TEACHERS' SENSEMAKING OF A RESPONSE-TO-INTERVENTION EDUCATIONAL REFORM MODEL

A Dissertation by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my granddaughter Collins Grace Thuy Huynh who was with us four and half short months and my supportive wife DeAnn Guthrie and our two wonderful children Ashley Huynh and Garret Guthrie. Our family's unconditional love has allowed us all to March forth with a purpose greater than ourselves. For that we are eternally grateful to Collins Grace and for the sunshine she continues to shine on our lives.

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ABSTRACT

Response-to-Intervention (RTI) is a federal policy designed to reform instruction by using a systemic three tiered model to support all students. Because RTI requires teachers to adapt to new roles and responsibilities, it is important to consider their perceptions. This study examines teachers' sensemaking of RTI utilizing a qualitative case study of one elementary schools implementation. This study employed focus groups, individual interviews, and observations with grade school teachers to investigate how teachers describe and make sense of RTI. Constant comparative analysis revealed three major themes: (a) RTI adoption and understanding of its purpose, (b) RTI implementation and teachers' practices, and (c) RTI resources and barriers. The conclusions were developed from the analysis of these findings through the theoretical framework of Organizational Sensemaking in an effort to explain how teachers made sense of the reform initiative. Teachers believed their professional identity was at stake with the district's adoption of RTI. Veteran teachers collectively believed that RTI was a special education driven reform and it should not involve them in changing their teaching roles. A pivotal factor in the sensemaking process was whether the principal provided time for teachers to make sense together and see connections between the RTI literacy components and their current teaching practices. In the process of making sense of RTI in the context of their school, teachers altered and changed the basic foundations of the state's RTI model. Teachers identified time, lack of staff, and quality professional development as barriers to implementing a Multi-Tier System of Supports consistently and effectively. The implications for school reform include providing RTI initiatives with strong principal leadership and sufficient time for teachers to make sense of the reform efforts.

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CHAPTER 1

Beginning with a glaring warning the United States was losing its global economic competiveness, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) released a report entitled *A Nation At Risk*. The report claimed the educational system in the United States was in grave difficulty and without large-scale reforms aimed at improving quality of schooling the country would be unable to compete economically with other countries (Cuban, 2013; Levin, 2001). Response to this crisis of educational regress spawned a surge of laws and regulations across the country focusing on the need for greater governmental control of the nation's schools (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The solution was standards-based reform requiring more standardization by governmentally imposed mandates targeted at increasing graduation standards and increased student testing requirements (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; David & Cuban, 2010; Elmore, 2004)

The passage of the federally legislated No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 included additional outcome-based standards in the mandated reform with further far-reaching requirements over states and school districts (No Child Left Behind, 2002). NCLB imposed curriculum and assessment standards, teaching quality standards, and accountability regulations for reporting student performance results within student subgroups including students with disabilities, race, and economically disadvantaged categories (Cuban, 2013).

Passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 emphasized the need to provide preventive practices with whole school supports for early literacy including intentional alignment with NCLB provisions (Hazelkorn, Bucholz, Goodman, Duffy, & Brady, 2011). As mutually linked legislation, NCLB and IDEIA provided a complementary and comprehensive system of supports which would have a significant impact on

school districts efforts to meet the needs of all students (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004; No Child Left Behind, 2002). Specifically Congress instituted a regular education law (NCLB), which imposed the use of scientifically-based instruction in math and reading. Congress further strengthened this provision within the reauthorization of IDEIA by stipulating that students who did not receive effective interventions could not be eligible for special education services. This process of educators providing and documenting the provision of effective interventions along with teachers' documenting the student's response became officially titled Response-to-Intervention (RTI). The main purpose of RTI was to reduce the number of children inappropriately identified as learning disabled under the specific requirements of IDEIA. As envisioned, the reform was to be accomplished by establishing learning supports for all students as specified under NCLB policy provisions (Kovaleski, VanDerHeyden, & Shapiro, 2013).

Congress recently reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2015 for implementation in August 2016. Prior to this recent ESEA reauthorization the United States Department of Education offered states flexibility waivers concerning specific requirements of NCLB through the approval of state adopted reform plans (United States Department of Education, 2015b). State-developed plans must show how their reform efforts will improve educational outcomes for all students, lower achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve quality instruction. Flexibility waiver requirements align with RTI practices by necessitating all schools use subgroup performance data against achievement outcomes to deliver early supports and targeted interventions (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; United States Department of Education, 2015a). In conjunction with the state waivers the Obama administration authorized a competitive grant process, Race To The Top, designed to incentivize

state educational reform. Reform efforts aligned with RTI under the competitive grant process involved strategies and supports for turning around low performing schools academic outcomes (McGuinn, 2012). Specific strategies relating to RTI within the transformational model required implementation of researched-based interventions and extended student learning time (H. Adelman & Taylor, 2011).

Research Problem

RTI denotes the practice of applying high-quality instructional practices and targeted interventions based on assessment of student needs and delivered within a multi-tiered approach for services. Characteristically, RTI models involve at least three tiers: Tier I provides universal quality instruction and assessment for all students in the regular education classroom; Tier II, requires purposeful strategies and interventions be provided for students who have not benefited as expected from Tier I; and Tier III provides the most intensive interventions for students who are unable to progress with Tier II services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Individual student responses within the tiered framework are monitored, which allows for adjusting instructional approaches within each tier. Increasing levels of instructional intensity is accomplished by reducing student group size and extending instructional time at higher tiers so that services can be individually matched to students' needs. Student progress is evaluated within a problem solving model by analyzing the student's rate of improvement compared to peers; data-based decision making is utilized to determine if the intervention is effective (Batsche et al., 2005).

According to Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton (2012) RTI is a comprehensive framework focused on the infrastructure of curriculum, instruction, and interventions; it is considered an educational reform initiative purposefully targeting all students for better quality academic and behavioral outcomes. Research analyzing RTI as a system reform model indicates it represents

an educational initiative with the potential to transform the manner in which districts support schools and professional staff function together. This change will involve role changes at all levels of the system and require districts to build capacity at the district, school, and individual staff levels to achieve a system approach (Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008).

RTI has become an important innovation across the country with the possibilities of reshaping general education into a multilevel prevention and intervention system (Fuchs et al., 2012). Conceptually RTI has the potential to unify regular and special education by providing one system of supports for all students (Kozleski & Huber, 2010). RTI implementation requires teachers to adapt to new roles and responsibilities for implementing universal screening, matching students for targeted interventions, and using data-based decision making to monitor the effectiveness of the interventions (White, Polly, & Audette, 2012). Moreover, the expectation for regular education teachers to implement researched-based instruction and monitor ongoing progress represents a huge change from present practices and necessitates regular education teachers to make sense of an educational reform in which they have had minimal input (D. F. Mellard, Byrd, Johnson, Tollefson, & Boesche, 2004).

Many schools have created RTI structures and collected large amounts of data related to student outcomes. However, many schools are not seeing meaningful improvement in student achievement or behavior (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012). According to Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009), "The effect sizes reported for research studies of RTI are less consistent than many of its supporters profess and those studies reporting strong results are highly likely to have levels of treatment fidelity that are atypical" (p.131). The failure to establish and sustain effective RTI practices are a result of regular education teachers viewing RTI as another form of special education in which they are not taking ownership (Chard, 2013).

In Kansas RTI has been incorporated within a comprehensive system called Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) and the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) has aligned this model for implementation at the state, district, and building level. Kansas State Department of Education (2013) defines MTSS as:

> MTSS is a coherent continuum of evidence based, system-wide practices to support a rapid response to academic and behavioral needs, with frequent data-based monitoring for instructional decision-making to empower each Kansas student to achieve to high standards. (Definition section, para. 1)

Currently 48% of Kansas' 1,472 schools have participated in formal MTSS training. This represents 67% of the Kansas school districts statewide with two thirds of the 286 districts having schools that have participated in the formal MTSS state structuring process (WestEd, 2015).

MTSS is described as a system level change process focusing on academic and behavioral support at the classroom, school, and district level. MTSS encompasses the same essential components of RTI including early prevention based on universal screening, implementation of evidence-based practices, customization of interventions, and adjustments in instruction based on monitoring of students' progress (Kansas State Department of Education, 2013). In spite of its potential to effect systemic change, MTSS is vulnerable to the same difficulties as other large-scale reform efforts.

Research has indicated that educational reform, even when tied to supportive policy legislation often results in limited implementation outcomes or success, possibly due to the top-down model of change (Fullan, 2007; Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008; Sarason, 1996). However, top-down change forces have not worked because policy makers have failed to acquire the

necessary levels of teacher commitment and ownership nor have they provided for the clear articulation of the reforms (Cuban, 2013; Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Sarason, 1996; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002)

Teachers are the center of many reform efforts and they are actively involved in changing roles and responsibilities. Yet their perspectives are seldom represented or considered when initiating educational reforms (Darling-Hammond, 1993; Datnow, 1998, 2005; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). The aim of school reform is to effect changes in the practices of teaching and learning yet comparatively minor attention has been devoted to the role teachers play in interpreting educational reform (Angus, 1998; Elmore, 2004; Spillane et al., 2002). Few research studies have examined teachers' perspectives of RTI/MTSS systemic framework as an educational reform model (Rinaldi, Averill, & Stuart, 2011). The question of top-down reform may not be as important as teacher perceptions of change and their ability to make sense of educational reform efforts by developing shared meaning. According to Apple (1995) A person must make sense out of these reforms if he or she is to decide to support or reject them" (p. 107). For realization of reform outcomes it may be of importance for teachers, individually and collectively, to reach a consensus and establish collective commitment for the reform effort. Teachers' perceptions of educational change involve sensemaking, which influences their beliefs, attitudes and culture and ultimately their actions (Weick, 1995).

Theoretical Framework

Teachers are the ultimate target of most policymakers when promoting educational change and their involvement is critical in school reform efforts (Darling-Hammond, 1990). Therefore, as policies compel educators to reform instructional practices to meet the needs of diverse populations, a model for understanding educational change is beneficial. According to

Fullan (2007), the meaning of change is puzzling as people approach it on a large scale because it involves developing shared meaning individually and collectively. Fullan described this change process as one that "depends on what teachers do, and think - It's as simple and as complex as that. It would all be so easy if we could legislate changes in thinking" (p.129). The frequent failure to realize the goals of educational reform has increased the need for understanding systemic change as central to school improvement (H. S. Adelman & Taylor, 2007).

To understand the implementation of a Multi-Tier System of Supports in an elementary school, it is critical to understand how teachers and staff within a school make sense of MTSS as an educational reform effort. The theory of organizational sensemaking by Weick (1995) served as the framework for this study. In this study, the theory of sensemaking was utilized to formulate questions and depict how teachers and staff understood and described the implementation of MTSS.

Sensemaking is an analytical theory for understanding organizations; it is grounded in both individual and social activity. Sensemaking is a shared process of making individual and collective meaning of the environment (Weick, 1995). According to Weick (1995), "People make sense of things by seeing a world on which they already imposed what they believe" (p.15). This allows each individual to compose their own story that portrays the world from their view. Sensemaking is how people use language to shape meaning when they communicate with each other. According to Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005), "The operative image of organization is one in which organization emerges through sensemaking, not one in which organization precedes sensemaking or one in which sensemaking is produced by organization" (p. 410). Specific attempts at sensemaking occur when individuals perceive an event to be

different from what they had expected. This occurs particularly during times of change, when people ask, "What is going on?" and during times of disruption, "What just happened?" People create their own environments and organizations are talked into existence, when people make meaning individually and collectively about events (Weick, 2002). To comprehend how teachers and staff made sense of MTSS in their school, it was necessary to understand the organizational context within which the educational reform is embedded. Additionally, it was important to examine how the understandings of teachers and staff interactions were collectively formed to tell a story of MTSS in their school.

The process of sensemaking involves seven overlapping characteristics that people utilize in an organizational setting to make sense of what they encounter. The first characteristic is *grounded in identity construction*. According to Weick (1995), this is the sense of self, the identity people have that results from interactions with others in the organization. It is an individual process in which organizational participants perceive contextual cues about their identities as they carry out their specific roles. Because the sense of self can be a reflection of what people believe others think of them and because individuals interact in multiple roles in schools they can create varying identities. They use their identities to screen new information, make assumptions, and assign meaning to organizational events. The establishment and preservation of identity is a primary driver in sensemaking within organizations (Weick et al., 2005). Identity construction applies to MTSS because the reform structure requires teachers and staff to develop new roles, skill sets, and responsibilities (White et al., 2012). With the implementation of MTSS in the school, it is important to understand how teachers and staff identities develop, change, or remain the same because of the reform efforts. This would be

evidenced in schools as teachers and staff weighing the threats or challenges presented by change and the ways in which they choose to avoid or enhance their sense of self.

Second, the process of sensemaking is always *retrospective*. People only know what happens after it happens; sensemaking is made up of looking at the past and noticing the events by the act of remembering. People in an organization can feel overwhelmed by multiple events and making meaning from multiple priorities, therefore a problem arises when there are too many meanings to synthesize (Weick, 1995). Schools can have multiple initiatives and many participants simultaneously engaged in making individual and collective meaning from what they notice happening in the school. Factions may grow as different collective groups try to explain the confusion by talking, examining, judging, and evaluating what has happened. Within a MTSS framework it was vitally important to understand how teachers and staff retrospectively attached meaning to their new roles and responsibilities. In addition it was valuable to understand teachers' interpretations of the actions that led to their sensemaking retrospectively.

Enactment of sensible environments is the third characteristic of sensemaking. By taking action and reflecting on it afterward, people make sense of their work. In school settings individuals partially contribute to confrontations within their school environment. They talk with others to see what makes sense after they have taken action. They construct their realities by making declarations, rigid rules, and authoritative acts; in so doing they create their own school cultures. They probe, ask questions, and negotiate to see what type of reactions they invoke from others so that they can make sense of what they are up against. For this study it was important to examine how teachers and staff reflected on their actions around MTSS and how they perceived and interpreted meanings about the reform initiative.

The process of sensemaking occurs in *social context*, the fourth characteristic. Sensemaking is a social process with individuals and groups interacting and developing shared meanings, common understandings, and common language. Individuals and groups within schools may support initiatives in which they perceive there is social support and act collectively. They may find consensual support, shared relevance, or importance. Different groups of teachers, administrators, and instructional coaches can develop different shared meanings when they interact within social networks. As school leadership introduces change and new ideas, people create new meanings and as a result they change the social context in which they work. People need conversations to determine what meanings are possible and shared amongst groups. In this study examining how teachers and staff perceive the MTSS initiative, the common language, common understanding, and the level of consensus as to the purposes of MTSS was important.

The fifth characteristic of sensemaking is that it is *ongoing*. People are always in the middle of sensemaking; it has no beginning or end but is a continuous flow. As people experience interruptions in their environment at a fast pace they have a hard time making meaning and updating previous meanings that are outdated. The rapid pace can make people feel as if they are losing control of their environment. In schools, staff may feel as if they are always in the middle of change: that requires new meanings and updating of things they thought they had figured out. It was essential within the study to understand how teachers and staff perceived the new demands required of them from the implementation of MTSS.

The sixth characteristic is *focused on and by extracted cues*. People notice cues they selectively believe support initial perceptions of what they think is going on in their organization. This leads to a self–fulfilling prophecy in which individuals are continually searching for

confirmatory evidence. In schools, this characteristic may be evident when people pay attention to a small number of cues about educational change and continually search for evidence to confirm their beliefs. This results in people ignoring immense amounts of information that could lead to greater meanings. For this study it was important to understand from teachers and staff their perspectives of how MTSS implementation in their school has affected their beliefs about the value MTSS as an educational reform.

The final characteristic of sensemaking is *driven by plausibility rather than accuracy*. People will look for coherence so their description of what is going on makes sense. To them it needs to be reasonable therefore accuracy is not as important as the plausibility of what is happening. Plausibility provides an anchor to which people can further organize a story. As educational change efforts are implemented in schools, various stories may develop among staff with a tendency to filter out information that would distract from the plausibility their stories. The main purpose of plausible stories is to hold up under criticism, to appear creditable and mobilize action. In schools this could be indicative of forced changes, resulting in staff dividing sides or blaming each other for failed outcomes. Examining the descriptions of teachers and staff stories about MTSS was instrumental to gaining the rich details of their experiences.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers in one elementary school perceived, understood, and made sense of the Kansas model of RTI known as Multi-Tier System of Supports. Doing so involved observing, gathering, and analyzing the perceptions of teachers who experienced the MTSS model and were involved in building-level implementation. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How do teachers make sense of MTSS as a reform model?

2. How do teachers describe the implementation of MTSS at their school?
3. How do teachers describe the influence of MTSS on their instructional practices?

The next section will provide a literature review relating the research problem and theoretical framework within the historical and current context of educational reform. I use the literature review to situate RTI and MTSS within the historical context of special education and current implementation practices.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This literature review provides the reader a context for RTI/MTSS reform efforts. I discuss the cyclical nature of school reform and the policies driving the need for teachers to make sense of these reforms within the context of schools and classrooms. I provide the historical context within special education that led to the policy development of RTI and why it was initiated and purposely designed to reduce the mislabeling and over-identification of students with disabilities. The literature review discusses the empirical studies of RTI implementation, teachers' perceptions of RTI implementation and current status of MTSS implementation in Kansas' schools.

Educational Reform Failure to Scale Up

Since the early 1980s federal and state policymakers have continued to increase their influence into schools and classrooms with the dominant theme of student accountability. The outcomes-based themes have been extremely forceful over an extended period time (Elmore, 2004). Even after several decades of educational change emphasis there continues to be interest among policymakers and within the field of educational administration about the process of educational change. This prolonged and intensified interest continues to originate from policymakers' desire to produce profound and long-lasting change in the process of teaching and learning (Elmore, 2004; Sanders, 2012).

In spite of policymakers' desire for significant reform in school-based practices, results of research have shown that most of these federal and state-sponsored educational reforms have left schools fundamentally the same (Cuban, 2007; Payne, 2010; Sanders, 2012). Generally the school-based practices where change has occurred have been limited to a small number of

classrooms in a school building, small number of schools within a district or a few districts within a state (Cuban, 1993). According to Elmore (1996) a large amount of evidence suggests a systemic incapacity of U.S. schools, and the teachers who labor in them, to advance new approaches to teaching and learning in anything but a small portion of schools and classrooms. This incapacity is deep-rooted in the incentive structures of schools and solving the problem of scale means markedly changing the incentive structures. Elmore (1996) stated, "The primary problem of scale is understanding the conditions under which people working in schools seek new knowledge and actively use it to change the fundamental process of schooling" (p.4). Describing the prerequisite conditions for undertaking the problem of scale, Elmore contended reforms that profess to change instructional practice must contain explicit theory of how teachers learn how to do things differently. Furthermore, the theory of action makes sense at the individual teacher and organizational level. Elmore further claimed the closer educational change gets to the core of school practices the less likely it will change teaching and learning on a broad scale. The history of educational reform is filled with examples of notable reforms which have failed to change educational practices (Cuban, 2013).

After decades of well-meaning educational reforms and the assurances to make schools improve, the results of most reforms have shown very little scalable impact on student achievement (David & Cuban, 2010; Elmore, 2004). Most schools, especially the bottom performing schools across the country, are generally the same kind of organizations producing poor student outcomes as they were before the reform efforts began (Payne, 2010). In spite of decades of educational reform, children of poverty and minority students continue to encounter far less success in school than their middle-class peers (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Policymakers need to be cognizant of how they are shaping educational reform, according to Datnow (2005) as

there are few studies of successful sustainable reform existing because most reform efforts do not last.

Cyclical Nature of Top-Down Reform

Tyack and Cuban (1995) labeled recurring reform efforts as "policy cycles" impinging on schools in a cyclic fashion. The first cycle is policy talk when problems are identified and solutions advocated. The second cycle in education reform is policy adoption in which decisions by those in authority, state legislators, governors or superintendents put into action the advocated solutions. The last cycle is policy implementation when actual reforms become implemented into practice within schools. Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggested it is policy talk that cycles far more often than implementation because of the political tension created by the conflicting values inherent in public schooling. Because of this policy elites tend to dominate reform discussions especially when there are significant concerns about education at the federal level. Policy elites continually overstate problems and understate the complexities of finding solutions and focus on teacher characteristics rather than attending to the teaching context (Cuban, 2013).

