2022-06-15

Exploring the Perceptions of School Teams Implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Educational Specialist

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the Perceptions of School Teams Implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Many schools are transitioning towards a preventative approach to meet the needs of at-risk learners with academic and/or behavioral concerns through the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework. This qualitative study explored the perceptions of the impacting factors for MTSS and the needs of building leadership teams through semi-structured interviews using a video conferencing-based online platform. Participants included 15 building administrators from school districts in a mountain west state of the United States. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis.

A total of four themes or impacting factors were identified. First, participants reported that MTSS relies on the district's capacity to provide support and partnership, like administrators or district leadership. Second, provision and prioritization of resources (e.g., personnel, time, or training) was perceived as key to MTSS implementation. Third, stakeholder buy-in and disposition were perceived as effecting MTSS practices, including staff buy-in, the awareness of the need for MTSS, and building's culture and established practices. Lastly, other contextual factors in the building were reported as also influencing MTSS implementation.

The results of this study can act as an implementation guide for building and district MTSS teams looking to strengthen and enhance their MTSS efforts. It is also a call to action for school districts nationwide to prioritize their MTSS practices through ongoing training, provision of resources, and consistent support to building-level teams. Finally, this study sheds light on the day-to-day realities of MTSS implementation. Limitations of this study include the following: (a) limited generalization of findings to other geographic regions; (b) little to no involvement of the participants in day-to-day implementation of MTSS interventions; (c) potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; and (d) possible confirmation bias during data analysis. Steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, including pilot interviews, member checks, analyst triangulation, and audit trailing.

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Keywords: Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, interventions, building administrators, effectiveness, fidelity

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Ellie Young, for her kindness and guidance through this process. Thank you for your passion, your expertise, and for being there for me every step of the way. I would also like to extend my deepest appreciation toward my committee members, Dr. Paul Caldarella and Dr. Elizabeth Cutrer-Pàrraga, for their invaluable contributions to this research. Your expertise and insight helped mold this research into the final product it is today. I am also extremely grateful to my co-researcher and friend, Julia Facer. Thank you for always reminding me that we were in this together!

Many thanks go to all the wonderful building administrators who participated in the study. Thank you for taking the time in your busy schedules to talk with me about this important topic of research. I would also like to say a special thank you to the students who assisted with this research: Tyler Beer, Emilie Gunnell, Melinda Garrard, Ethan Andrews, and Carson Hernandez. I am immensely grateful for your help with transcribing and reviewing this research.

I could not have completed this thesis without the endless support and love of my roommates and my friends. They were always there for me, whether I needed help with proof-reading, writing, editing, or simply moral support. Thank you for your belief in my abilities, for putting up with me working for hours on end, and for providing a happy distraction to rest my mind outside of research.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the unwavering support of my family throughout the duration of my studies. I would like to extend my gratitude to my parents, who blindly supported me when I decided I wanted to go to graduate school in a country 7,805 miles away from home and choose a career they had never heard of before. And to my sister, for being my personal cheerleader and my guiding light.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Schools are beginning to place an emphasis on a preventive, rather than reactive or punitive, approach to addressing the needs of at-risk students (Lane et al., 2013). A Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework strives to meet the academic and behavioral needs of students by creating a range of instructional strategies of increasing intensity. MTSS provides students with academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional supports using evidence-based systemic practices and frequent data-driven monitoring to maximize student achievement (Bohanon et al., 2016; Kemp & Poole, 2018; Utah State Board of Education [USBE], n.d.). MTSS is implemented by teams within schools who collaborate to use data, solve problems, align instruction, and target interventions based on student's needs. MTSS support for students is provided along a continuum, starting with universal services at Tier 1 that provides interventions for all students (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Tier 2 provides additional targeted supports for at-risk students in a small group setting, while Tier 3 includes intensive and individualized support to at-risk students or those who need support beyond that of Tier 2 (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019).

For this study, we use the term "building" as a noun describing a single school. We specifically focused on building leadership teams that are implementing MTSS. A building leadership team includes representation from across the school, specifically school staff demonstrating an interest in MTSS (Kemp & Poole, 2018). The building MTSS team is responsible for planning and guiding the implementation of MTSS within a school (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016), while a district leadership team provides the vision, leadership, and resources necessary for implementing a district-wide initiative (George & Kincaid, 2008). Support from

district teams ensures that reform efforts do not lose momentum, become unfocused or fade away (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

District leadership teams play a key role in how building leadership teams guide the implementation of MTSS in schools (Freeman et al., 2015; George & Kincaid, 2008; Rorrer et al., 2008). However, the research literature currently provides limited knowledge about the needs of building leadership teams, how these needs are met by district leadership teams as they implement MTSS, and whether building leadership teams perceive that their needs are being met. There is also little research on the various impacting factors of MTSS implementation faced by building leadership teams.

Statement of Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to contribute to the limited existing literature about the experiences of building leadership teams while implementing MTSS. It explored whether building team leaders perceived that their needs were being met and helped examine various potential impacting factors for MTSS implementation, especially as they relate to district support. Finally, the study provided insights that were valuable for district and building teams planning to implement MTSS in the future.

Research Question

This study addressed the following research question:

1. According to building leaders in public schools, what impacting factors arise during MTSS implementation?

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a three-tiered framework that consists of robust and evidence-based systemic practices to maximize student achievement with regards to academics and behavior (Utah State Board of Education, n.d.). Gamm et al. (2012) defined MTSS as "an evidence-based model of education that employs data-based problem-solving techniques to integrate academic and behavioral instruction and intervention" (p. 4). MTSS generally consists of three tiers of support provided to students. It includes needs-based instruction and/or intervention with varying levels of intensity at each tier, depending on the severity of academic and behavioral needs (Gamm et al., 2012).

Tier 1, or the 'Universal' tier, provides instruction to all students with the goal of reducing the number of students at risk for academic and/or behavioral problems, and overall prevention of learning and behavior problems (Merrell et al., 2011). Tier 1 instruction must be implemented with fidelity before implementing Tier 2 and Tier 3 practices (Utah State Board of Education, n.d.). Tier 2, or the 'Targeted' tier provides selected at-risk students with additional support devoted to specific deficits, in a small group setting (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019). This tier is usually for the 10-15% of students who do not respond to Tier 1 prevention efforts (Lane et al., 2013), or is provided to remediate or accelerate student success (Utah State Board of Education, n.d.). At this level, school teams identify students based on school-wide screening data or other data that indicates students need additional instruction. Tier 3, or the 'Intensive' tier provides specialized support to students exposed to multiple risk factors or those who need support beyond Tier 2. This tier may or may not include students receiving special education

services (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019). This tier generally focuses on the 5% of students who have multiple risk factors or require more intensive supports. Further, Tier 2 and Tier 3 additional supports are used to supplement—not replace— the universal level of support of Tier 1 (Lane et al., 2013).

Wait-to-Fail Approach

Historically, schools have responded to problem behavior with reactive responses, such as verbal reprimands, detention, suspension, and expulsion. This over-reliance on reactive responses stems from the belief that aversive consequences can lead to a reduction of problem behavior (Sugai et al., 2010). Lyon et al. (2001) discussed the negative consequences that students had to experience to be eligible for special education services. Since the eligibilities based on IQ scores and standardized achievement tests for learning disabilities differed from state to state, students often had to fall behind grade-level peers to be evaluated, known as the "wait-to-fail" model. Typically, a student had to experience the academic, emotional, and social consequences of failure before their instructional needs could be adequately addressed. Lyon et al. (2001) also noted that without early intervention, a below average first-grade reader will eventually become a below average adult reader.

Schools must play a crucial role in identification and intervention of at-risk students (Walker et al., 1996). Efforts need to be shifted from more punitive and reactive methods to more preventive methods (Merrell et al., 2011). This can help to prevent failure and promote student success. A tiered model like MTSS provides a range of supports so that students' needs are met with a continuum of data-based interventions, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Therefore, across the US, schools are slowly shifting from a reactive approach towards a more proactive approach (Lane et al., 2013). The MTSS model proactively provides interventions for

students before special education services are required, instead of waiting for them to fail (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019).

Components of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

All components of the MTSS framework should be implemented using culturally responsive and evidence-based practices (National Center on Intensive Intervention [NCII], 2010). These components include: a multi-level prevention system, screening, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making.

Multi-Level Prevention System. MTSS includes a school-wide, multi-level academic and behavioral system to facilitate early identification of learning and behavioral challenges and therefore, prevent school failure (NCII, 2010). All students are provided with preventive interventions as part of Tier 1 supports, which then intensifies across each tier to match the needs of students who require additional support (Horner et al., 2010).

Screening. Screening involves brief assessments with scores that are valid and reliable to help identify students who are making adequate progress and those who require additional support (Sugai, 2008). It also helps predict which students are at risk of developing learning or behavioral problems (NCII, 2010). Screening data can be used to detect problems at the first sign of concern, when students are most responsive to change, thereby allowing early intervention and successful prevention (Lane et al., 2013). Screening assessments may be followed by further testing or progress monitoring, as needed (Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, n.d.).

Progress Monitoring. Student progress monitoring is defined as "repeated measurement of performance to inform instruction of individual students in general and special education" (NCII, 2010, p. 8). Progress monitoring data is used to monitor academic performance and evaluate the responsiveness and effectiveness of an intervention (Center on Multi-Tiered

Systems of Support, n.d.), typically in tiers 2 and 3. It must be conducted on a regular basis to determine rates of improvement, understand the efficacy of different forms of instruction, and identify which students are not making adequate progress (NCII, 2010). This data will also help to support timely decisions regarding instructional needs (Sugai, 2008).

Data-Based Decision-Making. Evidence-based interventions are at the core of best practice and must be included in all levels of the MTSS process (NCII, 2010). Data from screening and progress monitoring can be used to make decisions about movement within the multi-tiered system (Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, n.d.), student interventions, and implementation strategies (Forman & Crystal, 2015). Further, data can help contribute to adapting and modifying interventions (Sugai, 2008). Implementation fidelity data also helps teams measure the extent to which interventions are being implemented successfully and as intended (Cooper et al. 2007).

