance of the Study

This phenomenological study has empirical, theoretical, and practical significance for administrators and educators, specifically those in Title I school districts. Legislative and educational reforms, such as the recent implementation of MTSS, often change requirements placed upon educators and administrators (NCDPI, 2020). Findings from the study provide insights into educators' perceptions of the academic and behavioral impact MTSS has on students, as well as educators' implementation of the interventions.

Empirical

Empirically, this phenomenological study fills a gap in the literature by exploring educators' implementation of MTSS as a shared lived experience in a Title I school district in North Carolina. Administrators and educators in Title I school districts may use findings from this study to strengthen MTSS implementation within Title I school districts in rural North

Carolina. Students in Title I school districts are much more likely to develop specific learning disabilities if interventions are not provided (Harn et al., 2015). MTSS begins with universal screenings and works to strengthen and improve areas of need among students, as determined by empirical data (Wexler, 2018). Research indicates that when properly implemented, MTSS is associated with increased student achievement and improved behaviors (Scott et al., 2019). MTSS promotes positive social, emotional, and behavioral development, in addition to addressing issues in absenteeism (Rosen, 2020). MTSS is a universal framework that addresses the needs of all students, so educators can monitor and document the implementation of academic and behavioral interventions to determine the level of intervention needed (Rosen, 2020). MTSS fosters collaboration among stakeholders to maximize the utilization of available resources and support (Rosen, 2020). Finally, educators' perceptions of their lived experiences provide insight for administrators, school districts, and future researchers, regarding the implementation of MTSS in Title I schools in rural North Carolina schools.

Theoretical

Theoretically, this study was built upon Vygotsky's (1978) and Skinner's (1938) theories. Vygotsky's cognitive framework and Skinner's behavioral framework are used to explore Title I educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of the MTSS interventions, and their experiences implementing them. Vygotsky explores the impact of instructional support on student learning and growth. Vygotsky describes three ways in which students learn; his theory became known as the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). With each level of learning, Vygotsky assesses how students learn and the level of support needed for growth to occur. MTSS uses a similar tiered method to determine the level of support needed, as demonstrated through students' ability levels (Rosen, 2020).

Positive behavior interventions systems of support (PBIS) are derived from Skinner's (1938) framework. Skinner noticed behavior modification increases when positive reinforcers are utilized instead of negative reinforcers. Skinner recognizes reinforcers could be positive or negative; negative reinforcers are consequences that yield negative results regarding behavior modification (Camarota et al., 2018; Skinner, 1938). PBIS utilizes the theoretical framework of the operant conditioning theory and provides positive reinforcement to encourage and reward positive behaviors (Skinner, 1938). MTSS provides students with a variety of contexts in which to learn. Findings from the study may help educational administrators understand educator implementation of MTSS in Title I school districts by utilizing both educational theories as a framework for the educational practice. Both theories can be applied in new ways by utilizing data collected through the study and applying it to individual school districts.

Practical

This study also has practical significance in that the data collected are beneficial for administrators as they analyze findings to discover the impact of MTSS implementation in Title I school districts. Administrators may better understand how educators generally understand and define MTSS while implementing the interventions. School administrators can recognize educators' understanding and implementation of the NCSCOS as it is integrated with MTSS (NCDPI, 2020c). With the integration of standards into MTSS, some learning disabilities can be prevented (Harn et al., 2015; Wexler, 2018). Behaviorally, academic challenges can cause delays associated with cognitive frustration. When academic deficiencies are addressed through MTSS, behavioral challenges should decrease; however, for students with behavior disabilities, PBIS, which falls under the MTSS umbrella, is equally effective. The tiered model of MTSS provides

interventions and supports that are beneficial for all children, especially those with special learning needs (Green et al., 2019).

Research Questions

This transcendental phenomenological study of the lived experiences of Title I educators in a rural North Carolina school district is guided by four research questions. These questions are designed to foster the exploration of the perceived impacts of MTSS. In addition, the questions examined possible barriers to implementation fidelity.

Research Question 1

Among educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, what is the perceived impact of response to intervention on students' reading achievement?

Despite the implementation of the RtI at the study site school, students continue to underperform academically. RtI is part of MTSS, which is used to improve students' academic and behavioral outcomes (Hunter et al., 2015). By exploring educators' perceived impact of this intervention, areas of strength and weakness may be gathered from the educators who work directly with students each day.

Research Question 2

Among educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, what is the perceived impact of positive behavioral interventions and support on students' discipline referrals and suspensions?

The second research question is similar to the first, with a focus on PBIS instead of MTSS. PBIS gaines popularity after its introduction in the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997. The intervention is developed to positively impact academic and behavior outcomes for all students by using empirical data to make informed decisions regarding the utilization of interventions

(Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). The findings for this question shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of PBIS, in terms of students' behavioral outcomes.

Research Question 3

Among educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, what are the perceived barriers, if any, to the implementation fidelity of multi-tiered systems of support interventions?

Research indicates the effectiveness of academic and behavioral interventions can be undermined by poor implementation fidelity (Kim et al., 2018). Accordingly, to improve the effectiveness of the MTSS interventions implemented at the study site school, it is essential to understand educators' perceptions of implementation fidelity barriers that may undermine implementation. This question reveals barriers to implementation that school leaders could address.

Research Question 4

Based on the perceptions and experiences of educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, how could the implementation fidelity of multi-tiered systems of support interventions be improved?

As a follow-up to Research Question 3, this question explores educators' perceptions of how implementation fidelity of MTSS interventions may be improved. Many researchers have echoed the importance of implementation fidelity to maximize the effectiveness of interventions (Gage et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2014). It is possible that student's academic and behavioral outcomes would improve with increased implementation fidelity of the MTSS interventions.

Definitions

The following terms were relevant to the study.

1. *Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)-* United States federal law that provides students with disabilities free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environments (MacLeod et al., 2017).
2. *Individualized Education Plan (IEP)-* A legal document that describes accommodations for students with disabilities, which school personnel must follow to ensure students have access to education in the general education classroom (MacLeod et al., 2017).
3. *Fidelity-* Fidelity was defined as how closely an educational initiative, practice, or intervention is implemented and aligned to the way it was initially designed to be implemented or utilized (Folsom & Schmitz, 2018).
4. *Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)* - MTSS is a tiered framework to provide supports to all students (Stoiber, 2014; Wexler, 2018).
5. *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* – NCLB was a federal legislative bill designed to hold schools accountable for student success through standardized testing; the bill expected all students to be proficient by 2014 (Bonilla & Dee, 2017).
6. *North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS)* – A consistent curriculum, determined by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and based on subject and grade level, which every student is expected to know by the end of the school year (NCDPI, 2020e).
7. *Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)-* Multi-tiered framework, which was created to meet the individualized behavioral needs of students (Eiraldi et al., 2019; Putnam et al., 2009).

8. *Response to Intervention (RtI)* – Multi-tiered framework created to meet the individualized academic needs of students (March et al., 2018; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009).
9. *School-wide positive behavior interventions (SWPBIS)* – Provides a framework in which educators may use data to make instructional decisions and to develop academic and behavioral systems of support for students. SWPBIS is consistently implemented among faculty (Mitchell et al., 2018).
10. *Zone of proximal development (ZPD)* – Theoretical framework developed by Vygotsky in 1978, which provided the cognitive framework for MTSS (Fernández et al., 2015).

Summary

The specific problem addressed in this study was the ongoing academic and behavioral problems at the study site schools, despite the implementation of MTSS interventions. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of MTSS interventions (RtI and PBSS) on students' academic achievement and disruptive behaviors, as well as their perceptions of barriers that may undermine the impact of these interventions. Chapter One included background information to establish the contextual historical, social, and theoretical background for this study. The problem statement and purpose of the study was also addressed within this chapter. The situation to self and significance of the study, as well as the empirical, theoretical, and practical significance of this study, included in this chapter. The research questions driving the study and definitions of key terms were also provided. The following chapter consists of a literature review to conceptualize the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two includes an explanation of the theoretical framework for the transcendental phenomenological study. This literature review is presented to contextualize the implementation of MTSS within Title 1 schools, and the impact of MTSS on reading achievement and discipline incidents. The frameworks of Skinner (1938) and Vygotsky (1978) were used to develop the conceptual framework of MTSS, which guided the current study.

MTSS serves as a metaphorical umbrella over which response to intervention (RtI) and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) are categorized. Although both are MTSS, RtI and PBIS are tertiary models designed to address two different areas in education (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). RtI is the academic tiered model that supports math and reading (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). In grades K through 3, RtI focuses on the academic areas of reading and math (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). Interventions in Tier 2 often include small group instruction or other evidence-based strategies are delivered three to four times each week for 20 to 30 minutes per session (Gersten et al., 2009; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019).

If data progress monitoring indicates students have not made adequate progress on Tier 2, the MTSS team will recommend they transition to Tier 3 to receive more frequent, individualized, and intensive support (Gersten et al., 2009). Systematic data monitoring and collection also occurs during Tier 3, which helps the special education team make referral decisions (Gersten et al., 2009). MTSS allows educators to place more emphasis on monitoring and less emphasis on paperwork (Gersten et al., 2009).

PBIS is the behavioral model that provides behavior supports (Arvedson et al., 2014). Skinner's (1938) operant conditioning model demonstrates how behavior is modified through positive reinforcement (Dandashi et al., 2015; Saad et al., 2015). PBIS utilizes positive reinforcement as a framework to modify behaviors and gain positive results. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) explains how students best learn within three areas of support (Vygotsky, 1978). This literature review includes an explanation of how MTSS is an effective measure for improving reading achievement and decreasing disciplinary incidents.

Theoretical Framework

The theories guiding the study included operant conditioning theory (Skinner, 1938) and the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). These two theories complemented one another and merged to form the framework by which MTSS could be examined. Skinner (1938) recognized that the best approach to modifying behavior involved the implementation of positive reinforcements rather than the use of punishment and consequences. Vygotsky (1978) believed students learned best through scaffolding and collaboration, as presented in three categories: independently without assistance; with the assistance of others; and those who struggle alone or with the assistance of others.

RtI utilizes collaboration in small group instruction and intensive interventions to address students' academic needs (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). MTSS includes all students, utilizes empirical data, and transitions students to tiers based on academic or behavioral needs (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). Vygotsky (1978) expressed the importance of helping students comprehend and retain material, and believed it was important to take students at their current academic level of achievement and provide appropriate

interventions to increase academic progress. Through his research, Skinner (1938) demonstrated the impact of positive reinforcers on both behavioral modification and academic achievement.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Initially, Vygotsky (1978) created the zone of proximal development to dispute assessments designed for the sole purpose of testing student intelligence ("Zone of proximal development," 2009). Vygotsky believed all students could learn with appropriate support, which he referred to as "more knowledge of others." According to the scholar, more knowledge from others could come in the form of an adult or a more advanced peer (Vygotsky, 1978). Each student has a different level of academic need that requires different levels of support (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky argued that instead of basing students' levels of intelligence on background knowledge, intelligence should be determined by their abilities to work independently or dependently. Vygotsky acknowledged other factors impact student learning, such as social and cultural backgrounds (Shanbani et al., 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Despite such factors, when students collaborate in small groups with educator-led interventions, the likelihood of success increases (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978).

The ZPD refers to the differences between a student's actual ability level, their ability to perform tasks independently, and their potential for academic development with support (Shanbani et al., 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). The level of instruction should meet the student's level of need, as determined by achievement that is often demonstrated through benchmarks or standardized testing (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). Vygotsky (1978) believed assessments should measure a student's learning or potential for learning material with the support of an educator or peer. The application of the ZPD has helped many students receive the

appropriate level of instruction and academic intervention based on their current academic abilities.

MTSS is an educational context in which ZPD is applied. MTSS uses a tiered system of support to help students who are struggling academically or behaviorally, and need additional support from classroom educators (Rosen, 2020). All students begin on Tier 1 of MTSS, which in the ZPD, aligns with the tasks students can do without assistance (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019; Vygotsky,1978). Tier 2 of MTSS is recommended for students who are unsuccessful on Tier 1 and need additional support from an educator, educator assistant, or a more advanced peer. In the ZPD, Tier 2 aligns with the tasks students can only complete with assistance (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978).

Empirical data are used to determine the length of time students remain on a tier; if a student does not make adequate progress on Tier 2, the MTSS team may transition the student to Tier 3 (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). Based on the MTSS model, Tier 3 provides the most intensive level of support services. In the ZPD, Tier 3 aligns with the level in which people cannot complete tasks, even with assistance (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019; Vygotsky,1978). The ZPD provides the cognitive conceptual framework for which MTSS is developed and modeled through the study (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019).

Operant Conditional Theory

Skinner (1961) believed that every behavior can be motivated with the correct reinforcement (Schlinger et al., 2017; Skinner, 1961). Behavior modification occurs through the delivery of reinforcement, or operant conditioning, which describes the use of consequences to modify behavior (Staddon et al., 2006). Skinner theorized human actions are motivated by

consequences and rewards. When consequences are negative, actions are less likely to be repeated; when they are positive, actions are more likely to occur again. Skinner concluded that positive reinforcement was most effective for behavior modification after his “Skinner box” experiment. The Skinner box was an experiment in which Skinner discovered how to change the behavior of rats through reinforcement (Dhiabat & Tawalbeh, 2019; Skinner, 1961). Through the experiment, Skinner identified reinforcer schedules using fixed or variable time intervals to modify behaviors. Interval schedules are determined by the time between reinforcements and are utilized in two different formats: fixed intervals and variable intervals (Skinner, 1961). During a fixed interval, reinforcers are provided at a specific time after the desired behavior has been achieved (Skinner, 1961). Variable intervals occur at variable times and are delivered after the desired behavior has been achieved (Skinner, 1961). Both fixed and variable intervals produce results at a much slower rate due to the scheduled time of reinforcements (Skinner, 1961).

The other type of scheduling Skinner (1957) proposed was ratio scheduling, which is determined by the number of responses in comparison to the number of reinforcements. Ratio scheduling may be fixed or variable. In a fixed ratio schedule, a reinforcement is provided after a certain number of responses are made. With a variable ratio, a reinforcement is provided based on an average number of responses. Skinner also attempted to prove the motivation to learn is correlated with operant conditioning, but linguists rejected this theory. Despite differing opinions, Skinner continued to pursue his research and determined more complicated behaviors, such as academic behaviors, could be viewed as links of simple behaviors. By reinforcing simple behaviors over time, complex responses become reinforced for extended periods by links of simple responses (Day, 2016; Fancher & Rutherford, 1979).

In clinical and educational settings, operant conditioning is utilized to modify and manage classroom behavior, as evidenced through MTSS (Skinner, 1950). Skinner (1950) determined positive reinforcers increased the likelihood of the behavior occurring again, whereas, negative reinforcers were unpleasant stimuli to be avoided (Chaplin, 1985; Day, 2016). MTSS utilizes the theoretical framework of Vygotsky (1978) and Skinner (1938) to strengthen the tiered model and implement reinforcements to strengthen academic skills and modify behaviors. Skinner proved implementation of positive reinforcement was more useful in behavior modification than the utilization of consequences and punishment. As a result of Skinner's findings, it was determined that the operant conditioning theory should be utilized as the behavioral conceptual framework for PBIS, based on its use of positive reinforcement (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019).

Related Literature

The correlation between government funding and academic achievement is evidenced through the United States Department of Education Title I funding for schools where free/reduced lunch is provided to at least 40% of students. This funding is intended for programs to help underachieving students who lack reading proficiency ("Title I," 2004). Title I schools use funding to provide equal educational opportunities by ensuring educators receive resources, training, and supplies needed for educational initiatives (i.e., MTSS, RtI, PBIS, etc.). Title I funds provide schools with opportunities to close achievement gaps between various subgroups, including minority, economically disadvantaged, and poor students ("Title I," 2004). Title I funds may be used to implement MTSS in schools and has been utilized in many North Carolina schools where the implementation of MTSS was mandated to begin by July 1, 2020 (NCDPI: Exceptional Children's Division, 2020). The literature presented in this section provides (a) an

explanation of the foundational educational policies of Title I and its purposes, (b) a description of MTSS, and (c) a discussion of the correlation between PBIS and RTI. Goodwin and Miller (2012) advocated for schools to utilize PBIS, which also encourages educators to utilize positive peer pressure and positive peer leadership to foster behavior modification.

Educational Policies

Under President Johnson's administration, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was enacted to address poverty at a national level and provide equal access to education (Paul, 2016). The ESEA statute was designed to narrow the achievement gap among impoverished school systems and provide funding for professional development, instructional resources, and educational opportunities in primary and secondary schools (Paul, 2016). ESEA was reauthorized every 5 years by the government and has undergone several revisions since its inception (Paul, 2016).

One section of ESEA was Title I, which addressed the educational needed of low-income families (Paul, 2016). Title I underwent several provisions, over time (Paul, 2016). Title I Part A, a provision of ESEA, was developed to provide funding to school districts with large student populations from low socio-economic families (Paul, 2016; Riley, 1995). Title I Part C is known as the Education of Migratory Children Program; Title VII, as the Bilingual Education Act, and Title IX as the Indian Education Program (Riley, 1995). ESSA was created to address achievement gaps in reading, writing, and mathematics for children from impoverished families who attend urban or rural schools, as well as and students from the middle-class families that attend suburban schools (Jeffrey, 1978; Paul, 2016; Riley, 1995).

Title II, another provision of ESEA, offered literary support for school libraries and textbook resources, to public schools, private schools, and preschools (Paul, 2016). Title III,

often referred to as the Adult Education Act of 1966, stated that other supplementary locations, centers, and services must be provided to increase attendance (Paul, 2016). Under Title III, educational programming became required, regardless of whether school was in session, creating special education and similar services in rural areas (Paul, 2016).

An amendment to ESEA was made in 1968, which provided the foundation for what would later become known as The Bilingual Education Act and the Education of the Handicapped Act (Paul, 2016). A $100 allotment over a 5-year period was provided under Title IV to continue the educational training supports for educators. Under ESSA, Title V issued monies to state department, while Title VI provided legal explanations and restrictions (Jeffrey, 1978; Paul, 2016). During the first 5 years of its enactment, ESEA encountered many financial, spiritual, and inter-governmental relation challenges (Jeffrey, 1978; Paul, 2016). While the implementation of ESEA resulted in gains amongst the nation's underprivileged students, the gains were minimal, causing the government to question the best way to close the achievement gap among economically disadvantaged communities (Jeffrey, 1978; Paul, 2016).