Policy Adoption Cycle

The transition of policy talk to adopted policy is frequently initiated by federal and state mandates and inducement grants. Key policy decisions on how to respond to federal and state reforms generally are made at the district level typically with a top down approach comprised of formal leadership from a dominant coalition (Firestone, 1989). Ordinarily the dominant coalition influencing decisions is made up of the school board, superintendent, and top administrators within the school district. Parent and community groups and organized teacher unions may be part of the coalition or could be viewed as outsiders exerting influence (Firestone, 1989). The district coalition typically views itself in a superior position to distinguish useful innovations and

reforms and decide which ones to initiate or ignore. Schools are seldom directly subjected to federal and state policy without the district filtering the reform (Firestone, 2009). The amount of commitment from the district level according to Firestone (1989) is contingent upon how the state or federal policies align with the dominant coalition's agenda. The weaker the alignment the more likely the formal leaders will lose their commitment after the adoption of state or federal reforms.

Policy Implementation Cycle

Transferring adopted policy into implementation within individual schools and classrooms is not cyclical like the rhetoric of policy talk and adoption. The process is more linear. Schools have histories as institutions with existing structures and cultures embedded in their organizations (Cuban, 2013). Furthermore, implemented policies can influence practices, incrementally and gradually changing these existing structures. However, the reform passage from adoption to implementation to integration into the daily practices with teachers is likely to be transformed. Teachers modify the reform as they implement the design in their schools and classrooms (Cuban, 1993). Thus, implementation of new reform efforts may take five years or more to realize noticeable differences within schools.

According to Firestone (1989) school districts may lack the will and commitment for policy implementation or they may lack the personnel, knowledge and skills for implementation. Complicating the change process schools may not have the capability to implement new complex reforms because other concurrent initiatives consume teachers' attention, energy, and time (Malen et al., 2015). The findings from Malen et al. (2015) case study of district-led change revealed too many reform programs existed at the building level. In addition, the district failed in assisting staff on how to make sense of the new reform in the context of their work, and too

much of the district responsibilities were delegated to site-level administrators. Further findings suggested schools capability for change were significantly hampered because the multiple reform programs lacked coherence and alignment. These identified barriers resulted in the district's failure to sustain the reform. According to Fullan (2007), districts accumulate a track record on how they handle change which can be described as a proposition: "The more that teachers or others have had negative experiences with previous implementation attempts in the district or elsewhere, the more cynical or apathetic they will be about the next change" (p. 93). This produces a cycle of fragmented attempts and failure. Policy makers continually underestimate the power of workplace cultural constraints upon teachers and overestimate the impact of the reform to alter teaching and learning (Cuban, 1993; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Teachers' Receptivity and Resistance to Educational Reform

For the most part, policy makers do not pursue teacher support in creating, adopting and defining implementation of classroom practices, thus leading teachers to feel excluded from decisions aimed at affecting their classrooms (Cuban, 2013). According to Darling-Hammond (1993) "Top-down directives are based on presumptions that teachers cannot be trusted to make sound decisions about curriculum and teaching" (p. 3). Furthermore, teachers are supposed to change beliefs, their own knowledge of teaching, and practices based on policymakers' rhetoric of school reform. This approach to educational policy reform cannot accomplish the goals of reform (Darling-Hammond, 1993). Teachers are policy brokers of reforms yet little attention is given to the role teachers play in interpreting school reforms (Angus, 1998; Goodson, Moore, & Hargreaves, 2006).

Teachers receptivity to educational change was analyzed by Waugh and Punch (1987) who described system-wide variables affecting the receptivity to change. Teachers' basic

beliefs, attitudes, and behavior play a key role. According to Waugh and Punch (1987) teachers are not apt to be supportive or receptive of any proposed educational change that is in direct conflict with their basic values of schooling. Another key variable identified by the researchers was the degree to which teachers may fear uncertainty related to their perceived risk of the change effort. Additional variables relating to teacher receptivity were the practicality of the change in relation to how they currently conduct their classrooms and teachers' perception of building level support for the proposed changes. These findings are compatible with other research indicating the importance of teachers' attitudes and beliefs and their receptivity to educational change (Fullan, 2007).

The more teachers are involved in the planning and preparation of implementing educational change, the more likely they will take responsibility for change, rather than associating the changes with others. Additionally, to the degree teachers are involved in the change process the more likely they will try to problem solve during the educational change implementation (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Sarason, 1996). Further findings by Datnow and Castellano (2000) indicated educational change was embraced most deeply by teachers who believed the change fit with their own ideology of what comprises good teaching. The authors identified how reformers should encourage teachers to identify school problems during the consensus stage and how the various reforms could assist in solving these identified problems.

Policymakers typically discount acts of teacher resistance to school reform. However understanding teacher resistance may shed light on teachers sensemaking and the school culture supporting the innovation (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995) According to Gitlin and Margonis (1995) "For reforms to be successful, school change researchers recommended that closer attention be paid to teachers' understanding of reform, and that ways be found to engage teachers in the

reform process" (p. 378). Findings from their research suggested teachers' obstructionist actions are to be anticipated and viewed as a normal part of the educational reform process and as an opportunity to be dealt with rather than perceived as deficit behavior. Leadership with an open stance toward understanding teachers' resistive actions will allow for the leaders of the change process to effectively navigate the resistance (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995).

Teachers' Sense-Making of Educational Reform

Because policy makers typically target teachers for purposes of reform efforts, it is essential they be involved in reforms to change the core processes of teaching and learning (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). For teachers to understand reform they need to be able to make sense of the purpose and the vital aspects of its implementation (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005). Spillane et al. (2002) pointed out the danger in policymakers assuming teachers understand what they are being ask to do, therefore, "most conventional theories fail to take into account the complexity of human sense-making" (p. 391). The difficulty as Spillane et al. (2002) claimed is policy representations differ in complexity with some policies pushing for tremendous changes in behavior and others pursuing fundamentally less expected change. The authors suggested opportunities for learning is a structured process so stakeholders can create sense making within the interpretation of policies and the expectations required for changing their behavior. Spillane et al. (2002) stated, "What is paramount is not simply *that* implementing agents choose to respond to policy but *what* they understand themselves to be responding to" (p. 393). That is, the likelihood for teachers to change behavior depends on the individual's background, experiences, and levels of expertise. Therefore individuals are dependent upon their prior experience and knowledge to make sense and construct meaning of policy reform (Spillane et al., 2002).

Schmidt and Datnow (2005) found teachers' sense making of reforms targeted at the school level revealed little emotional attachment to them. However, teachers' sense making of reforms targeted at practices within their own classrooms attached more emotion with responses being positive and negative. They suggested teachers need time and opportunities to develop shared meanings especially when changes in core classroom practices are the expectation of the reform. Kelchtermans (2005) found similar results describing teachers' experiences with reform and the extent to which they chose to implement reforms are determinates of social and individual process of sense making.

Historical Special Education and RTI Policy Development

The landmark passage of the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) in 1975 provided for "child find" activities by requiring the identification of school children with qualifying disabilities. The EHA further guaranteed a free and appropriate public education for children who met the qualifying criteria. Under the act, the term Specific Learning Disability (SLD) was first originated as a qualifying category. SLD was defined as:

> A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological process involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. (§620[b] [4] [A])

Since the 1975 enactment of EHA, the number of students who have been identified as SLD has increased significantly. Students identified with specific learning disabilities encompass more than 50% of all students identified as having a disability (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2004).

Considerable subjectivity among diagnosticians and the ambiguity with the definition of SLD resulted in the marked increase in SLD students identified. The Institute for the Research

on Learning Disabilities gathered assessment data over a five year period and reported there were no valid psychometric differences among students diagnosed with learning disabilities and those students considered to be low achieving (Ysseldyke & et al., 1983). As a result of this over identification the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments (IDEA) of 1997 included a provision aimed at prohibiting schools from labeling students as disabled if their academic problems were a result of lack of instruction in reading and mathematics (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). In response to the claim that many children lacked appropriate reading instruction and were being placed in special education resulted in an increased emphasis on the prevention of reading difficulties. Foundational work sponsored by the Department of Education in cooperation with the National Research Council produced a report entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al., 1998). The report provided an integrated analysis of how reading develops in young children and how appropriate instruction should proceed for the prevention of reading problems.

In 1997, Congress requested the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), in consultation with the Department of Education, to assemble a National Reading Panel (NRP) to evaluate the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of numerous approaches to teaching children to read. The panel was charged with providing a report of the results of this research and to develop an efficient approach to rapidly disseminating the information in order to facilitate effective reading instruction in the nation's schools. The findings of the NRP report are significant for the early foundations of RTI as they identified major components of early reading instruction. These essential reading components were phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension. This report brought national attention to the importance of early literacy instruction and the

prevention of reading failure. These findings were significant as the report focused on use of reading instruction proven to work and promoted identification and use of researched-based instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000).

IDEA was scheduled to be reauthorized, therefore in October, 2001 President Bush created the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education to assist in identifying priorities for its reauthorization. The 19-member Commission represented individuals recognized as experts in the fields of special education, general education, educational research, educational practitioners, and finance, as well as young adults with disabilities, and parents of children with disabilities. The Commission's order was to support open dialogue with families, teachers, and communities in an attempt to create better approaches to meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Public hearings were held in 13 cities across the nation with hundreds of individuals and organizations testifying before the Commission. A substantial amount of written comments were also collected as voices for reform. Members of the Commission prepared their findings and recommendations in a report titled, *A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their Families* (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). Persuasive features of the Commission's report included many findings and recommendations intended to shift the special education field toward implementing practices associated with RTI. The report had three important recommendations: (a) the need to focus on results, not on compliance or processes; (b) support for a system of prevention not failure; and (c) consideration of students with disabilities as regular education students first. The Commission's report also indicated that 80% of children with specific learning disabilities were in special education because they had not learned how to read (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

Significant policy and legislative proceedings further setting the stage for RTI was the passage of the (No Child Left Behind, 2002). Specifically NCLB mandated schools use scientifically-based instructional practices. As defined in the law, this included scientifically-based reading instruction incorporating the NRP's essential components of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These original five areas of reading previously identified as effective instruction within the National Reading Panel Report formed the official language within NCLB. The culmination of this mandate requiring scientifically based instruction was further reinforced by the reauthorization and passage of Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004. The reauthorization provided the legal foundations for RTI implementation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

The IDEIA established RTI as a component of evaluations for students suspected of having a specific learning disability. IDEIA contained a provision requiring the use of scientifically and research-based interventions as part of the process for special education eligibility determination. IDEIA further conveyed a local education agency should not be required to consider if a child had a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability for the purpose of identification of a learning disability (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). The severe discrepancy model measured the gap between a student's ability and achievement on norm-referenced assessments with the stipulation that the gap had to be significant before a student could be considered eligible for special education services. Research had demonstrated the ability and achievement discrepancy was not a reliable predictor for identifying students with learning disabilities (Kovaleski et al., 2013; Torgesen, 2007; Torgesen et al., 1999; Vellutino, Scanlon, & Lyon, 2000). Further describing the need for

RTI (Kovaleski et al.) stated, "a student's response to robust interventions is the best evidence for the existence of SLD rather than the student's performance on group norm-referenced tests" (p. 8). IDEIA highlighted the need to provide preventive practices with whole-school supports for early literacy and behavior interventions designed to reduce the labeling of children. The core RTI concepts for identification were the application of researched-based interventions in the regular education classrooms, measuring students' response to the interventions, and utilizing data from the RTI process to drive instruction (Hazelkorn et al., 2011).

To assist local districts and schools in the planning, preparation, and implementation of RTI in the areas of academics and behavior, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education developed three policy guidance documents. The first document, *Response to Intervention Policy Considerations and Implementation* (Batsche et al., 2005) was designed to provide direction to local and state educational agencies for effective leadership in developing RTI aimed at unifying general education and special education. The policy document gave guidance for the development of a systemic approach. Specifically, the policy recommended using RTI as an integrated approach encompassing special education and regular education by delivering scientifically based instruction with decision-making practices informed by student outcomes. Successful implementation of RTI involves leadership, provision for collaborative planning, and implementation by educators at all levels across the education system.

The two other policy documents, *Response to Intervention: Blueprints for Implementation at the District Level* (Elliott & Morrison, 2008) and *Response to Intervention Blueprints for implementation at the School Building Level* (Kurns & Tilly, 2008) were designed to provide a framework for developing the foundational practices of RTI at the district level and school building level. All three policy guidance documents from the National Association of

State Directors of Special Education entailed capacity building for systemic reform in the areas of implementation, leadership, and professional development.

Implementation of RTI and MTSS

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multistep process of providing early and progressively intensive academic and behavioral interventions and monitoring student progress within general education for the purpose of improving student achievement outcomes and prevention of over-identification of students for special education. The RTI process of documenting individual student progress in comparison to peers also allows for a more accurate approach to identifying students with learning disabilities (Jenkins, Schiller, Blackorby, Thayer, & Tilly, 2013). Ideally, RTI as a framework would be widely used for providing high quality instruction and targeted interventions matched to students' needs, as well as provide a process for integrating federal education policies (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004; D. F. Mellard, Stern, & Woods, 2011; No Child Left Behind, 2002). The RTI structure has become increasingly prominent in schools as an educational initiative with the potential to meet the needs of struggling learners (D. Mellard, McKnight, & Jordan, 2010). According to Wixson (2011),

> RTI is best thought of as a comprehensive, systemic approach to teaching and learning designed to address learning problems for all students through increasingly differentiated and intensified assessment and instruction. Equally important is the need for highly qualified professionals with appropriate expertise to deliver this instruction. From this perspective, RTI is a process that cuts across general, compensatory, and special education and is not exclusively a general education or special education initiative. (p. 504)

Because RTI is a unified approach for all students it requires systemic reform efforts to build a culture and belief system that all students can learn regardless of disability, race, socioeconomic status, and primary language (Elliott, 2008).

Kansas has labeled its RTI framework as a Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS). The MTSS process contains the same essential components of RTI including universal screening of all students, early intervention with evidenced based interventions, multi-tiered levels of supports, and data-based decision making (Jenkins et al., 2013; Kansas State Department of Education, 2013).

The successful implementation of a school-wide multi-tiered system of supports has been found to be dependent on teachers' understanding and implementation of effective evidenced based interventions (Erickson, Noonan, & Jenson, 2012; Noell & Gansle, 2006). Furthermore, the fidelity of implementation within a tiered model of supports is dependent on consistent behaviors among teachers (Fixsen, 2013). A school implementation scale was developed by Erickson et al. (2012) to measure the effectiveness of school-wide implementation of an integrated academic/behavior RTI model. The School Implementation Scale was designed to measure implementation integrity of evidenced based practices; specifically universal screening, data-based decision making, and progress monitoring. In addition, the School Implementation Scale measured the level of staff commitment to a shared vision for these school-wide supports. Erickson et al. (2012) conducted a quantitative study involving 356 educators in eleven public elementary schools and three middle schools utilizing the School Implementation Scale to determine the level of school-wide implementation of a multi-tiered model of supports. The authors' findings showed a correlation between school staff commitment levels and the degree of implementation utilizing the evidenced-based practices. Analyses also showed the greater

fidelity of staff implementation regarding the evidenced-based elements resulted in a positive correlation with increases in reading and writing outcomes for students.

Addressing the difficulties associated with implementing RTI can systematically be approached by utilizing an educational change model. Fullan (2007) developed a framework with a three phase model for educational change that Sansosti and Noltemeyer (2008) applied to RTI. They described phase one as the RTI initiation phase in which consensus is reached prior to the initiation of change. Phase two is the process of implementing RTI with the proposed changes usually taking an extended amount of time. Phase three is the process of sustaining RTI and the changes, so that it is ongoing within the institution. Sansosti and Noltemeyer's (2008) research indicated decisions to initiate educational reform during phase one varied but most of the reform efforts were likely to occur from administrators instead of teachers. Also, the process of shared decision-making and the development of shared vision between administrators and teachers were usually not achieved.

During phase two Fullan (2007) identified interactive factors affecting change, including the change characteristics, which involve the stakeholders' perceived need for change and clarity for goals and procedures for change. Sansosti and Noltemeyer (2008) related the importance of the change characteristics in light of RTI stating:

> It will be essential for state departments of education, districts, and schools to provide a clear understanding and compelling rationale for change rather than relying on legislative directives or mandates. That is, RTI initiative may be doomed for failure unless educators responsible for implementing change understand the need for such reform, as well as reflect on their own attitudes and beliefs related to practice. (p. 58)

Fullan (2007) further identified local characteristics as an interactive factor by stressing the importance of understanding the local district and school contexts when attempting reform. Fuchs and Deshler (2007) found local context critical for RTI success, identifying success was contingent upon district and school settings having the necessary conditions to support RTI use. Successful local contextual conditions identified by the authors for effective implementation were: (a) Initial adoption of RTI influenced by beliefs of teachers; (b) continual investment in professional development for staff; (c) administration engagement setting high expectations for implementation fidelity; and (d) adequate time for teachers to make sense of RTI within their instructional framework (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007).

RTI Leadership

Leadership is one of the most significant factors for the realization of any change effort (Fullan, 2007). Research conducted by O'Connor and Freeman (2012) reported that success or failure of RTI implementation is influenced by staff perception of leadership support. The authors surveyed 700 educators from numerous schools and found just 11% "strongly agree" with the statement: "In our district/school, district level leadership provides active commitment and support for school improvement actions" (p. 299). Their findings indicated district administrators have limited understanding of RTI concepts and inadequate knowledge of RTI implementation plans and outcomes. Building level support from the bottom up can produce considerable progress but specific district level support is a necessary factor. O'Connor and Freeman (2012) further analyzed the survey responses of 600 teachers, and findings from their data indicated a large number teachers do not believe all students can attain specific learning goals. This poses a significant leadership challenge for administrators to lead RTI practices with staff who do not believe in the capacity for all students to achieve at high standards. O'Connor

and Freeman (2012) found in school districts where RTI implementation was effective and well established, school staff believed that data analysis of students' responses to evidenced-based interventions would produce instructional information to help close students skill deficits. According to the authors, in districts with effective RTI implementation, teachers believed all students can achieve at high standards because teachers reported they have seen it happen in their own school. O'Connor and Freeman (2012) recommended connecting the principles of RTI with the mission and goals of district work thus creating consensus and a working culture for sustaining RTI practices. They found without leadership attending to the culture and beliefs among staff RTI reform initiatives faltered.

Nellis (2012) examined existing empirical research on high quality teaming practices to identify potential barriers to effective RTI implementation. Leadership teams involved district and building leadership teams being accountable for developing the process of consensus building for the collective agreement of the core principles of RTI. Nellis explained, "Implementation of any new method or practice is highly complex and requires the thoughtful integration and coordination of policy, evidence-based practices, and systems-change strategies" (p. 250). Nellis noted barriers were inadequate clarity in defining team purpose and team member roles, lack of diverse representation in team membership, and limited training and support to ensure team members have sufficient knowledge and skills for RTI implementation. Another barrier was building principals' not participating as team members on building leadership teams. Nellis recommended the following strategies for maximizing leadership team's effectiveness within the RTI framework. First, use a system change approach to build consensus and understanding about the team's purpose, membership, and roles. Second, explicitly communicate the procedures and processes in which teams and staff will follow.

Third, provide support for the integrity and consistency of intervention implementation. And fourth, have teams engage in reflection of team effectiveness and results. Productive implementation of RTI is contingent upon the collective works of school- based teams supported by leadership and collaborative practices.