Approaches to Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

The MTSS model is an umbrella framework that includes Response to Intervention (RTI) and School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). The two approaches have been integrated into a single cohesive system termed MTSS. Although each of these were developed by different researchers and educational leaders with other purposes in mind, both approaches have several practices in common (Bohanon et al., 2016).

School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS). School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports is used to strengthen the school's capacity to teach positive and socially acceptable behaviors, address challenging behavior, and subsequently prevent disruptive behavior (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019). This is implemented through the three tiers of support, the same as those within the MTSS model. All students are provided with

universal behavioral support in Tier 1, which explicitly teaches behavioral expectations to all students and identifies effective reinforcement when expectations are met. Behavioral instruction intensifies across each tier to include evidence-based strategies that are aligned with the needs of students who require additional support (Horner et al., 2010). Tier 3 interventions include individual support for students, such as, conducting a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) to determine the function of their targeted behavior (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019). This may then be followed by creating a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) to reduce and eventually eradicate the target behavior.

One of the main aims of SWPBIS is to increase school safety and to reduce the occurrences of problem behaviors in schools, especially those that result in reduced academic engagement and disruption (Horner et al., 2010). Further, it can also be used to replace challenging behavior with socially acceptable behaviors (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019). SWPBIS involves the integration of four main elements (Sugai et al., 2010). Firstly, it emphasizes operationally defined and valued outcomes for students, such as improvements in a student's quality of life. Secondly, SWPBIS is based on conceptual principles from behavioral sciences, such as how behavior can be learned and taught. Thirdly, it emphasizes research-validated practices to achieve goals. Lastly, SWPBIS prioritizes systems change to enhance the learning and quality of living for all students and to reduce problem behaviors.

Response to Intervention (RTI). Response to Intervention (RTI) is a system of assessment and intervention that is implemented through a multi-level system to enhance student achievement and prevent behavioral problems (NCII, 2010). It is perceived as a means of providing early intervention by focusing on academic, rather than behavioral problems (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The RTI model is a decision-making framework that is utilized by educators to

move students towards curriculum mastery. RTI has recently been applied to general education classrooms, in addition to special education classrooms. It can be used to identify students with learning disabilities and allow for referrals for special education (Hahn, 2015). Additionally, it can also be used to reduce the chances of incorrect identification of students as having disabilities (NCII, 2010).

RTI emphasizes a focus on effective core instruction (Bohanon et al., 2016) and ensures that students are provided with evidence-based instruction and interventions. Further, it also helps to discern the overall health of schools as it allows schools to examine the data for all students and determine which students require additional support (Hahn, 2015). Like the tiered instruction of SWPBIS, RTI consists of three tiers or levels of prevention, wherein each student is matched with a tier of support depending on their need (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019).

Need for Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

The Multi-Tiered System of Support is an umbrella framework that integrates the academics-based approach of RTI and the behavior-targeted model of SWPBIS. The rationale to integrate both these approaches is backed by research in the literature. A study by Nelson et al. (2004) indicated that behavioral problems such as attention problems, aggression, and delinquency were linked to low academic achievement. RTI and SWPBIS also share foundational principles, as they are both tiered approaches focused on prevention and intervention (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Sugai (2008) discussed how SWPBIS and RTI shared several similar elements, such as the use of screening data, data-based decision-making, continuous progress monitoring, evidence-based interventions, and implementation fidelity. The goal of both systems is to promote positive outcomes and student success. Further, targeting both academic and behavioral difficulties within the same system results in a more comprehensive

intervention that allows a school to save on resources and time that would otherwise be spent on implementing independent or separate intervention strategies (McIntosh et al., 2010).

The systems approach of MTSS helps enhance student outcomes as the entire school participates as an organization to provide robust, evidence-based instruction that aligns with students' needs. This is based on the belief that the collective efforts of the entire organization are more effective than the disunified efforts of individuals (Lane et al., 2013). The MTSS model also intends to integrate and improve collaboration between general and special education teams in schools (Lesh, 2013). Further, MTSS approaches generally consist of explicitly stated measurable goals (Bohanon et al., 2016). Schools have the ability and responsibility to identify at-risk students in a timely manner, and then address these problems with the necessary resources and expertise (Walker et al., 1996). Thus, MTSS not only promotes goal setting, but also provides the tools needed to achieve those goals (Lane et al., 2013). A study by Reedy and Lacireno-Paquet (2015) found that implementation of MTSS benefited students in terms of improved instruction and overall functioning of schools. The authors also found that implementing MTSS had a positive impact on overall student outcomes, in terms of performance on tests and assessments, improvements in reading and math, decreases in the number of office discipline referrals (ODRs), and reductions in the number of special education referrals.

The MTSS framework is an effective way to provide intervention to meet the various needs of all students, while targeting achievement of academic and socio-emotional goals (Ysseldyke et al., 2016). Student populations are now more diverse than ever before, not just in demographics, but also with regards to abilities and motivations (Lane et al., 2013). For example, a classroom consists of students who have several differences in their reading abilities, which may be impacted by their interests. This diversity in demographics and abilities is accompanied

by a range of unique experiences for these students, which must be recognized and valued (Merrell et al., 2011). MTSS allows educators to take such diversity into account in schools.

MTSS has also proved to be useful with students diagnosed with mental illnesses, such as emotional and behavioral disorders (E/BD) and depression. Research by Benner et al. (2013) discussed the need for multi-tiered systems of academic support in reducing the achievement gap experienced by students with E/BD, when compared to students without these disorders. The authors stated that PBIS points to success for students at-risk for or with E/BD, by preventing and tackling these disorders. MTSS can also be used to target specific mental health initiatives in schools. For instance, a study conducted by Arora et al. (2019) investigated already existing evidence-based practices targeting depressive symptoms, such as depressed mood, irritability, loss of energy, and difficulty concentrating, within MTSS. There are several interventions that have positive results for the prevention of depressive disorders within an MTSS framework, such as Strong Kids, Project SHIFA, or Bounce Back (Arora et al., 2019). It was also noted that interventions at the Tier 3 level were the fewest, indicating a lack of resources available in schools for students who are diagnosed with depressive disorders.

Barriers to Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Implementation

While it has been established that there is a need for MTSS in schools, research shows that there are several factors that can be identified as either barriers or facilitators (depending on their absence or presence) during implementation. These include factors such as time, access to training and resources, perceptions of school staff, trustworthy relationships, opportunities for collective learning and support received from district teams. This section examines some of the most known barriers experienced by schools while implementing MTSS.

Time

A study conducted by Mason et al. (2019) showed that time was identified as the most significant barrier faced by schools. This is because MTSS had to compete with other school initiatives, or because of the difficulty in scheduling time for MTSS teams to simultaneously work together. Another important aspect of time as a barrier is how it affects various aspects of the MTSS process before, during, and after implementation, such as the amount of time required to find and understand an intervention, or the time spent in assessing screening and progress monitoring data (Rinck, 2018). The results of a study by Castro-Villarreal et al. (2014) showed that teachers expressed a lack of time to plan, implement, and gather data as significant impediments to the effective implementation of RTI in schools. It was noted that teachers also reported a loss of instructional time while implementing these interventions.

Lack of Training and Resources

Research indicates that training and access to resources for educators is a vital factor to consider while implementing MTSS. Mason et al. (2019) identified access to resources needed for assessment and intervention, as well as the size of the school, as barriers to MTSS implementation. It was also found that teachers perceived their lack of access to resources like staff support, interventions, and intervention materials, as factors that hindered successful implementation (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). Research conducted about teachers' level of training regarding MTSS has identified various ways to support teachers implementing MTSS. For example, teachers may participate in professional learning community (PLC) meetings, beginning-of-the-year trainings, grade-level meetings, as well as other training programs provided by schools and districts. However, Fleury (2018) found that some staff were concerned about not having the exposure or access to such training. Another study showed that teachers

were concerned that the current staff level may not be sufficient to support an adequate service delivery model (Shute, 2017). The lack of ample training or training opportunities has often resulted in unstandardized or inconsistent implementation of these systems (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). Although teachers believed that their ability to use MTSS data was consistent, there was a lack of skills required to calculate the gap between students' current performance and the grade level benchmark (Shute, 2017).

Process of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Often, school teams face many challenges associated with the process of MTSS, such as the length of the process or the amount of documentation involved. Castro-Villarreal et al. (2014) found that a significant barrier was the amount of paperwork involved in the process of implementation, with several teachers stating that the process involves "constant documentation" that can be "unmanageable" and "lengthy". Many teachers in this study also perceived the process as "too long," "overwhelming," or having "too many steps" (p. 108). Further, they viewed the process as delaying provision of services to students who are in need of additional support (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014).

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Language

Challenges can arise from the language used to describe the MTSS framework. Specifically, a lack of consistent MTSS terminology can make implementation more difficult. For instance, all school faculty must be well-versed with the distinctions between MTSS, RTI, and PBIS, and they must be able to draw connections with current district practices. A clear understanding of MTSS and the use of terminology that is incorporated into school-wide and district-wide implementation and goals consistently will allow a cohesive approach towards problem-solving (Dulaney et al., 2013).

Perceptions of School Staff

Another important factor to consider is staff perceptions or "staff buy-in," which refers to the level of acceptance or resistance by staff members towards the implementation of reform practices. The literature recommends that a minimum of 80% of the staff must commit to an implementation for it to be effective (Jolivette & Nelson, 2010). Barriers faced in this context include a lack of staff buy-in and attitudes of cynicism, resistance, or hesitation (Dulaney et al., 2013). It is important for staff to agree and commit to the implementation of MTSS prior to the process, which may influence the perceptions of other staff. It is also common for staff to hold a fearful mindset towards MTSS, which can be manifested as the fear of change, of a lack of knowledge, of a lack of confidence, or of being judged. Each of these may impact MTSS implementation to a great extent, as the fear instilled in the minds of the teachers may result in a lack of willingness to try something new (Rinck, 2018).