In 1969, President Richard Nixon, a known critic of ESEA, signed the 1969 amendments to ESEA, including Title II, Title VI, Title VII, Title VIII, and Title IX (Jeffrey, 1978; Zascavage, 2010). To decrease the federal government Title I regulations, President Reagan presented the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA) to Congress in 1981, which helped provide school funding from state and local governments, rather than the federal government (Paul, 2016; Zascavage, 2010). The year of 1993 also produced additional changes to ESEA. The National Assessment of 1993 examined weaknesses in alterations of Title I, which led to the revision of ESEA in 1994 (Paul, 2016); this ESEA revision became known as Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) (Paul, 2016). The purpose of IASA was to coordinate

federal resources and policies with state and local attempts to strengthen instructional practices for all students (Paul, 2016). Under IASA, programs previously structured in ESEA were woven into each state's school improvement plan, which was focused on state standards (Paul, 2016; Riley, 1995). IASA provided three significant changes to Title I: (a) math and reading/language arts standards added to evaluate student academic progress and academic accountability, (b) school-wide programs were allowed to be reduced from 75% poverty to 50%, and (c) schools were allowed to use federal funding for a longer period of time and from multiple programs to disperse the funds at the school level. IASA provided local control to schools for federal and state government officials to waive federal requirements if they interfered with school improvements (Paul, 2016).

President George W. Bush reauthorized ESEA in 2001, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Paul, 2016). The purpose of NCLB was to increase accountability among schools, educators, and students through the same standardized assessments set by Title I (Paul, 2016). Under NCLB, each state was required to explain to their respective state departments of instruction for local schools to emphasize a focus on literacy proficiency, and local schools would be provided with the funding and resources needed to provide high quality instruction (Addison & Wargner, 2011). Because NCLB encouraged the accountability and achievement of all students, it defended the civil rights of students considered at-risk (Paul, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Under NCLB, military recruiters and colleges could access eleventh and twelfth grade students' names, addresses, and telephone numbers (Paul, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). If educators were hired using Title I funds, NCLB required educators to be highly qualified (Paul, 2016). Under NCLB, schools were expected to submit and publish an annual report card that detailed student achievement data and demographics (Paul,

2016). Among schools that did not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP), disciplinary action and remedial steps would be taken if they lacked an assessment system approved by Title I (Paul, 2016).

NCLB required a restructuring plan to be implemented for schools that failed to demonstrate AYP for 3 years after being identified for improvement (Paul, 2016). Despite its reduction in achievement gaps and increased accountability, NCLB faced many criticisms and challenges (Paul, 2016). By emphasizing scores and proficiency rather than growth and progress, NCLB punished failure instead of rewarding achievement (Paul, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). A major criticism of NCLB was that it held students with disabilities to the same standards as students without disabilities, and all schools were held to the same standards regardless of student demographics ("Every Student Succeeds Act and Students with Disabilities," 2018). Due to the use of evidence-based practices to measure the effectiveness of intervention, high-quality instructional practice has become more common and has contributed to more schools wanting to participate and implement RtI within their school districts (Addison & Wargner, 2011).

In 2015, President Obama reauthorized ESEA as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA. ESSA replaced NCLB and was designed to close achievement gaps ("Every Student Succeeds Act and Students with Disabilities," 2018; Paul, 2016). ESSA provided some leniency from its most difficulty provisions if schools could demonstrate specific criteria (Paul, 2016). To qualify, schools must implement college and career readiness standards and assessments; the lowest achieving schools must demonstrate school accountability systems. Moreover, states must demonstrate the use of resources, supports, and evaluative tools provided to educators and principals (Paul, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

IDEA (2004) supports the implementation of MTSS in schools to make data-based decisions regarding students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs for support. Under the ESSA (2015), school psychologists may utilize MTSS data to make special education determinations in lieu of IQ testing (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). IDEA allows schools to determine how educational institutions implement interventions and how flexible grants are spent for resources to support improved student learning (IDEA, 2020). MTSS provides the framework for students to receive academic, behavioral, and social-emotional interventions through evidence-based practices (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). When MTSS is implemented consistently and with fidelity, outcomes for *all* students are improved (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). MTSS benefits English language learners, students who are academically gifted, and students with learning disabilities or challenges (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018).

MTSS also improves school culture by promoting positive change and encouraging collaboration (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). Through a positive climate and culture, schools can foster environments that discourage bullying and promote cooperative learning (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). Student mental health and social-emotional wellness is supported through MTSS implementation (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). Levels of support are determined through data, and gradually increase in intensity and frequency according to student needs (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018).

As of July 2020, all public schools in North Carolina were expected to implement MTSS (NCDPI, 2020). The integrated academic and behavior systems (IABS) of NCDPI worked collaboratively with the exceptional education division and formed the Every Child Accountability Tracking System (ECATS) MTSS early warning system, which is published in a live online binder (NCDPI, 2020). The MTSS reference tool is color-coded and uses various key indicators categorized by grade level, academic area, attendance, and behavior (NCDPI, 2020). The red category is representative of students on Tier 3; yellow is indicative of students on Tier 2; and green applies to students on Tier 1 (NCDPI, 2020). Based on the criteria established by NCDPI (2020), students are considered green (Tier 1) if 4% or less of school is missed; students qualify for yellow (Tier 2) supports and interventions if 5-9% of school is missed; and students meet red (Tier 3) criteria if absences exceed 10% or more.

Behaviorally, students in grades pre-k through12 are green if zero ISS/OSS incidents occur per quarter (NCDPI, 2020). Students are yellow and qualify for additional supports if they have one in-school suspension (ISS) or one out-of-school suspension (OSS) incident occurred within one or two semesters (NCDPI, 2020). Students are considered red if they receive more than one ISS/OSS incident in one semester, or zero ISS/OSS in one semester but more than one suspension in the second semester; two or more ISS/OSS incidents per quarter (NCDPI, 2020). In math, for students in grades K through 3, the previous year grades must be an A, B, or C to be green; students receive additional supports and are placed on a yellow tier if they earned a D in math during the previous year. They are placed on red if they earned an F (NCDPI, 2020). For grades 4 through 8 in the category of math, the criteria are similar (NCDPI, 2020). Students remain green if they earned an A, B, or C in the previous year and scored a three, four, or five on the math EOG (NCDPI, 2020). Students are placed on yellow and receive additional supports if

they receive a D as the previous year math grade and scored a two on the math EOG; supports and interventions include small group instruction with evidence-based interventions (NCDPI, 2020). Students qualify for red if they earned an F during the previous year in math and scored a one on the math EOG; these students receive the most frequent and intensive level of supports in addition to regular instruction (NCDPI, 2020).

Tiering students and using the ECATS MTSS monitoring tool for literacy is identical to its use for math (NCDPI, 2020). For literacy and grade levels 4 through 8, students remain on green, as long as they earned an A, B, or C in the previous year ELA grade and a three, four, or five on the reading EOG (NCDPI, 2020). Students are placed on yellow if they earned a D in ELA in the previous year or scored a two on the reading EOG (NCDPI, 2020). Students meet criteria and are placed on red if they earned an F in the previous year in ELA and scored a one on the reading EOG (NCDPI, 2020).

The ECATS MTSS early warning system for secondary grades examines academics, including GPAs as a key indicator for needed interventions and supports (NCDPI, 2020). Analyzing the green level and for ninth grade, students who earn an A, B, or C in the previous year and score a three, four, or five on the eighth grade math/reading EOG, remain on green (NCDPI, 2020). Students in grades 10 through 12 who earn an A, B, or C in the previous year and score a three, four, or five on North Carolina End of Course (EOC) Tests (NCDPI, 2020). Students in the ninth grade are placed in yellow for additional monitoring, supports, and interventions if they earn more than one D in a class and score a two on the eighth-grade math or reading EOG (NCDPI, 2020). Students in grades 10 through 12 are placed on yellow and receive additional supports and interventions if they earned a D during the previous year, have a GPA between 1.01 and 1.99, and score a two on math, English, or biology (NCDPI, 2020). To receive

the most intensive and frequent level of supports in the red category, students in ninth grade must have made more than one F and score a one on the eighth-grade math or reading EOG (NCDPI, 2020). To meet criteria to receive the intensive level of supports on the red tier, students in grades 10 through 12 must have more than one F, have a GPA under 1.0, and score a one on math, English, or biology EOC (NCDPI, 2020).

Tier 1, or the universal tier, serves all students, promotes wellness in all areas, and focuses on prosocial behaviors (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). Data from Tier 1 are analyzed by the MTSS team and discussed before moving a student to Tier 2 (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). Struggling students who are moved to Tier 2 receive evidence-based interventions and small group instruction that target deficiencies in reading, math, and behavior (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019; Wexler, 2018). Student progress monitoring continues on Tier 2.

An example of a Tier 2 intervention is known as the check-in, check-out (CICO) (Hawken et al., 2015). Hawken et al. (2015) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of CICO and found its effectiveness was contingent upon implementation fidelity, which is consistent with findings from previous studies (Klingbeil et al., 2019; March & Horner, 2002; Reno et al., 2017; Swain-Bradway, 2009). CICO starts the day out positively and helps educators check for school readiness, potentially circumventing academic and behavioral problems (Klingbeil et al., 2019; March & Horner, 2002; Reno et al., 2017; Swain-Bradway, 2009). Educators provide a morning greeting and set the atmosphere with expectations of behavior. The

end of the day allows time for educators to reflect with students and provide reinforcement (Klingbeil et al., 2019; March & Horner, 2002; Reno et al., 2017; Swain-Bradway, 2009). Mentors can use the check-out time of CICO to give encouragement for the next day and to discuss positive grounding techniques (Klingbeil et al., 2019; March & Horner, 2002; Reno et al., 2017; Swain-Bradway, 2009). Throughout the Tier 2 process, educators provide students with daily feedback and monitor academic and behavioral performance (Klingbeil et al., 2019; March & Horner, 2002; Reno et al., 2017; Swain-Bradway, 2009). If a student progresses as needed, they transition back to Tier 1 (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). If the student has not progressed or continues to struggle, the MTSS team will evaluate data and recommend Tier 3 (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). After the student has moved to Tier 3, they receive frequent, intensive, and individualized instruction (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018). Data continue to be monitored often and analyzed by the MTSS team to determine if a special education recommendation is needed (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019; Wexler, 2018).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

For the purposes of the study, PBIS is an evidence-based tiered model of interventions designed to provide positive academic and behavioral results to all students (Sugai et al., 2000). PBIS gained popularity after its introduction in the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997. The intervention was developed to positively impact academic and behavior outcomes for all students through the use of empirical data to make informed decisions regarding the utilization of interventions (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). The 1980s demonstrated an educational need for evidence-based behavioral interventions for students with behavior disabilities (Gresham, 1991;

Horner & Sugai, 1999; Simonsen & Sugai, 1999, 2012; Walker et al., 1996). As a result, researchers from the University of Oregon began researching prevention, evidence-based practice, empirical data-based decisions, using school-wide systems, targeted social skills instruction, collaborative implementation, professional development, and student outcomes (Biglan, 1995; Colvin et al., 1993; Horner & Sugai, 2002; Horner et al., 2010; Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Mayer, 1995; Simonsen & Sugai, 2012; Skinner, 1961). Empirical data are leveraged to determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of positive reinforcers, as conceptualized through the framework of operant conditioning (Skinner, 1961). Skinner encouraged educators to utilize reinforcers to increase motivation and positive behavioral outcomes among students. A grant was provided to expand PBIS and provide assistance to schools implementing PBIS to improve behavioral outcomes for students with behavior disabilities (Simonsen & Sugai, 2012). To better understand the framework of PBIS, it is important to understand the characteristics of PBIS. Student results, or outcomes are the basis for data collection, decision-making, and evaluation (McIntosh et al., 2008, 2010; Simonsen & Sugai 2012).

PBIS has been primarily examined at the elementary and middle school levels, with less research in the context of secondary education (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Sugai and Simonsen (2012) addressed this literature gap by studying the impact of PBIS in secondary educational settings. PBIS is known for the implementation of Skinner (1961) and his conceptual framework known as operant conditioning in which positive reinforcements are used for behavior modification. Positive reinforcement is utilized in PBIS to assist students in learning and maintaining prosocial behaviors and replacing maladaptive behaviors (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019).

Research to explore the fidelity of PBIS revealed the effectiveness of the interventions, when properly implemented (Bradshaw et al., 2008, 2009. 2010; Fairbanks et al., 2008; Horner et al., 2009, 2010; Koth et al., 2008, 2009; Luiselli et al., 2002; Muscott et al., 2008; Nelson et al., 2009; Pas et al., 2011; Reinke et al., 2013; Sadler & Sugai, 2009; Simonsen et al., 2008, 2011; Simonsen & Sugai, 2012). Rewards are used in addition to reinforcement; however, these two terms should not be used interchangeably (White, 1989). Neuroanatomically, rewards appeal to the cortico-ventral basal ganglia (BG) circuit (Haber, 2011). The orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), ventral striatum (VS), ventral pallidum (VP), and midbrain dopamine (DA) neurons are all part of the BG and function in reward processing (White, 1989). According to White (1989), after rewards have been distributed, signals are transferred to dopamine cells, which are communicated throughout the striato-nigro-striato system and transmitted to other areas that control cognition and habitual routines. Rewards are explained as anything given to students, which may not impact behavior (Project IDEAL, 2013). Reinforcers are used to reinforce prosocial behaviors and may include praise, good grades, a positive call home, etc. (Project IDEAL, 2013). Reinforcers are individually based and contingent upon fulfilled expectations (Project IDEAL, 2013).

The initial goal of PBIS was to increase classroom learning by reducing distractions and minimizing behavioral incidents, which allows educators to maximize instructional time and provide students with more opportunities to learn (Gage et al., 2015). PBIS is often used to promote a positive school culture through behavioral change and the implementation of tiered interventions (Horner & Sugai, 2015; Reinke et al., 2013). For PBIS to be effective for modifying behaviors, educators must have opportunities to participate in professional development. Through professional development, educators may develop skills needed to

efficiently implement PBIS, thereby maximizing student success and minimizing problem behaviors through positive reinforcers (Skinner, 1961; Simonsen & Sugai, 2012). Before a student is placed on the MTSS model for behavior and using PBIS for behavior modification, a problematic behavior should be established through functional behavior analysis (FBA) (Horner & Sugai, 2015). The FBA determines the function of a behavior, which then allows the team to target specified behaviors and establish interventions (Horner & Sugai, 2015). The implementation of interventions in MTSS supports the level of intensity based on the needs of individual students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Simonsen (2012) and Bradshaw et al. (2015) investigated the implementation of PBIS in high school, which focused on correlations with bullying and other disciplinary incidents. Bradshaw et al. concluded the best source for data collection at the secondary education level was to utilize victimization data rather than readily accessible data (i.e. suspension rates), as that may be more beneficial when trying to advocate for PBIS to be implemented in a secondary setting (Bradshaw, 2013). Forman et al. (2013) explained school psychologists be utilized to collect data for this purpose.

The United States Department of Education was provided a grant to develop PBIS.org, also known and referenced as OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2019). OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2019) fosters the research of evidence-based interventions, and provides educators with current practices, references, tools, and sources. Utilizing information provided by OSEP, Tier 1 emphasizes the promotion of prosocial behaviors and teaching skills to prevent maladaptive behaviors from occurring, along with a reduction in Tier 2 referrals. All students receive universal interventions on Tier 1, which includes learning prosocial behaviors and behavioral expectations that are modeled and supported throughout the school OSEP

Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2019). Tier 1 is the bottom tier of the pyramid, which serves as the foundation for Tiers 2 and 3 (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019).

Tier 2 supports provide individualized and targeted interventions from an educator or mentor, as previously discussed (Klingbeil et al., 2019; Horner & March, 2002; Michigan Department of Education, n.d; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports 2019; Reno et al., 2017; Swain-Bradway, 2009). Tier 2 supports are provided to students who fail to progress on Tier 1 and are in need of targeted supports (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). Supports during PBIS on Tier 2 are for students at an increased risk of developing severe behavior problems, and the interventions and supports at Tier 2 are proactive approaches to reduce the development of poor behaviors (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019).

Tier 2 supports offer group interventions in which 10 or more students learn social-emotional and self-regulation skills, and receive academic core support (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). PBIS Tier 2 supports are expected to align with school-wide expectations and be implemented promptly after the referral is received, which is no later than 72 hours (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). Throughout the Tier 2 process, the PBIS team collaborates to ensure implementation of tiered interventions, the monitoring of data and student progress, and evaluation of outcomes (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). Interventions and supports for Tiers 2 and 3 are similar and often overlap. Students transition to Tier 3 if they do not behaviorally progress or if

their behaviors become more severe (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019).

Tier 3 interventions are provided to students who need more frequent and intensive supports to modify behaviors and learn positive grounding techniques (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). Approximately 10-15% of students are considered Tier 2 and 1-5% of students are considered Tier 3, due to the severity of behaviors and the lack of emotional regulation (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). Behavior is malleable and can be changed when appropriate interventions, supports, and skills are provided (Michigan Department of Education, n.d; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). Faculty must be willing to address student behaviors and accept a student's current behavioral level in order to work toward behavioral change (Michigan Department of Education, n.d.; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). Using the FBA, developing a strong behavior intervention plan (BIP), implementing positive reinforcement, and monitoring behavioral data provide a starting point to behavior modification (Michigan Department of Education, n.d.; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019).

Sensory tools, social stories, relaxation techniques, conflict resolution, structured breaks, and check-in/check-out are all Tier 2 and Tier 3 evidenced-based interventions (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). Students can also be referred to Tier 3 if their behaviors are severe or if they have been referred by a faculty or staff member (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). For the purposes of the study, severe or intense behaviors are defined as

forceful, violent, or disruptive behaviors that impact the classroom, interrupt instruction, and create unsafe environments for students and/or staff (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). According to Geoff Colvin, seven phases of acting out behavior occurs, which initially begin in a calm state but are triggered and gradually escalate before peaking, de-escalating, and calming back down to recovery (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). The calm is when students are rationale, engaged, and working with the educator and instruction (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). Phase two is when students in Tier 3 or 2 become triggered (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). Triggers can occur at home or school, but directly impact the student at school. Triggers are emotional experiences that affect the student and prompt an emotional response (Michigan Department of Education, 2019).