RTI Professional Development

Professional development which allows for teachers to meet and discuss their practices and receive feedback from one another enhances the educational change process (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Professional development for teachers designed to improve instructional practices in the core or tier one level of RTI/MTSS can prevent children from becoming at risk for learning difficulties (Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider, & Sweeney, 2008). A longitudinal quantitative study conducted by Scanlon et al. (2008) compared the effects of professional development for kindergarten teachers on literacy skills of students who were considered to be at risk of facing difficulties in reading acquisition. They examined the characteristics of teacher instruction before, during, and after professional development. The authors' premise was the quality of tier one core reading instruction is a significant determinant of students' continued at risk status. The study compared cohorts of early literacy at risk students who received instruction from kindergarten teachers who had received professional development training in reading acquisition skills. The professional development provided teachers with the knowledge and coaching support to target student literacy needs and deliver small group differentiated instruction at the tier one classroom level. A second cohort of early literacy at risk students received tier two only intervention instruction from kindergarten teachers who had not received the professional development in reading acquisition or coaching support. Cohorts were labeled professional development only versus intervention only treatment groups.

The professional development only group of teachers was also observed during the longitudinal study to determine the degree in which they incorporated the reading acquisition strategies into their instructional practices. The results indicated the professional development only (classroom Tier I instruction) was as effective as the intervention only (Tier II instruction) in reducing the number of kindergarteners who remained at risk for reading difficulties over the course of the kindergarten year. The longitudinal study of kindergarten teachers who participated in the professional development program demonstrated sustained classroom instructional practices that effectively improved the literacy outcomes for their students. In context to RTI this evidence supports the important role of professional development especially influencing differentiated classroom instruction at tier one in reducing the need for supplemental tier two interventions (Scanlon et al., 2008).

The success of a multi-tiered model is largely based on creating a culture of professional development. Research conducted by Chard (2013) based on observations of teachers delivering tier two instruction indicated professional development relying on coaching in which teachers were provided feedback based on student data was most effective in improving the quality of intervention instruction. Additionally, coaches examined implementation fidelity and offered feedback when instruction required improvement. The establishment of trust between teacher and coach was found to be a critical feature in having feedback viewed as supportive rather than evaluative and judgmental. Within the participating elementary schools, Instructional coaches provided targeted and differentiated professional development resulting in a school culture where teachers expected feedback about the quality of their work and student outcomes (Chard, 2013).

Robust professional development is necessary for effective RTI implementation and intervention fidelity. Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements, and Ball (2007) examined professional

development activities across six research centers from the Office of Special Education Programs' K-3 Reading and Behavior Intervention Models Project. Key findings garnered from the authors' analysis were professional development utilizing collaborative problem solving was important as well as coaching and mentoring in early phases of implementation. Professional development efforts that worked in conjunction with preexisting school initiatives benefited from teachers having prior background knowledge from previous trainings. Active learning during trainings utilizing intervention materials and case studies improved professional development outcomes as well as ongoing student data analysis. Kratochwill et al. (2007) further summarized their findings in context of RTI implementation as consistent with research on professional development regarding the respective relationship with changes in teachers' instructional practices and resultant improvement in student performance.

Professional development was a critical indicator of teacher efficacy, that is, how teachers perceived their ability to influence student learning outcomes. Teacher efficacy is developed by professional development which leads teachers to feel empowered in dealing with difficult academic and behavioral challenges (Nunn & Jantz, 2009). A study of 429 K-12 educators was conducted by Nunn and Jantz (2009) during a year-long pilot RTI implementation initiative. Significant professional development consisted of training in RTI concepts and skills with follow up consultation during the year to assist in teams with problem solving, intervention plans, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making. Findings from Nunn and Jantz (2009) study identified high levels of teacher efficacy for teachers who also scored high on teacher RTI involvement and high on teacher RTI implementation levels. The findings suggested RTI professional development training influenced teachers' beliefs about their capabilities to promote positive student outcomes. Implications from this research are supportive

of how teachers perceive their level of RTI involvement and skill application of interventions, which in turn influenced their feelings of empowerment for student learning. Without proper professional development, attending to the primary beliefs and learning culture that exist amongst staff, RTI efforts will falter (Chard, 2013; Kratochwill et al., 2007; Nunn & Jantz, 2009; O'Connor & Freeman, 2012).

Teachers' Perceptions of RTI/MTSS Implementation

Studies of RTI and MTSS reform efforts have analyzed teachers' perceptions, understandings, and sensemaking have conflicting outcomes. Rinaldi et al. (2011) conducted a three-year study of teacher perceptions during the adoption of RTI reform efforts in an elementary school. The study consisted of a school- university partnership for the purpose of supporting teachers in planning and developing an RTI model for implementation in an urban elementary school. The collaboratively developed RTI reading model included student universal screening in reading three times per year. Also included were assignment of students according to reading needs into a three-tier model consisting of core regular classroom instruction (Tier I), targeted supplemental instruction (Tier II) and intense small group instruction (Tier III). Students' progress was continuously monitored in reading monthly for tier two and weekly for tier three. Eight participants out of 26 teachers in the school were selected for the longitudinal study of teachers' perceptions of the RTI reform. Data were collected through surveys, focus groups, and individual in-depth interviews. Results of the study indicated teachers' perceptions changed from the first year in which RTI was viewed as an administrative directive to subsequent years when teachers saw themselves as the primary stakeholders invested in the model and being equal partners with the administration. Findings indicated the following perceptions and positive outcomes with the RTI model: (a) an increase in collaboration with all

educators within the school; (b) improved instruction for all learners within the multi-tiered delivery model; (c) reduction of special education referrals; and (d) a shift in the culture to shared ownership for the learning of all students. Other key findings with RTI model implementation were teachers saw themselves as change agents and there was greater use of data and collaboration with instructional practices. Specifically, by the third year teachers reported a shift in how they used data to inform instruction. Teachers reported the value of professional development, collaborative planning schedule, and shared coaching model as important with in the three year RTI supportive model (Rinaldi et al., 2011).

Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, and Moore (2014) analyzed teachers' perceptions about RTI within a descriptive qualitative case study involving 97 urban city teachers. Participants responded to survey and open-ended questions designed to understand teachers' knowledge about RTI and barriers teachers perceived with RTI implementation. The results indicated that 78% of teachers had a poor understanding of RTI and the necessary key RTI concepts required within this reform effort. Five major themes emerged in regard to teachers' perceptions of barriers to RTI implementation. The most frequently cited barrier was lack of proper training specifically in interventions and progress monitoring. Time was the next most cited barrier with teachers perceiving insufficient time to plan and implement and collect data. Resources were cited as the third most important barrier with a lack of staff support to deliver tiered interventions. The overall RTI process was cited as a barrier being cumbersome to navigate with multiple processes and structures. Additionally, paperwork was included as a barrier to RTI implementation specifically the amount of documentation required for student decision-making. Castro-Villarreal et al. (2014) attributed the lack of understanding of RTI concepts to the limited

amount of pre-service and in-service training teachers receive and that many of them were in schools where RTI was not properly implemented.

Bineham, Shelby, Pazey, and Yates (2014) conducted a nationwide survey with general and special education educators at the elementary and high school levels. The study involved 627 participants responding to a survey designed to assess educators' perceptions of RTI implementation efforts. Critical findings revealed one third of the respondents reported they had not participated in RTI professional development training. One-third also reported confusion about who was responsible for RTI delivery between general education or special education teachers. Respondents specified the involvement of principals was critical to the RTI processes involving decision making, professional development, and implementation practices however, respondents indicated principals significantly lacked understanding of RTI practices. Bineham et al. (2014) further suggested implications of the study showed a disconnect between RTI theoretical key concepts and actual practice in the field.

A mixed methods study by Wilcox, Murakami-Ramalho, and Urick (2013) examined teachers' perspectives on the RTI framework and implementation in Michigan and Texas schools. Questionnaire data were combined with focus groups and semi- structured interviews with the 117 participants inclusive of both states. Michigan and Texas teachers reported they had received limited RTI training and professional development. One-third of all participants indicated they had received no RTI professional development. Over 50% of the Michigan teachers reported they were not sure what instructional intervention model and tiered support their school had adopted. Both Michigan and Texas educators believed the classroom teachers were primarily responsible for interventions yet the majority of teachers in the study indicated they were only fairly confident in their expertise to adapt instruction based on targeted student

needs. Overwhelmingly the most reported need was the desire for ongoing and embedded professional training in intervention and data analysis of student needs. Wilcox et al. (2013) summarized the findings noting in both states teachers valued the RTI problem solving structures to support students however, there were concerns about whether educators were sufficiently prepared to deliver RTI practices and improve student outcomes.

Supporting adoption and implementation of RTI requires teachers see the benefits of its implementation in their schools and that teacher "buy- in" is at a high-level (Burns et al., 2013). Teachers' are more likely to implement RTI interventions and instructional practices in which they support and believe in their effectiveness to produce better outcomes for students (Pinkelman, McIntosh, Rasplica, Berg, & Strickland-Cohen, 2015). Pinkelman et al. (2015) study was designed to identify teachers' perceptions of enablers and barriers in the implementation of a RTI school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS) model. Educators representing 860 schools implementing school-wide positive behavioral supports were surveyed regarding their perceptions of RTI implementation. Qualitative analysis of the results identified significant themes as to the important enablers and barriers faced in RTI implementation. The most important theme teachers' perceived as an enabler for RTI was staff buy-in, described as the commitment of teachers in supporting positive behavioral interventions. The second most cited enabler was school administrative support identifying active building level support by principals as crucial for success. Consistency was reported as an important enabler described as a shared approach among teachers and consistent plan of implementation with common understanding and goals. Barriers identified were lack of staff buy-in, time for planning and implementing the interventions, and resources for systemic implementation. The results were consistent with previous research by Kincaid, Childs, Blase, and Wallace (2007)

indicating teachers believe absence of staff buy-in was the most important barrier to implementation of a RTI behavioral model followed by lack of consistent implementation, resources, and insufficient time. Both of these studies have significant Implications for practice when selecting school-wide RTI approaches and the importance of staff buy-in for effective implementation. Previous research suggested assessing staff concerns prior to selecting an RTI initiative was important to enhancing staff buy-in (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010).

A qualitative study examined the benefits special education teachers' perceive for students as a result of RTI implementation (Werts, Carpenter, & Fewell, 2014). The researchers collected survey data from 211 rural area special education teachers in North Carolina. Findings from the study indicated 72% of the teachers perceived students were receiving a higher level of instruction as a benefit from RTI implementation. Additional student benefits reported were intervening earlier for students and providing targeted differentiated instruction based on student needs. Teachers reported they received benefits from RTI implementation as well their schools, citing increased level of professional development, increased opportunities for collaboration and increased accountability for student outcomes (Werts et al., 2014).

The Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) contracted with WestEd, an independent research and evaluation organization, to conduct an external evaluation of the Kansas Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS). WestEd developed and conducted a multi-year mixed method evaluation system whereby data were collected from the 2012 school year through 2014 across the state. Results of the WestEd (2015) investigation indicated 48% of the 1,472 schools in Kansas have participated in KSDE's formal and structured MTSS training. Currently the group of schools who received formal structured training represents two-thirds of Kansas school districts. Approximately 224,000 (43%) of all Kansas students are enrolled in these participating

schools. WestEd (2015) administered annually MTSS school surveys to the 704 participating schools who were recipients of KSDE's formal structured MTSS training. The 2014 results among the 555 respondents, 75% reported they were implementing MTSS currently and another 10% reported they were planning to implement. A majority or 85% of the schools reported implementing MTSS in reading and 57% indicated they were implementing in math. Of the respondents 44% of the schools reported they were implementing the MTSS model in behavior. WestEd (2015) found the survey data as well as interview and focus group data indicated the following commonly reported benefits. District and school data showed improvements in both academics and behavior as well as improvements in school culture and attitudes about student discipline. Students received interventions earlier, giving students' an opportunity to catch up from the support provided. Students learned to use their own data for goal setting and took pride in their own personal accomplishments. Additional benefits reported were improvements in the special education referral process and the use of MTSS data to assist in special education identification.

WestEd (2015) found schools implementing MTSS reported benefits for teachers which included increased collaboration among teachers with the use of common planning time and data review meetings. Teachers reported greater understanding of student needs and how to meet those needs through instruction and classroom management.

Consistent results reported byWestEd (2015) across 2013 and 2014 identify factors that characterize what it takes to implement MTSS with fidelity. Factors were (a) strong leadership support at the building and district level; (b) professional development that is ongoing to reduce implementation barriers; (c) staff providing fidelity for high quality core curriculum, assessment,

and instruction; and (d) staff buy-in of MTSS practices including fostering a school culture of collaboration and problem solving with a shared MTSS vision.

CHAPTER 3

Research Design and Methodology

A major purpose of this research was to understand how participants involved in implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Supports initiative made sense of this educational reform. The research design selected was a qualitative instrumental case study of an elementary school implementing the MTSS initiative. An instrumental case study allows for the examination of phenomenon for the purpose of facilitating understanding of an external interest beyond the specific case. As compared to an intrinsic case study which is investigated for the interest in the particular case itself (Stake, 2005). In this study the external interest relates to the systemic implications for understanding how teachers make sense of RTI school reform efforts. A qualitative design was appropriate for this research because it was conducted in the field where teachers had direct experiences with MTSS implementation. Merriam (2009) emphasized, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 5). I conducted a qualitative case study to gain insight in understanding how teachers made sense individually and collectively of the MTSS reforms effort (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). By observing and asking teachers to share and describe their perceptions, I was able to portray a picture of what teachers believed was happening with the MTSS initiative in their school.

The type of qualitative methods utilized were a naturalistic inquiry emphasizing the significance of context resulting in a rich description of the events and context under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This type of research involves fieldwork in natural settings and provides researchers with a method to understand how participants perceive their world (Merriam, 2009). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) it is important in a case study when

examining individuals within groups that they identify with each other and share expectations about interactions and behavior. Qualitative research is experiential and developed through personal understandings (Stake, 2010). A thick and rich description of this phenomenon addressed the research objective, which was to construct an in-depth picture of how teachers make sense of the MTSS reform initiative in their school. Data collection for this study focused on exploring these three research questions:

1. How do teachers make sense of MTSS as a reform model?
2. How do teachers describe the implementation of MTSS at their school?
3. How do teachers describe the influence of MTSS on their instructional practices?

Research Site

In discussion with the Kansas State Director of Special Education it was recommended that Mount Hayward Public Schools (MHPS) be considered for this case study. The state director believed MHPS represented a typical district within the region that had participated in MTSS training and was currently supporting MTSS districtwide implementation. The state director did not recommend a particular school within the MHPS district.

Mount Hayward Grade School (MHGS) was selected for the site of this study due its district supported implementation of MTSS for the past four years. Currently, the grade school qualifies as a Title I school serving third through fifth grades with 372 students. Mount Hayward Grade School is organized with one principal and a faculty comprised of five third grade teachers, six fourth grade teachers, and six fifth grade teachers. Special education staff includes three resource teachers, a gifted teacher, a speech teacher, and fifteen para educators. Support staff is comprised of a part-time psychologist, nurse, and social worker, along with a full time

counselor and Title 1 teacher. Additional full time staff includes a music teacher, art, physical education, and librarian. A full description of the site can be found in Chapter 4.

Study Participants

Purposeful sampling was utilized for participant selection. According to Patton (2002) purposeful sampling allows for the selection of data sources and participants based on criteria about what can be learned from them, thus yielding information rich descriptions and deeper understanding of the case study. Mount Hayward Grade School had been implementing MTSS for four years subsequent to participating in MTSS structured training provided by the Kansas Department of Education. Participants related to this study were purposefully selected because of their knowledge and perspectives of MTSS adoption and implementation at MHGS.

Criteria for selection of participants were MTSS stakeholders at MHGS defined as general and special education teachers providing academic instruction in reading and math as well as providing behavioral supports to students. Overall, 21 teachers met the selection criteria and were invited to participate in the study. All 17 core subject faculty members teaching third, fourth and fifth grade classes met the selection criteria as primary implementers of the MTSS model. Additionally, three special education resource room teachers and one Title I reading specialist met the criteria and were purposefully selected as study participants. These selection criteria also resulted in the purposeful sample being representative and inclusive of a typical school staff.

The majority of MHGS classroom teachers have between 5-10 years of experience, three teachers have over 10 years, and the remaining teachers have 1-to 4 years of experience. MHGS has a small staff; therefore it was feasible to include as many participants as possible who met the selection criteria. This allowed multiple and various perspectives to be investigated and to

reach a saturation point with the data collected. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the saturation point as attained when the data are redundant and no new information is forthcoming.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection strategies employed in this study were selected to portray how participants make sense and meaning of the MTSS educational initiative. Described by Merriam (2009), qualitative data collection procedures should be "determined by the researcher's theoretical orientation, by the problem and purpose of the study, and by the sample selected" (p. 86). Utilizing these criteria, I collected data through the use of customary qualitative research methods, including focus groups, semi-structured personal interviews, observations, and review of documents (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

Focus Groups

I conducted three focus groups using a semi-structured interview format. Each focus group consisted of 6-7 general and special education teachers representing each grade level team within the school. Overall 20 teachers participated in the focus groups. Each focus group took place at MHGS and the lasted approximately 45- 60 minutes. The focus group format was chosen because sensemaking occurs in the social context of organizational groups and sensemaking is a shared process of making individual and collective meaning (Weick, 1995). Focus group interviews allow group participants to hear others perspectives, and by listening to each other's responses, make additional comments (Morgan, 1996; Patton, 2002) Patton further described, "Interactions among participants enhances data quality. Participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other, which weeds out false or extreme views" (p. 386). The semi-structured interview format was selected and an interview protocol developed with eight to ten questions utilizing an open-ended probe. This format allowed for flexibility within the posed

question protocol to examine and probe topics that were central to informing the proposed study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2010). The semi-structured interview allowed me to explore emerging views of MTSS sensemaking and allowed for the examination of individual and collective perspectives. Each focus group interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim to assist with data analysis (Merriam, 2009). The focus group protocol and questions are in Appendix A.

Interviews

This study included three individual and five follow up interviews. In qualitative studies in-depth interview allows the participants' perspective to unfold as the participants views the phenomenon, the emic perspective (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I purposefully selected to individually interview the Title I teacher and one special education teacher who were both present during the adoption and implementation of MTSS. Both teachers were able to describe their perspectives on the role Title I and special education played during the delivery of tiered instruction at MHGS. In addition, the counselor was interviewed for deeper understanding of the MTSS/GEI special education referral process.

According to Morgan (1996), focus group studies have used follow-up interviews with individual participants to explore specific opinions and experiences in more depth. This strategy has the advantage of first identifying a range of experiences and perspectives, then drawing on the pool to add more depth where needed (p. 134). Five follow-up interviews were conducted with grade level teachers who were present during the adoption and early implementation phases of MTSS. They were selected because of their prior background knowledge and allowed me to further examine teachers' understanding and perspectives toward the districtwide MTSS

adoption. The emergent design allowed for follow-up individual interviews and provided flexibility for further investigation into individual sensemaking of the MTSS reform efforts.

I maintained a fieldwork journal as a written record of the experiences in the field setting in order to record my thoughts and reactions during the study. The introspective reflections provide the basis for early analysis of the data as it was collected. The fieldwork journal and recorded reflections during the study assisted in identifying follow-up interview participants (Merriam, 2009).

For this study, open-ended questions were utilized in the individual interviews to yield clarity and further descriptive data about individual stories and experiences (Merriam, 2009). Individual and follow-up interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed as well any field notes personally recorded during the interview process (Creswell, 2007). The interview protocol and sample questions are in Appendix B.

Observations

To understand fully the complexity of the many conditions it is important to study participants in their natural environment (Patton, 2002). Five nonparticipation observations were conducted involving grade level teachers during daily instruction. First, I observed tier time instruction at each grade level for the purpose of examining small group differentiated instruction. I then conducted observations during the delivery of Title I and special education for the purpose of investigating student groupings for Tier II and Tier III instruction. Observations gave me the opportunity to gain firsthand experience of how participants implemented RTI and allowed for recording information as it happens (Creswell, 2007). Teacher participation in problem solving team meetings was observed to gain insight into the congruence of teachers'

descriptions of MTSS and observed school-based practices. Problem-solving teams are described as building staff organized for the purposes of analyzing group or individual data to determine the next course of action within the tiered school-wide model. Nonparticipant observations allow for identification of variations among individuals and during interactions together (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012).