District Readiness

The district must not only acknowledge that a change is required but must also be willing and able to commit to changes that are critical for effective MTSS implementation. This is termed as district readiness, which is defined by Handler et al. (2007) as "the understanding by district personnel that systemic change will require a multi-year commitment of time and resources intended to produce changes in adult and student behavior" (p. 37). Success or failure with previous attempts at implementation of school-wide initiatives can have a significant impact on district readiness. Any initiatives already in place may also potentially compete for resources and time from staff members. The authors suggest that all past, present, and near future initiatives must be identified to plan for the efficient use of resources by the district. Further, to ensure district readiness, the district must plan for allocation of funds prior to the implementation

of MTSS. Financial support can consist of funds from the district, or from other sources such as grants or donations (Handler et al., 2007).

Collaboration and Communication

A barrier faced by schools during MTSS implementation is the lack of collaboration involved in the process, which is often a result of differences in implementation stages across schools and districts. This means that schools and districts may be at varying stages in their implementation of MTSS. They may also have implemented SWPBIS before implementing RTI, or vice-versa. A lack of communication across various tiers of MTSS may also act as a barrier to effective MTSS implementation (Freeman et al., 2015). Thus, a key aspect of MTSS is the collaborative culture involved, which requires active involvement from school and district leaders. In this regard, communication between schools and district-level stakeholders is important. Therefore, regular scheduled meetings between schools and districts are recommended to review and assess the current initiative (Handler et al., 2007).

Facilitators to Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Implementation

Research has identified several factors that can facilitate MTSS implementation in schools to ensure a smooth and effective process. This section explores such facilitators or contributors that are essential to keep in mind while implementing the MTSS model.

Need for Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Mortrud (2017) used Fullan's Educational Change Model to study the perceptions of middle school and high school teachers about the implementation and effectiveness of MTSS. Although all the characteristics of change (need, quality, practicality, complexity, and clarity) had positive correlations with the perceived success of MTSS, the 'need for MTSS' was seen to be the greatest predictor of success. This suggests that teachers recognized that the

implementation of MTSS had met a need in their schools. Research also shows that there is an understanding among teachers that the implementation of MTSS can provide individualized support to students who are struggling or those who require enrichment (Shute, 2017). Therefore, being aware of the need and purpose for MTSS implementation significantly contributes to the effectiveness of MTSS. These authors suggested that a helpful way to prepare for the implementation of MTSS is to educate school faculty on the need, clarity, complexity, quality, and practicality of the initiative. Establishing how MTSS can meet the needs of teachers and students is also important.

Collaboration and Active Involvement

It is beneficial for all educators who are part of MTSS implementation to collaborate, cooperate, and be actively involved in the process of implementation. According to a study conducted by Dulaney et al. (2013) regarding superintendents' perceptions of MTSS, collaboration has a major impact on the implementation of MTSS. Working together as a team can allow for increased collective capacity for change as it creates mutual accountability and responsibility (Harris, 2010). Rinck (2018) found that teachers also reported the benefits of having a sense of reciprocal and collective responsibility for positive student outcomes. Vekaria (2017) interviewed building administrators and district-level administrators to gather information regarding MTSS and found that collaboration and communication among team members and administrators was a major factor that should be given importance during MTSS implementation Therefore, active involvement and collaboration in the process of MTSS contributes significantly to effective implementation.

Nature of Relationships

Additionally, schools must consider the nature of relationships among staff members while implementing systems change. This includes robust and trusting professional relationships which help to make all staff members feel important and cared for. Rinck (2018) found that building and sustaining a culture of trust was a major theme in the data. In the study, there was an emergence of trustworthy relationships through "transparent communication flow, feelings of openness with administration, inclusive engagement with others, and acts of vulnerability which cultivated feelings of trust" (p. 203). A study by Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) that explored relational linkages in schools found that trusting relationships are an essential component for professional accountability and successful reform. The development and restoration of cooperation and trust between the central office and schools was able to support reform in other areas and linkages. MTSS involves the collaboration of many individuals performing several different roles and responsibilities. Therefore, establishing positive and trusting relationships among staff members is beneficial to the process of implementation.

Support From District Teams

Successful and sustainable implementation requires district-level support and leadership (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012). To create sustainable change, it is important to involve the efforts of district leaders. For instance, some districts provide a district-wide late start or early out day or allocate funds to provide extra workdays for collaboration for staff and faculty (Dulaney et al., 2013). Further, district-level involvement and commitment can facilitate the success of MTSS, as they provide financial support, assist with problem solving, and provide access to resources (Handler et al., 2007). Support from district teams will ensure that school improvement efforts do not lose momentum, reduce focus, become fragmented or fade out (O'Connor & Freeman,

2012). However, this body of research has not explored specifically how district supports are perceived by school building leadership teams, which is the focus of the current study.

Learning Experiences

Another important factor that may facilitate the implementation of MTSS is the organization and availability of opportunities for collective learning. Learning experiences like professional development opportunities allow the teachers to feel like they are working collectively towards MTSS implementation (Rinck, 2018). Additionally, using concrete tools and immediate steps for implementation can help to ease the process. Keeping in mind the hectic schedules that teachers usually have, MTSS interventions that are easy to implement are preferred over complicated instructional strategies (Mason et al., 2019).

Presence of a Change Agent

It is important to note that the results of the study by Mason et al. (2019) showed that the presence of an individual who played the role of a change agent facilitated the implementation of MTSS. This individual, such as the school principal or a subject coordinator, was key in understanding the need for change within the school and leading the change initiative. This generally involved taking charge of MTSS processes within the school, by arranging for training and professional development or initiating progress monitoring data.

Support From Administrators

The amount of support and encouragement received from administrators is also a facilitator for MTSS implementation. In a study by Vekaria (2017), principals stated that there was an increase in the staff's willingness to change based on their improved relationships in a building and their display of support for staff members. Participants in a study by Rinck (2018) mentioned administrative support as a major facilitator during MTSS implementation. The

participants in the study defined “administrator support” as the presence and accessibility of principals during team meetings to provide feedback and answer questions, as well as maintenance of relationships with them. Some of the strategies used by the principals interviewed in the study were: providing support, being present in team meetings, and offering suggestions and feedback without telling the team members how to solve the problem.

Implementation Science

There is often a gap between the knowledge of a new practice and the successful implementation of the practice (Mason et al., 2019). To reduce this gap between research and practice, it is essential to consider quality and fidelity of implementation when implementing new practices in a system. Implementation science focuses on generating new knowledge about applied techniques to support sustained implementation. It also helps to improve practices within the classroom setting by providing effective techniques with evidence to support their success (Lyon, 2005). This section presents a review of the literature on implementation drivers (processes and factors that enhance the process of implementation) and key techniques for sustained implementation of educational reform.

Implementation Drivers

Implementation science discusses the processes that drive change between each stage of implementation, known as implementation drivers. According to Blasé et al. (2015), implementation drivers can be defined as “key components of the infrastructure and capacity that influence the successful use of an innovation” (p. 5). These include organization, leadership, and competency drivers. Implementing these drivers with intentionality will result in an infrastructure that allows for sustained implementation and long-term success of MTSS.

Organization Drivers. For change to occur, it is important to have organization drivers in place, such as systems intervention, facilitative administration, and decision support data systems. These drivers ensure building, creating, and sustaining a hospitable organizational environment to sustain MTSS (Fixsen et al., 2013). Systems interventions oversees the financial, human, and organizational resources necessary for implementation. Further, school administrators and principals provide facilitative administration in the form of leadership, ensure commitment to the new program, offer effective problem solving and overcome administrative barriers. For continued implementation, data must be collected frequently and assessed in all steps of the process to make decisions (Metz & Bartley, 2012).

Leadership Drivers. These types of drivers focus on providing the best leadership strategies to deal with technical and adaptive challenges as they occur. Technical challenges are easy to identify and often have clear solutions, while adaptive challenges usually are more difficult to recognize and are not resolved through traditional solutions (Freeman et al., 2015). It is important to note that the leadership style may change, depending on the stage of the implementation process. For example, the adaptive leadership style will be most effective when the program has just been implemented and the challenges seem unfamiliar and daunting. After some time has passed, there will be a transition to a more technical leadership style that is used to manage daily challenges that arise (Fixsen et al., 2013).

Competency Drivers. Competency drivers focus on the means to advance and improve the skills of the implementation team to implement MTSS. They consist of selection, training, coaching and performance assessment (Metz & Bartley, 2012). Selection involves building a competent and appropriate team to implement evidence-based programs, such as MTSS (Fixsen et al., 2013). Training is used in the MTSS context to develop and sustain expertise (Freeman et

al., 2015). Coaching, which is explained in further detail below, is important to ensure that the skills developed during training are retained and sustained by the learner. Performance assessment or fidelity is used to assess the skills that are determined during the selection process, taught during training, and reinforced with coaching (Metz & Bartley, 2012).

Sustained Implementation

Implementing and sustaining change in a classroom, school, or a school district, is an iterative process that requires continuous planning and assessment. Therefore, the implementation of MTSS must be focused on long-term sustainability in schools. Averill and Rinaldi (2011) found that to sustain MTSS implementation, district and school leaders must first achieve consensus regarding the importance of using MTSS practices. This must be followed by steps to develop infrastructure and build capacity to support MTSS practices and finally, the implementation of the multi-tiered service delivery framework must be evaluated. Forman and Crystal (2015) found that some important factors to consider for sustained implementation of MTSS include coaching, effective leadership, active involvement of stakeholders, intervention fit, and support from within and outside the organization. The timeline for implementation must also be considered. For instance, choosing an appropriate time during the school year for transition to MTSS practices with fidelity is recommended (Lyon, 2005). Lyon (2005) also presented recommendations to promote effective implementation of change in the long term. These include ensuring system-wide buy-in from a variety of stakeholders, providing training and post-training support to ensure the success of the program (such as consultation and coaching), and checking fidelity through objective measurement (using methods such as peer observation, student report of teacher practices, and expert consultant ratings).