During a trigger, it is critical for educators to respond appropriately and not out of emotion; they must offer choice, redirect, provide space, implement behavioral interventions, and consider student needs in the moment (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). Phase three is the agitation phase, during which the educator may notice verbal or non-verbal cues (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). All cues need to be written in the behavior plan so educators are aware when agitation may occur and what those behaviors look like (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). During this phase, it is important for the educator to use anxiety reduction techniques to help the student and work to provide the student with grounding (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). Phase four is considered the acceleration phase, when the behavior of the student escalates significantly to include screaming, yelling, threats, or throwing objects (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). During these behaviors, educators must not respond emotionally to prevent the escalation to crisis. Students demonstrating these

behaviors must be removed from the classroom (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). During phase five, a crisis has arisen, the behavior is out of control, and the situation has become dangerous for everyone (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). If the student has not been removed from the classroom, they must be removed at this time (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). Crisis events are the most serious in the chain of behavioral events. Phase 6 includes the de-escalation, which helps students process events; some students process by crying, sleeping, or denying (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). It is important for the educator to allow this phase to happen, as the student processes it, and not force discussion (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). The final phase is 7, which includes the recovery of the incident during which the student is calm and able to return to work. During phase 7, the student may be reserved and somewhat guarded (Michigan Department of Education, 2019).

Knowing how to teach students who have come from impoverished homes can be beneficial to their academic and behavioral success (Payne, 2005). Students who have grown up in poverty and in a matriarchal family often laugh when disciplined, which is helpful for educators to know, so they do not respond in a punitive manner (Payne, 2005). Students from poverty may resolve conflicts with violence because this is the only way they know to resolve issues (Payne, 2005). Impoverished students often have their hands on one another, which may get them in trouble due to school rules. Payne (2005) explained the physical touch is due the need to have non-verbal communication and cues (Payne, 2005). People who have grown up in poverty have a large distrust of anyone in authority, which explains why students of poverty argue with educators (Payne, 2005). While these are not excuses for behavior, they can help educators understand the framework of poverty and why students behave in certain ways (Payne,

2005). Understanding poverty helps educators and administrators better serve students and provide them with the skills needed for success (Payne, 2005).

For educators in schools implementing PBIS, expectations for student behavior goals are shared with students and educators, which are taken from the PBIS framework (Horner & Sugai, 2002; Houchens et al., 2017; Lewis & Sugai, 1999). Noltemeyer et al. (2019) explored differences in outcomes between discipline and academics under the MTSS model for students in 153 Ohio Schools. Noltemeyer et al. concluded MTSS implementation provided positive outcomes in both discipline and academics for students when faculty implemented PBIS with consistency and fidelity (Freeman et al., 2016; Pas & Bradshaw, 2012; Simonsen et al., 2012). Many researchers have echoed the importance of implementation fidelity to maximize the effectiveness of interventions (Gage et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2014). SWPBIS must be implemented with consistency throughout the entire school to yield accurate results. Gage et al. (2015) stressed the importance of implementing SWPBS with fidelity to increase academic achievement. PBIS positively contributed to the reduction of OSS (Noltemeyer et al., 2018, 2019). Further, Noltemeyer et al. noted that schools should monitor the fidelity of implementation of PBIS to achieve the best outcomes.

To ensure consistency amongst schools across North Carolina and as part of the MTSS initiative, NCDPI (2020) included a behavior and social-emotional learning (SEL) component within the PBIS. NCDPI provides an outlined intervention plan to increase attendance and teach students behavioral expectations, utilizing faculty support for consistent implementation and providing incentives for progress made. NCDPI suggests using CICO, a mentoring program, social skills group, and a daily report card. With positive student behaviors being linked to the implementation of this practice, it is more likely educators will consistently implement MTSS

(Han & Weiss, 2005; Reinke et al., 2013). The current transcendental phenomenological study explored educator perceptions of student academic and behavioral outcomes as determined by their implementation of MTSS with fidelity. As previously discussed, MTSS uses empirical data to make academic and behavioral decisions to determine the tier of interventions (Gage et al. 2015; Horner et al., 2010). Addressing and monitoring academic and behavioral concerns at the school level helps ensure consistency (The National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019).

Understanding how educators implement MTSS with fidelity and how they align MTSS to the NCSCOS may help rural schools address the achievement gap in Title I settings. As Horner and Macaya (2018) explained, "PBIS approaches have been adopted and implemented in over 26,000 schools nationwide and over 21 countries worldwide" (p.664). Schools have begun to recognize that consequences and punishments do not increase positive behaviors. PBIS uses positive reinforcements to achieve behavior modification, as opposed to more traditionally used punishments or consequences (Horner & Macaya, 2018; Walker & Gresham, 2014).

Among children with behavioral issues, praise has been found to reduce behavioral incidences (Lewis & Stormont, 2010; Reinke et al., 2013). Providing educators with opportunities to reflect on their own lived experiences helps them to discover the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). When PBIS is implemented consistently among faculty and within the school, students are happier, safer, and more motivated. Reinforcers can provide students with motivation to learn (Skinner, 1957). Various types of reinforcers are used to modify behaviors and achieve desired behavioral outcomes. Differential reinforcement of alternative (DRA) behavior without extinction is a type of reinforcer often used in PBIS settings (Athens & Vollmer, 2010). DRA is one of the most frequently used evidence-based interventions in behavior analysis (Athens & Vollmer, 2010). The implementation of DRA involves

withholding a reinforcer, following the problem behavior, and providing reinforcers after the desired behavior has occurred (Athens & Vollmer, 2010).

Differential reinforcement of incompatible (DRI) behavior is a reinforcer used to modify behaviors by identifying prosocial behaviors the are incompatible with the maladaptive behaviors (Wehby, 2020). After the incompatible, prosocial behaviors are identified, students receive positive reinforcement each time they engage in the prosocial behavior rather than the maladaptive behavior (Wehby, 2020). For example, a student cannot wander around the classroom and be seated and focused on classwork at the same time. When the educator notices the student seated and working, they would provide positive reinforcement (i.e., sticker, praise, additional, computer time, etc.).

Differential reinforcement of other behaviors (DRO) is another type of positive reinforcement used to modify maladaptive behaviors (Wehby, 2020). When educators implement DRO, they must be careful to not inadvertently reinforce other maladaptive behaviors (Wehby, 2020). Another form of reinforcement, differential reinforcement of low rates of behavior (DRL), is also used to reduce maladaptive behaviors by praising the student for engaging in maladaptive behaviors less often (Wehby, 2020).

When educators have clear expectations, fewer behavioral disruptions occur (Grossman, 2004; Reinke et al., 2013; Witt et al., 2004). After implementing PBIS for 2 years, a rural school in Texas reported significant increases in positive behavioral outcomes among students, as well as consistent behavioral goal setting among educators and students (Kelm et al., 2014; Sugai et al., 2001). Educators may use the MTSS tiered pyramid with fidelity to minimize negative behaviors and increase positive behaviors (Green et al., 2019). Several meta-analyses revealed PBIS was effective when implemented with fidelity, as evidenced by a decrease in office

referrals, a decrease in suspensions, an increase in school attendance, and an increase in academic achievement (Gage et al., 2018; George et al., 2018; Goh & Bambara, 2015; Jerin et al., 2018; McIntosh et al., 2014; Simonsen et al., 2012; Ty, & Miller, 2014).

Response to Intervention (RtI)

In 1977, Deno and Mirkin researched the effectiveness of a three-tiered system of support interventions and progress monitoring for students who struggled with reading (Addison & Wargner, 2011). During the same year, Bergan (1977) investigated the effectiveness of behavioral interventions that incorporated a progress monitoring component (Addison & Wargner, 2011). Both studies (Bergan, 1977; Deno & Mirkin, 1977) fostered further research to support the development of RtI and PBIS. After the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, RtI was presented as part of the MTSS model, as an alternative to the IQ discrepancy model for diagnosing learning disabilities (Allington et al., 2019; Johnston, 2011; Savitz et al., 2019). Although RtI is not specially mentioned in IDEA, Congress alluded to it to measure students' responses to targeted interventions (Addison & Wargner, 2011). The initiative for RtI came from concerns of misidentifying special learning disabilities (Allington et al., 2011; Johnston, 2011; Savitz et al., 2019). Interest in the exploration and research of misidentification of special learning disabilities was grounded in multiple studies in which most students who had been identified as at-risk of failing reading achieved grade level after they received intensive reading instruction (Allington et al., 2019; Mathes et al. 2005; Richard & Wilkins, 2019; Savitz et al., 2019; Scanlon et al., 2008; Vellutino et al., 1996). After the interest and discovery of misidentification, MTSS and RtI gained federal approval. However, the federal government had not provided any legislation on how RtI should be implemented (Allington et al., 2019; Fuchs et al., 2012; Savitz et al., 2019). Consequently, school districts began providing professional

development opportunities for RtI implementation (Allington et al., 2019; Balu et al., 2015; Savitz et al., 2019).

RtI utilizes strong instructional practice, universal screening processes, and empirical data to determine if additional support is needed in the areas of math or reading (Leonard et al., 2019). In 2014, RtI was updated to include word identification, alphabetics, word fluency, and phonics (Bouton et al., 2018; Lam & McMaster, 2014). In schools that utilize MTSS models, universal reading strategies begin in kindergarten. Al Otaiba et al. (2015) examined RtI reading improvement outcomes in early literacy among students at-risk of developing reading disabilities. Al Otaiba et al. found RtI was an effective intervention for addressing the reading academic achievement gap among Tier 1 and Tier 2 students. Additional research is needed to identify effective reading interventions for students on Tier 3 (Al Otaiba et al., 2015). Each tier provides specific interventions, as noted below.

Within Tier 1, all students are provided high-quality instruction by licensed educators, which ensures any learning discrepancies are not from the quality of instruction (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). Students are provided universal screenings to determine an academic baseline and recognize students who need additional learning supports (Leonard et al., 2019; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). Educators review the most current standardized test data and benchmark assessments to identify students scoring below grade level and provide these students additional instruction within an inclusive classroom over a 6 to 8-week period (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019.).

During the time of supplemental instruction, academic progress is monitored and recorded to be analyzed by the MTSS team. Students who demonstrate adequate progress are kept on Tier 1, while those who need additional assistance are progressed to Tier 2 (Gage et al.

2015; Horner et al., 2010; Leonard et al., 2019; National Center for Learning Disabilities 2019). On Tier 2, students received targeted instruction in small groups and educators monitor their progress on a temporal scale. Student progress is used to determine the length of time they remain on Tier 2 or when they are moved back down to Tier 1.

If students do not make adequate progress on Tier 2, they are moved to Tier 3 (The National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). To best target academic deficiencies, educators must identify intervention strategies for students on Tier 3 (The National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). On Tier 3, educators and school psychologists work to identify underlying causes of learning challenges (The National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019; Tilly, 2002); a variety of are used to make this determination, including interviews with students, parents, and educators, direct observations, and assessment tools (The National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019).

Educators and administrators must identify instructional elements they can modify to improve student outcomes, such as curricular design, instructional strategies, and learning materials (The National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). Next, educators must consider if the learning problem relates to misalignment between students' skill levels and learning materials, or their skill levels and instructional presentation (The National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019); this helps educators better understand whether the deficiency is a function of behavior (task avoidance) or lack of comprehension. Educators may then determine the most effective type of intervention to implement to address the deficiencies (The National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). If the student is avoiding work on Tier 3, educators must uncover the reason behind the avoidance behavior (The National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019).

Title I funds can be used to fund initiatives to improve student achievement. However, to do so, schools must identify students most at-risk and determine which interventions are needed (Munson, n.d.). Among schools that utilize educators to assist students on Tiers 2 and 3, Title I funds may be used to hire educators for these purposes (Munson, n.d.). There are specific guidelines by which schools must adhere to utilize the funding (Munson, n.d.). For example, the use of Title I funds is permitted when educators provide reading and math assistance to at-risk students (Munson, n.d.). In addition to classroom instruction, supplemental instruction is required on Tier 2 (Munson, n.d.). Analyzing the correlation between Title I funds and MTSS implementation provides a better understanding of educator experiences with implementation of MTSS in Title I schools in North Carolina.

By exploring educators' lived experiences, a better understanding of perceived effects of MTSS and its implementation was gained. Providing educators with time to reflect is an important part of transcendental research (Moustakas, 1994). When a student has received supports in Tiers 2 and 3 without success, educators may make the recommendation for the student to be referred for special education testing. In these cases, there is little argument due to the empirical data MTSS provides (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Leonard et al., 2019; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010;). Implementing RtI to strengthen reading and mathematics skills as part of MTSS model does not come without challenges. The implementation of MTSS requires the entire school to make adjustments; educators must be willing to work collaboratively to analyze empirical data, participate in professional development, work as a team (i.e., department, grade levels, MTSS committee), and dedicate time to deliver the instruction to other faculty. For these reasons, it is imperative that administrators ensure MTSS is being implemented with fidelity across the school (George et al., 2018; Leonard et al., 2019). To

ensure this, each school must have a MTSS team able to the monitor student data and progress, determine the goals of MTSS, and ensure implementation fidelity. Findings in a reading study for grades 1 through 3 suggested Tier 2 interventions can produce positive student outcomes in reading achievement. Coyne et al. (2018) determined the success of student outcomes was heavily based the effective use of tiered measures on small group instruction, the intensity of the interventions, and the consistency of MTSS implementation within the school.

MTSS and Title I Student Outcomes

To review, MTSS functions as a tiered model, with varying levels of intensive interventions determined by individual student need (Harlacher et al., 2013; Hunter et al., 2015). RtI and PBIS are part of MTSS, which are used to improve students' academic and behavioral outcomes (Hunter et al., 2015). Research indicates RtI can increase reading achievement at various educational levels (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Leonard et al., 2019; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). PBIS and RtI became popular after MTSS was introduced alongside the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA (Allington et al., 2019; Johnston, 2011; Savitz et al., 2019). PBIS was designed to strengthen behavior outcomes in a variety of educational settings. With consistent implementation, PBIS is associated with a reduction in student suspensions, office referrals, and dropout (Freeman et al., 2015, 2016; Gage et al., 2018). Ensuring consistency in the collection and monitoring of student performance data is essential to the effectiveness of MTSS interventions (Klingbeil et al., 2019; March & Horner, 2002; Reno et al., 2017; Swain-Bradway, 2009).

Summary

The theoretical frameworks of Skinner (1961) and Vygotsky (1978) drove the conceptual framework of the study. A gap in literature existed regarding educators' experiences

implementing MTSS in Title I schools in rural North Carolina. While poverty is the qualifying factor to become a Title I school, the distinguishing difference between the study site Title I school district and surrounding districts is the culturally diverse student demographics. The current study explored Title I educators' lived experiences implementing MTSS in a rural North Carolina school district. The historical, social, and theoretical context for this research study were discussed in this chapter (Patton, 2015). Relevant literature and studies were presented to conceptualize the history of MTSS, PBIS, and RtI, and justify the conceptual frameworks.

Educational policies have been enacted to support a variety of populations and provide equal educational opportunities to low-performing and economically disadvantaged students ("Title I," 2004). Through Title I funds, educators are provided instructional resources and professional development, and schools are held accountable for the academic and behavioral success of students ("Title I," 2004). Instructional resources for schools may include adding teaching positions, instructional supports and initiative programs, and including behavioral specialists ("Title I," 2004). Schools have flexibility with Title I funding, provided use of the funding falls under one of the Title I categories for increasing student achievement in Title I schools ("Title I," 2004). Schools that qualify for Title I funds can also connect students and families to community resources and provide parents with opportunities to become involved in their children's education ("Title I," 2004).

MTSS provides targeted, intensive instruction to improve students' academic and behavioral outcomes. Through MTSS, RtI and PBIS can be used to address such deficiencies, as determined by empirical data. Schools that have implemented RtI and PBIS with fidelity often experience improvements in student outcomes (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). Academics and behavior have been focal areas within educational systems in recent years (Gage et al., 2015).

Decreased academic achievement and increased school violence have led to a nationwide movement for more initiatives within school settings (Gage et al., 2015). Disciplinary issues and truancy can potentially influence student learning. MTSS is a widely used, evidence-based practice leveraged by many schools to combat academic and behavioral issues. Consistency in the implementation of MTSS is critical to intervention success (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). A comprehensive review of the existing research revealed no scholarship on educators' perceptions of MTSS implementation in Title I North Carolina Schools. Information regarding these topics are suggestions for future research and relate to the topic of the current study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of the transcendental phenomenology was to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of MTSS interventions (RtI and PBIS) on students' academic achievement and disruptive behavior, as well their perceptions of barriers that may undermine the impact of these interventions. A significant decrease in academic achievement and social-emotional development among students in Title I school spurred the drive for initiatives to increase student achievement and identify students for special education services after the reauthorization of IDEA ("About IDEA," 2020 & Horner et al., 2015). Chapter Three includes an explanation of the research study, a restatement of the research questions, and a description of the research setting and sample. The chapter further includes procedures of the study, the role of the researcher, and a description of data collection and analysis methods. The chapter concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical considerations, followed by a concise summary of the chapter.

Research Design

When conducting a research study, the researcher selects a blueprint, or design, to coherently address the research questions (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006; Trochim, 2006). This study employed a qualitative method and transcendental phenomenological design. Qualitative research begins with inferences and the identification of a theoretical framework through which to explore social or human problems, as experienced by individuals or groups (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Research design refers to the process of investigating a problem through the development of research questions, data collection and analysis, the interpretation of data,

and data reporting (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) explained many qualitative approaches exist.

A qualitative design was selected for the present study to better understand the study phenomenon through educators' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) specified five designs for qualitative research. Of these designs, phenomenology was selected for the present study. A phenomenological design was aligned with an exploration of the shared lived experience of educators in a Title I school, regarding perceived impacts and implementation of MTSS (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenology was selected over case study because the aim was to explore educators' lived experiences, rather than conduct a comparison of educator perspectives in different schools. To better understand the rationale for the selection of phenomenology, it is important to understand the history of phenomenology.

Phenomenology has a rich history (Creswell & Poth, 2018), drawing upon the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Spiegelberg, 1982). In phenomenological studies, researchers collect data to focus on the shared lived experiences of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1990). Transcendental phenomenology is useful for exploring natural phenomenon as experienced and perceived by individuals (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology uses individual experiences to provide extensive descriptions of study phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenologists believe that to understand reality, individual experiences must be transcended, rather than interpreted (Kafle, 2011). Within the basis of every phenomenon, objective truths may lie (Kafle, 2011). Through descriptions of their lived experiences, participants provide data from which phenomenological researchers can derive meaning (Giorgi, 1979; Moustakas, 1994).

Researchers examine descriptions of participants' lived experiences and search for repetition to eliminate any redundancies. Among details related to the topic, the researcher searches for relationships and commonalities. Transcendental phenomenology uses qualitative data based on the perspectives of those who experience the essence of the study phenomenon. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on awareness to understand the essence of individuals' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) is an intervention model implemented by educators. To understand educators' experiences with the effects and implementation of MTSS in a Title I rural North Carolina school district, educators' individual experiences and perceptions must be explored. Thus, a transcendental phenomenological design was well-aligned with the investigation.

Research Questions

Research Question 1. Among educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, what is the perceived impact of response to intervention on students' reading achievement?