Observation sessions lasted 45-60 minutes in length and allowed opportunity to triangulate emerging data in combination with interviews and document analysis (Merriam, 2009). Field notes were recorded to provide written descriptions of the setting, the participants, observed activities, and direct quotes of participants. Field notes provided assistance in determining how participants' perspectives converged with the other data sources.

Document Review

Prior to conducting focus groups and interviews, I collected documents about MHGS. Document review and analysis provided an opportunity for a richer understanding of the school context prior to entering the field (Merriam, 2009). Document review also provided another method to triangulate data. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) documents, "are a rich source of information, contextually relevant and grounded in the contexts they represent" (p. 277). Some of the documents included the school's public information available from the district's website and documented statements concerning the core beliefs and values expressed about MTSS reform initiative. Analysis of formal MTSS policy provided a better understanding of how teachers made sense of the MTSS expectations and their own MTSS role clarification within the function of the MTSS work. Written procedures for documenting a special education referral and the MHGS family handbook were reviewed and provided an important source of data in this qualitative case study. In addition, document review provided opportunity for

obtaining and examining participants own language and words as they compiled the record (Creswell, 2007).

Data Analysis

According to Merriam (2009), the process of data analysis is interactive and simultaneous with data collection occurring in and out of the field. The data analysis process should focus on answering the research questions guiding the study. I began the data analysis simultaneously with the collection process. Interpreting the data in an ongoing manner allowed me to interact, reflect, and question the meaning of the data during collection process. Furthermore, I utilized the constructs within my sensemaking framework as a basis for initial organizing and analysis of the data collected.

Subsequent to each focus group and interview I converted the audio recording to text by electronically transcribing and creating a written record. This process provided the basis for managing and segmenting the data into smaller units. Creswell (2007) described this process of chunking data into units as a way to organize the data before attempting to make meaning of all the information. The process of transcribing the audio recordings allowed me to become familiar with the data prior to making meaning.

Observations provide a method to document and check what is reported in focus groups and interviews (Patton, 2002). Field notes are analogous to focus group and interview transcripts providing a written account for data analysis (Merriam, 2009). After each observation, I converted field notes and reflections into segmented manageable text in preparation for the analysis process.

All transcription text from focus groups, interviews, and observations were broken down into single segments and entered into Excel spreadsheet to facilitate managing the data. Miles,

Huberman, and Saldana (2014) suggested the first cycle of the analysis process, is to break the data into units or segments and assign codes that represent symbolic meaning, a process of descriptive coding. I labeled these segments and assigned codes. My coded segments became the prompts for reflection on the meaning of the inferential information and data. The second cycle, finding and generating patterns of codes, this allows for condensing significant amounts of data into smaller analytic patterns such as themes, categories, and constructs. I started this process by thoroughly reading all of the coded information within the excel spreadsheet. Next, I identified patterns of common themes in which I classified into categories. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to this process as a constant comparative method of interacting with the data and generating evolving categories or themes. I displayed categories of data in an interactive matrix format for reflection, drawing conclusions, and confirming comparative data (Miles et al., 2014). This interactive process is intuitive and moves from the specifics to the general and requires several levels of analysis (Creswell, 2007). Since this is a multilevel progression Ryan and Bernard (2003) recommend examining similarities and differences, analogies, metaphors, linguistic connections, and finding meaning from data that maybe missing. Because this type of analysis is highly intuitive I made a concentrated attempt to continue to be open to any findings that may be contrary to any preconceived views identified prior to the case study (Lapan et al., 2012).

Content analysis was the selected approach to analyze documents gathered. Content analysis is a systematic process for describing and interpreting the communication content from documents and media. I analyzed the collected documents and placed pertinent data into the appropriate categories for further analysis and interpretation. According to Merriam (2009) content analysis, "in its adoption for use in qualitative studies, the communication of meaning is

the focus" (p. 205). This procedure requires the creation of categories that denote the pertinent characteristics of the document's content. Documents and media content are organizational sensemaking activities and allow insight into the social context of organizations (Patton, 2002).

Miles et al. (2014) claimed data analysis must move beyond descriptive summary of data and extend toward explanation through the process of checking and confirming, with making if-then tests, triangulating sources, and following up on hunches or surprises. Within this stage of the data analysis I spent considerable amount of time interpreting the emerging themes and then identifying participants' direct quotes associated with the important themes. This triangulation of sources and checking and confirming assisted in identifying the case study findings. After the findings were developed I utilized the sensemaking framework to examine and understand these findings. The process of pulling the findings through the sensemaking framework led to the conclusions of this study. Since this process from case study design, collection of data in the field, and data analysis requires consideration of research quality I will discuss this topic.

Research Quality

Several constructs were put forth to depict qualitative standards for trustworthiness by Lincoln and Guba (1985) including credibility, dependability, and transferability, along with specific procedures to accomplish these standards. Trustworthiness is important in qualitative research as it establishes the authenticity of the findings and answers the question are the findings worth having confidence in and paying attention to.

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility criterion requires the research be carried out in such a way that enhances the findings will be found to be credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility I devoted sufficient time in the field setting or what Merriam (2009) refers to as

"adequate engagement in data collection…. that the data and emerging findings feel saturated" (p. 219). For individual interviews I utilized a process referred to as member checks which can increase the credibility of the study by involving participants in the process of reviewing the transcribed interviews to corroborate the draft findings and report on the accuracy of his or her contribution of the recorded data (Lapan et al., 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Teachers who were individually interviewed had an opportunity to clarify their responses for accuracy of their communication. This process also ensured that I accurately understood the teachers' communications and intentions. Regarding focus groups, I provided participants of each grade-level team with a written draft summary of what was discussed to garner their comments on the accuracy of the discussion.

The strategy of triangulation is an additional approach to enhancing that the findings are credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I collected data from multiple methods, including focus groups, individual interviews, observations, and documents. I also collected data through multiple sources including grade level teacher teams, veteran teachers, counselor, and new teachers. This multi-source, multi-method approach of triangulation increases the trustworthiness of the findings by not relying on a single source of data to generate findings and as way to identify inconsistent or conflicting findings (Miles et al., 2014). I triangulated the data by comparing and evaluating the multiple sources and the multiple methods to identify emerging findings. This triangulation process allowed for identifying information, which was complimentary as well as information that was unique to specific sources. Grappling with the similarities and differences I was able to develop a deeper understanding and meaning to what the data meant in context of this study.

Creswell (2007) suggested the process of peer debriefing or peer review to enhance accuracy and trustworthiness of the case study findings. This involves including a peer or colleague to review the process throughout the development of the study to ask questions and provide opportunity to corroborate findings. I had the benefit of utilizing a colleague periodically throughout the research study to reflect, corroborate findings, and discuss any biases or oversights (Lapan et al., 2012).The debriefing opportunity was especially important during the comparing and contrasting process of checking the data for meaning. In addition debriefing led to discussion of interpretations and possible conclusions.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to dependability and consistency in qualitative research as an approach to ensure reliability of findings. A method to obtain dependability is the development and maintenance of an audit trail. During the field study I kept an audit trail to provide documentation and to record how the study was conducted systematically and how data was analyzed. Through the use of a research journal or audit log, specific recordings can be made as a running record of the field study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 2009). This logging process was useful as I adjusted interview questions for follow-up interviews and in the logistics of scheduling observations to ensure different tiered instruction was observed. I logged inconsistencies with information during interviews and focus groups so that I could investigate the inconsistencies and verify accuracy of information. Keeping an audit journal with specific questions led to arranging an interview with the counselor so I could further understand the special education referral process. Lapan et al. (2012) referred to this process as a dependability audit describing changes to the research process occurring in the field study and reasons for such changes. Additionally I have incorporated triangulation, peer debriefing, and investigator's

position in the study design which can enhance the dependability of the findings (Merriam, 2009).

Transferability

The concept transferability refers to how a study's findings can transfer to other settings and participants. The potential of transferability is established by describing with sufficient details the study's participants and the specific research setting (Lapan et al., 2012). I enhanced the transferability of the findings by providing detailed rich quotes from teachers describing how they make sense of MTSS. I further enhanced the findings by asking probing questions to give teachers the opportunity to describe in their own words their experiences with the adoption and implementation of MTSS. Furthermore, I described the findings and conclusions with sufficient detail to increase the transferability of this study. By including rich multiple perspectives and coherence within the study others may examine the potential of the transferability of the findings (Creswell, 2007; Miles et al., 2014). This also gives the reader the opportunity to determine the degree which the findings may transfer to other settings and context (Tracy, 2010).

Positionality and Reflexivity

Merriam (2009) stated, "Investigators need to explain their biases, dispositions and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken" (p. 219). This clarification allows readers to understand how background and experiences brought to the study may influence the researcher's interpretation of findings. This critical self-reflection is called reflexivity and is an important characteristic of qualitative research. I kept a reflexive journal to record and reflect on my own biases and assumptions. The reflexive journaling was especially important after the first focus group at MHGS in which I realized veteran teachers held hostility toward the new MTSS referral process. An important goal that I established for this study was to collect credible data.

The self-reflection journal was used to examine how I was interpreting the data and then used to debrief with my colleague to become aware of any biases within my interpretation. According to Kleinsasser (2000) this process of reflexivity allows for discovery of possible ethical entanglement within the planning process, conducting the field study, and after the conclusion of the research study.

Understanding the researcher is the human instrument in qualitative research, I provide insight into my background and experiences and beliefs that I bring to this study (Merriam, 2009). I am a white male who grew up in a small Midwestern, mainly all white, community. From an early age, I have been attracted to the helping professions and have a deep caring for people especially those who are least able to advocate for themselves. I pursued a field of study in college that prepared me for entering the profession of school psychology and worked in this capacity for twelve years. During this time, I became sensitive to the labels applied to children with disabilities and the potential harm caused by viewing children differently from others. I believe we all matter and we all need to contribute in order to have a sense of belonging to a community.

I became an administrator to help build a more responsive system to meet the needs of all children. I have a passion and a belief that one unified system for meeting the educational and behavioral needs of all children can be accomplished and the need for labeling children can be greatly reduced. I have had the opportunity to work in rural, suburban, and urban school districts as both a psychologist and as an administrator.

Most recently as an assistant superintendent for an urban school district I have been involved in the district level planning and implementation of the Kansas MTSS model. I have also presented nationally to the National State Directors of Special Education, National Council

Administrators of Special Education, and various state organizations on the topics of RTI and MTSS. I have also been involved as advisory member for the National Center for Learning Disabilities and assisted in development of the current guidelines for diagnostics of learning disabilities utilizing the RTI process. Because of my level of involvement in the implementation of MTSS/RTI, I have a personal vision in the potential for MTSS to meet the needs of children without harmful labels and the capability to serve students with disabilities in inclusive settings with other children. Since I have such a strong position on the potential of MTSS/RTI to increase outcomes for all students, I must be acutely aware of this biases and its potential to affect my research. Having been involved in MTSS/RTI implementation for the past five years, it is important to reflect critically on myself and understand my disposition on the topic. My reflective journaling was critical to document my feelings and thoughts especially when I was faced with conflicting thinking and viewpoints expressed by participants. According to Kleinsasser (2000), researchers involve themselves in reflexivity because they believe it results in good data.

Ethical Practice

Wichita State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this proposed study. Participants were informed of the purpose and nature of the study and importance placed on the confidentiality of the participants. All participants were provided informed consent for the focus groups and interviews, informing them they can withdraw consent at any time and informing participants of any potential identifiable risk. For the protection of respondents I used pseudonyms in place of names. Participant information including transcripts, audio recordings, and notes are stored on secure data password protected storage. After data are collected and

analyzed for this research study, I will destroy all identifiable information to protect anonymity. The consent form is found in Appendix C.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The purpose of this case study was to examine how teachers in one elementary school perceived, understood, and made sense of a statewide model of RTI known as Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS). This chapter presents findings from the analysis of data collected during the study, which were gathered during three months of individual and focus group interviews, observations, and document reviews during Fall 2015. The findings and analysis provides descriptive insight into teachers' perceptions of the MTSS school reform initiative. The collected data were organized and classified according to general themes and categories (Miles et al., 2014). The findings derived from the coding process focused on three major themes: (a) MTSS adoption and understanding of its purpose, (b) MTSS implementation and teachers' practices, (c) MTSS resources and barriers. The chapter begins with a brief description of the research site Mount Hayward Grade School (MHGS). The rest of the chapter reports the findings categorized under the three major themes.

Mount Hayward Grade School

Mount Hayward Grade School (MHGS) is part of Mount Hayward Public Schools (MHPS) system, which is a small suburban school district operating four public schools. The city of Mount Hayward is located on the county line between Jefferson and Lincoln counties and has a population base of 6,100 citizens. The district's 2013-2014 enrollment reported a total of 1,825 students attending Mount Hayward Elementary School, Mount Hayward Grade School, Mount Hayward Middle School, and Mount Hayward High School. The racial and ethnic make-up of the district's students identified as 88% White, 5% Hispanic, 1% African American, and 6% comprised as "Other" category, which includes Asian and multi-racial. Forty-two percent of

the students qualify for free and reduced lunches, which is an indicator of economic disadvantage. The four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate was 95% for the 2013 reporting year.

Mount Hayward Grade School according to the state department of education website, meets the criteria as a Title I school serving third through fifth grades with 372 students in attendance. The schools reported student demographics consists of 87% White, 6% Hispanic, 1% African American, and 6% reported as "Other" category. Approximately 45% of the grade school students are eligible for free and reduced lunches. Furthermore, 15% of the student population receives special education services and less than 1% qualifies as English Language Learners. KSDE reports Mount Hayward Grade School's reading performance as 92% of the students at or above standard and the school's math performance as 94% of the students at or above standard. Economically disadvantaged students scored 86% proficient or above in reading and 88% proficient or above in math. Additionally KSDE building report card indicated students with disabilities scored 75% proficient or above in reading and 81% proficient or above in math.

Among the 21 MHGS teachers interviewed for focus groups or follow-up interviews all had formal degrees in education. Years of teaching experience ranged from 1 year to 23 years with 8.5 years being the average. For the purpose of reporting these findings teachers with three years or less experience teaching at MHGS will be referred to as new teachers.

The Mount Hayward family handbook describes the context of the MTSS services provided within the Hayward public schools. The district implements MTSS within a school-wide model for the purposes of identifying students who may require supplementary supports within the general education setting. All students are screened periodically during the school year through the collection of academic and behavioral performance data. Based on screening

data additional supports are provided for targeted students within the school-wide model. Academic and behavioral performance data are collected on students receiving general education interventions to effectively plan targeted instruction, monitor student progress, and determine the potential of a disability. School-wide support services are provided on a continuum from supplemental to intensive services addressing both academic and behavioral needs of all children. The continuum of services and strategies allows customization of support for each student and differentiates the level of intensity and explicitness necessary for each student to progress.

According to the MHPS family handbook should a child be suspected of a disability the district's special education department has in place a district defined process called General Education Interventions (GEI) to determine a student's need for a special education evaluation. The GEI terminology is unique to MHPS, however the intent of the GEI process is to meet response-to-intervention requirements contained within the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004. The district chose to embed the GEI process and procedures within its MTSS framework and formally labeled it the MTSS/GEI policy. The regular education teachers' requirements for the documentation process are outlined in the MTSS/GEI Tier Referral Plan document. A GEI team established at each building comprised of the principal and predominately general education staff is responsible for planning, implementing, and documenting the results of student interventions delivered within the MTSS/GEI Tier Referral Plan. Oversight of this MTSS/GEI process is the responsibility of the district's special education department. The MHPS family handbook stipulates a school's GEI team must document the following requirements under The MTSS/GEI policy and within the MTSS/GEI Tier Referral Plan:

> School personnel have data-based documentation which indicates that general education interventions [GEI] and strategies would be inadequate to address the areas of concerns for the child. In addition school personnel have data-based documentation that indicates the child was provided appropriate instruction in regular education settings and the child's academic achievement was repeatedly assessed at reasonable intervals which reflected formal assessment of the child's progress during instruction.

Only after documentation within the MTSS/GEI Tier Referral Plan that these stipulations were met could the GEI team proceed with a special education evaluation. The MHPS family handbook further indicates parents will be involved in the MTSS/GEI process and have access to explanation for any data-based decision making concerning their child. As will be seen, this district policy decision to conjoin the special education pre-referral process with MTSS had a significant affect on MHGS teachers' understanding of the MTSS adoption purpose.

MTSS Adoption and Understanding of its Purpose

In response to a statewide initiative to expand MTSS district officials elected to adopt the MTSS initiative districtwide within all four schools. During the 2011-12 school year the district arranged for each building to participate in formal MTSS training provided by the state at a nearby educational resource center. The state requested school districts send a school building leadership team to participate in three full day MTSS trainings at the beginning of the school year. In addition, the state also required districts to participate in a full day middle of the school year training and one full day end of year training session, for a total of five full days of training. These specific trainings were intended to provide a structuring process for schools to build capacity for an MTSS schoolwide integrated model of literacy and behavior supports. According to state documents, the desired goal for participating schools was to build a shared vision of

MTSS led by general education in what was termed an "all education initiative" with the purpose of producing more equitable outcomes for all students. The trainings assisted schools in developing staff consensus, administrative support, and the essential components for MTSS implementation. Learning outcomes were designed to prepare leadership teams to build capacity for the MTSS essential components including universal screening, use of data-based problem solving, and implementation of a multi- tier model of instruction.

The findings in this section are discussed under six major themes describing how teachers viewed the MTSS adoption and their understanding of its purpose at MHGS. These six themes include teacher's perceptions of MTSS adoption process, teachers' perceptions that MTSS is a special education driven initiative, and how teachers developed such negative' views of MHGS general education interventions requirements embedded within MTSS. In addition this section discusses teachers' view of the dual perceptions and roles of MTSS along with the principal's role in making sense of these dual roles. The last portion of this section discusses teachers' descriptions concerning a common understanding of the purpose of MTSS.

Teachers' Perceptions of MTSS Adoption

Teachers' perceptions of the MTSS adoption process centered around three general themes. One is the theme in which teachers perceived they lacked voice at the building level in participating in the decision to adopt MTSS. Teachers also described the theme of skepticism about the appearance of being represented at the district level decision process to adopt MTSS districtwide. The third theme involved teachers' perceptions of being directed by district's special education administration that MTSS was a required state mandate imposed on them.

MHGS teachers' strongly expressed within the focus groups and individual interviews that MTSS was a district initiative in which they had little voice in the decision to participate.

Most veteran teachers present during MTSS adoption communicated there was no opportunity at the building level to discuss or develop "teacher buy in" prior to the district adopting the MTSS initiative. Many of the teachers expressed they had never heard of MTSS until they were directed by district administration that MTSS would be implemented districtwide. A teacher reported hearing about "rumors that something was coming but we didn't know what, then just all of the sudden here it [MTSS] is… We didn't have any say, we had no idea." Another teacher conveyed similar sentiments, "For the MTSS process as a whole, it was very much top-down, we were told this is what we're going to be doing." The majority of the teachers' perceived there was lack of teacher input or choice at the building level regarding the decision to implement MTSS within their school. Overall this theme was frequently voiced and was common across all grade levels.

Teachers also conveyed skepticism about the degree of teacher involvement within the district level committee responsible for the decision to adopt MTSS. Veteran teachers believed the decision to adopt MTSS had already been made prior to the formation of a stakeholder committee. Some teachers further indicated that teacher involvement in the district committee was a token measure to give the appearance of teachers having a voice in the decision to adopt MTSS. This skepticism provided teachers with a feeling of mistrust with the decision making process. One teacher described the experience this way as she remembered the adoption process:

> They did have a teacher or two teacher representatives on the district committee but it was one of those things where it has already been decided and we are just there to fill in the box to say that they had a teacher representative. Those teachers' voices, I don't think were heard. I think it was more checking the boxes that we go through this process

and we have buy in from all groups. They had people come in to say, so they could say we had teachers on the committee.