Teams are key to sustained implementation of MTSS. Schools must ensure that MTSS implementation teams consist of those most experienced to deliver the multi-tiered prevention system in schools (Lyon, 2005). Systems change is most effective when the teams at various levels are collaborating and integrating so that successes and challenges are shared with teams at other levels (Blasé et al., 2015). A study done by Johnson (2008) confirmed the fundamental role of social capital, such as trustworthy and meaningful relationships between the people implementing change. It is also important to consider the barriers and facilitators in the literature to ensure sustained implementation. Research has also shown that professional development and coaching are integral to sustainable MTSS implementation, which are discussed in detail below.

Professional Development. Professional development (PD) can be defined as ongoing structured sessions of professional learning that focus on improving teaching practices to enhance student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The knowledge gained from professional development helps to improve teaching in the classroom, which in turn enhances student achievement (Yoon et al., 2007). Yoon et al. (2007) found that students in a control group would have increased their achievement by 21 percentile points if their teacher had received substantial professional development. Dulaney et al. (2013) interviewed superintendents to evaluate their perceptions of MTSS, and most of them emphasized the positive benefits of focused PD. One superintendent stated that the provision of PD for teachers not only allows them to know that a change is being implemented in the system but also helps them know the 'why' of it. An interviewee in the study accurately expressed: "Building capacity in teachers [leads to] fewer resisters to change" (p. 41). Unless capacity is built purposefully within the faculty of the school, systems change is likely to fail.

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) mandated that teachers receive high-quality professional development learning opportunities. Yoon et al. (2007) stated that the act set five criteria for professional development to be considered high quality:

1. It is sustained, intensive, and content-focused—to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction and teacher performance.
2. It is aligned with and directly related to state academic content standards, student achievement standards, and assessments.
3. It improves and increases teachers' knowledge of the subjects they teach.
4. It advances teachers' understanding of effective instructional strategies founded on scientifically based research.
5. It is regularly evaluated for effects on teacher effectiveness and student achievement (p. 1).

Tooley and Connally (2016) identified the system-level obstacles to effective professional development. A major concern was understanding and ensuring that the needs of teachers are being met. For example, schools may send out an online survey or questionnaire to teachers after a PD session to assess their feedback and suggestions. Also, since professional development is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach, it is essential to select approaches that are evidence-based and more likely to be effective, rather than implementing those that are easy or simply less time-consuming. It is not sufficient to merely implement these approaches, but it must be ensured that they are implemented with quality and fidelity. Finally, for PD to be effective, reviewing it is necessary. This includes assessing the quality of implementation and studying its impact, to determine potential barriers.

Coaching. Coaches who are experts in the field are employed to facilitate and guide teachers' learning in professional development. Educators today are gradually moving from more traditional approaches of professional development, like workshops or seminars, towards the implementation of coaching support to help ease the implementation process of MTSS in schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Coaching helps to reinforce what is taught during professional development (Mason et al., 2019). Major reform efforts can be improved with the presence of a coach, who will provide technical knowledge, as well as a clear vision of the goal of intervention implementation (Handler et al., 2007). Coached teachers tend to retain, enhance and practice learned strategies with greater skill and accuracy than uncoached teachers. It also helps teachers gain a clear understanding of the purpose of the strategies and can increase the likelihood of them explaining these new strategies of teaching to their students (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

Effective professional development must be accompanied by coaching to create sustainable change. A five-year study of staff development conducted by Bush (1984) showed that the approach chosen for professional development had an impact on whether teachers made use of new practices learned or not. The results of the study showed that when teachers were shown a presentation of a theoretical concept, 10% of them used it in the classroom. When modeling and demonstration was used with the presentation, implementation increased by 2-3% each time. The use of practice in a controlled setting and feedback based on their practice also led to a 2-3% increase each. However, when the use of assistance and application (i.e., coaching) was added to staff development, it resulted in approximately 95% of teachers implementing the practice in their classroom (Bush, 1984).

It is evident from the literature that professional development and coaching promote meaningful change and help to sustain it. Therefore, schools must consider using professional

development to teach best practice models to their staff. This must be followed by coaching with experts to reinforce what was learned during professional development. This will also allow faculty to know about the change being implemented in the system but also help them understand why there is a need for the change. Finally, it helps staff to retain the knowledge gained during PD and provides them with clear goals to work towards.

Teams in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Collaboration within a team is essential to the process of MTSS. A collaborative culture allows individuals within a school setting to work towards a common goal by creating trust, promoting school initiatives, and sharing ideas and resources (Kemp & Poole, 2018). Working in a team allows the workload to be distributed among multiple people, thus reducing exhaustion, stress, and burnout. Teamwork also means that the initiative does not fade away or disintegrate due to staff turnover. Finally, it leads to enhanced problem-solving and increased staff buy-in (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

Roles and Functions of District Leadership Teams

District leadership teams consist of members such as the district MTSS coordinator, superintendent, curriculum directors, special education director, local community representatives, school administrators, district coaches, juvenile court representatives, and family members (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). It is helpful to include members who have the authority to make policy and funding decisions without requiring approval. The district leadership team has several roles and responsibilities that facilitate systemic reform in schools, thus playing a key role in the implementation of MTSS.

Rorrer et al. (2008) found that while implementing educational reform, districts have responsibilities in the areas of leadership, policy, organization and culture, and equity-

orientation. Firstly, district leadership creates the will to reform and builds the capacity to do so. District leaders can influence the school staff and educators' commitment to change by establishing a vision and purpose for change. Further, they are responsible for mobilizing the personnel and resources necessary and monitoring the reform efforts. Secondly, districts play the essential role of reorienting organizational structures and processes to align with the educational reform. This also results in a change of district culture (such as norms, expectations, and values). A third role of district leadership is to establish policy coherence, in that they mediate local, state, and federal policy, and ensure district-level policy coherence. The district also aligns resources with identified internal and external demands. Finally, districts must maintain an equity-focus. This includes ownership and accountability for past inequities and measures taken to reduce such occurrences in the future, for example, by ensuring transparency of data. Therefore, districts play the roles of institutional actors that serve to improve, supplement, and achieve the process of systemic reform.

Freeman et al. (2015) stated that districts can support school teams in the process of implementation by providing a curriculum with introductory information about the MTSS initiative for all staff. Further, they can also provide schools with the technology necessary for data collection, training, and other technical assistance. Districts may also have a website in place that allows schools to gain information about the district's vision and goals, as well as MTSS strategies, resources, and tools. This also acts as a one-stop platform for parents and families to increase awareness, access newsletters and learn about upcoming events.

A district leadership team provides the vision, leadership, and resources necessary for implementing a district-wide initiative (George & Kincaid, 2008). Their involvement is essential to initiating, promoting, and sustaining systemic reform in schools. The primary role of a district

in the MTSS process is to provide a structure that trains and assists building teams and provide financial assistance throughout the implementation process. This financial support may come from internal district funds, grants, donations, or fundraising (Handler et al., 2007).

Roles and Functions of Building Leadership Teams

There is no single type of team or recommended number of teams that will fit perfectly within the MTSS framework for each school. However, most schools have one or more of the following MTSS teams: individual student team, classroom team, grade-level team, school leadership team, and student support team (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). For this thesis, we will specifically focus on school leadership teams. School leadership teams consist of individuals who demonstrate an interest in MTSS (Kemp & Poole, 2018) and show effective communication, leadership, and team-building qualities. They must be willing to put in the additional time needed to implement the initiative, depending on the practices of the school building. The school leadership team may include general education teachers, special education teachers, specialists, support staff, school psychologists, counselors, and paraprofessionals (Handler et al., 2007). These teams must involve representation from across the school (e.g., different grade levels, content areas, and other school teams). The team also generally includes the school principal and a facilitator, such as an internal or external coach. Often, family members and students are limited or full members of the school leadership team to represent the concerns of students and families (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

School leadership teams are responsible for team activities, including meetings, agendas, and follow-up support, to ensure fidelity of implementation. They identify and plan specific goals (Handler et al., 2007) and provide guidance by building capacity for initial implementation and planning for long-term sustainability. They are responsible for Tier 1 interventions, while

Tier 2 and 3 interventions are usually managed by individual, classroom, or grade-level student teams. The school leadership team also communicates useful information about MTSS to the district, staff, parents, and other stakeholders such as outcomes, status, progress, and updates. The team has access to data to coordinate these roles, including fidelity data and student outcome data (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

School staff and faculty members must be actively involved in the implementation of MTSS. Before implementation begins, it is important for schools to set aside time and resources to train staff members for effective implementation of strategies. School teams must also consider when school-wide training can take place. For example, some schools prefer setting aside time during professional development sessions, while others may choose to conduct workshops after school hours or during non-school hours (Handler et al., 2007). The school must set clear expectations with the staff in advance and must also be prepared to provide compensation for training sessions.

Communication is also key to effective implementation of the multi-tiered service delivery framework. School leadership teams must ensure that there is well-planned communication with all faculty members and school administration (Handler et al., 2007). This will ensure productive feedback and discussion among team members. Decisions must also be made regarding the frequency and mode of communication. For example, weekly meetings initially may be reduced to monthly meetings later. Communication among team members may occur through in-person meetings and supplemented with brochures or email communication.

Another important role that school teams play is in staff buy-in, which can be evaluated using formal methods of assessment (Handler et al., 2007). This refers to the level of acceptance towards the implementation of reform practices. It is important for staff to agree to and commit

to the implementation of MTSS prior to the process, as it influences the perceptions of other staff. Handler et al. (2007) suggests undertaking steps to increase the level of staff buy-in, such as increasing awareness about principles of the intervention being used or using data to show its effectiveness. Buy-in towards MTSS can be encouraged within the school using word-of-mouth, testimonials, or targeted communication (Lyon, 2005).