Research Question 2. Among educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, what is the perceived impact of positive behavioral interventions and supports on students' discipline referrals and suspensions?

Research Question 3. Among educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, what are the perceived barriers, if any, to the implementation fidelity of multi-tiered systems of supports and interventions?

Research Question 4. Based on the perceptions and experiences of educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, how could the implementation fidelity of multi-tiered systems of supports and interventions be improved?

Setting

The setting for this research study was two Title I schools located in two different counties and school districts in the Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina. The first study site was a rural school district, which included eight schools, four of which were Title I schools (three k-8 schools and one k-12 school), two that were early colleges, one high school, and one alternative learning school. One Title I K-8 school in Bridgewater County was selected for this study for several reasons. The first rationale for selecting this school was that Riverside Elementary was located on the southwestern part of the county, which bordered another county. With a population of 38,840, this community consisted of 15, 270 households with an average income of $45,254 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019a). Nearly one-third of the community members lived below the poverty level, and almost one-third of families received food stamps (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019b). Over 50% of the families consisted of married individuals, over one-third were single female-led households, and one-seventh were single male-led households (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019b).

The first school district school district for the study consisted of one high school, four K-8 schools, K -12 school, and one community school. Riverside Elementary School (pseudonym), an elementary school selected for the study, consisted of a student body compromised of 47.9% males and 52.1% females, which also consisted of a diverse student population. Less than 1% of students at Riverside Elementary School were African American and only were 3.9% Asian; however, 46.4% were Caucasian and 30.8% were Native American, with 4.2% consisting of two or more races (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020e).

The implementation of MTSS in Title I schools in Western North Carolina was identified as the topic for the research and was worthy of investigation due to a gap in the literature. For the

purposes of this study and to ensure confidentiality, two different school district study sites were assigned the pseudonyms of Riverside Elementary and Creek Water High. A pseudonym was also assigned to the school district to ensure confidentiality. Riverside Elementary was a Title I school that implemented MTSS and consistently demonstrated poor student performance on standardized assessments. Riverside Elementary and its surrounding school district implemented MTSS to improve student reading and math achievement. For this reason, Riverside Elementary and Creek Water High provided an ideal research site for this study.

The school district leadership followed a hierarchy consisting of a school board, district superintendent, district associate superintendent, human resources director, chief academic officer, director of elementary education, director of student support services, director of testing and accountability, director of operations and logistics, transportation direction, chief technology officer, and chief communications officer. The Riverside Elementary administration included one principal, one assistant principal, one guidance counselor, two administrative assistants, an instructional coach, and a lead educator. North Carolina requires all educators to be highly qualified under state guidelines, and each participant at both Riverside Elementary and Creek Water High met this requirement. School administrators were responsible for student discipline matters, while lead educators provided curricular support.

For schools to qualify to for Title I funds, at least 40% of the student population must be below poverty, and the school must have an established plan to address student poverty (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020d). The student body at Riverside Elementary was 47.9% males and 52.1% female. Less than 1% of the school's students were African American and only 3.9% were Asian. Nearly half (46.4%) of the students were Caucasian,

30.8% were Native American, and 4.2% identified as two or more races (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020e).

The second study site was a secondary setting. Creek Water High School was located in Bourne County in Western North Carolina. Bourne County Schools has the schools divided into districts to assist parents in knowing which school their child must attend, based on their geographic location. Creek Water High (pseudonym) was located in 1 of the 6 districts within the school system. 45 schools comprised this large school system, making it the 13th largest school system in North Carolina Public Schools (Bourne County Schools, 2022). Creek Water High has a student population of (NC Report Card, 2022).

Participants

I solicited 12 educators from Riverside Elementary School for the study. Participants differed in teaching experience, but all had at least 2 years of educational experience with at least 1 year of MTSS implementation. I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as district approval from the superintendent and both the Riverside Elementary and Creek Water High School. School Principal and district superintendent agreed to this research project (See Appendix A for superintendent and principal's approval). After receiving approval from the superintendent, principal, and the IRB, I emailed a study invitation to all faculty members. Email responses helped determine participant eligibility and willingness to engage in this research study. After potential participants were selected for the study, I contacted prospects to obtain informed consent.

To determine the sampling strategy most appropriate for the study, I had to consider participants, the research site, and goal of the investigation. Based on these considerations, I selected a purposeful sampling strategy. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposeful sampling

allows researchers to recruit a criterion-based subset of participants who meet specific eligibility criteria. Purposeful sampling allowed me to select participants based on criteria that ensured they possessed the experience and background needed to produce data required to answer the research questions. According to Patton (2015), purposeful sampling allows researchers to select participants based on predetermined inclusion criteria. Moustakas (1994) argued that some of the most influential understandings were the products of one's own exploration, learning, lived experiences, and reflections. Purposeful sampling allowed me to gain knowledge from the lived experiences of educators implementing MTSS in two Title I rural North Carolina schools. Demographic information were collected from participants to provide descriptive statistics of the study sample. Pseudonyms were used for both schools and all participants.

Procedures

To begin this transcendental phenomenological study, I first gained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). I then gained approval and consent for Riverside Elementary in Bridgewater County (pseudonym) from the principal of Riverside Elementary School. I also gained approval and consent for Creek Water High School in Bourne County (pseudonym) from the principal. See Appendix A for IRB approval. After all approvals were obtained, I communicated with both principals via email to discuss sending a study invitation to school faculty to recruit participants. Criteria for study participation included the following: (a) participant age range 22-65, (b) a minimum of 2 years in education, with a maximum of 35 educational service years, and (c) at least 1 year of experience implementing MTSS. Educators, for the purpose of this study, were defined as teachers of various grades and subject areas, school social workers, school counselors, and behavior specialists, all of whom had implemented MTSS with students throughout the school year.

Participants were recruited via an emailed study invitation, which included details of the study purpose, participation requirements, inclusion criteria, and my contact information. Interested individuals were invited to contact me, via phone or email, to review their eligibility and schedule interviews. When individuals contacted me to express interest in participation, I reviewed the inclusion criteria, study purpose, and participation requirements. During this call, I asked prospects if they had any questions about the study or participation. I scheduled eligible and interested individuals for their Zoom interviews, at days and times that were convenient to them. I explained that prior to participation, written informed consent must be obtained. See Appendix C for participant consent form.

Data for the transcendental phenomenological study were collected via open-ended individual interviews, questionnaires, and participant journals. Prior to any data collection, all participants received, reviewed, scanned, and submitted their signed consent to me via email. The consent provided a detailed explanation of the study. The questionnaire was then sent to all participants via email in addition to an email to schedule an interview. Data gathered through the questionnaire was reviewed and allowed me to determine which participants qualified for the study, based on the established research criteria. Each questionnaire was reviewed upon return. Interviews were scheduled, confirmed, and conducted via Zoom, tele-conference, or in-person, based on participant preference. The interview questions were open-ended questions that fostered reflection and open sharing (Moustakas, 1994). By creating a friendly and open climate, I gained participant trust and fostered a comfortable interview process. Participant responses provided in-depth understandings of educators' perceptions of the impact and implementation of MTSS. After interviews were conducted, I transcribed all recordings from Zoom meetings, tele-conference calls, and in-person calls. After the interviews were conducted, transcription of

participant responses were shared with the study participant to ensure accuracy. Participant journal prompts were shared with individual participants via Google document, with participants completing responses in Google docs. Google docs were shared with me to review, and Google settings were arranged to secure privacy for access between the participant and myself. Participant journals were also shared with individual participants via Google document, with each participant completing the responses on Google docs and sharing with me. Security for all Google responses, including interview transcriptions, questionnaires, and journals had restricted access. Additionally, both the computer and Google were password protected.

In phenomenology, data are collected through interviews that consist of open-ended, informal questions designed to develop a comprehensive narrative of participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). All interviews were conducted via three platforms: Zoom, telephone calls, and in-person, with each interview being both informal and casual. The day before scheduled interviews, I sent participants an email that contained a link to join the meeting, along with a reminder of the scheduled interview time. I signed onto the meetings a few minutes early and admitted participants when they entered the waiting room. From there, I welcomed participants, thanked them for their time, and spent a couple minutes fostering a warm and inviting atmosphere.

When participants feel relaxed and comfortable, they are more likely to communicate openly (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) emphasized the importance of creating a relaxing and comfortable atmosphere to build trust with participants. Moustakas suggested that interviews begin with light conversation or an activity to build trust and to create a relaxed atmosphere. Accordingly, I began the interviews with a welcome and brief icebreaker activity. After the icebreaker, I answered any study-related questions that participants had. I informed the

participant that the interview was about to begin. With participant consent, all Zoom sessions were recorded for transcription. I began the interview, reading questions as written in the interview protocol to ensure consistency across the interviews. Phone calls and face-to-face interviews were scheduled via email, and I sent a reminder of our interview appointment via encrypted email. The environment established for the interviews fostered a welcoming and safe sharing space. I told participants they did not have to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with and reiterated the highest level of confidentiality would be upheld. During all interviews (Zoom, face-to-face, and phone calls) I used the questions as a conversation piece, which helped participants feel more at ease and comfortable discussing experiences, as they often shared more than what the question initially asked.

For research participants to provide the substantial qualitative data needed to answer the research questions, Moustakas (1994) recommended the use of more broad questions to foster and encourage responses. Detailed field notes, interview transcripts, personal journals, and interpretive notes supported the reliability of my research (Hatch, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2013). All participants were referred to by pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Physical gestures, facial expressions, and other non-verbal forms of communication were documented in my field notes journal. Reflexive journals, field notes journal, digital recordings, emails, signed consent forms, and study transcripts were securely stored on my password-protected computer. At the conclusion of the interview, I thanked participants for their time and reviewed the transcript review and member checking processes. I ended the recording and closed the meeting.

The Researcher's Role

My role as the researcher in this transcendental phenomenological study was to serve as

the human instrument, gathering information to understand educators' perceptions of the impact and implementation of MTSS in a rural Title I North Carolina school. Due to my own 20 years of experience teaching and implementing MTSS in Title I schools, I implemented epoché to prevent personal biases from influencing data collection or interpretation (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). By engaging in self-reflection of my own experiences, possible biases were set aside to foster data that were transparent and free of judgement or prejudices (Moustakas, 1994). Daily journaling and reflection on the data helped me remain unbiased and grounded in my research (Moustakas, 1994). To prevent conflicts of interest, I did not interview individuals from my district, or with whom I had current professional relationships.

Data Collection Plan

Data for the transcendental phenomenological study were collected via open-ended individual interviews, a participant journal, and a questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to all participants with the informed consent form. Data gathered through the questionnaire allowed me to provide a description of the sample. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and consisted of open-ended questions that fostered reflection and open sharing (Moustakas, 1994). By creating a friendly and open climate, I gained participant trust and fostered a comfortable interview process. Participant responses provided in-depth understandings educators' perceptions of the impact and implementation of MTSS. After face-to-face interviews were conducted, I transcribed all recordings. After interviews, I sent each participant a link to an online participant journal. This journal contained questions that followed up on the interview questions, but allowed for anonymous completion. The online journal prompts gave them opportunities to share any information they preferred to keep anonymous.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

Primary data for this study were collected via face-to-face interviews, conducted via Zoom. As Moustakas (1994) explained, individual open-ended interviews are the most common form of data in phenomenological investigations. As previously noted, I initiated interviews with an ice breaker activity that helped me get to know the participants and created a comfortable environment. Participant-researcher rapport is essential to phenomenological investigation. Moustakas suggested that researchers create an atmosphere in which participants feel relaxed, comfortable, and willing to share information. With participant consent, all Zoom meetings of interviews were recorded. My computer and the virtual meeting platform were both password-protected, ensuring the protection of study data. The questions that were asked in the interview are described, as follows.

Open-ended Interview Questions

1. Please state your title and explain responsibilities at Riverside Elementary School or Creek Water High School. CRQ
2. Please describe your experience learning about MTSS. CRQ
3. Please tell me about any directions or assistance you were given regarding the implementation of MTSS. CRQ
4. Please describe any follow-up or accountability that is in place at Riverside Elementary or High to ensure all educators properly implement MTSS. CRQ
5. Based on your experiences with RtI at Elementary or High, what is perceived impact this intervention has on students' reading achievement? RQ1
6. Please explain any ways you believe RtI implementation could be improved to achieve better student outcomes in reading. RQ1
7. Based on your experiences with PBIS at Riverside, how have you observed the

implementation to impact students' discipline referrals and suspensions? RQ2

8. Please describe any ways you believe PBIS implementation could be improved to achieve better behavioral outcomes among students. RQ2
9. Overall, please describe how effective you think the implementation of MTSS interventions are at Elementary or High. RQ4
10. Thinking about your personal implementation of MTSS (both RtI and PBIS), please describe any barriers you have encountered that have prevented you from fully implemented it as intended. RQ3
11. Based on your experiences with the implementation of MTSS, please describe any ways you believe administration could foster improved implementation fidelity among educators. RQ4
12. Please feel free to share any additional information from your lived experiences from implementing MTSS in a Title I. RQ4

Questions one and two were designed to orient the participant to the study. Moustakas (1994) mentioned jogging participants' memory as a strategy used in transcendental phenomenology. Beginning the interview in a positive climate fosters rapport and trust between participants and researchers (Moustakas, 1994). Question 3 aimed to explore any training, direction, or assistance participants had received regarding MTSS implementation. Title I schools must use funding to provide equal educational opportunities by ensuring educators receive resources, training, and supplies needed for educational initiatives, such as MTSS (Kim et al., 1973). Question 4 shed light on any follow-up or accountability measures in place to ensure implementation fidelity with MTSS. Research indicates the effectiveness of academic and behavioral interventions can be undermined by poor implementation fidelity (Kim et al., 2018).

Questions five through nine focused on educators' perceptions. Research indicates educators' perceptions are a valuable tool for exploring the impact of academic and behavioral interventions (McGoey et al., 2014).

The fifth and sixth questions explored educators' perceptions of RtI and its impact on student achievement, as well as any ways the intervention could be improved. Questions 7 and 8 explored educators' perceptions of PBIS and its impact on student behavior, as well as any ways the intervention could be improved. Question 9 explored participants' perceptions of the overall effectiveness of MTSS. In support of questions 5 through 9, previous researchers have leveraged educators' perceptions to explore perceived effectiveness of the interventions as well as opportunities for improvement (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Landrum et al., 2007). Castro-Villarreal et al. (2014) examined educators' perceptions and attitudes about RtI and found educators perceived ineffective training and support as impediments to intervention success. Educators in the study felt better training and support could help improve the intervention and RtI practices (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). Similarly, Landrum et al. (2007) explored educators' perceptions of the utility of educational interventions to study whether data-based or personal experienced based intervention information was most effective. Analysis revealed educators preferred information that was more experience based than data-driven (Landrum et al., 2007). Educators' perceptions can be a valuable tool for exploring the impact of academic and behavioral interventions (McGoey et al., 2014). In an examination of educators' perceptions of factors that undermine the implementation of evidence-based practices and interventions, McGoey et al. (2014) found the most prominent barriers included lack of resources and inadequate training.

Questions 10 and 11 focused on possible barriers to implementation fidelity. Previous investigation indicated the effectiveness of academic and behavioral interventions were undermined by poor implementation fidelity (Kim et al., 2018). Kim et al. (2018) found strong implementation fidelity of SWPBIS interventions was associated with reduced disciplinary and behavioral problems among students. Thus, an understanding of barriers to implementation fidelity, as perceived by educators, may be useful for improving intervention implementation as well as student outcomes. Finally, the question 12 invited participants to share any additional information they felt was relevant.

I piloted the interview protocol with two educators. To conduct the pilot, I performed the interview exactly as described above. After the interviews, I asked pilot participants for feedback and any suggestions for revising the protocol or adding/removing questions. No changes to the protocol occurred as a result of the pilot.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

After interviews were conducted, audio from each was transcribed and reviewed by participants to ensure accuracy. Next, the analysis process began. Interview transcripts were analyzed using the steps of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis procedures consisted of the following six steps:

1. Perform a repeated review of all transcripts;
2. Code transcripts;
3. Revise list of codes and combine into themes and subthemes;
4. Compare the themes to the research questions and framework to ensure alignment;
5. Create succinct definitions for each theme; and
6. Craft the narrative of study results.

The first step of the thematic analysis involved submersion in the data via a repeated review of all transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step allowed me to begin identifying ideas and repetition in the data, prior to coding. As I read through the transcripts, I made notes in the document to identify repeated sentiments that seem to be emerging. After transcripts were read two to three times, I moved on to the second step of the analysis process and began coding the data. To code the transcripts, I systematically worked through each transcript to identify thoughts, words, sentiments, ideas, utterances, or phrases that seemed to repeat across the transcripts. I assigned a label to each of these repeated notions, which are known as codes. I reviewed each transcript a minimum of two times during the coding process to ensure all codes were properly assigned.

Participation Journals

In addition to the individual interviews, participants kept a participant journal in which they responded to prompts I provided. Participant journals contained prompts that followed up on the interview questions, and participants were able to complete them privately, without associating their identities with their responses. Because it was possible that participants may hesitate to answer openly about their personal implementation fidelity, the journal prompts gave them opportunities to share any information they preferred to keep anonymous. The participant journal contained 10 prompts and consent to complete the journal prompts was included in the informed consent form. After all educators completed the journals, responses were thematically analyzed, following the same procedures described for the interview.

Participant Journal Prompts

The participant journal prompts were as follows:

1. Based on your own experiences, please define MTSS in your own words. CRQ

2. With your experience and implementation of MTSS, please explain progress monitoring and data collection. CRQ
3. Please explain the training or professional development, which has been involved with the implementation of MTSS in your school. CRQ
4. Reflecting on your personal implementation of RtI, please detail any barriers that have prevented you from fully implemented it as intended. RQ1, RQ3
5. Thinking about your personal implementation of PBIS, please detail any barriers that have prevented you from fully implemented it as intended. RQ2, RQ3
6. Reflecting on your experiences with the implementation of MTSS, please describe Any ways you believe administration could foster improved implementation fidelity among educators. RQ4
7. Thinking about your observations and experiences, please explain how well you perceive MTSS is implemented by other educators at Riverside. RQ4
8. If you believe there are any issues with implementation fidelity, please explain any of those issues and why you feel those exist. RQ3
9. If you believe there are not any issues with implementation fidelity, please explain the measures you have observed educators take to ensure fidelity. RQ3
10. What advice would you give to educators beginning to implement MTSS in their classrooms? RQ4

Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan

Written responses to journal prompts were analyzed using the six aforementioned steps of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Following submersion in the data via a repeated review of all journal data, I began to code the journals. The process of coding involved

a systematic process in which I went through each line of data, seeking out repetition and patterns. When a repeated phrase, word, or idea was identified, I assigned it a code label. All codes identified in the journal responses had already been identified while anlayzing the interview data. I performed two passes of coding on all journal data to make sure I did not miss any codes. The codebook that I developed while coding the individual interviews did not expand during the process of analyzing journal data.