The theme of having the appearance of representation within the district committee left some teachers feeling angry at district administration regarding MTSS adoption. Overall the perceived lack of integrity in the adoption process laid the foundation for early teacher resistance to implement MTSS.

According to teachers the rationale the district communicated to staff during districtwide MTSS roll out was that MTSS was a state mandate. Teachers stated the district gave schools a large MTSS state handbook, which laid out the processes for implementing MTSS. Many teachers' expressed the feeling that they had little opportunity to develop an understanding of what MTSS entailed, why it was being required, and the benefits of the initiative prior to being directed to implement the state process. They described being given the state's MTSS handbook in a large binder with directions to implement the initiative. According to one teacher, "It felt like state government telling you need to be doing this, you need to figure out how to do it, here's an option." A second teacher described some of the teachers' sentiments, "A few teachers grumbled about another new thing from the state, we've done something like this before, and it didn't work then and won't work now." A third teacher commented on this statement, "Yeah the first year it was just well we were all handed a binder and said this is your information, this is what you have to do." Teachers in general communicated that they understood MTSS was a requirement from the state but had limited knowledge of what they were being directed to do prior to their required involvement.

MTSS is Special Education Initiative

Teachers who were present at MHGS during the adoption process of MTSS strongly felt MTSS was a special education initiative which had little to do with them. They observed the initiative being driven by special education district leadership. One of the goals of the state MTSS training was to have MTSS perceived and led as a unified all education initiative. The state's systemic design of an all education approach was to avoid the perspective of special education forcing regular education to implement the federal RTI policy. However, MHPS decided that special education leadership would introduce and lead the requirements of MTSS. Because MHPS's special education department embedded their own terminology, labeling their version of the RTI requirement as a MTSS/GEI process, this resulted in teachers perceiving that the GEI was a Trojan horse within the newly introduced MTSS framework. Teachers believed MTSS was a special education mandate requiring regular education teachers to implement new school structures as outlined within the state MTSS handbook. This sharply contributed to staff being resistant to accepting MTSS as a unified approach between special education and general education designed to support all students. The perception that MTSS was being led by special education made it extremely problematic for general education teachers to support the initial district roll out. As a result, many teachers did not perceive MTSS as a unified effort. To illustrate, one teacher conveyed, "The person who talked to us from day one about MTSS was the special education director." Another participant shared similar thoughts: "It felt very much like a special education initiative because the special education director presented it in a big notebook as a beautifully wrapped package." A third teacher related, "It definitely did come from special ed down this way and because of the way it was introduced, MTSS was not a positive thing at the beginning." A fourth teacher was emphatic in expressing her perceptions

that MTSS was a special education initiative, which she believed purposefully took away teachers' autonomy to refer students for special education evaluation and replaced it with a heavily bureaucratic MTSS/GEI process:

> I feel like MTSS was written by special education people and when it first started here, I felt like it was simply a way to slow down admitting kids that needed to be tested into special education. I just felt like in the past teachers were able to say these are the things I've tried, these are the scores, I've got to back this up and we would have a meeting and a child could be referred directly to special education. Now I feel MTSS has created many more hoops that have to be jumped through to get the help the kids need.

Teachers generally described special education as the initiator of the MTSS initiative and responsible for delivering a series of requirements and burdensome documentation to which teachers were being forced to comply. One teacher described the group's feelings:

> At the beginning it was the special education person who ran the first professional development meeting. It was the special education director giving the presentation of this package that arrived on our doorstep. It was this large hefty notebook of intervention ideas. Basically this is what you're doing. Here are some ideas for it.

Overall the district's special education leadership was solely perceived as driving the MTSS/GEI policy into the school, thus creating resistance for the acceptance and understanding of MTSS. Having the district's special education administrator explain to staff that the MTSS/GEI process was a state mandate to meet the response-to- intervention requirement under law made teachers' resentful of the MTSS initiative. The district's choice to make their own GEI procedures part of MTSS a mandate created staff resistance to the broader purpose of MTSS being a combined regular education and special education initiative.

MHGS General Education Interventions

Examination of the district's MTSS/GEI Tier Plan documents and procedures revealed that teachers were expected to plan and implement a series of general education interventions with referred students and document the students' response to these interventions. This process of documenting a student's response provided the mandated GEI record for determining if a referral for special education evaluation was warranted. The GEI document consisted of 21 pages requiring the regular education teachers who comprised the GEI team to address interventions in academics, language, and/or behavior. The document, known as the *MTSS/GEI Goal and intervention Plan for Tier 2 or Tier 3*, provided the specific intervention plan to be implemented by staff. There were differences, however, between the views of veteran teachers and those of new teachers toward MTSS/GEI.

Veteran teachers' perceptions. Many veteran teachers voiced a general theme that MTSS was nothing new and that previous to MTSS they had been providing for students' needs and making appropriate referrals to special education. One teacher expressed frustration and feelings of being forced to comply with teaching practices that she felt were already the norm in MHGS before this mandated process. In her perception, teachers already provided appropriate supports for students prior to referring them to special education. The new MTSS/GEI requirement made her feel the process had become constrained and rigid with more formality and less flexibility to be organic in approaching students' needs:

> As someone who's been around just long enough to see the pendulum swing a few times before the word MTSS was around, we were putting kids in groups and we were looking at data. We were very much diagnostic before then. I think it was just strange to have MTSS imposed on us. We've always, as teachers, been putting kids where they

need to be. This just seems like a new word for it now. I mean I was on the GEI committee and it felt very forced, very weird compared to the informal let's get together to talk about these kids. It just felt like it was very much metered and not organic.

Other teachers conveyed similar perceptions that the MTSS/GEI requirement was nothing new and they were satisfied with their previous process of documenting students' needs. Prior to MTSS, teachers' described documenting students' needs as a simple straightforward process of documenting interventions provided by a teacher. After MTSS adoption teachers' described a complex dictated process of prescriptive interventions and burdensome documentation. For example, one teacher described that before MTSS they were utilizing their own pre-referral process and student documentation procedures. She went on two relate that after MTSS was introduced and they were handed the state MTSS intervention handbook, "Then it just felt like a dictate. They came in and said it's now called MTSS and here's your information." A third teacher described this theme of teachers feeling dictated to, imposed upon, and forced to implement this new MTTSS/GEI process within their school. She felt as if a business model of compliance and efficiency had been imposed within the school's family, home-like atmosphere:

> It just felt like they had imposed a business model in our home. I feel like we were already doing a good job before so I think that's part of what made it uncomfortable to impose this GEI. It's like here's this artificial structure that we're giving you. It makes you wonder were there people that were not getting students the help they needed before. I feel like they gave us a new buzzword like whole language… it just felt artificial as a whole since we already had those processes in place.

In addition to the perception of an imposed artificial structure, other teachers perceived MTSS to be a heavily bureaucratic, complicated process that disrupted the family atmosphere of already

caring adults. A teacher responded in agreement to this description of a cumbersome bureaucratic model being forced on their family home as a reason for her initial resistance:

> I think a lot of my frustration comes from the fact it was simpler… it used to be. I would just talk to someone and say I'm really worried about this kid and we would just do it. There wasn't 48 pieces of paper to be filled and signed by forty people. It just feels like this very heavy thing. Before it felt more like family. It almost would feel like I was talking to my spouse and say I'm worried about this kid, these are the reasons why, and then we would take steps to help this child. Now it's slow and accompanied by lots of paperwork.

The new MTSS/GEI procedures and paperwork accompanying the mandate created negative perceptions from veteran teachers. These teachers felt resentment, anger from being imposed upon, and unfair treatment in being required to meet these new burdensome requirements. The new process struck a chord with teachers who despised being forced to alter many of their school practices to meet the new mandate. Veteran teachers were overwhelmed after being told during roll out they had to create multi- tier structures, universal screening procedures, intervention plans, and progress monitoring practices under the MTSS/GEI policy. Many veteran teachers chose not to participate as a GEI team member out of frustration and resentment.

Teachers described the GEI team at MHGS consisted of volunteer regular education teachers, counselor, and the principal. The GEI team met at 7:15 am every Tuesday morning to discuss students and develop intervention plans. This required meeting for teachers who referred students to the team added further resentment for the MTSS/GEI process. To illustrate, one veteran teacher stated, "Having a student that needed to go through the GEI process felt like getting a summons. We're going to discuss your kid at 7:15 in the morning. It was awful."

New teachers' perceptions. In contrast, new teachers were satisfied with the process and believed it was effective. They reported the school had changed the GEI meeting time to take place during grade level plan time when the principal and counselor would meet with teachers for the GEI plan development. New teachers had learned about the process from their college classes and practicum experiences. One new teacher declared, "I believe it is effective." The teacher went on to describe her experience with the process:

> We identify a student that has a need of some kind and the GEI team meets. We meet at least three times as a team. If there isn't student growth as a result of the intervention we look at Tier II interventions with accommodations or increase the intervention to a Tier III and document what is working or not for the student. At that point we can recommend special education evaluation or show that the student is growing academically from the intervention and does not need to be referred.

Another new teacher reported, "Our GEI team, we get together and determine what intervention is or isn't working. It provides data and proof to move the student in the right direction." The majority of new teachers perceived the MTSS/GEI process was working effectively to support their students.

Neither did new teachers have the negative perceptions of the GEI portion of MTSS held by veteran teachers. One new teacher in the focus group responded:

> I hear about MTSS in our late start from our curriculum director. It makes sense to me. Maybe I'm like a six year old who heard a dirty word, but don't know why the word is dirty and I'm ok with that. I love the kids and want to do what I can to help them and if that means I use tier as a [dirty] word or whatever, I don't care.

New teachers did not experience the history of MTSS at MHGS and did not understand why veteran teachers viewed the special education GEI with such negativity. From the new teachers perceptions, the special education and the regular education portions of MTSS were helpful for students.

Veteran Teachers Dual Perceptions of MTSS/GEI

Veteran teachers at MHGS held two different views of the district's MTSS/GEI policy. On the one hand they perceived the GEI process as extremely negative, a special education responsibility, and separate from MTSS. Contributing to their negativity was the bureaucratic aspect of the GEI process, which consisted of the mandated response-to- intervention requirement and its accompanying paperwork. In addition, many veteran teachers felt they were already supporting students appropriately before MTSS/GEI was required and resented the imposed process.

On the other hand, the MTSS literacy supports created at MHGS after the state training which included universal screening, student targeted tiered instruction, progress monitoring, and the data problem solving process were viewed positively as part of their work. Veteran teachers' perceived these MTSS literacy practices as the regular education portion of MTSS and conveyed teacher ownership and pride in developing the school's literacy practices. One teacher described this dual perception, "I love what we do with MTSS the screeners, diagnostics, progress monitoring to support tiered instruction. For me, the introduction of MTSS as the GEI process was not a positive thing at the beginning." Another teacher voiced agreement, "The processes of MTSS that we do are great. But the GEI term associated with MTSS is bad; it doesn't feel good, it's a dirty word." Veteran teachers resented their role in the GEI process and voiced numerous negative opinions, while they simultaneously embraced the literacy component.

Principal's Role in Helping Teachers Understand MTSS/GEI

MHGS teachers credited the principal with playing a key role in leading the MTSS literacy work and assisting teachers to see how MTSS fit into the structure and context of their school. During the early training phases of MTSS, the principal could see how staff was confused between the special education and regular education expectations of MTSS. A veteran teacher commented on the difficulties and the principal's role in assisting teachers in making sense of this confusion, "We worked hard to make this [MTSS literacy] our own. When our [leadership] team was sent to the education resource center to receive state trainings during the year, the district didn't send any classroom teachers." This made it difficult for teachers to be leaders in the process of developing a common purpose and understanding of MTSS. They felt they had to work extremely hard to understand the expectations of MTSS on their work. This teacher went on to explain who did attend the trainings:

> It was just the principal, counselor, and school psychologist. I know money wise they didn't want to pay for substitutes. The team was to go learn what MTSS was supposed to do and bring it back and help us build the MTSS literacy work. The principal could tell we were overwhelmed by it all. If it wasn't for the principal, we still wouldn't be making any sense of it [MTSS].

Because teachers were not involved in the MTSS trainings, it placed full responsibility on the principal to orchestrate the necessary teacher learning to begin implementation. According to teachers the principal listened to them voicing frustration over the GEI process but encouraged and strongly supported teachers in owning the school's MTSS literacy work. The principal was able to support teachers in building capacity to implement the universal screening, the data problem solving process, and tiered student instruction. The principal was also able to make

connections with the work teachers were already doing with data and instruction before the MTSS/GEI initiative. Another teacher summarized her memory of this experience, "I think she [principal] could see the panic, of who, what, and how are we going to do this. It felt to us a whole new world." Teachers felt overwhelmed with all the changes in their practices needed to implement MTSS. This teacher went on to describe how the principal's leadership was critical.

> She said, "Well here's what this looks like, we already do these things. Here's how this could look like in our building. We can make this work." She put so much effort into pulling the team together and helping us learn what it [MTSS literacy] was.

The principal provided leadership during a crucial time by helping teachers see that MTSS was doable in their school. The majority of the veteran teachers voiced how instrumental the principal was in assisting teachers to make sense of the school's MTSS literacy supports. In their perceptions, the principal was able to support teachers and make important connections in their learning. This support assisted teachers to make sense of the expectations as they moved forward and prepared for implementation.

Regular Education Teachers Current Understanding of MTSS Purpose

Teachers were asked to provide their current understanding as to the purpose of MTSS. The majority of regular education teachers, including new teachers, expressed a common understanding that its purpose was to provide academic and behavior supports for students. The veteran teachers achieved a common understanding of MTSS' purpose with the guidance of their principal. They developed ownership through their work and actions together. New teachers' understandings were facilitated from their previous experiences as well as learning from the veteran teachers about the MTSS structures and process at MHGS.

According to the majority of veteran teachers the main purpose of MTSS was to help all students succeed academically and behaviorally. One teacher described her current understanding this way:

> It is huge and there are so many different pieces to it. It's a process that we use to screen the students and figure out what areas they need help in and how intense they need the assistance whether academically or behaviorally. Then it requires putting a plan in place to make sure they're successful.

Another veteran teacher described her understanding that the purpose of MTSS "is to provide matched or targeted instruction for the various levels of skills and abilities to help all students." A third teacher affirmed the MTSS concept of targeted support for all stating, "My impression it is to help all students get what they need at the lower or higher end academically. Identifying support for targeted skills or enrichment or behavior."

New teachers also described their current understanding of MTSS in similar terms as the veteran teachers. One new teacher stated her agreement with veteran teachers, "MTSS targets support for all kids at different levels, especially struggling students who need small group interventions to help them grow." A second new teacher described the goal of MTSS as, "Identifying kids who are not making gains in the classroom and pinpoint what needs they have and provide tier group instruction at different levels. During follow up questioning new teachers described how their current understanding of MTSS developed with the support of veteran teachers at MHGS. One new teacher expressed, "Working here has helped me understand how screening and testing students helps us figure out what to do for the different levels of students." The findings indicated that new teachers current understanding of the purpose of MTSS was congruent with the veteran teachers current perceptions of MTSS.

Special Education Teachers Current Understanding of MTSS

Special education teachers were in agreement with other teachers that one of the main goals of MTSS was to assist all students academically and behaviorally. Special education teachers however, were the only ones to describe a main purpose of MTSS was to implement a process to identify students for special education eligibility. They spoke specifically about the response to intervention process. One special education teacher conveyed:

> One of the main purposes of MTSS is to identify students who may need special education services. So it doesn't necessarily have to be anymore that there's a discrepancy between IQ and students' performance level. Students can be identified if they are not making gains using interventions that are typical in the classrooms. If they [students] are making gains doing classroom interventions you would not refer the student for special education evaluation.

A second special education teacher reported, "The purpose of MTSS is to use the RTI process to delineate who best needs special education. We're attempting to meet students' academic and behavior needs before they qualify." A third special education teacher voiced the importance of the MTSS process in helping students before they fail. She explained," The purpose of MTSS is to help kids sooner than later so they don't have to be placed in special education to get support. We can prevent over placing kids." Overall special education teachers understood the broader goal of MTSS as academic and behavior supports for all students and preventing students from being placed in special education when students' performance indicated it was not warranted.

MTSS Implementation and Teachers' Practices

Teachers' described MTSS implementation and embedded teacher practices from what made sense within their school context. Analysis of the data identified teachers' perceptions

revolved around the essential components of MTSS which they had individually and as a group implemented over the course of the initiative. Specific MTSS components implemented were multi-tier instruction, the use of data to drive instruction and problem solving, universal screening, and progress monitoring. Teachers described MTSS implementation in relationship to their beliefs about what constituted good teaching and from their participation as grade level team members implementing MTSS together.

Implementation of Multi-tier Levels of Instruction

The original plans for multi-tier levels of instruction called for a building wide "walk to read" or "walk to intervention" model. This meant all students were grouped according to reading skills regardless of their actual grade level. Teachers were to utilize individual student data to determine how to group students across the building and to determine what instructional skills would be taught. The intent was to support students with targeted tier instruction designed to meet the needs of all students. The model required students to walk to designated classrooms to receive differentiated instruction based on their needs. One teacher described the model:

> We had the vision of that, we called it walk to intervention, and it was going to be thirty minutes all school intervention time and different teachers would focus on student needs. So for example I would have lower level students depending on the skills they would need. So your classroom would be thirty minutes with a group who were all on the same level and it could be third graders with fifth graders, fourth graders with third graders - it all depended on what students required.

Unfortunately, the teachers ran into logistical issues trying to make the model work for them. The same teacher went on to relate, "After we implemented it for a short while we had to scrap the model. We just couldn't make it work, we didn't have enough staff."

The walk to read model was one of several options within the state's MTSS handbook. Some teachers felt there was not enough broad consensuses from the staff for this particular model. Moreover, teachers' felt this model was a forced option when it was originally chosen for building wide implementation. For example, one teacher described her recollection of the problems they encountered when attempting to implement the walk to read model:

> One of the first MTSS things we implemented was the walk to intervention. It was so confusing to us and it didn't work. I mean, we had to scratch it, kids were coming to each classroom, and going to the secretary, it was too much. They more or less forced it down on us; this is the way it's going to be. We couldn't do it.

A third teacher described how unwieldy the process was which resulted in large groups of students that defeated the model's purpose. To illustrate, a teacher shared, "It was disastrous, we didn't have enough staff to get the numbers down. I had the enrichment group and it was thirty students and I didn't know them." Teachers felt the model required too much logistical planning and there was insufficient staff to make the model work effectively. Most of the teachers believed the model was too chaotic for students as well as staff. Teachers described the problem as having too many designated groups and too much student movement across the building at once. In general, the majority of grade level teachers described the walk to read model as a failure and thus required staff to redefine what a multi-tier model of support would look like within the context of their school.

Teachers' Redefine Multi-Tier Implementation

According to teachers, the MTSS multi-tier model continued to be a building wide expectation however, staff would have a voice in redefining what implementation would entail. The revised model designated Tier II services as instruction exclusively provided by the Title I

department. Tier III services were redefined as special education instruction provided only to students with disabilities. In addition, the revised model required teachers to schedule 30 minutes of what they described as "tier time" into the master schedule for each grade level. The 30-minute tier time occurred during core instruction block when the Tier II and Tier III students are pulled from core. By placing restrictions on who was served in the specific tiers this model was not consistent with the state MTSS policy. The revised model violated the basic foundations of MTSS and its inclusiveness as an all education initiative. Within a typical MTSS model any student regardless of special education or Title I label could be served within any tier. In addition, any regular education student could be served within Tier II or Tier III without being labeled Title I or special education, which was not the case at MHGS. One teacher described the redefined process, "After our initial failure with MTSS we decided to go back to our own classrooms and do it. We like our multi-tier model better." A second teacher described how the new model works at her grade level. She said, "We schedule our tier time around our Tier II and Tier III schedule. Our SPED teachers teach my Tier III special education students during their tier time. Our Title teachers teach my Tier II students during their tier time." This meant classroom teachers were not responsible for their Tier II and Tier III students during tier time because they were pulled out. For example during math instruction with tier time in place this teacher described. "My kids that go to tiers are gone. My Tier III SPED students are pulled out for math, my Tier II Title students are pulled for math at the same time. So my instruction is with the rest of my class. We call this our tier time." The scheduled tier time within the master schedule allows for students to receive targeted instruction at their designated group level. This teacher went on to explain:

> It's thirty minutes where we group the remaining students into either an enrichment group, on grade level group, or a below grade level targeted group. Each group receives differentiated support. So our below grade level kids get small group instruction during this instruction time.