Support Needed From District Leaders

O'Connor and Freeman (2012) surveyed approximately 650 school staff members found that only 11% of staff members strongly agreed with the statement, "In our district/school, district level leadership provides active commitment and support for school improvement actions (e.g., meets to review data and issues at least twice each year)," while almost 50% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This is a cause for concern, as district-level involvement plays a significant role in successful MTSS implementation (Freeman et al., 2015; George & Kincaid, 2008; Rorrer et al., 2008). O'Connor and Freeman (2012) also found that district leaders were not always involved in the planning of instructional initiatives. School teams may be experiencing difficulties with coordinating efforts to involve district-level teams due to busy schedules or merely because it is easier to plan with fewer individuals involved. This may result in district leaders having limited knowledge of interventions and little awareness of implementation results. The authors suggest that it is imperative for district leaders to have extensive knowledge about the initiative, the conceptual framework, and its rationale. Additionally, it is necessary for district leadership to remain updated about the dynamic nature of evidence-based practices.

Based on the existing literature, district leadership teams contribute greatly to building capacity within schools, evaluation of implementation fidelity, and long-term planning. They

provide resources, coordinate across buildings, and assist teams with assessment (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Therefore, the process of MTSS implementation must consider both the school district entity and the school buildings as units of change. Effective and sustainable MTSS implementation in schools requires district-level leadership. Provision of district support and involvement during this process has a large influence on the success of the MTSS implementation in schools (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012). Collaboration between district teams and building teams is also necessary to ensure fidelity of implementation (Vekaria, 2017).

Statement of the Problem

Since there is currently limited knowledge in the literature about the needs of school building leadership teams, this study focused on the perceptions of building leaders regarding what school MTSS teams need to better implement MTSS and how they feel their needs are being met. This can inform the gap between the perceived needs of building leaders and the support received from district leaders as they implement MTSS. The study also explored the various impacting factors of the process of implementation. Doing so allowed a deeper understanding of how these facilitators and barriers can be considered for schools who are in the early stages of the MTSS implementation process or are looking to begin implementation soon.

CHAPTER 3

Method

This section of the thesis focuses on the participants, setting, and procedure of the study. Further, the steps for data analysis and to ensure trustworthiness of data are also presented below. The study used human subjects as participants and received approval from the Institutional Review Board (See Appendix A for Institutional Review Board approval). The researchers utilized a qualitative approach to data analysis for this study due to the nature of the research question. This approach allowed the researchers to gauge an in-depth understanding of the participants' perceptions and experiences of MTSS.

Participants

Study participants included school building administrators who: (a) were members of school building leadership teams; (b) self-reported their involvement in overseeing and implementing the MTSS framework in schools, and (c) were at least 18 years of age. The sample consisted of 15 building administrators from school districts in the Mountain States. All participants volunteered to participate in this study and were contacted via email to ask if they would be willing to participate. They were required to sign a consent form before participating in the study and had the choice to withdraw from the study at any time if they wished to do so. They responded to a list of demographic questions at the beginning of the interview session (See Appendix B for Demographic Questions). They were later compensated with a $25 Amazon gift card at the completion of data collection. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned a participant code number and all personally identifiable information shared during interviews was de-identified in the transcripts and not reported in the study. Participants also had the opportunity to review their transcripts and mask any additional information they were not

comfortable sharing. Table 1 describes the demographic data of participants and the settings where they were employed.

Participants for the study were selected based on purposeful sampling, which involves selecting participants or settings for the important information they provide to the researcher (Martella et al., 2013). Purposeful sampling can be described as a method that allows the researcher to select information-rich cases to gain an in-depth insight into a research topic of central importance. There are several sampling strategies a researcher can use to select such information-rich cases. Two such strategies employed for this study were convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling involves individuals that are available to the researcher and is an easy and inexpensive way to generate a sample. Snowball sampling is used by researchers to locate key informants or information-rich cases by asking well-situated individuals about who else to talk to. Asking several people helps to create a bigger and bigger "snowball" or sample (Patton, 1990). Snowball sampling allows the researcher to include the most critical individuals in the sample, as over time, the names of these critical individuals will likely be mentioned repeatedly (Martella et al., 2013). Some limitations of using these sampling methods are the lack of representativeness of the population. Further, the use of these sampling methods does not necessarily permit for generalization of the study (Patton, 1990), as the results will be difficult to generalize to a broader format. However, attending to trustworthiness of the data analysis can limit any difficulty with generalizability.

A total of 26 individuals were contacted via email to participate in the study. Eleven individuals were not interviewed because they did not respond to the invitation. Fifteen individuals were interviewed as part of this study. Dworkin (2012) states that there is variability in what is considered an appropriate sample size for qualitative research. However, an

Table 1

Demographic Data of the 15 Participants

Characteristic	Categories	*n*
Gender		
	Male	9
	Female	6
Mean Age (in years)		46
Ethnicity		
	Caucasian	14
	Asian/Pacific-Islander	1
Highest Earned Degree		
	Masters	13
	Education Specialist (Ed. S.)	1
	Juris Doctor (J. D.)	1
Official Job Title		
	Principal	13
	Assistant Principal	2
Building Level		
	Elementary	11
	Secondary	4
Number of Years in Present Role		
	1-5 years	7
	6-10 years	5
	11-15 years	1
	16-20 years	2
Number of Years of Involvement in MTSS		
	1-5 years	6
	6-10 years	5
	11-15 years	3
	16-20 years	1
Number of Students in Building		
	1-400	2
	401-801	8
	801-1200	5

Characteristic	Categories	*n*
Number of Buildings in District		
	10-40	5
	41-70	4
	71-100	6
Type of MTSS Initiative		
	District-wide	9
	Building choice	6
Number of Years of Building MTSS Implementation		
	1-5	9
	6-10	6
Number of Members in MTSS Team		
	5-10	10
	11-16	5

adequate sample size in the literature ranges from anywhere between 5 to 50 participants in qualitative research (Dworkin, 2012). The number of participants interviewed in this study are within this range. The researchers determined this number to be sufficient for the purpose of this study, as this allowed sufficient data to answer the research question. Further, the number of participants interviewed provided the researchers with an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

Setting

Participants were contacted via email to participate in the study. A consent form and a recruitment letter with all relevant details of the study were emailed to the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a video conferencing-based online platform (i.e., Zoom). Each interview was recorded and transcribed using audio transcription for cloud recordings. Each transcript was reviewed by two researchers to ensure accuracy.

Measure

The primary measure used for conducting this research was a self-developed question guide, which was employed during the interviews (See Appendix C for Interview Guide). There are various strengths and weaknesses associated with the interview method. One important strength of this method is being able to directly solicit information from the participant, rather than through an observer (Martella et al., 2013). Further, it allows for an understanding of internal dialogue such as thoughts and feelings by asking clarifying questions to the participant. Finally, an interviewer can ask questions about a wide variety of subjects with the help of several types of open-ended questions. A limitation of the interview method is the possibility of the participant responding with what they believe the researchers want to hear or know (Martella et al., 2013). As part of this study, several strategies were implemented to ensure trustworthiness of the data, such as member checks and pilot interviews.

Prior to the interviews, the interview guide was developed by the researcher and reviewed by colleagues who are familiar with MTSS implementation. The interview questions were reviewed and refined after two pilot interviews with university faculty members. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to gain in-depth insight into the perceptions of participants, with flexibility for probes to further understand responses. Since participants were interviewed by the researcher to better understand their perceptions of what was needed from district level administrators and teams to implement MTSS effectively, this study utilized an "emic perspective" or an insider's account, as opposed to an "etic perspective" or an outsider's view (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015).

Procedure

The research study consisted of interviews with 15 school building administrators involved in an MTSS leadership team members from school districts in a western state in the United States. Participants were interviewed by the researcher using a semi-structured interview protocol following two initial pilot interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using audio transcription for cloud recordings. Each transcript was reviewed and de-identified by the primary researcher. The original transcripts were edited to account for accurate spelling, grammar, body language, and pauses. The transcriptions were also checked by a second researcher to ensure accuracy. The interview recording and transcripts were stored using cloud storage through password-protected accounts.

Each interview session occurred once and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interview began with a brief explanation of the goals of the interview and information about the participant's confidentiality, followed by a list of demographic questions. The interview questions were used to explore the participants' experience with MTSS, their relationship with the district, and their perceptions of the district's level of involvement in the implementation of MTSS. At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked the participant if they had any other thoughts that they would like to share about MTSS. The interviewer ensured that each participant provided consent to be contacted again and stated their preferred mode of contact, in case of questions or clarifications. Participants were also provided with an opportunity to review their interview transcript to ensure that it accurately reflects their views.

Research Design

The research design employed in this study was a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is a systematic approach that concerns itself with understanding the qualities of a

phenomenon that exists within a particular context. It is focused on meaning, such as how people perceive phenomenon and experience events (Martella et al., 2013). Qualitative research is also useful in understanding the role of context and relationships in forming certain thoughts and behaviors (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). For the purposes of this study, the researchers selected a qualitative approach due to the nature of the research question. When compared to quantitative analysis, this approach allowed the researchers to interpret the data with greater flexibility, while also ensuring an in-depth understanding of the entire range of participant experiences and needs.

This study sought to explore and better understand the perceptions and needs of building team leaders regarding MTSS in schools through semi-structured interviews. The interview method allows a researcher to learn what is on someone's mind (Patton, 1990). It also allows them to enter the interviewee's world and understand their experiences more thoroughly (Martella et al., 2013). Using the interview method, a researcher can attempt to understand the complexities of subjective experiences and perceptions. The interview method was considered appropriate for this study as it allowed researchers to gain an understanding of participants' needs and experiences regarding MTSS. Further, since this is a semi-structured interview, the interview questions may be accompanied by probes and follow-up questions, to allow for discussion, flexibility, and clarification of participants' perspectives (Patton, 1990).

Data Analysis

The data for this study were collected from the interviews with participating building-level administrators. Once the interviews were transcribed, transcripts were reviewed multiple times to identify patterns within the data. A spreadsheet was used to organize and analyze data within and across interviews. This spreadsheet also helped the researchers determine the prevalence of each category and theme within and across interviews.