Questionnaire

Finally, all participants completed a questionnaire. As previously mentioned, I sent a link to the questionnaire, alongside the informed consent form, for participants to complete, scan, and requested they return both to me, via email. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather information needed to describe my sample and collect additional information regarding participants' experiences and perceptions with MTSS.

Questionnaire Items

Participants answered the following questionnaire prompts:

1. Please tell me about yourself (including your age, biological gender, race, level of education, and anything else you would like to share). Please note you do not have to share any information you are uncomfortable disclosing. CRQ
2. Please share a little about your teaching experience. CRQ
3. Please describe your experience teaching in a Title I school. CRQ
4. Please describe your experience implementing multi-tiered systems of support. RQ3
5. Please describe your perception as to the level of effectiveness response to intervention is for improving students' reading achievement. RQ1
6. Please describe your perception as to the level of effectiveness positive behavioral

interventions and supports is for improving students' behaviors (i.e., reducing disciplinary referrals). RQ2, RQ3

7. Please describe your perception as to the level of effectiveness multi-tiered systems of support and interventions are being implemented by educators, in general. RQ3
8. Based on your experience, please identify consider types of support, which may be helpful to strengthen the implementation fidelity of multi-tiered systems of support and interventions in a Title I school.RQ3, RQ4
9. Please describe the types of support you have received during your experience of multi-tiered systems of support and implementation. RQ4

Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan

Finally, questionnaire data were analyzed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis. The same analysis process used for the interviews and journal prompts was employed. First, I became submersed in the data by reviewing all questionnaire responses repeatedly. During this process, I made notes in the documents to identify repeated sentiments. After I read through all responses at three times, I began coding the data. Working through the data, line by line, I identified repeated thoughts, words, sentiments, ideas, utterances, or phrases. I reviewed each questionnaire response two times. The codebook that I developed while analyzing interview and journal data did not expand while analyzing the questionnaire data, indicating saturation had been reached with the interview data, alone.

Data Synthesis

After coding was completed across all data sources (interviews, journals, and questionnaires), I compiled a list of all codes that emerged. Next, I identified and removed codes that were not in alignment with the research questions, as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006). I

studied the final list of codes for possible relationships and determined how they may be grouped into themes and subthemes. Once I developed a preliminary list of themes and subthemes, I reviewed each against the theoretical framework to ensure all themes were aligned with the study. Next, I defined each theme and subtheme. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested theme definitions be simple and concise. After this step of the analysis, I sent all participants a copy of the preliminary analysis to conduct member checking. I requested participants to review the findings to ensure they aligned with the sentiments they wished to express during their interviews. For the final step of the analysis, I wrote up the narrative of the results, which is presented in Chapter 4. The same analysis procedures were applied to participant journals.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the transcendental phenomenological study, I was responsible for ensuring the research was reliable, relevant, and transferable. Ensuring trustworthiness means the study is free of bias and all information is accurately documented. Each participant was provided with the opportunity to review transcripts to ensure there were no errors.

Credibility

Credibility refers to how closely an analysis aligns with the realities participants intended to convey (Moustakas, 1994; Patten, 2015). To ensure credibility, I utilized member checking. All participants had the opportunity to review my preliminary analysis to ensure it reflected the ideas and sentiments they intended to convey (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patten, 2015). I carefully documented all study details, including data collection and analysis procedures. Credibility was also fostered via participant-researcher trust, which helped ensure participants were open and honest in their interviews. I nurtured trust by engaging in small talk and an

icebreaker activity prior to interviews. In addition, I created a timeline and ensured all appointments are met. Building trust between the researcher and the participant is an important part or research (Moustakas, 1994; Patten, 2015). Finally, triangulation of the three data sources also improved credibility.

Dependability

Maintaining neutrality in research and ethical professionalism is of utmost importance. To do this, I cast aside any known bias I possibly had. Through reflective journaling, I reduced personal bias and maintained a boundary between my personal experiences and the experiences of the participants. To ensure the accuracy of interviews, all meetings were confirmed with the researcher and participants, and were both documented, and recorded via Zoom (Moustakas, 1994; Patten, 2015). All participants were permitted to review the notes of their sessions at any time. Participants could have chosen to revoke their participation from the study at any point throughout the research. Participants were given all information at the beginning of the study to establish trust (Moustakas, 1994).

Confirmability

Confirmability describes how accurate findings are, in terms of the relevance and meaning (Elo et al., 2014). Confirmability is typically achieved when credibility, transferability, and dependability are achieved (Guba & Lincoln, 1992). Confirmability has been achieved when findings can be corroborated by other scholars. In the current study, confirmability was assured through an audit trail, the richness of study data, and the use of multiple data sources (Morse, 2016).

Transferability

Transferability describes the degree to which study findings can be transferred to other

contexts (Merriam, 2009). While qualitative researchers do not endeavor to produce generalizable results, transferability is an important way to improve trustworthiness. In the study, transferability was improved through a rich audit trail, description of the sample, and rich participant responses to interview questions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations address the relationship between researcher and participants, issues of confidentiality, and informed consent (Sanjari, et al., 2014). For Riverside Elementary, consent was collected before any research began. I obtained IRB approval, the school principals and district superintendent's approval to conduct the study and informed them how data will be collected and shared (Sanjari et al., 2014). Written consent was collected from the superintendent, school principal, and all participants in the study and kept digitally on a password-protected passport drive. For Creekside High School, I obtained IRB approval, principal approval and the approval of the district MTSS Coordinator. I provided information regarding the study and how data will be collected and shared (Sanjari et al., 2014)

Additional strategies to ensure ethical research practices were employed, including the protocol for addressing the ethical consideration of relationship between the researcher and participants. I selected voluntary participants with whom I did not interact frequently on a professional basis (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I did not work in the study site school district, so there were no potential conflicts of interest of risks of coercion. All participants, the study site schools, and the study site school districts were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. I provided all participants with information regarding the purpose, intention of the study, and risks. I met virtually with each participant before the research study began to thoroughly explain the purpose of the research study and answered any questions participants

had (Moustakas, 1994). All data were maintained digitally, on a password-protected computer to which only I had access. Plagiarism was avoided by citing all collected information and data (Creswell, 2018). All results were openly and honestly reported (Creswell, 2018).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology study was to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of MTSS interventions (RtI and PBSS) on students' academic achievement and disruptive behavior, as well their perceptions of barriers that may undermine the impact of these interventions. MTSS was defined as an evidence-based, tiered system of interventions and supports aimed at improving students' academic achievement and behaviors (Wexler, 2018). A comprehensive explanation of the research design and justification for the study was provided in this chapter. The rationale for site selection, participant selection, and demographic information was also outlined. This chapter included details of study procedures, data collection, and data analysis. Strategies to ensure trustworthiness and ethical practices were also discussed. Results are reported in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of MTSS interventions (RtI and PBIS) on students' academic achievement and disruptive behavior, as well their perceptions of barriers that may undermine the impact of these interventions. Analysis of all study data followed the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Findings from the analysis are presented in this chapter. First, details of study participants are provided, including demographic information and brief narrative descriptions. A discussion of study results follows. Finally, each of the research questions are answered. The chapter closes with a brief summary.

Participants

Study participants included 12 education professionals. To be eligible, participants had to complete at minimum one full year of experience as a classroom teacher who implemented MTSS. All twelve participants were women and ten possessed master's degrees. Five participants work as teachers while the other seven worked in various specialist roles. Participants' experience in education ranged from four to 25 years, and their ages ranged from 27 to 57 years. Using participant questionnaires, participant demographics are displayed in Table 1, followed by brief descriptions of each participant derived from their questionnaire.

Table 1

Teacher Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education	Years of education experience	Current Professional Title
Sally	48	F	Master's	25 years	Autism Coordinator
Mary	37	F	Bachelor's	4 years	Lead pre-K teacher
Beth	42	F	Master's	4 years	Behavioral specialist
Liz	40	F	Master's	19 years	Sixth grade teacher
Becky	30	F	Bachelor's	8 years	First grade teacher
Jane	37	F	Master's	8 years	High school special education teacher
Maggie	43	F	Master's	14 years	Behavior outreach coordinator
Ruth	57	F	Master's	27 years	Autism specialist
Anne	27	F	Master's	5 years	First grade teacher
Cindy	48	F	Master's	20 years	EC specialist
Fran	34	F	Master's	9.5 years	Autism specialist
Jess	35	F	Master's	20 years	K-5 special education case manager

Sally

Sally is an autism coordinator for the school district. She supports a team of behavior specialists at a Title 1 school, providing consultations, attending IEP meetings, and supporting teachers and administrators in the implementation of MTSS. She worked to support teachers and administrators in MTSS implementation by conducting observations, modeling effective implementation, and providing teachers with feedback.

Mary

Mary has been teaching since 2005, working with pre-k and elementary age students. She works as a lead pre-K teacher at an elementary school. Her mother was also an educator, and she is proud to work in public education. The student population at her school consists of a large

population of low-income students, including homeless students dealing with trauma. In addition to teaching full time and attending graduate school, she and her husband own their own business and recently became licensed foster parents for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

Beth

Beth possesses a graduate degree and 4 years of experience as a teacher. She has a background in mental health, residential care, day treatment, and foster care. She works as a behavioral specialist, helping students with academic and behavioral deficiencies. She works primarily with students who are identified as Tier 3 students and have demonstrated an academic or behavioral deficiency. She explained the student population she serves consists mostly of students in the exceptional children's program.

Liz

Liz works as a sixth-grade math and science teacher. She has served in education for 19 years, working with students in grades two through eight. Over the years, she has taught math, English, and science. She also worked as an assistant principal for 3 years, but missed being in the classroom and returned to teaching 5 years ago. Liz enjoys working with underprivileged students and positively impacting her students on a daily basis. She lives and teaches in the same community of her school and feels a personal connection with many of the families she serves. She mentioned she enjoys maintaining relationships with her students as they become adults. Part of what makes her job worthwhile is knowing she can be a positive role model for her students.

Becky

Becky is a first-grade teacher. She grew up in a small rural town and has taught in two different counties. She previously spent seven years teaching kindergarten. Most of her students

lack support systems at home. Additional professional responsibilities have included car duty, creating lesson plans, and facilitating multi-cultural day at the school. When asked about her experience with MTSS, she explained she has struggled with annual changes to the implementation protocol. She said, “Each year that I have been at this school, I have not had the same MTSS paperwork. This is very frustrating when you have a student who needs this information to follow them throughout their school career.”

Jane

Jane works as a special education teacher at a high school. She began her career in education as a teaching assistant. She has taught middle school English and said teaching in a Title 1 school helped her realize the importance of teaching the “whole child.” In her current position, she has found offering support and instruction for MTSS is both useful and necessary for student growth and success. Most of her students have IEPs, which aid in their ability to develop and make educational gains. She explained that implementing accommodations, modification, and providing MTSS are “an everyday necessity.”

Maggie

Maggie works as a behavior outreach coordinator, supervising other specialists and assistants, focusing on autism, mental health, and student behavior. She has 14 years of teaching experience in special education, math, and English. She has taught at the middle and high school levels. When asked about her experience with MTSS implementation, she said she has developed plans for implementation, but those plans are often undermined because teachers and instructional coaches are “spread too thin.”

Ruth

Ruth has 27 years of teaching experience, and works as an autism specialist. She coordinates with general education teachers, EC teachers, and administrators. Her role involves developing strategies to overcome challenging student behaviors. She emphasized the importance of consistency in the effectiveness of MTSS. Ruth believes that when all teachers, administrators, and support personnel are on the same page with implementation, student progress is remarkable and significant improvements in behavior and academic progress are observed.

Anne

Anne has served in education for five years. She works as a first-grade teacher. She possesses a Master's degree in elementary education with a specialty in STEM education. She has taught fifth, fourth, and first grade students. She explained that teaching at a Title I school is challenging because many of the students have experienced trauma. She has implemented MTSS all five years she has been teaching and described this process as "a lot of hard work." She said that implementation, documentation, and updating interventions as needed requires much time and planning.

Cindy

Cindy has been teaching in special education for 20 years. She works as the EC specialist at a high school. She began as a teaching assistant and job coach at a high school. She also worked as a lead teacher and was in charge of the school's Special Olympics. She has extensive experience teaching in middle and high school settings. When asked about her experience with MTSS implementation, she said she has received no support. She felt that the effectiveness of MTSS at the middle and high school levels was very limited.

Fran

Fran is an autism specialist, who has consulted for teachers and administrators in a number of school districts. She has taught middle and high school. She worked in a special education setting after graduate school and then moved to a self-contained classroom where she taught general and special education. As an Intensive Intervention teacher, her classroom experience primarily consisted of the MTSS implementation of tier 3 supports. She occasionally supported both general education and resource teachers with selecting and implementing appropriate tier 2 and 3 academic and behavioral interventions.

Jess

Jess is a K-5 special education case manager. She has taught elementary and middle school in Honduras and in the United States. She has extensive experience with IEPs, inclusion, and curriculum. She felt that MTSS could be used to identify students who needed additional support, both academically and behaviorally. When RtI was implemented correctly, she had observed much success.

Results

The first step of analysis involved an in-depth review of all study data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts from the open-ended interviews, journals, and questionnaires were each read twice to allow for familiarity with the data. The next step involved coding. During the coding process, each line of data was analyzed, identifying and naming patterns and repetitions. After coding the interviews, the journals and finally the questionnaires were coded. After one full pass of coding had been performed through all data, a second examination was completed to ensure all codes had been identified and assigned. In total, 41 codes emerged. The prevalence of each code is illustrated in Table 2. The most common codes included effects of COVID-19, lack of

guidance, fidelity is essential to effectiveness, and assess progress using data. The least common codes included high fidelity levels, administrative guidance needed, and administrative turnover.

Table 2

Code Frequency

Code	*F*
effects of COVID-19	27
lack of guidance	27
fidelity is essential to effectiveness	23
assess progress using data	23
funding needs	23
Inconsistency	22
implementation assistance for MTSS provided	20
lack of time	18
training is needed	16
meetings and committees	14
poor implementation fidelity	14
consistency	13
teacher stress and overwhelm	13
MTSS is effective	12
RtI is beneficial	11
accountability	10
monitor implementation	10
PBIS has positive impact	9
unclear expectations	9
ao not understand interventions well	8
PBIS not effective	8
administrative support is needed	8
administrator check-in or follow-up	8
resistant to change	7
teacher turnover	7
paperwork creates barriers	7
teachers should ask questions	7
more teachers needed	6
relationships	5
ongoing training is important	5
same page	5
staffing challenges	5
MTSS not effective	4
involvement of administrators could improve	4
frustrations	4
support staff needed	4
MTSS implementation requires a lot of energy	4

communication shortcomings	3
high fidelity levels	3
administrative guidance needed	3
administrative turnover	2

The third step of the analysis process involved arranging the list of codes into themes and subthemes, in alignment with the research questions. As shown in Table 3, four themes and 10 subthemes emerged. The themes included Perceived impact of MSS, RtI, and PBIS, Implementation fidelity is important, Perceived barriers to implementation fidelity, and Strategies to improve MTSS implementation fidelity. The subthemes included Overall impact of MTSS, Overall impact of RtI, Overall impact of PBIS, Lack of understanding, Lack of Resources, Inconsistencies, Teachers are overwhelmed, Improve teachers' understandings of MTSS, Monitoring, accountability, and consistency are needed, and Support and involvement of administrators. Themes, subthemes, and their associated codes are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3

Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

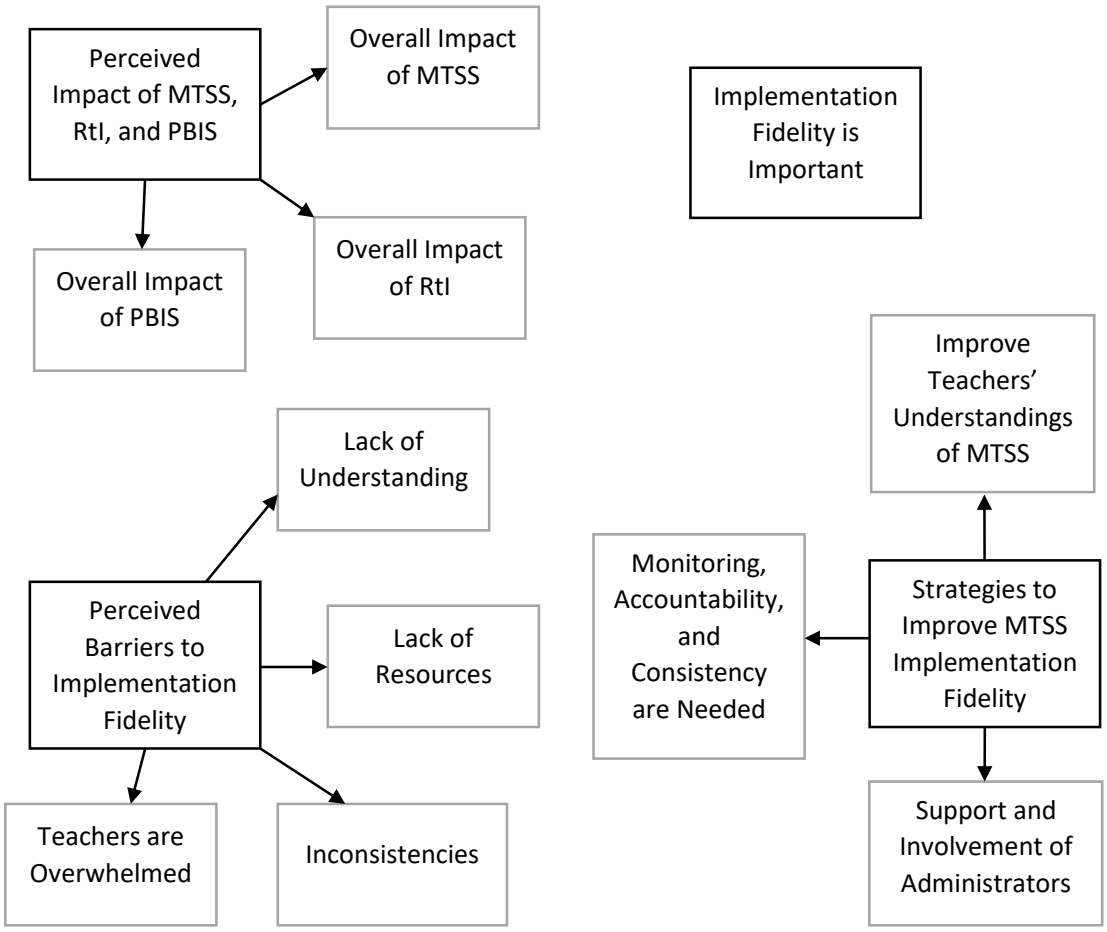
Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Perceived Impact of MTSS, RtI, and PBIS	Overall Impact of MTSS	-MTSS not effective -MTSS is effective
	Overall Impact of RtI	-RtI is beneficial
	Overall Impact of PBIS	-PBIS has positive impact -PBIS not effective
Implementation Fidelity is Important		-fidelity is essential to effectiveness -poor implementation fidelity
Perceived Barriers to Implementation Fidelity	Lack of understanding	-lack of guidance -unclear expectations -do not understand interventions well

	Lack of resources	-lack of time -funding needs -more teachers needed -support staff needed -staffing challenges
	Inconsistencies	-inconsistency -Effects of COVID-19 -teacher turnover -administrative turnover -communication shortcomings -same page
	Teachers are overwhelmed	-frustrations -teacher stress and overwhelm -resistant to change -paperwork creates barriers -MTSS implementation requires a lot of energy
Strategies to Improve MTSS Implementation Fidelity	Understanding MTSS	-implementation assistance for MTSS provided -training is needed -teachers should ask questions -ongoing training is important
	Monitoring, accountability, and consistency are needed	-assess progress using data -monitor implementation -accountability -consistency
	Support and Involvement of administrators	-administrative support is needed -administrator check-in or follow-up -administrative guidance needed -involvement of administrators could improve

The themes and subthemes were then compared to the four research questions to ensure alignment. Themes and subthemes were defined, followed by the development of the narrative of study results. A narrative of study findings is provided as follows, presented thematically. A thematic map of the organization of themes and subthemes appears in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Thematic Map



Perceived Impact of MTSS, RtI, and PBIS

The first theme focused on participants' perceptions of the impact of MTSS, RtI, and PBIS. It is important to note that perceptions not only varied based on the intervention type, but also by the current professional role held by participants. Those who were currently working as teachers had different perceptions of intervention effectiveness from those who were currently working as specialists. For example, when Becky, a teacher, was asked in the open-ended

interview to share her thoughts on MTSS, she replied, “They are not effective.” Sally on the other hand, an autism coordinator, described MTSS as “highly effective.” Seven of 12 participants explained they felt MTSS is effective, when it is implemented with fidelity, while five of 12 participants felt that MTSS was ineffective. Three subthemes emerged for this theme, each focusing on one of the following areas: MTSS, RtI, and PBIS.