The majority of the teachers conveyed the tier time schedule they adopted allowed for targeted support for students who did not qualify for special education or Title I services.

Teachers explained the structure across grade levels remained the same with minor variations in the size of the groupings. Another teacher described the structure at her grade level,

> The structure stays the same in the school. It [tier time] usually happens during pull out time for Tier III and Tier II students. We didn't want parents to feel the pull out students would be missing core instruction in the classroom.

Teachers felt it was important that students who were pulled to attend Tier II and Tier III services did not miss the opportunity to benefit from core instruction time. Therefore, the remaining students who did not attend tier pull out were grouped based on levels of need during their classroom tier time. The master schedule provided consistent delivery of tier time across all grade levels. This teacher further explained tier time, "So for the three of us that teach English Language Arts, we divided up students based on high, medium, and low kids so that every student is getting some kind of enrichment or intervention based on their standardized skills assessment results."

Teachers at different grade levels conveyed the MTSS implementation with tier time was consistently structured to provide tier time at all grade levels. Teachers felt more in control of MTSS tier time within their grade level teams and believed this redefined model benefitted their students. One grade level teacher described the overall process:

> I think it works for us because the kids that need tier intervention are going and getting that smaller group instruction which is at their level. So tiered students are working and being pushed but it's at their level so they're not frustrated or overwhelmed. Also our tiered students that are pulled out are not missing core instruction so when they come back to class they are not overwhelmed and feel they missed something huge in class.

For those remaining students who were left to instruct during tier time, teachers felt they were able to provide better quality instruction. They expressed the smaller number of students allowed for manageable and appropriate student groupings and time to deliver targeted supports. This same teacher went on to convey, "The students who stay with us during tier time are in a smaller section so the higher achieving kids are…challenged at that time. While the kids that are on level or below are doing exactly what we need." In general the findings portray a staff that had reached a consensus on what MTSS tiered support would look like within their school context. One veteran teacher stated, "I think our MTSS process works well, a lot of people have worked hard to make MTSS work and the kids that need the extra support are getting it." In the process of redefining and reaching a consensus of who would be served in the different tier levels during tier time teachers felt they had created a workable solution for MTSS implementation in their building.

Tier I Implementation and Teachers' Practices: Differentiating Instruction

Tier I implementation of the MTSS model at MHGS required teachers to embed new instructional practices into their teaching repertoire and to decrease their use of other practices. In particular, differentiating instruction based on student needs required teachers to rethink their current practices. Most teachers reported changing how they planned for student instruction. Specifically they described targeted planning for the different levels of student groupings. For

example one teacher expressed, "I do a lot less whole group. Whole group instruction has become a minimal portion of the instructional period, because we can target our kids better with individualized groups." Another teacher described the instructional changes she made as a result of the school's MTSS implementation:

> One thing I've noticed that I do differently is with my groupings. Before MTSS I did centers and everybody did the same thing and students just rotated through the centers. Now when we do rotations and I'm with a group we're not doing the same things. My Instruction is differentiated based on the students' needs. In reading I may be working on the same skills such as plot and theme or cause and effect but the material will be differentiated at the students reading level.

Teachers felt the building wide expectation was to provide differentiated small group instruction and they believed most of the staff was developing the skills to accomplish this instructional practice. Teachers reported they were helping each other plan for differentiated instruction within their grade level teams. A teacher explained how she changed her math instruction, "Previously when I instructed math everyone did the same thing. MTSS allowed me to target what students need in small group time instead of just activities and busy work." Teachers described planning time as critical to providing the necessary level of differentiation to deliver their small group instruction.

Teachers reported that much of the professional development they have received has been focused on increasing differentiation based on student needs. One teacher conveyed, "I think everybody is differentiating instruction more. I think within the last two years it's becoming used more. It's been our focus for our late start professional development time." Professional development days at their building were structured to give teachers the opportunity to develop an

understanding of differentiated supports based on student data. One teacher described this process, "We have spent some of our professional development time with our grade level teachers examining student data and how it relates to planning for differentiated instruction." The majority of teachers expressed the importance of professional development in learning new instructional practices.

Teachers also indicated they were using more technology to support core instruction, especially for enrichment to support higher achieving students and to assist with more practice time on individual skill development. Students had access to individual laptops and software, which were utilized during tier time so students could work at their instructional level. Teachers believed the technology freed up time for teachers to support the small group instruction. A teacher described her perception of the benefits, "Our technology programs in language arts, and math allows our students to work at their instructional levels. I can have my high kids working above grade level and my lower students working on skills at their level." Most teachers felt technology was a key factor in being able to address group needs especially during tier time.

Other teachers conveyed they have differentiated for students by utilizing more direct instruction and scaffolding support with their lower groups. A few teachers described differentiating for their Tier I small group instruction as a proactive approach to prevent students from needing special education and Title I services. A teacher summarized this belief:

> I feel as classroom teachers we can be doing interventions before students end up needing Title services or special education. Especially in reading, I think we've got the mindset that kids can read by the time they get to us, but some can't.

Small group tier time gave teachers an opportunity to deliver the differentiated interventions to support students who did not qualify for Title I or special education services.

Overall, a majority of teachers indicated that MTSS had contributed to teachers changing their instructional practices to allow for differentiated instruction to support students. Most teachers expressed they had incorporated planning for student differentiation into their grade level planning times and felt students' were befitting from the change in teacher practices during core instructional time.

All classroom observations substantiated teachers' perceptions that Tier I group support made it necessary to differentiate for students. As an example, during tier time in Language Arts one classroom teacher had 19 students divided among three groups. Nine high achieving students were working on research at their computers; five on grade level students were independently working from grade level workbooks at their desk. The teacher worked with a small group of five students gathered at a small table area. The teacher utilized differentiated instruction with the small group, building background knowledge, and checking for understanding frequently. Students were reading and identifying cause and effect from reading text. The teacher utilized a graphic organizer on a whiteboard to display the concepts and relationships. She modeled complete sentence writing and gave immediate feedback and correction to individuals as needed. Differentiated support and scaffolding was provided to students based on their ability to perform independently the task required.

Another example during a classroom observation of core tier time during math instruction revealed similar findings. Eight high achieving students were working at their desks on math with a computer software program. A paraprofessional was working with four students at a small table on grade level math workbooks. The classroom teacher was working with three below grade level students situated on the floor with white eraser boards. Students were practicing multiplication on the eraser boards and received guided feedback individually as

needed. The teacher remained fully engaged with the small group checking for understanding and modeling for students for the full thirty minutes of tier time support.

Focus groups, follow up interviews, and classroom observations all supported the finding that teachers were utilizing differentiated instructional supports for students during designated tier time. One teacher summarized the overall theme stating, "We do a lot of group work, with students divided up into leveled groups with differentiated instruction." The teacher practice of differentiated planning and instruction was exhibited across all grade levels. Teachers expressed pride in their ability to meet students' needs with differentiated instructional practices and believed their efforts were making a difference for students in their classrooms.

Tier II Implementation and Teachers' Practices

After the failure of the walk to intervention model teachers redefined Tier II to serve only students who qualified for federal Title I services. Under the Title I guidelines of serving the lowest performing students, MHGS chose to serve approximately 70 students daily. Students who qualified received 30 minutes of reading and math instruction within a small group pull out model four times a week. In addition, students received one 30 minute session weekly of "push in" services within their regular education classroom. During the push in time a Title I staff member would work with the regular education classroom supporting a small group of students. Teachers reported they liked the model because it gave clarity to who received the Tier II services and the Title I funding ensured there were sufficient resources to serve the needs of Tier II students.

The Tier II model of services being exclusively used for Title I students required teachers to develop collaboration practices with the Title I staff. One teacher described this collaboration:

> I purposely plan the reading block so when my Tier II students are pulled it's during the "read to self-time" or "read to someone time" as that is generally what my Tier II students struggle with the most and they get that support in the Title I classroom. We didn't want them to miss something in core instruction and during this pull out time is when I support our Tier I students with small group instruction for 30 minutes of tier time.

This Tier II model was standard across all grade levels in reading and math instruction. Teachers expressed the importance of students not missing core subject matter and receiving the supplemental Tier II support from Title I services. Another teacher described the need for collaboration to ensure learning was being reinforced in both settings. She explained, "I communicate with the Title I teacher what we are instructing within our academic pacing guide. So they get a second dose of the skills they are already learning." A third teacher described the importance of collaborating so that students can receive preteaching of material to be covered in core as well opportunity to reteach what they struggle with in their learning:

> They [Title I] also preteach some of those skills. Based on collaboration and where we are at in our pacing guide, they [Title I] have all the resources and they either preteach the skills so by the time the students are in their classrooms and working on core instruction the students have a little background knowledge. Sometimes Title I staff will reteach what we are doing in core so the students can have more time to master the material.

Some teachers felt the shared ownership of the students going to Tier II services was important. Having another colleague share the responsibility of meeting students' educational needs gave teachers the feeling they were not doing this work alone. One new teacher conveyed the feeling of shared ownership for students, "I don't feel any of them are her kids or their kids, I feel these

are our students and we want to make sure they're all being taught." Teachers expressed the importance of all students receiving core instruction and targeted tier II students receiving supplemental instruction, which was purposefully integrated with the core subject material.

All grade level classroom observations of Tier II services at MHGS supported teachers' descriptions of students receiving integrated supplemental supports in reading and math. One example revealed six fourth grade tier II students receiving small group instruction from the Title I teacher during a 30-minute pull out class setting. The Tier II services consisted of students practicing vocabulary words they would be expected to be learning within their core reading materials. This preteaching practice was accomplished with students participating in small group pair-and-share activities.

Tier II services at MHGS are provided by one Title I teacher and three paraprofessionals working within the pull out model four days a week and push in model once weekly. A third grade classroom observation example of push in Tier II services revealed one paraprofessional working with five Tier II students within a small math group. The paraprofessional was supporting students with direct instruction and feedback with basic math division practice. The paraprofessional spent 30 minutes engaged with these five Tier II students, allocating her time to support each one as necessary.

Teachers perceived students to be benefitting academically from implementation of the redefined model of Tier II services at MHGS. One new teacher reported, "I feel like we have a great team in place and I believe our Tier II students are benefitting…I mean I can see the benefits from it [Tier II] as my students make progress." Overall, veteran teachers as well as new teachers, expressed the Tier II model they were implementing was effectively addressing students' reading and math needs.

Tier III implementation and Teachers' Practices

Teachers defined Tier III interventions at MHGS as consisting exclusively of special education services. Students who were placed in special education received pull out special education services during tier time as designated by their grade level. Most teachers felt this model allowed students' with disabilities to receive individual or small group instruction from special education staff. Teachers' indicated collaboration with the special education teacher was important in effectively addressing students' educational needs.

Mildly disabled students received their education in the regular education classrooms dependent upon their ability to benefit from core instruction. Most teachers felt they were able to provide differentiated small group instruction to support students with mild disabilities in their classrooms. One teacher explained, "I collaborate with our grade level special education teacher to support my students who are included with me during portions of the day." Other teachers explained the importance of working with the special education paraprofessionals for supporting their students even though collaboration time was limited. One teacher conveyed, "I don't think there is enough time for us [teachers] to do planning with our special ed. paras to support our special ed. kids…I know it's important." Veteran teachers felt their special education students were included in regular classes before MTSS was introduced and there was not much difference in how much time they were included after implementation. A teacher shared, "We were already putting our special education students with us in regular classes before MTSS…it was implemented to keep some kids out of special education who don't need it." Most veteran teachers perceived the implementation of MTSS had not changed what special education students receive within their school, however they felt it assisted in defining who qualified for special education. The majority of teachers' expressed that relabeling or defining special

education services as Tier III instruction did not change what students with disabilities received at MHGS from previous special education delivery models.

Observation of Tier III pull out special education services was consistent with individually referenced services. During the observation some students received small group instruction in reading at their instructional level delivered by a special education paraprofessional. One-on- one instruction was also observed for a few students who needed more intense reading support delivered by the special education teacher. These observed teaching practices were typical of special education pull out delivery models.

Data Driven Instruction and Problem Solving

One of the essential components of implementing MTSS is the use of data to meet students' educational needs. Teachers reported utilizing student data has been an important feature with their implementation of MTSS. One veteran teacher explained how she used student data to target her instruction:

> I love that we've become more focused on what the data tells us about our kids in our room. I believe my instruction is much more specific based on kids' needs than it used to be…I feel like I can take one child and go through their data and say which areas they need support. I feel like we can use the data to be specific with our instruction as well alter our instruction when it's needed.

A second teacher conveyed similar thoughts, "My impression of using data is it's helping students get what they need. So whether that's data in the classroom and data driven instruction then that's helping us pinpoint the skills that kids need to be successful." Most of the veteran teachers as well as new teachers expressed the value they place on using data to plan and deliver instruction targeted on specific student needs. One new teacher commented, "Well it helps me

find ways to differentiate instruction for my students. It helps me bridge the gaps in their learning." Many teachers' reported the use of data was one of the benefits that MTSS had brought to their teaching practice.

Teachers reported the district had spent time and resources to support teachers with data to assist instruction. However, teachers expressed they needed further professional development. Specifically teachers reported needing support with the linkage between assessment and instruction. One teacher explained her understanding of the MTSS focus on data: "I think the data provides a focus…we met as a whole staff, looked at sorted data for the district…looked at where we were at and pulled up a class and looked at students' needs." The district then provided time for teachers to work together to examine the data and what it means instructionally to support students. This teacher went on to describe:

> Then we got to meet with our instructional teams and this presented us with a focus for our instruction and helped with ways to structure our tiers, how we could split up the planning, how we could be more intentional…with kids. We looked at the skills we needed to focus on…so it's just part of the process. It helps target what to put in our classrooms for specific kids.

Another teacher added her perceptions of the focus on data to drive instruction since the implementation of MTSS, "I think the district has done a better job of training teachers to dig into the data and see what they actually show about each kid and what their needs are. That's what I have noticed that's different since MTSS." Some teachers reported that data also had helped them problem solve behavior and attendance issues for specific students. One teacher conveyed, "I use the data to work with parents on their child's attendance because my kids that need tier support are often the ones absent the most." Overall teachers described the use of data

was important to organize their leveled student groups and to plan for the necessary differentiation to support students' with the specific skills needed.

Universal Student Screening

Teachers believed the use of universal screening data on each student provided a process to determine which students might be at risk for academic deficits. Universal screening consisted of a screener designed to assess the status of all students' progress with acquiring reading and math skills. Reading and math skills are screened three times per year to provide teachers with information on students' status in relationship to their peers nationally. Students are screened in reading in specific areas including phonics, oral reading fluency, and reading comprehension. Students' were also screened in math including math computation and math application skills. Knowing which students may need support early was important to teachers. One teacher described universal screening as an important process to see how her students rank based on comparative needs either for enrichment or targeted support. She explained, "It's a blanket screening where all our kids are tested on the same material in reading and math then it [screener] is a ranking system where we can see how our kids rank based on our school and on national norms." She felt universal screening was important for not only the low performing students, but also for identifying what her high performing students needed. She further stated, "I like to see how our kids stack up. I like looking at the data…I like to see not just what our lower kids' need but also our higher kids so that I can enrich them as well."

Teachers use the universal screening results to the see which students need leveled tier supports and which students may qualify for targeted Tier II support within the Title I program. For example one teacher explained, "We are provided our data, and we see what kids are where, then we determine our groups and what instruction is needed. We meet as a team and break it

down to determine what kids need." Because the universal screener is administered three times a year during the fall, winter, and spring sessions, it allows teachers to identify which students are making adequate academic growth during the school year. In addition, teachers can identify if they have students who may have fallen behind since the last administration and are currently at risk academically. Most teachers perceived the universal screening results as an important process for teachers to meet their students' academic needs. Furthermore, the majority of teachers indicated screening all students was a teaching practice they would continue even if it was no longer required.

Progress Monitoring Students

The process of monitoring student progress is an essential component of MTSS implementation. Progress monitoring involves measuring students' academic rate of improvement in comparison to the expectations of a normative group of peers. The frequency of progress monitoring depends upon the degree to which students are performing below their academic peers. The overall purpose of progress monitoring is to determine if instructional interventions are supporting students' academic growth. Teachers' reported that Tier II students are monitored monthly or bi-weekly based on severity and how far below expectations they are from the national norms in math or reading. One teacher explained the procedure, "The Tier II students are monitored by the Title I teacher bi-weekly if they are below the 25th percentile or monthly if they are above. Tier III special education students are monitored weekly by the special education teacher." Regular education teachers monitored monthly students within their lowest student group during tier time. Even though monitoring student progress was time consuming teachers felt it was valuable to student learning. They believed the benefits of progress monitoring to determine the effectiveness of instruction was worth the investment of

time. One veteran teacher conveyed her perceptions, "Yes progress monitoring is one more thing on the pile of the things we do but it's meaningful because it helps drive our instruction and it helps us reflect on whether our instruction is meeting our students' needs."

New teachers also reported they perceived benefits for their students through the process of progress monitoring. One new teacher described the importance. "Progress monitoring is good teaching…it helps us and yes it's time consuming but without that information, I don't know where we would look for it; I don't know how we would determine whether… what we did was successful."

Many teachers reported although they did not like taking away instructional time to monitor students, especially during their grade level tier time, they felt it was beneficial. The findings indicated progress monitoring across all grade levels was an embedded teacher practice, which was highly valued by the majority of the teachers. Moreover, most teachers' indicated they would continue the practice of progress monitoring even if it was no longer required or expected.

MTSS Behavior Implementation

The district's expectations were for each building to develop a multi-tier integrated behavior model to support students. The MTSS behavioral model had similar expectations to the academic model in which students' would be provided tiered supports based on identified behavioral needs. Although they understood the purpose of MTSS was to address students' academic and behavioral needs, teachers at MHGS did not perceive their teacher implemented behavior practices as part of MTSS. One veteran teacher reported, "We have a lot of positive behavior supports for students that we have implemented in the last four years. I don't know that it was part of MTSS." A second teacher responded, I don't either, we have a great process in

place for dealing with behavior, but I don't believe it's necessarily part of our MTSS, which in my mind MTSS is just the literacy side." A new teacher added, "I never hear behavior talked about in the context of MTSS. Maybe within the district's special education department it's all in that same MTSS process but I see those separate." The majority of veteran and new teachers perceived the behavior practices implemented within MHGS as separate from their MTSS reform efforts. In summation one teacher described her perceptions, "I just feel like MTSS, and our behavior practices are two separate entities. If you were to ask our new teachers I don't believe it [MTSS behavior] would be part of their understanding of MTSS either." Teachers' did not report that building leadership made any connections between MTSS and student behavior during the initial roll out of MTSS.

Teachers did describe those students referred for special education placement based on behavior concerns would have to have documented what behavior interventions were tried before the special education evaluation could be initiated. Again, this GEI procedure was perceived as a special education requirement but not part of the "all education" expectation of MTSS. One teacher described the GEI behavioral referral process; "My opinion is that's the part of GEI that has been the slowest…it's very difficult to get a kid through the process on the behavior side." This teacher felt documenting a student's response to behavioral interventions took an inordinate amount of time. She believed this lengthy process kept students from getting the support and help they needed. There was not a unified special education and regular education approach to the MTSS behavior requirements within the GEI process. Teachers viewed special education as being separately responsible for the burdensome process that took teachers an inordinate amount of time to get the behavioral assistance students' needed.