Data analysis was done by generating ‘a priori’ and ‘open’ codes in two phases. First, the process of coding was predetermined, by using a priori codes that were generated prior to data analysis. A priori codes may be based on a coding dictionary from another researcher, or on key concepts and theories in the literature (Stuckey, 2015). For this study, a priori codes were generated based on the impacting factors of MTSS found in a review of the literature. The data were then reviewed to find a priori codes within-case (i.e., codes that appeared within individual interviews) and across-case (i.e., codes that were seen across multiple interviews) to detect patterns in the data.

Secondly, coding was done following a preliminary examination of the data. Open or emergent codes may be established once the data are exposed to meanings, ideas, and thoughts (Khandkar, 2009). Thus, open codes were generated based on data from the interviews. The final step of data analysis involved axial coding to identify relationships and make connections among the open and a priori codes (Borgatti, 2005), leading to overarching categories (or sub-themes) and themes. The categories and themes based on the findings are presented in order of prevalence in the next chapter.

Trustworthiness of Research

There are several strategies that can be utilized to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Brantlinger et al. (2005) provide some examples of credibility measures including triangulation, disconfirming evidence, member checks, collaborative work, and external auditors. Korstjens and Moser (2018) recommend five quality criteria to check trustworthiness of qualitative data: credibility, transferability, dependability, reflexivity, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility, one of the key aspects of qualitative research, is the confidence that can be placed in the trustworthiness of the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Two pilot interviews with university faculty members were conducted to ensure the appropriateness and clarity of interview questions. These pilot interviews helped inform researchers about the credibility of the interview measure. To establish credibility for this study, analyst triangulation was also used. In addition to the primary researcher, the reviews of the findings of this study were reviewed by multiple researchers. The researchers involved in the analyst triangulation process included a faculty staff member and a graduate student colleague with in-depth knowledge of MTSS implementation, as well as an undergraduate student who was provided with training on MTSS practices. Further, member checks were also employed. This means that participants had the opportunity to review their interview transcript, determine the accuracy of the data, and make any necessary clarifications before data analysis. Each of the 15 participants were sent a copy of their interview transcript for member checks. Eight participants responded positively, stating that the transcript was reflective of the interview, and zero participants requested edits or clarifications.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which results of a study can be transferred or generalized to other contexts with different participants. The use of thick descriptions of participants, setting, method, data collection, and analysis was used to ensure transferability of this study. Thick descriptions mean reporting sufficient study details and participant quotes to provide evidence for researchers' interpretations and conclusions (Brantlinger et al., 2005). This can help other

researchers determine the extent to which the aspects of the current study may be transferrable to their own study.

Dependability

Dependability is the stability of findings over time. For the findings of this study to be dependable, audit trailing was used. Audit trailing refers to the process of keeping track of relevant details and procedures of the study (Brantlinger et al., 2005). This was used to document the study over time and substantiate that sufficient time was spent to claim dependable and confirmable results. Further, 15 participants were interviewed across multiple schools, school districts, and grade levels.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which the findings of a study can be confirmed by other researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure confirmability of the study, the interview transcripts and findings were reviewed by other research colleagues and by the thesis chair. The use of the audit trail also adds to the confirmability of the study.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves the researcher's attempts to self-disclose their beliefs, assumptions, and biases (Brantlinger et al., 2005). This ensures that the researcher's implicit biases or assumptions do not impact research findings. The researchers involved in data collection were school psychology graduate students at a private university institution with no prior experience of implementing MTSS in schools. They were not involved in either providing or receiving MTSS services during this study. A reflexivity journal was also used through the research process, detailing what the researcher did and why. This was used to document key decisions and

procedures of the research. It was also used as a written record for personal introspections of researcher perceptions and biases and steps that were taken to correct these.

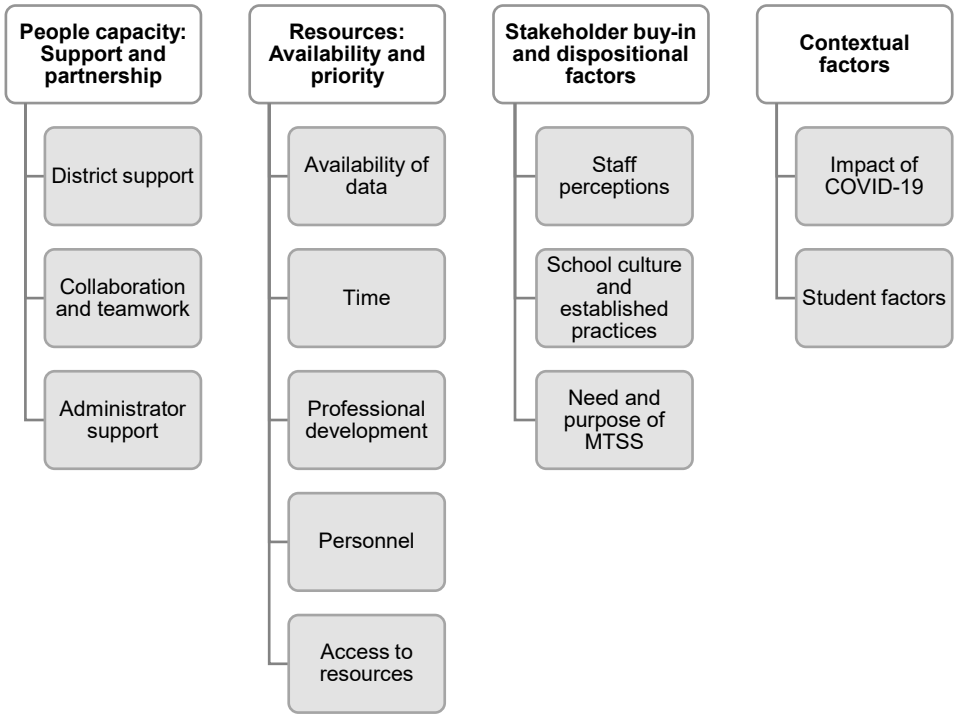
CHAPTER 4

Findings

This chapter presents the results of this study in the form of codes, categories, and themes. Interview data was thoroughly reviewed and coded for a priori and open codes. Axial coding was then used to identify overarching categories and themes among the codes. Four themes and 13 categories emerged in response to the following research question: According to building leaders in public schools, what impacting factors arise during MTSS implementation? These themes and categories are presented in order of prevalence below, starting with the most frequently occurring themes and categories. However, it is important for readers to note the intertwining and interconnected nature of the categories and themes within the data. Figure 1 presents the findings of this study based on prevalence in a synoptic table, which describes the various impacting factors of MTSS according to building administrators.

Figure 1

Factors Impacting the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Implementation Process



Theme One: People Capacity: Support and Partnership

The first theme refers to the critical role that people play in MTSS practices. Participants believed that the expertise and leadership qualities of people can act as an impacting factor for MTSS and contribute to its success. Three categories are included in this theme, specifically: district support; collaboration and teamwork; and administrator support.

Category One: District Support

This category was defined by the district's ability and willingness to support buildings through the provision of resources, as well as guidance and consultation. The category also addressed factors beyond the school district's control. Participants believed that district-level support and leadership is important for successful and sustainable MTSS implementation. When asked about the support provided by their district, participant S3 likened it to running an MTSS program with their building: "I think just like we treat our students in MTSS, the district leaders treat us …. They're running an MTSS program with us because they're positive and when they see that you need help, they're willing to give it."

Provision of resources at the district level was a significant idea for several participants. Resources provided by the district included training or professional development opportunities, access to district-level personnel, intervention materials, and financial support. Participants shared the value of district support to building teams. For example, S3 shared: "The district wants schools to do MTSS …. They're willing to put in the time and money and effort to train and support schools because … schools see that it can work when you put in the effort." District support was also especially helpful for staff buy-in, as noted by S3: "It's like our district supported us and then the teachers … just, you know, got right on board. So, it was kind of like a ground swelling, because we [had] the district supporting us and sending us to classes."

This category also included the district's ability to provide buildings with consultative and guidance support when needed, such as providing feedback, assisting with problem-solving, making recommendations, giving advice, and acting as a collaborative partner in the MTSS process. Knowledge and expertise at the district level was found to be beneficial as a guide for MTSS implementation. For example, participant S4 shared that they can be "hands-on" with their MTSS implementation, while having the ability to reach out to the district when they need assistance or support. While talking about the biggest facilitators for MTSS, S12 responded with the following: "The people at the district level are really impacting us as a school … It's hard to do things alone so they're impacting me in a way, and … then I in turn, [am] impacting my teachers." S4 also elaborated on how district support can help inspire or boost confidence for the building MTSS team.

> [District support is] empowering for us …. I don't feel like we're going to get any situation that we can't handle because I don't have to be the smartest person in the room. I know who to call, and they're smarter than I am about it …. We have a lot of confidence going into this because we don't feel like we're on our own.

The category of district support also included the autonomy that schools have to implement MTSS in a way that matches their specific needs. This meant that the district provided support to its schools for MTSS implementation in the aforementioned ways, while also allowing them to maintain autonomy during the process. Interviewees noted that MTSS was a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down one, thus providing school teams with sufficient freedom and independence to create an individualized MTSS framework, select interventions, and design tiers of implementation. This also includes the caveat that when the need arises, building teams must reach out and request support from the district. While some participants

appreciated this approach, others appeared to be more hesitant about it. For instance, S13 stated: “There [isn’t] coordinated or regular follow-up from the district. I don't know if that's because we're doing it and they don't need to follow up. If I was a school that was struggling with it, maybe they would.”

The final idea within this theme addressed those factors that were beyond the control and power of the school district. Interviewees recognized that districts were willing and motivated to support their schools in their MTSS efforts but were often limited by factors like multiple priorities and limited resources, budgets, and personnel. S2 addressed the lack of resources being beyond the district’s control: “I really feel the district gives us whatever they can, but sometimes they just can't. You know, [it] just boils down to money really, in so many ways.” Further, S11 added: “The district [tries] to provide and spread their resources as well as they can …. I think there's a desire to provide that and willingness to provide it, but sometimes just not the resources to provide it.” S9 emphasized the role of district support provided in the face of such factors beyond control: “There's a lot of things that, unfortunately, in education are outside of our control. I have addressed those concerns with my supervisor and she's helped me problem-solve … to synthesize things for teachers.”