Perceived Effectiveness of MTSS

Perceptions of the overall impact of MTSS varied. Using the questionnaire, four participants felt the intervention had minimal impact, while the other eight felt the intervention had significant impact. Beth said the implementation of MTSS was not effective, while Becky described the intervention, itself, as ineffective. When asked about perceived effectiveness during her interview, Anne replied, “Overall I think the effectiveness of the use of the MTSS system in our school would be a 6/10.” In her journal, Anne added that many teachers viewed MTSS as a burden and were cynical about the difference it could truly make:

> I think we [teachers] all know it can help students to a certain degree but at what point are we just working ourselves to death with no support? Other teachers that I have discussed MTSS [with] mentioned they wished that our work wasn’t “for nothing.” They feel we are doing all these interventions and paper work, data collection, and progress monitoring, and there is no real follow through with any of it.

Despite some negative sentiments about MTSS, other participants were more positive. In her questionnaire response, Sally said MTSS was “highly effective” when correctly implemented. Similarly, Mary’s questionnaire revealed positive effects were seen: “When staff use the MTSS tiers and reference information with fidelity.” Jess’s questionnaire stated, “Interventions in place as a result of MTSS are effective, as long as they are implemented with

fidelity." Later, Jess added "If it is not happening with fidelity, it will not work." Maggie also discussed the positive effects of MTSS when implemented with fidelity and supported by proper training and funding. Jane had a positive perception of MTSS, saying she liked that the program focused on meeting students where they were.

Perceived Effectiveness of RtI

Sentiments about the specific impact of RtI were more consistently positive among participants during their interviews, in which participants described the intervention's benefits. Negative sentiments about RtI, specifically, were not expressed. Beth explained that benchmark testing revealed the utility of RtI for improving reading skills. Liz felt RtI was beneficial because it allowed students to be placed into small groups to receive reading interventions. In her questionnaire, Jane shared, "The effective response to intervention in improving students' reading achievement has been positive. Allowing students the opportunity to work in small group settings, providing additional support and instruction is vital and necessary for student success." Sally shared that interventions had been helpful, while Maggie described the outcomes as "astronomical" in her questionnaire, explaining that with RtI, teachers "can double reading scores." During her interview, Cindy said that when RtI interventions were implemented with fidelity, "Either reading progress [improves] or determination to increase the level of supports needed for these." A similar sentiment was shared by Fran. In her questionnaire, Jess said "RtI is very effective when it is implemented with fidelity."

Mixed Reviews of PBIS

Data from all sources provided information regarding the participants' perceived effectiveness of RtI. While perceptions of the effectiveness of RtI were overwhelmingly positive, attitudes regarding PBIS were mixed. Some participants felt PBIS was highly effective, while

others described it as “a joke.” Among the positive perceptions, Jane shared in her questionnaire response, “PBIS interventions are important in improving student behaviors as it allows students the opportunity to see and develop positive behaviors they may otherwise not ever be presented with.” During their interviews, Sally said she had observed increases in positive student behaviors as a result of PBIS, while Mary felt it was ineffective because students do not get “bored with it.” Mary expanded her interview response to explain that PBIS “helped and reduced discipline from out the roof to almost non-existent.” In her journal, Cindy said discipline referrals were low at her school, which she attributed to the implementation of PBIS.

Stipulations regarding the positive effects of PBIS were also expressed. That is, participants believed PBIS could be effective, but only when properly implemented with fidelity and supported. For example, Beth explained in her questionnaire response: “If you have a supportive administrator, who is willing to allocate the funds for PBIS, reward systems, and designating appropriate number of personnel, it is highly effective.” Similarly, Maggie’s journal response revealed she felt PBIS was effective when teachers were provided with coaches, resources, and ongoing support needed for proper implementation.

Other participants were critical of PBIS, feeling it had little or no positive effects, and that it was not effective for all students. In her questionnaire, Liz shared, “I think PBIS does a good job of rewarding those students who are doing the right thing, but for students who have difficulty following the rules, PBIS has not been super effective.” Becky was also critical of the intervention in her journal, explaining that it enabled students rather than supported them. Becky elaborated on this during her interview, sharing: “I personally believe PBIS is a joke. We are setting students up for failure. The real world does not reward you for your good behavior. You receive a consequence for your bad choices.” Anne admitted that PBIS reduced referrals but not

suspensions. For Anne, the paltry impact of PBIS related to its forced implementation. In her journal, Anne shared:

> The problem is when we were forced to implement it was just that, it was forced. It felt forced for the teachers and forced for the students. It became more about the teachers and kids keeping up with tickets to go to a "PBIS store" once every 6 weeks than it was actually about learning positive behaviors, coping skills, and routines/habits. When we had a student who did not respond with the tier 1 PBIS and needed more, we were told that we just weren't doing PBIS correctly.

Implementation Fidelity is Important

While sentiments regarding the effects of MTSS interventions were somewhat mixed, participants' journals, questionnaires, and open-ended interview answers consistently described the importance of implementation fidelity in achieving successful intervention outcomes. Sally's questionnaire responses revealed consistent implementation was "important," explaining, "I believe that when response to intervention is being implemented consistently and all stakeholders are working toward the same goal, it is very effective." Similarly, Fran said in her interview, "It works when it is implemented with fidelity." In her questionnaire, Mary explained, "When staff use the MTSS tiers and reference information with fidelity, we see a decrease in disciplinary referrals." Becky's questionnaire stated MTSS "has potential" when implementation is consistent. In her journal, Ruth said positive outcomes would be more evident if the interventions were implemented with more consistency. Similarly, during her interview, Anne said outcomes "would be better if it were implemented consistently across the school." Jess's journal indicated there were issues with implementation fidelity that undermined the outcomes associated with

MTSS. Across all three data sources, teachers seemed confused with the MTSS process, and did not feel supported by administration or properly trained in the interventions.

Perceived Barriers to Implementation Fidelity

The third theme to emerge focused on perceived barriers to implementation fidelity. Interviews and journal entries revealed participants perceived a number of factors to undermine the implementation of MTSS. Four main categories of barriers emerged, including lack of understanding, lack of resources, inconsistencies, and teacher overwhelm. For example, in her journal, Ruth cited a major barrier to successful MTSS outcomes as teachers' "lack of baseline knowledge of interventions," while Fran's questionnaire revealed teachers needed "more intensive coaching and modeling" for MTSS. Fran explained, "Fidelity checks would be helpful. There should be some kind of accountability, but before that happens, administrators should explain how MTSS is defined." Each of these categories is discussed below, as a subtheme.

Lack of Understanding

Challenges associated with how interventions should be implemented were exposed due to open-ended interviews. Maggie described a lack of understanding with interventions, and Cindy said the utility of MTSS was contingent upon teachers' understandings of them. One of the most common codes to emerge from the data, "lack of guidance," illustrates the emphasis participants placed on the lack of guidance provided to teachers regarding how to properly use and implement the interventions. In her questionnaire response, Liz mentioned a lack of guidance and direction, sharing, "Honestly, I don't feel like I have received a whole lot of support implementing MTSS into my classroom over the years." A similar sentiment was expressed in Jane's journal: "This is the first year at my current school and I have not received any training or professional development on MTSS specifically." Maggie also said staff received

no professional development on MTSS, while Anne's interview revealed said teachers received "little to no support" on the implementation of the interventions.

Anne explained that new teachers, specifically, were not prepared for how to implement MTSS and track outcomes. In her journal, Anne shared, "New teachers come in and have not been properly trained on interventions, data tracking, and documentation." This idea was echoed during Becky's interview when she shared new teachers often have "no idea what [MTSS] is or how to implement it." Ruth also received little guidance on MTSS implementation and stated that the strategies she used to implement MTSS were based on her own research. Jess shared in her journal that she felt teachers should reach out to administrators to request professional development.

Lack of clear expectations in the implementation of MTSS was also mentioned as a barrier. In their journals, Liz explained that administrators are often unclear on expectations regarding how MTSS should be implemented, and Maggie said administrators rarely provide clear expectations because they lack a thorough understanding of the interventions. Anne said administrators are sometimes on different pages from teachers, specialists, and support staff, in terms of the goals associated with MTSS. During her interview, Anne cited "inconsistent expectations from administrators" as a primary barrier to the fidelity of MTSS implementation.

Lack of Resources

The second category of barriers described across all three data sources was a lack of resources. Insufficient resources were described in terms of a lack of time, funding, and staff. There was agreement across participants regarding the hurdle that time created in MTSS implementation. Participants said educators simply lack the time to implement the interventions, as intended. Liz described this issue in depth, in her journal:

> Time has been the biggest factor of fully implementing MTSS/RTI in my classroom. It is very difficult to cover all of the standards at the grade level while simultaneously working with students in small groups to fill in gaps. When I was in a self-contained classroom, it was much easier because I had the whole day to work intervention time into my schedule; however, being in the middle school setting makes it more difficult because there's a very limited amount of time for each class.

When asked about barriers to implementation in her journal, Becky replied, "[There is] not enough time in the day to do whole class, reading groups, and interventions." During their interviews, Maggie referenced time as a barrier and Mary said, "with teachers, there are not enough hours in the day." In their journals, Beth, Cindy, and Jane also discussed the challenges created by a lack of time.

Funding needs were described as additional resource barriers. In their questionnaire responses, Sally said teachers need to be provided with funding to purchase PBIS rewards and students and Beth said the "lack of funding" created obstacles in the implementation of MTSS interventions. In her journal, Liz described funding barriers with PBIS:

> One barrier has been the lack of funding for rewards for students who are doing the right thing. One administrator asked each classroom teacher to have a prize box system set up but no funding was provided for the prize box. Teachers were expected to pay for that out of their own pocket.

During interviews, Jane and Maggie discussed the lack of funding, and Beth said a key to improving implementation fidelity of MTSS was "more money, of course, to implement it."

The final resource barrier related to staffing, with participants describing the lack of support staff, teachers, and hands in the building to assist with MTSS implementation. Mary,

Beth, Liz, Jane, and Maggie all described teacher and staffing shortages as key barriers. For example, Maggie's questionnaire response revealed the ability to implement MTSS at her school "was non-existent due to lack of teachers." In her interview, Liz said the interventions had the potential to be effective, but explained: "lately I do not feel they are effective simply because of staffing [shortages]." In a questionnaire response, Jane explained that her school was limited in its ability to effectively implement MTSS because of "the lack of staffing." Speaking of implementation barriers during her interview, Mary shared, "we need more physical hands in the classroom."

Inconsistencies

The third type of barrier was described in participant journals and noted to be inconsistencies. Participants not only cited inconsistent use and implementation of MTSS as problematic, but also described inconsistencies in the classroom and school that were related to the effects of COVID-19, communication challenges, and teacher and administrative turnover. In her questionnaire, Sally said, "Not all educators are on the same page for PBIS." Similarly, Ruth's questionnaire revealed, "Not all teachers are on the same page or are consistent in implementing interventions, which deters progress and development." In reference to MTSS implementation, Jess shared in her journal that "The lack of consistency has been difficult." Also shared in her journal, Anne explained, "When everyone isn't on the same page, we might be spinning our wheels for no reason." Becky explained in her questionnaire, "Each year that I have been at this school, I have not had the same MTSS paperwork. This is very frustrating when you have a student that needs this information to follow them throughout their school career."

Several participants cited the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as a driver of inconsistent implementation. For example, Sally explained in her journal, "I think the few issues

with implementation fidelity stem from COVID-19." Also shared via journals, Beth said the COVID-19 pandemic "really impacted the implementation of RtI" and Mary said the pandemic made it difficult to track all the metrics needed for the intervention. Liz succinctly shared during her interview, "With COVID-19, MTSS started to fall off the face of the earth." In her interview, Fran said, "COVID-19 really impacted everything. I do not feel our teachers have fully recovered from it yet."

COVID-19 created gaps that interrupted MTSS implementation; it also may have contributed to staff turnover that exacerbated the problem. In journals, Sally cited teacher turnover as an implementation barrier, and Maggie said "Staff turnover is too high" to achieve effective MTSS implementation. Mary and Beth also referenced the barriers of teacher turnover. Maggie and Anne mentioned administrative turnover as another challenge. Maggie shared in her journal, "New administrators come in and have no clue and either dismantles things or lets things coast in relationship to PBIS." Anne said that her previous administrator fully supported the use of MTSS, but then transitioned to a new administrator who was unsupportive of the interventions.

Teachers are Overwhelmed

The last barrier described by participants in their journal entries, related to teacher stress and overwhelm. There was a general feeling that teachers have too much responsibilities, are short staffed, have inadequate resources, and cannot manage the additional work required to implement MTSS. Speaking of all the work required to implement MTSS, Anne said in her journal, "it gets overwhelming." Beth said a predominant barrier to MTSS implementation was teacher overwhelm. During interviews, Becky said, "Classroom teachers are already overworked," and Maggie said the added responsibilities of MTSS created even more stress for

teachers. Speaking of the workload required to implement MTSS, Anne's questionnaire response revealed, "It is a lot of hard work. Implementing, documenting, and updating interventions takes lots of careful time and planning." During interviews, Anne and Liz specifically cited the ample paperwork associated with MTSS implementation as challenges for teachers.

Strategies to Improve MTSS Implementation Fidelity

Participants were invited to share their thoughts on ways the implementation fidelity of MTSS interventions could be improved. Several codes related to these strategies, which were then organized into the following three subthemes: Improve teachers' understandings of MTSS, Monitoring, accountability, and consistency are needed, and Support and involvement of administrators. For example, Sally shared in her questionnaire: "Providing schools with professional development on specific reinforcers and how to implement MTSS consistently would be powerful." while Beth said in her journal that monitoring was needed to "make sure that everyone is implementing MTSS consistently and in a similar way." Each subtheme is discussed, below.

Improve Teachers' Understanding of MTSS

Improving teachers' understandings of MTSS and its implementation was the first suggestion mentioned in participant journals for improving implementation fidelity, offered by participants. While some said they received a basic overview of MTSS, they admitted little guidance was provided in how to implement the interventions. For this reason, participants described the importance of ongoing training and professional development. For example, Beth explained in her questionnaire, "I feel that providing a continuum of professional development and training for teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators is very important." Also via questionnaire, Cindy echoed this notion: "There needs to be ongoing trainings where everyone

can attend to stay abreast of how best to implement and support the staff/students though this process." Jane's journal responses described a lack of instruction as a main barrier to the fidelity of MTSS implementation. Maggie said little "targeted professional development" was available to teachers. Ruth explained via interview that could teachers understand the benefits of MTSS and improve implementation fidelity.

Monitoring, Accountability, and Consistency are Needed

Data across the three sources revealed monitoring strategies to create accountability and consistency could significantly improve the implementation fidelity of MTSS interventions. While all participants described the importance of assessing the effectiveness of the interventions using data, many also pointed out that assessing the fidelity of MTSS implementation was also necessary. Without confirming that an intervention was implemented as intended, data on the effectiveness of the interventions may be questioned. In her journal, Liz said teachers should be monitored to make sure they are implementing the interventions as expected, sharing, "The follow-up piece is also missing holding teachers accountable for implementing progress monitoring for students who need the support." Fran's interview indicated teachers were held accountable for their MTSS and PBIS data. During her interview, Maggie said leaders needed to "conduct progress monitoring." Also, via interview, Ruth similarly offered, "It would be beneficial if administration monitored the strategies utilized, through collection of data vs behavior outcome." Cindy's journal responses revealed administrators should go into classrooms to make sure MTSS is being implemented as expected.

Support and Involvement of Administrators

The final subtheme to emerged for strategies to improve MTSS implementation fidelity in participant journals and was related to administrative support and involvement. Many

participants felt administrators needed to become more aware of and involved in MTSS implementation, not only to ensure the interventions are being properly implemented, but also to make sure teachers are receiving necessary supports. Six participants described the importance of administrative support, explaining its relevance to improving MTSS implementation fidelity. Participants felt administrators needed to be more hands-on, rather than only stepping in when student behaviors resulted in referrals. As Anne shared in her journal, "The only time our administration is involved in MTSS is when a major incident referral is put into educator's handbook for the administration to call the parents and assign a consequence." Similarly, Beth felt administrators should be fostering better understandings of MTSS among their teachers. In her interview, Becky said administrators needed to be clearer about their expectations, regarding teachers' implementation of MTSS. Liz echoed this notion in her journal, explaining that administrators should provide all staff with clear expectations.