As was true on the literacy side of MTSS teachers did develop their own practices to meet the needs of their students' however, they did not refer to these behavior practices as part of the MTSS reform efforts. The implementation of these behavior practices was perceived by teachers to be entirely unrelated to MTSS. MHGS staff developed and adopted their own schoolwide behavior system called PAWS. Students can earn positive or negative points each day for behaviors such as being prepared for class, on-task behavior, and treating others with respect. One teacher described what PAWS stands for as it relates to the behavior practices within MHGS:

> We have a schoolwide behavior; it's called PAWS, which promotes responsibility, act with respect, work together to stop bullying behaviors. We've set up every teacher with the same classroom behavior expectations that tie back to PAWS. So for example, if a kid is not doing their homework then that's not promoting responsibility. We give students positive and negative points. At the end of the week on Friday afternoon we have fun activities for students who have been successful.

Most teachers' reported students enjoyed earning points for the Friday activities. However, for students who have a negative point balance as a result of their behavior, specific arrangements are made during Friday activities to work with support staff on their behavior needs. Students are required to complete "think sheets" and review with support staff on ways in which they could alter their behavior. This teacher went on to describe, "For those students who are not successful they work with staff about some of the things that they're struggling with and work out a plan on how they can do better."

Teachers' felt the classroom practices associated with PAWS were being delivered consistently across all grade levels and the Friday afternoon celebrations had reinforced

appropriate student behaviors. The majority of teachers were satisfied with how behavior was supported within the school and did not see it necessary to develop any further approaches to address student behavior. According to teachers, for the few students who were not successful, a referral was made to the counselor and school psychologist for problem solving their behavior. Teachers' reported should students need continued support with behavior they would be placed in special education for individualized behavior support.

MTSS Resources and Barriers

Teachers identified a lack of resources in several areas as barriers in implementing and sustaining MTSS at MHGS. General themes included insufficient time to implement MTSS, a lack of support staff for MTSS implementation, and a shortage of relevant MTSS professional development activities. In spite of these barriers the majority of the teachers felt they were providing MTSS support and students were benefitting from their implementation.

Insufficient Time for Teachers

According to most teachers, there was insufficient time for data collection and documentation and limited time to provide for the planning and delivery of MTSS supports. One teacher conveyed, "We definitely need more time to collect our data. And after we receive our data, more time to determine what and how to move students forward. More time to really dig into the data and translate that into instruction." Another teacher commented on the labor intensiveness of the MTSS process, "I know one of the struggles is we do a lot of documentation and that takes a lot of time for the paperwork. Time we don't have." Teachers also indicated the amount of time diagnostic assessments take for all students while also recognizing their importance. One teacher explained the process:

> I see a lot of testing going on. At first I was not a fan of it but the data it provides is so helpful because again we see forty-some students. I can't remember every single student and what are their exact needs. So it helps show you what they're doing and how they're scoring but it takes a lot of time and I don't think it's very fun for the kids because of the amount of time commitment.

Teachers valued the data but wanted more time to understand what the data was telling them about their students. Most teachers reported they wanted more time to plan the differentiation for their small group instruction during tier time. In addition teachers wanted more time to analyze the results of their progress monitoring with students as one teacher conveyed, "We progress monitor students' every month and some every two weeks to see where they are at. It takes a lot of time to see if there's anything we need to do different based on the results." Teachers in general felt time was a barrier to effectively accomplishing many of the MTSS procedures including time for assessment, evaluation of the results, and planning for the delivery of differentiated of instruction.

Lack of Support Staff

According to teachers there was a lack of staff, which made it difficult to have some groups small enough to meet students' needs. One teacher explained, "It's not enough support staff. It would be nice to have some support staff that could help during tier time. We struggle to have enough staff. You don't want to feel like you short change students." Another teacher in the focus group added to this statement:

> I agree we don't have enough support staff. For example, with reading fluency we need someone to listen to the kids read and then assist with that on an individual basis. So we've had to bring in community members. We've brought in trusted people that we've

> trained to listen for fluency and read with the kids. We need more bodies helping than we have currently.

Teachers reported that some additional students could benefit from Tier II services if there was more staff to provide the supplemental service. A teacher described, "I have a couple of students who need the support [Tier II], but we don't have the staff. They qualify but there's just not enough staff to provide the assistance." Many teachers expressed the lack of staff to provide targeted instruction especially during tier time was a barrier to effective MTSS implementation.

Special education teachers reported due to recent budget cuts it was difficult to have enough staff to provide the push in supports for students with disabilities during core instruction. One special education teacher explained, "We've been hit hard with staff cuts, we lost some of our paraprofessional support to assist our students, as well as the loss of a social worker to help our kids." The shortage of special education staff to assist with core instruction put an additional burden on the regular education teachers to provide the necessary level of support for students with disabilities.

Professional Development Needs

Veteran teachers perceived professional development to be inadequate in developing a coherent understanding of MTSS during the district's original roll out. One veteran teacher explained her recollection:

> I feel like originally we had to figure some things out on our own. Right now they are doing a good job helping us learn differentiation to support our students. But back when MTSS was started it was kind of everything was up in the air being adjusted constantly. It was kind of figuring it out on your own, "we'll play with it as we go and make sense out it." I felt like we were flying the plane as we were building it [MTSS]

Most veteran teachers agreed there was insufficient professional development to assist new teachers in understanding the "why" behind implementation of MTSS at MHGS.

New teachers reported professional development was also inadequate to provide them with the necessary understanding. One new teacher described his perceptions, "As a new teacher coming into the district just this year there was no professional development about their [MTSS] processes at all." Another new teacher added, "As a new teacher it's like being thrown into it, [MTSS] they [veteran teachers] tell us this is how we do things with our MTSS. We'll help guide you through it but this how we do it." New teachers especially expressed interest in receiving professional development to improve implementation. One new teacher stated:

> I feel like we know where to look for the information. We sat down and we had an inservice on finding the data and looking at what it means. The next step I feel in professional development is resources to help us know what to do. What can we do to help these students that are low? What can we do for enrichment to help our students?

New teachers felt professional development was important for meeting students' needs and necessary for them to sustain the MTSS practices.

Some teachers reported that paraprofessionals also needed high quality professional development. They stated that many of the paraprofessionals lacked the training and understanding to implement some of the reading interventions designed to improve struggling readers.

Teachers desired to spend some of their professional development time examining data together and determining what to do for their students' however; most of their professional development is planned by the district, leaving little opportunity to analyze their data and plan supportive instruction. Some teachers felt the district's professional development was not

aligned with their instructional needs. One veteran teacher described the district's professional development, "Our professional development from the district is definitely a barrier. It's kind of lackluster and not helpful. I want to learn how to teach better based on our students' data." In addition one new teacher compared the district's professional development to her previous experience:

> At my practicum school we had professional development time set aside to problem solve around our students' data. I don't see a lot of that here. I think we have to go out of our way to way to make time to do that. I've seen more just listen to a presentation, which I'm not saying aren't meaningful, but working with your grade level reading teachers and math teachers and purposefully looking at our students' data, I think that benefits us a lot more.

The majority of the veteran and new teachers felt the district's professional development was a barrier to providing the necessary professional learning to support and sustain MTSS within their school. Overall, teachers described a need for targeted professional development to support their understanding of student data and planning for the delivery of instruction based on their students' data.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and Implications

This study focused on the perceptions of teachers in one elementary school regarding how teachers made sense of a statewide model of RTI known as a Multi-Tier System of Supports. This chapter presents conclusions drawn from the analysis of the findings presented in chapter four and concludes with implications for theory and practice. The conclusions were developed from the analysis of these findings through the theoretical framework of Organizational Sensemaking Weick (2002) in an effort to explain how teachers made sense of the reform initiative. I begin by revisiting the theoretical framework.

Organizations consist of people and the process of sensemaking is literally the process of making sense of the organization by its people. This sensemaking process is based in both individual and social encounters as its organizational members try to understand and attribute individual and shared meaning to organizational events. Weick (1995) described the salient features of organizational sensemaking. The process of sensemaking begins with a sensemaker, that is, each person constructing meaning and interpreting and interacting in search of mutual understanding. Weick further explained the importance of beliefs and actions in the sensemaking process:

> Sensemaking can begin with beliefs and take the form of arguing and expecting. Or sensemaking can begin with actions and take the form of committing or manipulating… People make do with whatever beliefs or actions they start with. Sensemaking is an effort to tie beliefs and actions more closely together as when arguments lead to consensus on action, clarified expectations pave the way for confirming actions, committed actions uncover justifications for their occurrence, or bold actions simplify

> the world and make it clearer what is going on and what it means. In each of these cases, sensemaking involves taking whatever is clearer, whether it be a belief or action, and linking it with that which is less clear. (p. 135)

The outcome of sensemaking is beliefs and actions are tied together by socially acceptable implications. The organization and its people share beliefs, tenets, and assumptions that foster them to make mutually supporting interpretations of their own actions and the action of others.

Teachers' Make Sense of MTSS Adoption

As applied to this study, sensemaking opportunities arose when the MTSS reform initiative was first introduced by the Mount Hayward school district as an adoption and then a requirement for Mount Hayward Grade School. The MTSS introduction was a triggering event which disrupted the daily routines at MHGS and provided the conditions and context for sensemaking. This story, within the sensemaking framework, begins with a sense of threat to teachers' professional identities and as such creates teacher resistance to the MTSS initiative. Through the principal's leadership facilitating sensemaking, teachers accept the process of implementing MTSS literacy components and even claim ownership of the literacy implementation. During the chaos of early MTSS implementation teachers had to redefine and make sense together of the multi-tiered instruction structure and how it would work for them in the context of their school. As result of teachers' collective sensemaking of MTSS instructional practices, teachers chose to embed new instructional practices within their repertoire. All of which they felt reflected good teaching.

MTSS/GEI Threatened Veteran Teachers Professional Identity

Within the process of sensemaking a primary driver is the preservation of identity. Because of this the establishment and maintenance of identity preoccupies individuals in

sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Veteran teachers at MHGS believed their professional identity was at stake with the district's adoption of MTSS. Specifically, veteran teachers' weighed the risk, threats, and challenges presented by the MTSS reform alongside their need to maintain self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-consistency. Teachers believed their professional identity regarding roles, responsibilities, and teaching practices was violated when the district failed to include their voice in the decision to adopt MTSS. Because of this, teachers formulated beliefs of mistrust about the district's intentions and integrity during the adoption process.

Teachers projected feelings of skepticism about the degree to which teachers were part of the district's stakeholder process and believed the decision to adopt MTSS had already been made prior to the stakeholder committee formation. Their sensemaking of the district's MTSS adoption process was that it lacked transparency and any teacher involvement was a token measure to give the appearance of teachers having a voice in the decision. Teachers were offended with district administration about the appearance of representation within the district's MTSS committee. At the building level teachers believed there was no opportunity to develop a shared understanding of MTSS prior to implementation. Individually and collectively teachers' beliefs revealed they were initially unable to make sense of how MTSS would change their teaching roles and identities. Because teachers believed they had limited voice in the adoption process and little shared understanding of MTSS, it was difficult for them to make sense of MTSS and be in agreement with the district decision. This resulted in lack of teacher buy in at MHGS and initially contributed to overwhelming teacher resistance for the MTSS initiative.

Teachers' Made Sense of MTSS as a Special Education Initiative

In an attempt to help teachers make sense of MTSS the MHPS district linked its actions to special education requirements describing MTSS as a state mandated procedure for identifying

students with disabilities. According to Weick (1995), "In organizational life people often produce part of the environment they face" (p. 30). The sensemaking process of creating reality is labeled as enactive of sensible environments within the sensemaking framework. Enactive implies that people are part of the environments that they have created for themselves. The district constructed reality by declaring administrative acts intended to meet special education RTI requirements. The district's special education administration took action by enacting the MTSS/GEI policy and creating specific procedures and bureaucratic requirements to satisfy the databased stipulations within the policy. The special education administration produced these authoritative acts in an attempt to bring order, clarity of purpose, and understanding to the MTSS initiative. However, according to Weick (1995), "When people enact laws, they take undefined space, time, and action and draw lines, establish categories, and coin labels that create new features of the environment that did not exist before" (p. 31). The special education administration, perhaps not realizing it, had constructed new constraints and expectations for MHGS teachers. This disruption established the necessity and context for MHGS teachers to make sense of these authoritative directives.

Veteran teachers at MHGS individually and collectively attempted to make sense of the school district's declarative actions. In context of sensemaking Weick (1995) labeled a process he called "focused on and by extracted cues." Weick described features of the process, "Extracted cues are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring" (p. 50). Veteran teachers extracted cues indicating to them that the MTSS initiative was driven solely by the district's special education administration. Teachers noticed and extracted that MTSS was rolled out at the district wide inservice from special education administration and that the MTSS handbook was distributed and explained by

special education administration. The district's ongoing MTSS rollout activities were retrospectively perceived and interpreted by teachers to be a special education initiative.

Sensemaking is about organizing through communication; it is a socially constructed process in which people collectively make sense of circumstances and events. Veteran teachers at MHGS through communication and discourse with each other collectively made sense that MTSS was a special education driven reform and it should not involve them in changing their teaching roles. The teachers combined collective narrative positioned the MTSS initiative as a regular education versus special education conflict. MHGS teachers did not see the MTSS rollout as an all education initiative designed to support all students. This set the stage for conflict, mistrust, and anger as MHGS moved forward with the directive to implement MTSS schoolwide.

Teachers Create Narrative to Resist MTSS/GEI

The sensemaking process is retrospective in that people make sense from past events. Veteran teachers believing that MTSS/GEI was a special education initiative strongly resisted the teacher expectations laid out in the MTSS/GEI policy. The policy required teachers to create multi- tier structures, employ universal screening, develop intervention plans, and monitor student progress. Teachers authored the narrative that these requirements were being forced and imposed upon them needlessly. Teachers portrayed the story that they were already providing appropriate interventions for students prior to MTSS/GEI becoming district policy. The collective narrative was one in which the school was family like, with informal discussions about students taking place, and teachers being responsive to students' needs. The new requirements unnecessarily imposed a heavy bureaucratic process into MHGS' caring family atmosphere for students.

Sensemaking is about stabilizing disruption; teachers were involved in the social process of talking, communicating, and labeling the MTSS/GEI policy and what it meant for them individually and collectively. Teachers voiced a collective story that MTSS/GEI is about special education and it should not require them as regular education teachers to initiate changes in their roles and responsibilities. Teachers resisted the MTSS/GEI policy requirements with anger and lack of commitment to be involved in beginning phases of MTSS/GEI implementation. The actions of resisting the MTSS/GEI requirements provided teachers a sense of stabilization from the potential threats to their professional identity.

Principal's Leadership Helps Teachers Make Sense of MTSS Literacy Components

The district directive was that personnel from all buildings would participate in the state MTSS trainings. There were no MHGS teachers included on the leadership team participating in the state training. Because teachers were not included there was little opportunity for them to develop shared sensemaking and understanding of MTSS. The MHGS's principal was faced with veteran teachers' feelings of anger, resentment, and lack of commitment for MTSS. The MHGS principal accepted the teachers' anger and resentment toward the special education driven GEI portion of MTSS. However, she expected and provided leadership to build the literacy components from the state MTSS trainings. Together the principal and teachers agreed that they would claim the MTSS literacy components as their own work. The principal's leadership provided a crucial role in sense making for teachers to take action on the "all education" literacy structures of MTSS. The principal assisted teachers in making sense of the MTSS regular education and special education conflict by utilizing the important literacy components of MTSS that they were already doing at MHGS. She helped them make important connections in the areas of general academic assessments, individual diagnostic assessments, and

databased decision making. A pivotal factor in the sensemaking process was the principal provided time for teachers to make sense together and see connections between the MTSS literacy components and their current teaching practices. In addition, the principal was able to build commitment to acquire the necessary skills to implement the essential literacy components of MTSS. Without the principal providing leadership during this critical time teachers would have been unable to make the important learning connections individually and collectively to make sense of the MTSS reform efforts. Nor would teachers have been able to establish the commitment to participate in the professional development necessary to build the essential components for the MTSS literacy structures. As a result of the principal's leadership in sensemaking teachers created ownership for what they believed was the regular education driven practices of MTSS. This created the opportunity for teachers to collectively plan for MTSS implementation at MHGS.

Teachers Make Sense of the Chaos of MTSS Implementation

According to Weick et al. (2005) sensemaking starts with chaos and disruption. During these circumstances, "Explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world" (p.416). MHGS teachers developed MTSS implementation plans from the state's MTSS literacy handbook. The model selected was defined as the "walk to read" model for delivering reading interventions schoolwide. Within the model students were distributed throughout the building based on reading level and targeted needs regardless of their specific grade assignment. Teachers reported this produced chaos at all grade levels and teachers felt the attempt at delivering reading interventions within the walk to read model was a total failure. The narrative from the teachers' perspective was the model produced chaos amongst students and staff. Teachers created a

collective story utilizing a process Weick (1995) labels as "driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" in which the story developed by people is more about plausibility, reasonableness and coherence than the story accuracy (p.55). Teachers in their interactive talk reached an emerging consensus that the walk to read model was disastrous because they had too few staff to make it work and it was too confusing for the students. In the pursuit to stabilize chaos sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005) is "not about truth…it is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism" (p.415). MHGS teachers were in strong agreement that the walk to read model would not work in the context of their school.

After a chaotic and disrupting event, according to the sensemaking framework people ask "now what should I do?" Teachers were faced with creating a redefined tiered interventions plan to replace the walk to read model. The principal assigned the task for grade level teams to collaborate and create a tiered delivery model that made sense for their school. This process assured those teachers' voices individually and collectively would be heard. Through this social interaction teachers talked into existence a schoolwide tiered model, which they believed would be workable in their school.

Teachers Make Sense of Redefined Multi-Tier Implementation

After the failure of the walk to read model teachers were again confronted with the sensemaking question of now what should we do next. The expectation to redefine teachers' roles and responsibilities within a MTSS framework continued to be a threat to their professional and organizational identity. Teachers could view these expectations as either a threat or an opportunity. Weick (1995) described this process, "The meaning that is actually sustained socially form among these alternatives tends to be one that reflects favorably on the organization

and one that promotes self-enhancement, efficacy, and consistency" (p. 21). The veteran teachers collectively chose to enact stability, consistency, and clarity on what the redefined tiered model would look like in their school context.

MHGS teachers, in order to provide stability and make sense of MTSS, collectively decided to narrowly define and restrict which students would be served within the different tier levels. The redefined model designated Tier II services as instruction provided by the Title I department exclusively for Title I students. Tier III services were redefined as special education instruction provided exclusively by the special education department and only for students with disabilities. Furthermore, the redefined model required all grade level teachers to schedule 30 minutes each of tier time for reading and math within the master schedule.

Veteran teachers, in attempt to provide clarity to what their role and responsibilities would entail during tier time, agreed to several expectations. They agreed to provide targeted instruction during tier time for the remaining students who did not attend Tier II and Tier III pullout services. The tier time instruction would provide for three designated instructional groupings. At each grade level teachers would identify and distinguish students as performing above grade level, on grade level, and below grade level. Teachers also agreed to plan and deliver targeted and differentiated instruction for each designated student grouping.

In the process of making sense of MTSS in the context of MHGS, teachers altered and changed the basic foundations of the state's MTSS model. The state's purpose of an all education MTSS initiative was to provide a unified system to support all students regardless of labels and funding sources. However, MHGS teachers, in order to diminish the threat to their professional roles and responsibilities, collectively agreed to transform the basic principles of MTSS as an all inclusive reform. The redefined model with student labeled restrictiveness made

sense to teachers and they believed they were providing a model which was successful in meeting students' needs. Teachers' sensemaking had altered the basic fabric and composition of the state's MTSS policy.

Teachers' Sensemaking of MTSS Instructional Practices

MTSS implementation necessitated that MHGS teachers develop the capacity to implement the essential components of the MTSS literacy structures. This required teachers to take action and be involved in the planning and implementation. According to Weick (1995):

> Whatever coherence a sensemaking process has may arise through a focus on what people do rather than on what people believe…sensemaking starts with actions rather than beliefs. Oddly enough, this seemingly irrational inversion of the recipe think-then-act into act-then-think results in the eminently rational recipe, seeing is believing (p.134).