Category Two: Collaboration and Teamwork

This category was defined by several codes, including effective communication and collaboration; teamwork; dispersed leadership; home and community collaboration; school improvement efforts; and learning from other schools. Collaboration between stakeholders helped to increase MTSS effectiveness and provide ways to support staff during implementation.

Effective communication and collaboration are defined by continued, regular, and consistent communication or collaboration between school staff members and across MTSS tiers

of implementation. Some ways participants described collaboration was encouraging teamwork, having regular meetings, and using collaborative decision-making. MTSS is a teamwork-based initiative that must involve all key stakeholders and be well representative of the entire staff body, including members such as administrators, counselors, school psychologists, and general and special education teachers. Participant S4 discussed the importance of this: "I think that was really vital to get those key players in there because they're really the ones we turn to here …. Plus, it gave such a well-rounded voice as we were trying to implement this." Teamwork in MTSS is also defined by regular team meetings, where staff may share data, collaborate for decision-making, follow up, and support each other.

Being a people-focused practice, MTSS must also involve dispersed leadership. This means that MTSS ownership and responsibilities are shared by many individuals, thus allowing for mutual accountability and collective responsibility. S12 captured this idea while explaining, "The collaboration is huge. If we're not collaborating and sharing our ideas, then we can't move forward. Because one person can't have all the answers. It has to be a shared control." Another important aspect of this code was that of collaboration between staff members with various perceptions about MTSS, specifically those with social power who can collaborate with others to positively influence them about MTSS. Participant S13 talked about the importance of the social influence that such educators may have on their colleagues: "You have to have teachers on the team who are … 'movers and shakers' in the school, who are more influential so that you have teacher buy-in and have … your best and brightest helping you with these interventions."

Integration of school improvement efforts was a key idea within the category of collaboration. Some participants shared how MTSS initiatives work in tandem with other school improvement efforts. Participant S11 noted how MTSS is tied with other school initiatives and

separating the initiatives is difficult: “Everything we do within the schools is so multi-layer that they all play a role together …. So, it's hard to completely separate just MTSS from any of the other initiatives that we do.” Another aspect of collaboration was between the school and the home and community. Effective MTSS practices incorporate family and community inclusion and collaboration. Participant S7 discussed some ways they practice family-school collaboration in their building: “We did start sending home our Theme for the Month to read a quick little thing that explains what we're discussing here at school in the efforts of parents discussing things at home. So, it's not just at school.” Collaboration with the community could involve sharing details on MTSS initiatives within the school.

Lastly, participants discussed the value of collaborating with and learning from other schools implementing MTSS. Collaboration between schools or school administrators to disseminate information, resources, and/or materials is a beneficial starting point for teams that are just beginning implementation. In this regard, participant S5 commented that, “I really feel like the most effective way for me as an administrator to get support is by getting chances to talk to other schools who are just a little bit ahead of me in their implementation.” They also added that they would be willing to do the same with building teams who are just getting started to share ideas that did and did not work for their own team. This would also help save time and effort for building teams who are just starting out in the process. Participant S7 also shared the usefulness of collaboration opportunities between building leaders, “It would [be] nice to have more interaction between principals who are trying to do this together …. I think that would have been helpful … to touch base with each other, see how we're doing.”

Category Three: Administrator Support

Administrator support was defined as the ability and willingness of building administrators to get involved in MTSS implementation, provide support and encouragement for MTSS interventions, and take responsibility for provision of intervention resources. The data showed that building leaders attributed students' success to their school's MTSS interventions and reported that they tried to find ways to stay involved in its implementation.

Building administrators have a range and variety of roles that are involved in implementing MTSS. In the interview sessions, administrators reported facilitating and/or participating in MTSS meetings, recognizing and reinforcing positive behaviors, sharing school-wide MTSS communication, tracking and analyzing data, and monitoring tiered interventions. For instance, S3 discussed the importance of communication about MTSS: "My position as the school leader is to make sure that information is getting out during faculty meetings … that I'm making sure that people are attending the meetings." Administrators often took on the responsibility of tracking or analyzing data, as explained by S7: "When I can, I keep track of data myself in the form of how many office referrals are taking place … how much time is being spent on resolving discipline and behavior issues."

The overall consensus among participants was that MTSS is more successful when administrators are involved as much as possible, sometimes even providing rewarding interactions with students. S10 noted their involvement by providing rewards and prizes for students through a "Principal's 200 club": "We give out a reward … everyday, we put names up on the board …. If they get [one] whole row on the chart, … they get a [big] prize … once a month." Further, S3 discussed the participation of building administrators in Tier 2 interventions like Check-In/Check-Out at their school: "I also do … a Check-In and Check-Out. So students

that are having a hard time coming to school, they can come in and do [this] with either me or my assistant principal." Participants emphasized the diverse nature of their role as building administrators, as captured by S4.

> I am a reward for our kids … if they choose then they can play a game with me. So, I look at that as my role too, that I'm on both sides of that: I'm the "big disciplinarian" that if something comes down to the office, you are in trouble and this is not a good thing, but … my office is another classroom, and we are just learning how to … follow the rules and be a successful student. But it's also I'm the first to high-five you if you're doing something right too.

Support and encouragement from administrators included advocating for the use of MTSS interventions, helping increase staff buy-in, providing feedback, and creating open lines of communication with staff. Participant S5 described their role of a building administrator as being akin to that of a cheerleader: "As an administrator, it comes back to us to be actively promoting it, actively encouraging people to use the system, expecting it, giving feedback. Giving kudos, you know, kind of, yeah, cheerleaders." Several participants also emphasized the benefits of providing staff with incentives or reinforcements for MTSS. Administrators also helped their staff by providing emotional support and guidance, as explained by S12: "So it's educating teachers and being there and being present and being a part of the process that I'm learning too, I'm not the expert. But we're going to learn together and we're going to figure this out." Further, S14 shared that their role is to "provide [teachers] support in the classroom, … when they have a difficult student."

Finally, participants also shared that they supported staff by organizing and providing resources for MTSS. Access to these resources also helped to increase their skill set and

confidence regarding MTSS. Participant S9 explained their role in this area: “My primary role in implementing MTSS is to get together the key players … in making decisions for how we will [allocate] resources … and help them have the right tools [needed] to make decisions for all our students.” S15 also emphasized that administrators have a responsibility to continually explore the best resources to ensure ongoing learning for their staff: “I feel like my role is to … look for any kind of resource out there, whether it be in our school or outside of our school, to break down … barriers for students so they can be successful.”

Theme Two: Resources: Availability and Priority

This theme refers to a team’s access to various resources in the building that may be used during MTSS implementation. Overall, participants felt that these resources played a valuable role in the MTSS process. This theme included the following categories: availability of data; time; professional development; personnel; and access to resources.

Category One: Availability of Data

The first category within this theme focused on data and its availability. Specifically, the inclusion of data within the MTSS process, the availability of varied sources of student data, and the use of data tracking programs. Participants emphasized the use of data in the MTSS process, in that all MTSS decisions are made based on school-wide or progress monitoring data. For example, participant S6 stated that, “[A] big component is to collect data on the behaviors throughout the school so that you can review that as … an MTSS team and make decisions that are data-based.” Additionally, S6 noted the importance of consistently reviewing the data to monitor progress: “I would suggest making [MTSS] data-focused so that you’re frequently reviewing data across the implementation years to see if what you're doing is working.”

The interview data showed that MTSS teams within the participating buildings prioritized the use of several data sources to monitor student progress and response to interventions. Some frequently mentioned examples included standardized testing scores, performance on district benchmark tests, number of office discipline referrals, intervention data, assignment submissions, attendance records, student grade point average (GPA), grades, and graduation rates. In addition to these data sources, participant S8 noted the importance of using anecdotal data: “It's not all about data too. Some anecdotal information that you get from students or parents to say, ‘Hey, thank you for the climate that's being established here’ may be more powerful and motivating than just a number.”

The other aspect of the availability of data is the use of programs to track, collect, and analyze data, as well as view trends. Some frequently mentioned examples of such programs found in the data included Educator's Handbook, Panorama, SWIS, and PBIS Rewards. The use of such databases allows MTSS teams to note spikes in behaviors and specifically, the time, location, grade level, and type of behavior. While these programs were frequently mentioned in association with the behavioral side of MTSS, data is also critical for academic interventions. Academically, teams are able to use data tracking programs to determine the response to the intervention and monitor progress, as explained by S5: “So what do we see after … these interventions have been prescribed and what percentage are remediated or addressed in that [Tier] one [or] two stage, as opposed to needing to go to [Tier] three.” Finally, some participants added that while access to data is helpful, the lack of a proper system to track the data can be a limitation for their MTSS team. This sentiment was effectively captured by participant S12: “I think one thing we struggle with … is if we could come up with a system to track interventions and data … We have so much data and we don't know what to do with it.”

Category Two: Time

Participants noted the significance of time in multiple ways. Firstly, data from the interviews indicated that MTSS requires sufficient time commitment from all involved stakeholders for implementation of MTSS interventions, documentation of interventions, meetings, paperwork, and training. The category of Time also highlighted that educators have a large, heavy workload with many job duties and little time to integrate the additional tasks that are a part of MTSS implementation (e.g., team meetings, data analyses, instruction planning for students needing tiered instruction). This included the value of an educator's time, in that they have limited time during the school day to work on MTSS-related tasks. An already large workload and other job duties take up most of a teacher's time, leaving them with little to no time to focus on MTSS. For example, participant S7 emphasized the limited time for an educator and how MTSS initiatives can compete with several other job responsibilities, causing negative perceptions of MTSS: "The one challenge that came up initially was teachers and staff viewing this as a chore or a hindrance to their time which is – I think that's an educator's most valuable resource is their time."