In her journal entry, Cindy felt administrators needed to be visiting classrooms to ensure interventions were being implemented, and Maggie felt that low administrative involvement was due to leaders' limited understandings of the interventions. Similarly, Sally shared in her journal, "I think having administrators check-in with teachers and making sure [teachers] understand how to implement MTSS in their classrooms would be beneficial." During her interview, when asked how she felt administrators could improve implementation fidelity, Mary replied, "Consistency, check-ins with classroom teachers." Responding to the same interview prompt, Ruth said, "It would be beneficial if administration monitored the strategies utilized, through collection of data vs behavior outcome."

Research Question Responses

The themes and subthemes presented above provide direct answers to the research questions. A brief response to each question is presented as follows, using findings from the analysis. The findings provide a better understanding of each research question.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked: Among educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, what is the perceived impact of response to intervention on students' reading achievement? Analysis of study data revealed educators' favorable attitudes toward RtI. Although overall perceptions of the effectiveness of MTSS were somewhat mixed, participants were in agreement that RtI, when implemented with fidelity, could significantly improve students' reading skills. As Liz explained, RtI can be very effective when implemented correctly and when students receive individual or small group attention. Liz said reading specialists and tutors helped improve the effectiveness of RtI: "especially when we had reading specialists and tutors that pulled small groups of students for reading intervention." Maggie described the potential benefits of RtI, when implemented correctly, as "astronomical." Cindy said that when RtI was implemented with fidelity, either student progress improved or teachers were able to identify where extra supports were needed. In both of these cases, reading outcomes would ultimately improve.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked: Among educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, what is the perceived impact of positive behavioral interventions and supports on students' discipline referrals and suspensions? Participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of PBIS were divided. All agreed that implementation fidelity was central to the effectiveness of

interventions, but attitudes were split in terms of the intervention's effectiveness. Notable about the divided opinions is the way professional title seemed to relate. Three participants (Liz, Becky, and Anne) who were openly critical of PBIS, were all current classroom teachers. Becky said that PBIS was not effective because it relied on a system of rewards, which did not translate into the real world: "I do not find this to be helpful. I personally feel that students need to learn that their actions have consequences. I do not get a cookie or sticker each time I do something good."

Those who spoke highly of PBIS (Jane, Sally, Mary, and Cindy) included those who were specialists as well as those who taught in the classroom. Overall, those who were not current classroom teachers had higher opinions of PBIS. In addition, participants agreed that limitations in support and funding undermined the potential benefits of PBIS.

Research Question 3

The third research question asked: Among educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, what are the perceived barriers, if any, to the implementation fidelity of multi-tiered systems of supports and interventions? The third theme was in direct alignment with this question, indicating the following four main types of barriers to implementation fidelity: lack of understanding, lack of resources, inconsistencies, and teacher stress and overwhelm. As Liz explained, a lack of guidance often resulted in teachers having to guess as to how to implement MTSS: "there are not clear guidelines for implementing MTSS with fidelity at my school, so teachers are unsure exactly what to do." Participants felt that teachers lacked instruction, guidance, and training, not only on how to implement MTSS, but also on why the interventions were of value. Ruth noted a lack of "teacher cooperation and resistance" to MTSS, sharing "Some teachers are not sold on MTSS." participants also felt a lack of resources impeded MTSS

implementation. Inadequate time, staffing, funding, and support made it difficult for overworked teachers to implement MTSS with fidelity. Inconsistencies also created challenges, in terms of communication, teachers and administrators not being on the "same page," and staff turnover. Lingering effects of COVID-19 caused disruptions to education and routine, thus contributing to inconsistency challenges. Finally, high levels of teacher stress and overwhelm made MTSS implementation feel like additional burdens for many teachers.

Research Question 4

The fourth research question asked: Based on the perceptions and experiences of educators of a rural Title I school in North Carolina, how could the implementation fidelity of multi-tiered systems of supports and interventions be improved? The final theme was directly aligned with this research question. Associated subthemes revealed three main ways participants felt the implementation fidelity of MTSS could be improved: (a) by improving teachers' understandings of MTSS, (b) by creating accountability and consistency through monitoring, and (c) through support and involvement of administrators. By providing teachers with more guidance regarding the importance of MTSS, the expectations surrounding its implementation, and how to correctly implement it, fidelity could be improved. Maggie noted that "People have to be hired and there has to be training. There should be layers of intervention." In addition, accountability for the proper implementation of MTSS could be achieved through check-ins and follow-ups. When asked how the interventions could be improved, Mary replied, "holding people accountable for what they should be doing." Participants felt more involved and supportive administrators could also help make sure teachers had support, guidance, and accountability for MTSS implementation.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of MTSS interventions (RtI and PBIS) on students' academic achievement and disruptive behavior, as well their perceptions of barriers that may undermine the impact of these interventions. Data were collected via three sources: semi-structured interviews, a participant journal, and a participant questionnaire. Interview transcripts, participant journals, and questionnaires were all analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis. Four themes and 10 subthemes emerged. The themes included Perceived impact of MSS, RtI, and PBIS, Implementation fidelity is important, Perceived barriers to implementation fidelity, and Strategies to improve MTSS implementation fidelity. The subthemes included Overall impact of MTSS, Overall impact of RtI, Overall impact of PBIS, Lack of understanding, Lack of Resources, Inconsistencies, Teachers are overwhelmed, Improve teachers' understandings of MTSS, Monitoring, accountability, and consistency are needed, and Support and involvement of administrators.

Data analysis indicated that educators had favorable attitudes toward RtI. Although overall perceptions of the effectiveness of MTSS were mixed, participants agreed RtI could significantly improve students' reading skills when implemented correctly. Participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of PBIS, however, were divided. Teachers tended to have less favorable attitudes toward PBIS, while non-teachers often perceived the intervention more favorably. All participants agreed implementation fidelity was central to the effectiveness of interventions, but attitudes were split in terms of the intervention's effectiveness. Participants agreed that teachers lacked instruction, guidance, and training on how to implement MTSS and why the interventions were of value. Most participants suggested that MTSS implementation

fidelity could be improved by providing teachers with more guidance on why MTSS was important, what the expectations were surrounding its implementation, and how to correctly implement it. A discussion of study results, implications, and opportunities for future investigation are provided in the next chapter. No outliers were detected in this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of MTSS interventions (RtI and PBIS) on students' academic achievement and disruptive behavior, as well their perceptions of barriers that may undermine the impact of these interventions. Findings from the thematic analyses revealed four themes and 10 subthemes. The chapter begins with a discussion of the findings. Implications for policy and practice are presented, followed by theoretical and empirical implications. Limitations and delimitations are acknowledged. Finally, recommendations for future research are followed by the researcher's concluding remarks.

Discussion

This section includes a discussion of the study's findings in light of the developed themes. The discussion section has five major subsections including: (a) interpretation of findings, (b) implications for policy or practice, (c) theoretical and empirical implications, (d) limitations and delimitations, and (e) recommendations for future research. Each section provides a detailed description of the findings and recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

A summary and interpretation of study findings is essential to guiding this discussion chapter. To begin, a summary of the thematic findings is provided. Next, interpretations of the four main themes are offered.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Four themes and 10 subthemes emerged. The themes included Perceived impact of MSS, RtI, and PBIS, Implementation fidelity is important, Perceived barriers to implementation

fidelity, and Strategies to improve MTSS implementation fidelity. The subthemes included Overall impact of MTSS, Overall impact of RtI, Overall impact of PBIS, Lack of understanding, Lack of Resources, Inconsistencies, Teachers are overwhelmed, Improve teachers' understandings of MTSS, Monitoring, accountability, and consistency are needed, and Support and involvement of administrators. Each of the main themes is interpreted, as follows.

Perceived Impact of MTSS, RtI, and PBIS. The first theme revealed participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of PBIS were varied. Those who were currently employed as teachers tended to view MTSS as less effective than those currently working as specialists. This discrepancy in teacher and specialist perceptions exposed a potential lack of MTSS understanding and acknowledgement for fidelity with implementation. Overall, 10 of the 12 respondents agreed implementation fidelity was critical to any positive outcomes for MTSS. Sentiments about the impact of RtI were more positive across participants, and agreement remained regarding the importance of implementation fidelity. Research indicates RtI can increase reading achievement at various educational levels (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Leonard et al., 2019; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). For example, Al Otaiba et al. (2015) found RtI was an effective intervention for addressing the reading academic achievement gap among Tier 1 and Tier 2 students. The use open-ended teacher interviews, questionnaires, and journals in this study indicate similar findings to Al Otaiba et al. (2015).

Perceptions of the impact of PBIS were less positive, with many participants expressing open criticism of the effects of this intervention. The system of rewards stems from the theoretical framework of Skinner (1938) by utilizing the philosophy of positive reinforcement to modify behaviors; however, if the interventions are not implemented with fidelity, as described, they will not be effective (Freeman et al., 2015, 2016; Gage et al., 2018). Critical remarks about

PBIS often centered on its system of rewards, with participants suggesting rewards do not work with students who demonstrate disruptive behaviors. Findings from this study reveal perceptions of poor behavioral outcomes in association with PBIS which contradict the existing research. Previous research on PBIS revealed the effectiveness of the interventions, when properly implemented (Bradshaw et al., 2008, 2009. 2010; Fairbanks et al., 2008; Horner et al., 2009, 2010; Koth et al., 2008, 2009; Luiselli et al., 2002; Muscott et al., 2008; Nelson et al., 2009; Pas et al., 2011; Reinke et al., 2013; Sadler & Sugai, 2009; Simonsen et al., 2008, 2011; Simonsen & Sugai, 2012). Thus, the perceptions of poor PBIS outcomes expressed in the current study may relate to poor implementation fidelity.

Implementation Fidelity is Important. While sentiments regarding the effects of RtI and PBIS were somewhat mixed, participants consistently described the importance of implementation fidelity in achieving successful intervention outcomes. Academic and behavioral outcomes demonstrate positive outcomes when implemented consistently and with fidelity consistency (Freeman et al., 2016; Pas & Bradshaw, 2012; Simonsen et al., 2012). Participants agreed MTSS interventions were futile if they were not properly and consistently implemented. A few participants argued that the potential of MTSS interventions could only be realized if teachers began to implement them consistently, across entire schools. Research has shown that when MTSS is implemented with fidelity, positive student outcomes are achieved (McGoey et al., 2014). The notion of consistency emerged many times during participants' discussions of implementation fidelity, as they consistently believed the reasons MTSS failed to achieve the desired outcomes was due to the lack of implementation of MTSS holistically throughout the school. Lack of consistency prevents the effectiveness of MTSS (George et al., 2018; Leonard et al., 2019). Fidelity must be implemented for MTSS to be effective.

Perceived Barriers to Implementation Fidelity. Data analysis revealed participants perceived several factors to undermine the implementation of MTSS. Four main categories of barriers emerged including lack of understanding, lack of resources, inconsistencies, and teacher overwhelm. Title I schools receive funding to support students' academic and behavioral needs, since they are more likely to develop learning disabilities (Harn et al., 2015). Teachers in the current study expressed that inadequate resources contributed to the lack of consistency with MTSS implementation which overwhelmed them. Overall, participants felt teachers lacked guidance, training, and understanding of interventions, which contributed to the skepticism about achieving the outcomes through MTSS. For administrators, the information shared by teachers should help provide a starting point to better recognize teachers need to receive additional support and professional development. A lack of clear expectations regarding the implementation of MTSS was mentioned as a barrier including inadequate resources including time, funding, and support staff.

Professional development may provide teachers with training required to implement MTSS with fidelity and consistency (Simonsen & Sugai, 2012; Skinner, 1961). Participants cited inconsistency as problematic, specifically describing the ways COVID-19, communication challenges, and teacher and administrative turnover contributed to inconsistency in MTSS implementation. Five participants explained the negative impact COVID-19 had on student achievement and behavioral outcomes. Finally, participants explained that teachers were often overwhelmed, had inadequate resources, and could not manage the additional work required to implement MTSS, which created challenges for proper implementation. Teachers described a lack of time and support personnel to assist with implementation directly impacting MTSS implementation and student outcomes.

Strategies to Improve Implementation Fidelity. Participants were asked to describe ways the implementation fidelity of MTSS interventions could be improved. Kim et al. (2018) explained without fidelity of MTSS implementation, positive student outcomes will not occur. Responses fell into three main types of strategies, including (a) improving teachers' understandings of MTSS, (b) providing monitoring, accountability, and consistency, and (c) increasing administrative support and involvement. Overwhelmingly, participants felt MTSS interventions were poorly and inconsistently implemented because teachers did not understand how or when to use them. This information contradicted the level of effectiveness theorized by Skinner (1938) and Vygotsky (1978). However, neither Skinner nor Vygotsky considered how a global pandemic would impact learning and behavior interventions. Also, neither Skinner nor Vygotsky had to consider how a lack of resources would potentially impact student outcomes. By providing ongoing training and development, teachers' skills and knowledge with MTSS may improve, thereby improving the fidelity of implementation. Participants agreed that monitoring strategies to create accountability and consistency could significantly improve the implementation fidelity of MTSS interventions (Kim et al., 2018).

While all participants described the importance of assessing the effectiveness of the interventions using data, many also pointed out that assessing the fidelity of MTSS implementation was necessary. For example, Fran, explained in her interview that fidelity checks would assist with increasing the consistency and implementation of MTSS, which impacts positive student outcomes. Without confirming that an intervention was implemented as intended, data on the effectiveness of the interventions may be questioned. Finally, many participants argued that administrators should become more involved in MTSS implementation. Data from participant interviews, questionnaires, and journals, administrative involvement could

help ensure interventions are properly implemented and teachers receive support needed for proper implementation.

Implications for Policy or Practice

Findings from this investigation provided evidence of important policy and practice implications. Implications for policy include those related to policymakers and leaders, while implications for practice include those at the school and classroom level. Implications for teachers and specialists include a better understanding of the barriers related to MTSS implementation and the ability to work collaboratively with administrators developing proactive implementation plans.

Implications for Policy

At the policy level, implications highlight the need for more finding and support to help improve the implementation fidelity of MTSS interventions. Resources was a primary barrier to emerge in this study. Without adequate school funding, the support resources needed to foster implementation fidelity may not be available (Barrett & Newman, 2018). For example, teachers need ongoing professional development and support to help them properly implement MTSS interventions (Castro-Villareal et al., 2014). Many schools need more support staff to assist teachers with implementing MTSS to free up time needed to utilize the interventions. PBIS interventions, specifically, require budgets for teachers to purchase rewards to provide to students for good behavior (Gagnon et al., 2020). All of these barriers will persist without adequate funding (Munson, n.d.).

Policymakers and leaders should consider more consistent strategies to assess the outcomes of MTSS. While proper implementation is key to positive outcomes, ongoing assessment of the interventions is also important. Leaders cannot make changes needed to

address poor outcomes without measuring the impact of MTSS. Tools and strategies for assessing outcomes should be simultaneously developed and implemented by utilizing school resources, including and developing an MTSS matrix, MTSS committees, and providing professional development when making policies that require the implementation of interventions such as MTSS.

Finally, at the policy level, it may be necessary to consider other types of reading and behavioral interventions, which may be more effective. Leaders should begin considering other interventions with which to replace MTSS if the assessment of properly implemented MTSS interventions reveals desired outcomes are not being reached (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). Further, it may be of benefit to research more proactive tools addressing the root of behavioral and academic problems, rather than rely on reactive interventions, such as RtI and PBIS, as these are evidence-based interventions that yield positive student outcomes when implemented with fidelity (Noltemeyer et al., 2019).

Implications for Practice

Practical implications also emerged from this study. Data from participant questionnaires, open-ended interviews, and journal entries indicated at the classroom level, teachers must fully understand how and when to implement MTSS. Administrators should provide professional development preparing teachers to work with these interventions, and follow up to ensure consistency and implementation fidelity. Communities of practice, mentoring, and coaching may be effective tools for preparing teachers. New teachers should be thoroughly trained on MTSS and provided with opportunities to ask questions and receive guidance, as needed. Administrators and leaders must be responsible for holding teachers accountable for

implementing MTSS interventions. Classroom observations may be an effective strategy for administrators to check on teachers and ensure interventions are being used as designed.

It is particularly critical administrators have a thorough understanding of MTSS interventions and be supportive of their use. MTSS implementation fidelity trickles down from leaders' buy-in and understandings of the interventions. Research indicates administrators play a key role in achieving optimal outcomes from PBIS and RtI (Braun et al., 2020). It is also important that academic and behavioral interventions are tried at the core and supplemental levels before shifting to the intensive tier. RtI has been used to strengthen academic achievement (Bouton et al., 2018; Lam & McMaster, 2014; Leonard et al., 2019). It is important for stakeholders to remember RtI was approved as a screening tool for special education (Gischler et al., 2019). PBIS has proven to be an effective intervention and used to decrease student referrals and suspensions (Goodwin and Miller, 2012).

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

Theoretical and empirical implications for this study are described throughout this section and contribute to a better understanding of the MTSS framework, the perceived impact of MTSS implementation in Title I schools. Implications of the study and emergence of research are explained in addition to the limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research. The theoretical and empirical implications described can help support additional research related to implementing MTSS in Title I schools.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical theories guiding this study included operant conditioning theory (Skinner, 1938) and the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). These two theories complement one another to form a framework by which MTSS can be examined. The ZPD refers to the

differences between a student's actual ability level, their ability to perform tasks independently, and their potential for academic development with support (Shanbani et al., 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). The level of instruction should meet the student's level of need determined by achievement on benchmarks or standardized testing (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). The application of the ZPD helps many students receive the appropriate level of instruction and academic intervention based on their current academic abilities.

MTSS is an educational context in which ZPD is applied. MTSS uses a tiered system of support to help students who are struggling academically or behaviorally, and need additional support from classroom teachers (Rosen, 2020). In this study, the use of RtI was examined through the lens of the ZPD. This intervention provides tiered support to meet the needs of individual students. Teachers in this study believed RtI, when properly implemented, was effective. Outcomes reported by teachers suggested that RtI may be beneficial because it relies heavily on the ZPD.

The second theory used was Skinner's (1961) operant conditioning theory. According to Skinner, every behavior can be motivated with the correct reinforcement. This theory proposes behavioral modification occurs through the delivery of reinforcement, or operant conditioning, and describes the use of consequences to modify behavior (Staddon et al., 2006). PBIS is a behavioral intervention that relies on a system of consequences and rewards to influence behavior. In this study, most participants were critical of PBIS and did not feel using rewards was an effective way to improve student behaviors. Findings challenge Skinner's theory from the standpoint that consequences, specifically those used in PBIS, may not be significant enough to influence student behavior. That is, the type and gravity of a consequence, whether reward or

punishment, is central to using an intervention such as PBIS to modify behavior through operant conditioning.