Teachers started with action in implementing the universal screening. After teachers took action regarding these components of MTSS they were left with the sensemaking question, what does it mean?

Teachers reported that universal screening of all students made sense to them because it allowed them to determine which of their students were academically at risk. The screening process gave teachers an early warning of student deficits in which they believed they could improve upon overtime. Teachers believed that the screening process distinguished students based on need and was good for organizing students into their student groupings. They valued the screening process as good teaching practice because it made them feel self-confident in understanding their students.

After taking action in providing differentiated instruction for students, teachers made sense of its value, by extracting cues from their students' performance. Teachers described how

important it was to collaborate with colleagues and plan differentiated instruction to meet their students' unique needs. They noticed student improvement from their intentional planning for differentiated small group instruction. They believed after taking action that differentiated instruction was good teaching and they embedded the practice into their daily work.

Another essential component of MTSS which teachers implemented was progress monitoring. Teachers believed after taking action that progress monitoring allowed teachers to see if their instruction was making a difference with their students. They believed the benefits of monitoring student progress to determine the effectiveness of instruction outweighed the time consuming aspect of monitoring. Teachers reported that progress monitoring fit with their beliefs about good teaching. It made sense to them as they reported feelings of self-efficacy and they believed the teaching practice enhanced their self-image of being an effective teacher.

Data driven instruction and problem solving was reported by teachers to be a focus at MHGS. The teachers collectively made sense of the connections between student screening, diagnostic assessments to understand student needs, problem solving to determine how to meet specific student needs, and then monitoring to determine instructional effectiveness. When questioned, the majority of teachers stated that they would not give up implementation of these practices even if the district removed the expectations of implementing MTSS. Teachers' beliefs about what practices constituted good teaching changed overtime as they agreed collectively to take action and implement these essential components of MTSS. In the retrospective process of making sense of their actions, they saw student performance increase. As a result teachers perceived themselves with an enhanced self-esteem and an associated professional identity as an effective teacher.

Teachers Shared Experiences Creates Current MTSS Understanding

According to Weick (1995) the cultural glue of an organization is sometimes described as "shared meaning" however, the problem with this concept is that people infer meaning from their own prior experiences. Weick states, "Although people may not share meaning, they do share experience…They share actions, activities, moments of conversation, and joint tasks, each of which they then make sense of using categories that are more idiosyncratic" (p.188). The majority of MHGS teachers described a broad common understanding of MTSS and its purpose of providing academic and behavior supports for students. However, in reality teachers narrowly defined MTSS to the literacy components in which they had collectively taken action to implement. A specific connection existed between teaching practices that teachers regarded as MTSS and the MTSS components the principal and staff collectively experienced together. For example, student screening, targeted differentiated instruction, progress monitoring, and student based problem solving were all practices in which the principal and staff collectively made sense of and teachers embedded in their daily routines. Teachers, through the process of collective implementation together and retrospectively making sense of the impact on student performance resulted in teachers believing these MTSS practices made sense. The collective lived experience gave teachers time to enact these practices and socially construct meaning together that these MTSS practices made sense as good teaching.

A significant conclusion was MTSS continued to be a threat to teachers' personal and organizational identities. Because the original introduction of MTSS was strongly associated as a special education initiative, teachers continued to resist giving the MTSS initiative authority to construct additional expectations for their personal identities. To illustrate, teachers did not see their schoolwide behavior system or their supplemental behavior supports as related to MTSS.

Even though the schoolwide and supplemental behavior supports fit identically into the MTSS framework teachers did not refer to behavior in the MTSS nomenclature. Teachers did associate and define the narrow process of providing behavioral supports for students who were referred to special education for behavioral assessment as MTSS implementation.

Special education teachers understood MTSS in a larger context of providing supports for students and a process to identify students for special education eligibility. However, special education teachers did not voice concerns about the restrictiveness of Tier III being only for students with disabilities. For special education teachers MTSS made sense from the collective implementation they had experienced with their regular education counterparts even though it violated the all education initiative, for which MTSS was purposefully designed.

Veteran regular education teachers and special education teachers understood MTSS from the individual and collective actions implementing MTSS under the principal's guidance. In the process of making sense of MTSS they restricted the influence to the narrowly defined aspects of MTSS that they chose to implement together. New teachers were assimilated into the MTSS culture designed around tier time and also believed from taking action with their colleagues that the MTSS literacy components were making a difference for their students. What was important for teachers from a sensemaking perspective, the act-then-think process led them to see the impact MTSS had on students' performance then they believed and committed to continuing the MTSS practices as part of their embedded teaching practices.

Teachers Make Sense of MTSS Challenges and Barriers

Sensemaking in organizations is not as clear-cut and orderly as the sensemaking method proposes. Weick (1995) described a common form of interaction is arguing in the belief driven sensemaking process. Weick further explained, "Individual reasoning is embedded in a social

controversy. And the unfolding of the controversy is what we mean by arguing as a vehicle for sensemaking…Social argument is debate that expresses the contradiction implicit in any position that is articulated" (p. 137). Teachers at MHGS articulated challenges and barriers to MTSS implementation. They argued for more time, staff, and increased professional development as changes that would continue to move forward and sustain the MTSS school initiative.

Teachers argued they needed more time to assist them in making sense of student data, documenting student progress, and planning for differentiated instruction. Teachers identified time as being insufficient and a barrier to implementing MTSS consistently and effectively. In retrospect the teachers made sense of the MTSS components they were implementing but believed it was important for the administration to understand the need for more time to do the work. Their self-efficacy to move students forward was threatened if there was insufficient time to do the work correctly.

Furthermore, teachers argued there was a lack of staff to implement small group instruction and give individual time to each student. Teachers also identified the need for more students to receive Tier II services if additional staff were available to provide and deliver services. In addition special education teachers believed an increase in staff was necessary to deliver the push-in supports for students with disabilities during regular education inclusion time. Teachers argued for more staff because they did not want to feel as described in the findings, they were "short changing" students. MTSS was designed to provide individual supports for students; teachers' confidence in making a difference for students was threatened by their perception of the lack of staff to deliver the necessary supports. Within the sensemaking framework teachers' beliefs led them to argue for more staff, so their personal identity as effective teachers remained intact.

Teachers believed an increase in professional development opportunities was essential to provide the necessary teacher learning to support and sustain MTSS. Teachers believed they needed to continue build their capacity through professional development to analyze student data and understand the linkage between student assessment and differentiated student instruction. The limited professional development time to collaborate with their grade level team members was seen as a barrier for effective MTSS implementation. Teachers argued an increase in professional development targeted at collaborative problem solving around their grade level data would support students' needs. They believed the district's professional development was not relevant for their needs and insufficient advance MTSS practices at MHGS.

New teachers argued that MTSS professional development was inadequate to support them in acquiring the learning necessary to support MTSS implementation. Learning from their mentor teacher was important but they expressed more professional development targeted for new teachers to assist them in understanding and developing skills for MTSS implementation. To sustain MTSS teachers argued the need for leadership to orchestrate ongoing professional development designed to reduce the effect of teacher turnover and variation in teacher skill sets to implement MTSS. Overall teachers believed in the MTSS work they were doing with their grade level teams but realized the threat to sustainability, when team members' left and new teachers filed their places.

Implications of the Research

The following section includes study implications for researchers, policymakers, state departments of education, local school districts, and teachers that have similar settings and the desire to implement RTI/MTSS school reform initiatives. Implications were drawn from empirical research and this study's findings and conclusions. This study contributes to an

emerging body of research that examines how teachers make sense of school reform within their local context. The implications for school reform include teachers' perceptions of reform and its adoption, strong school leadership, teachers' sensemaking of reform; teachers embedded instructional practices, RTI barriers to supporting and sustaining implementation.

Understand Teachers' Perceptions and Professional Identity During Reform and Adoption

A major implication of the findings of this study is that teachers' perceptions of reform are important in considering and planning for school reform initiatives. This study showed how teachers' professional identity was threatened because of the new MTSS expectations for teachers' roles and responsibilities. Largely because policy makers do not include teacher support in the creation, adoption, and implementation of reform efforts they feel excluded (Cuban, 2013). The more teachers are involved in the adoption process and in the planning for schoolwide implementation the more likely they will take responsibility for reform efforts (Datnow & Castellano, 2000).

RTI reform efforts should be led by an "all education" shared leadership vision so that a unified approach includes all teachers in a shared ownership for all students. Prior research has found that many school districts adopt RTI superficially as a replacement for what they used to term special education. Chard (2013) described these situations, "There is no shared vision; instead general education teachers perceive RTI as just another form of special education and take no ownership of it" (p. 201). This was the case at MHGS, as general education teachers made sense of MTSS as a special education initiative. A shared vision will assist in developing teacher buy in and building strong communication among teachers for the planning and implementation phases of RTI reforms. Also making sure that special education and regular education are symbolically viewed as a unified when the reform is introduced. MHGS teachers

saw MTSS as a special education reform because it was presented only by special education staff and was not a joint effort.

Interactions between the district office and schools influence adoption and implementation of RTI reforms. The role district officials play in building district level and school level commitment is important. Coordination efforts are vital so that districts can assist schools in building their capacity for teacher consensus and teacher understanding of the purpose of RTI in their school. It is important during the adoption process for teachers to see the benefits of RTI implementation in their school and that teacher buy in is high as schools move forward with implementation (Burns et al., 2013). According to previous research by Pinkelman et al. (2015) teachers' perceptions of the most important facilitator for RTI implementation was teacher buy in leading to teachers commitment for implementation.

Strong Principal Leadership

A significant implication from this study is to ensure there is strong principal support for the RTI reform efforts and that the principals lead the RTI reform process. This study showed how important it was for the MHGS principal to facilitate sensemaking with teachers who had already decided to resist and reject this reform. Principals also must take ownership of special education in their buildings so that RTI is seen as unified reform rather than separate from RTI practices. Principal leadership is one of the most significant factors for developing the successful implementation of school reform efforts (Fullan, 2007). Principals involved in school reform should play an active role in instructional leadership and move away from being leaders of the status quo. Principals need to be facilitators of the reform and support teachers in developing ownership. According to Datnow et al. (2002), in their study of reform implementation, "Principal support for reform was so important that in most cases, the existence

of a reform hinged upon the principal. Reforms were less likely to be implemented fully, much less institutionalized, when principals did not actively support them" (p.65). For principals to be effective they should be perceived by teachers to be an active and ongoing supporter of the reform changes. Furthermore, principals should be perceived as guiding the change process and assisting teachers in making sense of the reform expectations for teachers.

Another important leadership implication is how principals can broker the new reform by making connections for teachers with past or current initiatives. Building on teacher learning from previous change efforts allows teachers to see the linkages and connections for the new reform on teacher expectations. Administrator led implementation supports teachers with role redefinition and staff acceptance for new responsibilities. The principals' leadership role is vital in providing understanding for the contextual factors that are unique to schools, as teachers begin reform changes.

It is important for principals to communicate explicitly the purpose of RTI, including its capacity to meet the needs of all students within a systemic schoolwide approach. In addition, they need to foster a commitment for a unified system of supports among regular and special education teachers. School principals should connect the purpose of RTI to their schools' mission and help create a school culture supportive RTI practices. O'Connor and Freeman (2012) found in prior research that without principal leadership assisting teachers in developing a clear understanding of the purpose of RTI in their school's context reform efforts would fail. It is necessary to ensure principal commitment and explicit communication with teachers prior to implementation.

Facilitate Teachers' Sensemaking of Reform

Teachers make sense of reforms and transform them in ways that are consistent with their own beliefs. Moreover teachers change and alter reform by their own interpretations and prior lived experiences (Spillane et al., 2002). MHGS' principal facilitated teachers' sensemaking of the MTSS literacy components however this resulted in teachers narrowly defining MTSS and limiting the "all education" purpose of the reforms original design. How MHGS' teachers redefined MTSS worked for them but it was not in conjunction with the intent of RTI reform to be inclusive of all students. This illustrates through the process of sensemaking how teachers modify the reform design as they integrate the expected practices within their schools and classrooms (Cuban, 1993). In addition Datnow et al. (2002) described, "local educators make educational reform, not just respond to actions imposed upon them. Actions that educators take during the later stages in implementation process modify the reform that was originally designed" (p.59). This co-construction process allows for the reform to be interpreted and implemented within the local context.

Sensemaking is individual and a social process of collectively talking into existence the environment people face. Because school reform threatens teachers' individual and professional identities, teachers will resist change when they feel overwhelmed by reforms expectations for change in their roles. It is important for school leadership to assist teachers in making sense of RTI practices during the implementation process. This gives opportunity for the collective experience to be retrospectively interpreted by teachers together allowing for collective sensemaking. According to Weick (1995) people may not be able to develop shared understanding because each individual interprets differently, they may benefit from shared experience and the actions they shared together. Furthermore, Weick indicated that if people

want to share meaning they need to talk about their shared experience and arrive at common way to talk about the experience. Therefore, principals need to be deliberate in their efforts to assist teachers in making sense of their beliefs and actions in relationship to RTI reform. The sensemaking process allows for teachers individually and collectively to build commitment together.

Teachers Embedded Instructional Practices

Universal student screening, targeted differentiated instruction, progress monitoring, and student based problem solving were all instructional practices that MHGS teachers reported they embedded into their daily routines. They believed implementing these practices was good teaching. A significant implication from this study was that teachers took action to implement these instructional practices, observed the practices positive impact on student performance, and then came to believe these practices should continue to be embedded in their instructional repertoire. Weick (1995) referred to this sensemaking process as act-then-think, in which sense is made of the actions retrospectively. Teachers believed these instructional practices fit with their beliefs of good teaching only after implementation within their classrooms. For effective RTI implementation it is important for leadership to first assist teachers in taking action together and then make sense of instructional practices collectively as a teaching staff during the implementation process. Fullan (2007) described that much of the learning and meaning necessary for change comes about during implementation.

Overcoming RTI Barriers to Supporting and Sustaining Implementation

Nunn and Jantz (2009) found that professional development for RTI practices was crucial for teacher efficacy. Teachers need to acquire the necessary skills to implement RTI and recognize their ability to influence student outcomes. This was the case at MHGS as teachers

wanted quality professional development to learn the important teaching skills to support their students. Appropriate professional development can build the capacity for teachers to take action and provide a learning culture supportive for RTI implementation.

An additional implication form this study was MHGS teachers' desire for professional development time and to collaborate in order to make important linkages between assessment data and instruction to meet students' needs. Without adequate time for professional development and teacher collaboration, teachers may resist RTI efforts because they feel overwhelmed by the demands of RTI on their roles and responsibilities.

Previous research has indicated that teachers perceived a lack of staff to be a barrier for effective RTI implementation (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). This was true at MHGS where teachers felt there was insufficient number of staff to support students. When establishing RTI intervention groups it is important to ensure there is sufficient staff available to maintain proper group size. Without sufficient staff the integrity of interventions can be compromised and students cannot receive the intensiveness of instruction for educational benefit. The use of technology and instructional software programs should be explored to assist teachers with appropriate group size during targeted instruction.

RTI sustainability is important for lasting schoolwide systemic improvements. School leadership including teacher leadership can facilitate RTI sustainability by ongoing problem solving of anticipated barriers. It is recommended that school staff give purposeful consideration to the contextual and cultural barriers unique to each school that inhibit sustainability. To enhance effective RTI sustainability it is important to understand how teachers utilize the sensemaking process to determine their future actions and beliefs.

Future research should continue to investigate teachers' perceptions and sensemaking of RTI reform and implementation. Especially significant would be to investigate teachers' perceptions of RTI reform in impoverished urban schools with a high percentage of students who are highly at risk for failure academically and behaviorally. Future research should examine how district led RTI reform could contribute to an "all education" unified approach, rather than a special education driven RTI design. In addition research should investigate students' perceptions of RTI reform efforts in their schools and how students make sense of RTI practices.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Focus Group Protocol Questions

1. Describe your understanding of MTSS its purpose and why it was implemented in your school?

   Probe: Do most staff share the same understanding? Why or Why not?

2. Please describe what MTSS looks like at MHGS?

   Probe: Describe your role as a primary stakeholder within MTSS model?

3. Please describe how MTSS was adopted at MHGS?

   Probe: Would you say there was a consensus among staff to adopt MTSS? Why or why not?

4. How would you describe the culture of the school during MTSS implementation?

   Probe: What changes have you noticed in your school?

5. In what ways has universal screening of all students influenced your instructional practices?

6. In what ways has the three tiered interventions influenced your practices?

7. In what ways has monitoring student progress influenced your practices?

8. Please describe what positive behavioral supports looks like in your school?

9. In what ways would you describe the school supports for implementing MTSS in your school?

10. In what ways would you describe the barriers to implementing MTSS in your school?

Appendix B

Individual Interview Protocol Questions

1. Describe your understanding of MTSS its purpose and why it was implemented in your school?

   Probe: Do most staff share the same understanding? Why or Why not?

2. Please describe what MTSS looks like at MHGS?

   Probe: Describe your role as a primary stakeholder within MTSS model?

3. Please describe how MTSS was adopted at MHGS?

   Probe: Would you say there was a consensus among staff to adopt MTSS? Why or why not?

4. How would you describe the culture of the school during MTSS implementation?

   Probe: What changes have you noticed in your school?

5. In what ways has universal screening of all students influenced your instructional practices?

6. In what ways has the three tiered interventions influenced your practices?

7. In what ways has monitoring student progress influenced your practices?

8. Please describe what positive behavioral supports looks like in your school?

9. In what ways would you describe the school supports for implementing MTSS in your school?

10. In what ways would you describe the barriers to implementing MTSS in your school?

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Appendix C

Focus Group and Individual Interview Consent Form

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study to examine teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Kansas Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) in Mount Hayward Grade School. I hope to learn how teachers make sense of the Kansas Multi-tier System of Supports reform initiative in their school.

Participant Selection: You were purposefully selected as a possible participant in this study because as a teacher at Mount Hayward Grade School you have been identified for your involvement in the MTSS implementation at your school. Approximately twenty individuals will be sought to participate in observations, focus group, and/or individual interview.

Explanation of Procedures: If you decide to participate, your participation could consist of a focus group interview that will take approximately 45-60 minutes and possibly a follow-up individual interview that will take approximately 45-60 minutes. I also plan to conduct observations in team meetings or building MTSS team meetings. With your permission I will audio-record the focus groups and interviews and take notes during the observations.

Discomfort/Risks: There are no anticipated discomforts or risks associated with participating in this study. However, if you feel uncomfortable with any questions, you may skip it or opt to

pass. During data collection you are encouraged to be open in your responses. All of your responses will be kept confidential and your participation is voluntary.

Benefits: The purpose of this study is provide a greater understanding of how teachers are involved in educational reform efforts specifically the Kansas MTSS model currently being implemented in your school. With your participation you may benefit from a greater understanding MTSS implementation at your school and in other schools throughout the nation. Results will be published in academic journals and presented at conferences in order to share what I have learned from the research study.

Confidentiality: Any identifiable information obtained in this study will remain confidential. Names and locations of individuals and locations will be masked by the use of pseudonyms. Every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, in order to make sure the study is done properly and safely there may be circumstances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are giving the research team permission to share information about you with the following groups:

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board;
- The sponsor or agency supporting the study.

The researchers may publish the results of the study. If they do, they will only discuss group results. Your name will not be used in any publication or presentation about the study.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University or Mulvane USD 263. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Contact: If you have any questions about this research, you can contact Mr. Neil Guthrie at 316-973-4424 or nlguthrie@wichita.edu. or contact: Dr. Jean Patterson at 316-978-6392 or jean.patterson@whichita.edu, CLES, Wichita State University Wichita, Ks. 67260-0142. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

- You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
- You are aware that this is a research study,
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction, and
- You have voluntarily decided to participate.

You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

_____

Printed Name of Subject

_____ _____

Signature of Subject Date

_____ _____

Witness Signature Date