Theoretical findings of the study confirm and corroborate previous research by describing the importance of fidelity in implementation (Skinner, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). Skinner (1938) indicated that reinforcement was a critical component of behavior modification. Through PBIS, students receive positive reinforcement at a variety of levels. Participants in the study confirmed the significance of providing reinforcement on a consistent basis; however, the difference between the theoretical and empirical implications is Skinner (1938) and Vygotsky (1978) did not consider external influences, like COVID-19 on the impacts of their results. A novel idea to emerge from this study was how administrators can help to increase MTSS implementation fidelity. This study diverged from the extant theory by recognizing the theoretical framework from which MTSS has been derived, but also by understanding how the level of intervention intensity is based on students' individual needs (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Empirical Implications

Previous researchers reported PBIS was used to promote a positive school culture through behavioral change and the implementation of tiered interventions (Horner & Sugai, 2015; Reinke et al., 2013). In addition, it was noted in the literature in order for PBIS to be effective for modifying behaviors, teachers must have opportunities to participate in professional development. Through professional development, teachers may develop skills needed to efficiently implement PBIS, thereby maximizing student success and minimizing problem behaviors through positive reinforcers (Skinner, 1961; Simonsen & Sugai, 2012). In this study, many participants felt PBIS was not effective, but they also admitted having received little to no

training or professional development on the interventions. Thus, perceptions of low effectiveness may be the result of poor knowledge or inadequate training on MTSS.

Findings regarding participants' perceptions of RtI as effective are supported by existing literature. Research indicates RtI can increase reading achievement at various educational levels (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Leonard et al., 2019; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). Finally, findings regarding participants' beliefs that implementation fidelity was central to the outcomes of MTSS are supported by the existing literature. Researchers reported that PBIS was designed to strengthen behavior outcomes in a variety of educational settings. With consistent implementation, PBIS is associated with a reduction in student suspensions, office referrals, and dropout (Freeman et al., 2015, 2016; Gage et al., 2018). Researchers have posited that ensuring consistency in the collection and monitoring of student performance data is essential to the effectiveness of MTSS interventions (Klingbeil et al., 2019; March & Horner, 2002; Reno et al., 2017; Swain-Bradway, 2009).

Empirical findings were described through participants' shared experiences implementing MTSS, RtI, and PBIS in Title I schools and during a pandemic, which would provide assistance and support in the event a pandemic occurs in the future. The empirical findings were discovered through participants' shared experiences within the study. The empirical findings were in alignment with the theoretical findings. Both the empirical and theoretical research, provides valuable information to educators, administrators, and parents regarding the impact MTSS implementation has on academic and behavioral outcomes in Title I schools.

Empirical implications extend current research by establishing the positive impact of MTSS on student outcomes based on educators' experiences (Bouton et al., 2018). Research indicates that when MTSS is implemented with fidelity, positive student outcomes are the result

(McCart & Miller, 2019). Participants in the study explained that when implemented with fidelity, MTSS interventions provide positive academic and behavioral outcomes; however, if interventions are not implemented with fidelity, no positive outcomes exist (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Traditionally, literature explores the impact of MTSS implementation on academic and behavioral outcomes without accounting for COVID-19 (Fetterman et al., 2020). Educators' experiences accounted for the impact COVID-19 had on the implementation of MTSS.

Practical Implications

Research from the study expands upon the work of Skinner (1938) and Vygotsky (1978) by exploring the impact of MTSS implementation in Title I schools. Skinner's principle of rewarding behavior with positive reinforcement is used in schools that implement PBIS. Similarly, Vygotsky's model for determining levels of student support continues to be utilized with MTSS. The concern with MTSS, as study participants indicated, includ administrative involvement, the impact of COVID-19, and lack of implementation fidelity. Title I funds are provided to strengthen and improve students' academic and behavioral outcomes, but even with these funds, academic and behavioral deficits continue ("Title I," 2004). Leaders in North Carolina tried to address these issues by mandating the MTSS model; however, this plan was made prior to COVID-19 (NCDPI, 2020).

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was subject to a few limitations, which must be acknowledged. The main limitation related to the small amount of time participants had to utilize, implement, and plan. With demanding workloads and personal lives, time was often stretched thin for teachers and specialists. Finding time to participate in interviews, complete study questionnaires, and respond to journal prompts was difficult for most participants. As a result, I had to persistently follow up

with participants, and it took far longer than expected to obtain complete data for everyone. Time also created limitations to the amount of data provided through the questionnaires and journal responses. While some participants were thorough, most provided short answers, thereby limiting the amount of data available. In addition, responses across the journals, questionnaires, and interviews were often redundant. It was expected that journal responses, in particular, would provide opportunities for participants to expand upon their interview responses and maybe share information they were uncomfortable discussing during the interviews. This did not seem to be the case, however. Teachers and specialists have demanding professional responsibilities, and asking them to provide three complete forms of data may have been too much to ask of each participant.

Another limitation was that not all participants were current teachers. Although most had teaching experience, only five of the 12 participants were current teachers who had ongoing experience with MTSS interventions. As noted in Chapter Four, there were some general differences in perceptions of PBIS, specifically, between teachers and specialists. While teachers were able to provide data based on their current classroom experiences with the interventions, specialists had to rely on memory recall from when they were teachers. Memory recall may have undermined the accuracy of information provided by specialists.

Additionally, contextual differences based on current events (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) may have created different experiences and perceptions with MTSS, between the current teachers and the specialists. Finally, this research was subjective in that it explored participants' perceptions of interventions and implementation fidelity. I had no way of objectively assessing perceptions or validating that the information provided was truthful. This limitation was accepted because qualitative research is inherently subjective, and the aim of this

study was to explore perceptions, rather than to quantify MTSS outcomes or implementation fidelity.

The scope of this study was also subject to a few delimitations. First, participants were all located at one elementary school and one high school located in North Carolina. Teachers and specialists working in other geographic locations, or with students of other ages, may have very different experiences with the studied interventions. The study also focused only on perceptions of the effectiveness of MTSS interventions. Other reading and behavioral interventions may have been in place at the school, and they may have impacted student behavior and reading outcomes; however, this research was only focused on MTSS interventions.

Another delimitation had to do with the time of data collection, which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic was not a focus of the study, it had undeniable effects on the public education system. Virtual and hybrid learning environments created drastic changes within education, and data collected prior to the pandemic may have produced different findings. Lastly, the scope of this study was limited by the theoretical lens. While a number of educational theories could have applied to this study, the zone of proximal development and operant conditional theory were selected as most aligned. Had findings been interpreted through another framework, presentation of the results may have differed.

Recommendations for Future Research

Results from the current research provide directions for future research. Opportunities exist to expand upon findings and address shortcomings in the current investigation. For example, future researchers could perform a large quantitative investigation regarding teachers' perceptions of implementation fidelity with MTSS interventions. A quantitative study could leverage anonymous survey data, which may increase the openness and honesty of responses. A

larger study could also provide more generalizable results that shed light on perceived implementation fidelity across schools, districts, and geographic regions.

Another research opportunity lies in replicating the current study, but without requiring participants to complete a journal. In the current study, journal responses did not provide many new insights; rather, they just seemed to repeat the information provided through the interviews and questionnaires. Removing the journal entry component may also encourage more teachers to participate, as participation requirements may be perceived as significantly less.

Future researchers could also replicate this study in other districts. Teachers in different regions of the country may have varied experiences with MTSS. By repeating this study in other parts of the country, broader understandings of perceptions of these interventions and implementation fidelity may be achieved. Future researchers in this area should consider only using current teachers who are actively implementing MTSS. Because the current study included teachers and specialists with varying experience with the interventions, findings are not wholly reflective of teachers' current experiences.

Finally, it would also be of value to explore administrators' roles in MTSS implementation. Participants in the current study suggested that administrators needed to be more involved in MTSS, and they must create a system of accountability to ensure interventions are properly and consistently implemented. Future researchers could interview administrators of schools that use RtI and PBIS to better understand their perceived roles in the interventions, and whether disconnects in these perceived responsibilities exist between administrators and teachers.

Conclusion

The problem in this study was poor academic and behavioral outcomes among students attending Title I schools (Gagnon et al., 2020). The specific problem was ongoing academic and behavioral problems at the study site school, despite implementation of MTSS interventions. While the federal government provides Title I funding and initiatives to increase student academic achievement and social-emotional development (Harn et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2018; Wexler, 2018), academic achievement gaps and behavioral problems persist in many Title I school districts (Berkowitz et al., 2017). It is possible that implementation fidelity may undermine the outcomes of MTSS interventions. Thus, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of MTSS interventions (RtI and PBIS) on students' academic achievement and disruptive behavior, as well their perceptions of barriers that may undermine the impact of these interventions.

Participants included five teachers and seven specialists who all had experience implementing MTSS. Data were collected via interviews, questionnaires, and journal entries. Thematic analysis of all study data followed the six steps described by Braun and Clarke's (2006). Four themes and 10 subthemes emerged. The themes included Perceived impact of MSS, RtI, and PBIS, Implementation fidelity is important, Perceived barriers to implementation fidelity, and Strategies to improve MTSS implementation fidelity. The subthemes included Overall impact of MTSS, Overall impact of RtI, Overall impact of PBIS, Lack of understanding, Lack of Resources, Inconsistencies, Teachers are overwhelmed, Improve teachers' understandings of MTSS, Monitoring, accountability, and consistency are needed, and Support and involvement of administrators.

Findings indicated educators had favorable attitudes toward RtI. Although overall perceptions of the effectiveness of MTSS were somewhat mixed, participants agreed RtI could significantly improve students' reading skills when implemented correctly. Participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of PBIS, however, were divided. All participants agreed implementation fidelity was central to the effectiveness of interventions, but attitudes were split in terms of the intervention's effectiveness. Participants agreed that teachers lacked instruction, guidance, and training on how to implement MTSS and why the interventions were of value.

Two key takeaways from this study lie in the policy and practical implications discussed in this chapter. At the policy level, implications highlight the need for more funding and support to help improve the implementation fidelity of MTSS interventions. Without adequate school funding, the support resources needed to foster implementation fidelity may not be available. At the classroom level, teachers must make sure they fully understand how and when to implement MTSS. Data showed administrators need to provide professional development that prepares teachers to work with these interventions, and they should follow up to ensure consistency and implementation fidelity. In addition, administrators must have a thorough understanding of MTSS interventions and be supportive of their use.

Students in Title I schools face economic disadvantages. These disadvantages are compounded by poor academic and behavioral outcomes, which often follow students throughout their academic careers and undermine their potential as they emerge into adulthood. In order to ensure fair and equitable education, the continued quest to improve academic and behavioral student outcomes in Title I schools is essential.

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Appendix A

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 24, 2022

Whitney Harris
Linda Holcomb

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-520 TEACHER EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT IN A TITLE I SCHOOL: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Whitney Harris, Linda Holcomb,

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 46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). 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

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 1, 2022

Whitney Harris
Linda Holcomb

Re: Modification - IRB-FY21-22-520 EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT IN A TITLE I SCHOOL: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Whitney Harris, Linda Holcomb,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY21-22-520 EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT IN A TITLE I SCHOOL: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to make the following changes has been approved:

1. Include educators as participants "rather than focusing solely on teacher perceptions." Participants will include teachers, school social workers, and behavior specialists who "have experience in education and . . . implementing MTSS, and often facilitate training on MTSS."
2. Add a option to enter a raffle for a $200 Visa gift card as compensation.

Thank you for submitting your revised study documents for our review and documentation. Your revised, stamped consent form and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study in Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form 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 should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B
Open-Ended Educator Interview Questions:

1. Please state your title and explain responsibilities at Riverside Elementary or Creek Water High.
2. Please describe your experience learning about multi-tiered systems of support.
3. Please tell me about any directions or assistance you were given regarding the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support.
4. Please describe any follow-up or accountability that is in place at Riverside Elementary or Creek Water High to ensure all educators properly implement multi-tiered systems of support.
5. Based on your experiences with response to intervention at Riverside Elementary or Creek Water High, what is perceived impact this intervention has on students' reading achievement?
6. Please explain any ways you believe response to intervention implementation could be improved to achieve better student outcomes in reading.
7. Based on your experiences with positive behavioral interventions and supports at Riverside, how have you observed the implementation to impact students' discipline referrals and suspensions?
8. Please describe any ways you believe positive behavioral interventions and supports and implementation could be improved to achieve better behavioral outcomes among students.
9. Overall, please describe how effective you think the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support interventions are at Riverside Elementary or Creek Water High.
10. Thinking about your personal implementation of multi-tiered systems of support (both response to intervention and positive behavioral interventions and supports), please

describe any barriers you have encountered that have prevented you from fully implemented it as intended.

11. Based on your experiences with the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support, please describe any ways you believe administration could foster improved implementation fidelity among educators.
12. Please feel free to share any additional information from your lived experiences from implementing multi-tiered systems of support in a Title I.

Appendix C
Consent

Title of the Project: Educator experiences implementing multi-tiered systems of support in a title I school: A transcendental phenomenological study

Principal Investigator: [Whitney Wiggins, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University]
[Co-investigator(s): Name(s), credentials, institutional affiliation]

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study with 12 other educators from Riverside Elementary School and Creek Water High School. To participate, you must be an educator, at either Riverside Elementary or Creek Water High School, between the age of 22-65, with a minimum of two years in education and maximum of 35 years in education, and at least one year of experience implementing MTSS in a Title I school. Educators in a variety of roles will be selected, including teachers from different grades and subject areas, school social workers, school counselors, and behavior specialists with varying experience levels implementing MTSS. 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.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the transcendental phenomenology study is to understand educators' perceptions of the impact of multi-tiered systems of support MTSS interventions on students' academic achievement and disruptive behavior, as well their perceptions of barriers that may undermine the impact of these interventions.

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. Contact me via phone [redacted] or email [redacted] to review eligibility and schedule your interview **within one week of receiving your initial study invitation**. All meetings and correspondence via email, zoom meetings or phone conversations will be recorded to maintain accuracy and authenticity throughout the study.
2. Zoom meetings will be recorded to maintain accuracy and authenticity throughout the study. Zoom meetings will begin within two weeks of receiving the initial study invitation.

3. Educators will be required to participate in a variety of data collection methods, including participant journals, educator interviews, and the questionnaire.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are administrators and educators in Title I school districts may use findings from this study to strengthen MTSS implementation within Title I school districts in rural North Carolina. Students in Title I school districts are much more likely to develop specific learning disabilities if interventions are not provided (Harn et al., 2015).

Benefits to society include the demonstration that the integration of standards into MTSS, some learning disabilities can be prevented (Harn et al., 2015; Wexler, 2018).

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. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms in place of participant names. Interviews will occur outside of the work day, using Zoom platform and phone conference calls in each person's respective homes to ensure privacy.
- Data will be stored on my password protected computer and on my password-protected google drive. Data will be used for presentation in the Riverside Elementary School for professional development as well as the school district in which Riverside Elementary School resides. Further, data from this study may be published by Liberty University in the doctoral dissertations. Data and research may be used for future educational presentations to strengthen MTSS implementation in Title I school districts. Data should be retained for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study.
- Recordings will be used for face-to-face interview data collection and will be recorded and transcribed. Each will be maintained digitally, on a password protected computer with the researcher being the only person with access to it. The participant will have access if requested at any time. Recordings will remain on researcher's computer for three years, at which point they will be permanently erased. The researcher may choose to use the recordings for educational research at any time during the three years prior to the deletion.

- All information will remain anonymous and confidential. **Anonymous** means you, the researcher, will not be able to link your data (e.g., survey responses, grades, etc.) to the specific participants who provided or are associated with the data. **Confidential** means you will be able to link individual participants to the information they provide or are associated with, but you will not disclose participant identities or how named or identifiable individuals responded.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study by receiving a $10 gas card and entered to win a $200 visa gift card. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes; however, they will be pulled and separated from responses to maintain your anonymity.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as a Behavior Specialist in Bourne County Schools. To limit potential or perceived conflicts [the study will be anonymous, so the researcher will not know who participated.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not 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. All survey information will be anonymous. 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[s] at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you 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 Whitney Wiggins. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact [her] at [[redacted] and/or [redacted]]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, [Dr. Linda Holcomb], at [ljholcomb@liberty.edu].

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.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. [You will be given a copy of this document for your records/you can print a copy of the document for your records.] If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the [Whitney Harris/study team] using the information provided above.

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[s] 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/video-record/photograph] me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix D

Questionnaire

1. Please tell me about yourself (including your age, biological gender, race, level of education, and anything else you would like to share). Please note you do not have to share any information you are uncomfortable disclosing.
2. Please share a little about your experience in education.
3. Please describe your experience teaching in a Title I school.
4. Please describe your experience implementing multi-tiered systems of support.
5. Please describe your perception as to the level of effectiveness response to intervention is for improving students' reading achievement.
6. Please describe your perception as to the level of effectiveness positive behavioral interventions and supports is for improving students' behaviors (i.e., reducing disciplinary referrals).
7. Please describe your perception as to the level of effectiveness multi-tiered systems of support and interventions are being implemented by educators, in general.
8. Based on your experience, please identify consider types of support, which may be helpful to strengthen the implementation fidelity of multi-tiered systems of support and interventions in a Title I school.
9. Please describe the types of support you have received during your experience of multi-tiered systems of support and implementation.

Appendix E

Participant Journal Prompts

1. Based on your own experiences, please define multi-tiered systems of support in your own words.
2. With your experience and implementation of multi-tiered systems of support, please explain progress monitoring and data collection.
3. Please explain the training or professional development, which has been involved with the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support in your school.
4. Reflecting on your personal implementation of response to intervention, please detail
5. any barriers that have prevented you from fully implemented it as intended.
6. Thinking about your personal implementation of positive behavioral interventions And supports, please detail any barriers that have prevented you from fully implemented it as intended.
7. Reflecting on your experiences with the implementation of multi-tiered systems of
8. support, please describe any ways you believe administration could foster improved implementation fidelity among educators.
9. Thinking about your observations and experiences, please explain how well you perceive multi-tiered systems of support is implemented by other educators at Riverside.
10. If you believe there are any issues with implementation fidelity, please explain any of those issues and why you feel those exist.
11. If you believe there are not any issues with implementation fidelity, please explain

the measures you have observed educators take to ensure fidelity.

12. What advice would you give to educators beginning to implement multi-tiered systems of support in their classrooms?