Participants also noted the importance of time needed to consider, practice, and reflect on MTSS practices learned during training and professional development. Participant S9 noted that "knowledge without time to implement or time to consider or time to reflect or time to put those things in place, it's just good stuff that you know, right?" Finally, this category also included the idea that time needs to be built into the school schedule that is dedicated solely to MTSS for collaboration, feedback, instruction, and interventions. Further, MTSS must compete with other school initiatives for time. Participant S7 shared their ideal desire to implement MTSS without having to take care of other school-related responsibilities:

> In my perfect world, we'd be able to learn about and implement these things outside of trying to run a school at the same time …. It'd be great to just devote yourself entirely to something without your real job having to happen in the background that you still gotta go take care of.

Category Three: Professional Development

Many participants noted that it was critical to provide training and professional development opportunities for staff members involved in MTSS efforts to help build their capacity and knowledge. Participant S4 specifically emphasized the importance of training all school staff members, and not just teachers: "We trained everyone, and we have everyone involved, from our custodian to our lunch ladies to … our recess assistants." Additionally, S5 discussed the best timing to provide professional development by emphasizing the importance of training before the onset of the MTSS program: "Yeah, and that's why you know, initial training – if you're totally coming into it cold, you really have to have taken a team already to several trainings and to observe another school." Several participants also noted the importance of consistent and regular professional development opportunities to help refresh learning, reflect on current MTSS practices, provide training on new practices, and boost staff confidence.

Providing training for MTSS was noted as important for several reasons. For instance, S9 captured the importance of helping educators learn and understand the "why" of MTSS: "I would say get a good training that helps teachers understand the intention and the best practices in MTSS. And if you can empower them with good information and give them time, they can make anything happen." Further, some participants shared that training for each aspect of MTSS is important. Participant S8 emphasized the valuable combination of training with mentorship opportunities, like a coach: "I would say … where you have a whole program, there's a number

of trainings and facilitators that walk through step by step. And then you've got a coach to evaluate and help you go through each stage of the implementation." Finally, some participants opined that while training on MTSS implementation is important, training on data interpretation and analysis is equally important. For example, participant S13 mentioned: "I would appreciate more comprehensive data training. So, although I have all this data at my fingertips, a better ability to analyze it."

Category Four: Personnel

Personnel refers to the staff level required to support tiered interventions in the school, including but not limited to interventionists, behavior specialists, social workers, teacher aides, instructional assistants, school psychologists, counselors, and English as a Second Language (ESL) tutors. This category also included the building administrator's perception of the value of people as a resource. Participants emphasized the critical importance of hiring more people, which will positively impact MTSS implementation and fidelity. For example, participant S11 noted the importance of personnel in the MTSS implementation process: "I think it would be helpful to have more ESL tutors … [and] social workers …. You know, the social-emotional needs right now and the mental health aspect – more counselors."

The category of personnel also includes guidance and support from MTSS experts during the implementation process such as mentors or coaches. Participant S6 explained the value of consulting with MTSS experts: "I would tell them to have someone knowledgeable to guide you through the process that you can consult with." Participant S8 expressed similar views, "And then you've got a coach to evaluate and help you go through each stage of the implementation." Included in this category also are the financial expenses while hiring MTSS personnel. Several participants reflected on their need to hire more personnel but not being able to, due to the hiring

costs involved. Participant S1 shared that, “I think it would be really nice to have a little bit more money and a little bit more help. We can do a lot more than we currently are if we could afford more people.”

Category Five: Access to Resources

Access and availability of resources including supplies, materials, physical space, intervention programs, and financial resources were noted in several interviews as key impacting factors for MTSS. While many participants spoke about resources in general, some did elaborate on the specific resources. Some examples of frequently mentioned resources included evidence-based intervention programs, intervention materials, forms, rewards for positive reinforcement, and monetary investments to afford all these resources.

Access to interventions through evidence-based programs was a valuable aspect of this category. Participant S15 shared that, “The research-based programs that we could give to instructional assistants to be able to facilitate with targeted interventions have been really, really huge.” Several participants emphasized the value of district-wide forms or rubrics that could walk a school team through the steps of MTSS implementation. Participant S6 noted the importance of such forms being consistent and straightforward: “So the forms we have right now, there's lots of steps involved and I think teachers get overwhelmed. So really simplifying the process to [its] basic components is important.” Physical space was another key consideration for some building leaders. For example, participant S2 noted that:

> Well, I guess … sometimes it just helps to have the right building, you know? If you don't have the facilities to do it, which is a huge cost, but we are very blessed with a great building that has extra space to [work with] … these little ones.

Access to financial resources was another significant idea within this category. Participants focused on the role of monetary investments in the MTSS implementation process, specifically when it comes to affording other MTSS resources like posters, intervention materials, and rewards for positive reinforcement. While several participants stressed their need for more money to improve their MTSS efforts, others shared that they have had to resort to finding money from other sources like external grants, building funds, or donations from community businesses. Speaking to other buildings starting to implement MTSS, S13 shared that: "If money is ever your excuse, that shouldn't be. There's tons of people and grants that you can apply for … So don't worry about money. Make the plan first and then find the money if that makes sense."

Theme Three: Stakeholder Buy-in and Dispositional Factors

This theme refers to factors surrounding staff willingness to implement MTSS, as well as their general perceptions or outlook towards the practice. The theme included the following categories: staff perceptions; culture and established practices; and need and purpose of MTSS.

Category One: Staff Perceptions

This category referred to the perceptions of staff towards MTSS practices. Specifically, this included staff buy-in and attitudes towards MTSS, as well as resistance towards MTSS. Participants reported that the perceptions of those key stakeholders involved in implementation had a great impact on the success of MTSS practices. Firstly, staff buy-in and positive attitudes towards MTSS are key for implementation due to the systemic changes that occur with regards to school structure and culture. Staff attitudes included individual reactions and perspectives towards MTSS, such as positivity, acceptance, cynicism, hesitation, or resistance. Buy-in refers to educators' agreement and commitment towards the practice of MTSS. Administrators

discussed ways to increase buy-in among staff, such as discussing the "why" of MTSS, incentives for participation, and support during the process. Several participants emphasized the key role that MTSS plays in supporting staff. For example, S14 shared that, "I think that they view it as … tools for them in their classroom. They view … the behavior side of things as being a support." Additionally, S9 added that: "I think most view it as … we've given them the recipe for success and they're going to add their own ingredients, put their own flair on it."

Resistance towards MTSS was another key idea within this category. This was coded separately from staff attitudes and buy-in, due to its significance within the data. Perceptions of resistance stemmed from multiple factors, such as a lack of understanding of MTSS. S13 shared how many individuals in their building may have difficulty knowing or explaining what MTSS is: "I don't know how many [could] define or explain what MTSS [is] if you actually use those words …. I don't know if many teachers could talk about the philosophy of PBIS as well as the [PBIS] team members could." Another relevant factor was difficulty with adapting to change. Resistance was often rooted in a "fixed mindset" or difficulty adapting to newer ways of doing things, as explained by S1: "[Teachers] were used to having kids pulled out of their classroom. Like, 'I can't deal with [this kid] … I'm going to have somebody come get them.' When that changed … it required teachers to react to [kids] differently."

S2 added that some teachers struggled to adapt to taking ownership of students with greater than typical academic and/or behavioral needs: "We've had teachers … who insist that it's not their problem, [they] can't do it all, and [they've] got to pay attention to all the rest of the kids … instead of spending so much time with this one." Similarly, S12 discussed the lack of ownership for their role in implementing interventions for students who are struggling academically or behaviorally: "A lot of things I hear from teachers are … out of their control,

such as “Parents don't care, why should I?”, “Parents don't support me!” and “The kid’s not succeeding because parents won't help them with their homework.” Resistance also stemmed from the traditional separation of teaching roles between general and special education. For instance, S2 elaborated by stating, “There are some [teachers] that may think, ‘Well, this isn't the kind of child that I was hired to teach …. And so, it's the special [education] department’s problem, not mine, to educate those kids.’”

Resistance was also rooted in the belief that MTSS challenges one’s self-efficacy. Participant S5 discussed the perspectives of some educators who may feel this way: “[They] feel like [MTSS is] too regimented, taking away from their autonomy, or questioning their professionalism.” S5 added that teachers may have thoughts such as, “As a teacher, I know what to teach and how to intervene. For you to say that I should intervene in this different way is to say that I'm not a good teacher or I'm not professional.” Others found it difficult to adapt due to their dislike for the structure provided by the MTSS framework, as S5 also explained, “It was painful at first for some teachers, because it's just not their natural nature. Some of them are more easy-going and to have that much structure and routine is painful for them.”

Some participants opined that resistance could be based on feelings of fear, such as fear of change, uncertainty, or personal inadequacies. S5 stated that, "I think for some it is fear, it's fear that [MTSS is] not a natural way for them to do it and they're going to do it wrong.” S4 explained that while they did not have any direct pushback or resistance from staff, they did experience difficulties adapting to MTSS: “I don't feel like we really had pushback. I feel like it was just a lot of nervousness … and I think really that [fear of the] unknown. It was a learning curve for all of us.” Some other factors that resulted in resistance towards MTSS included the lack of motivation to participate, the time involved in seeing results, and the unwillingness to

share data. S12 commented on the perception of MTSS being a trend, "[Teachers] think, 'Oh, this is a trend that's going to go away.' And I'm surprised they're still saying that … Because how are you going to affect change in individual kids if you don't focus on the individual kid?"

While it has its disadvantages, resistance appeared to be important to several participants while implementing a program like MTSS. S9 explained that: "I think resistance is important [in] the development and implementation of MTSS …. Typically resistors in education aren't just … naysayers, they have good ideas of what could happen. Resistance … really does help to strengthen what you're doing." Further, S1 likened resistance to "growing pains" and stated that, "There's always growing pains when you have to get better."

Category Two: Culture and Established Practices

The category of culture and established practices included the following codes: school culture, scope for improvement, and explicit instruction and expectations. This category focused on the values and beliefs of the building, as well as the routines, procedures, and systems established within its culture. The first code, school culture, referred to how MTSS impacted a school's culture and the ways in which components of MTSS are embedded within the school's culture. S12 explained how MTSS is tied to the school's overall culture and ways of thinking: "[MTSS has] become part of the way we think. It's not the "old school" of 'I do this as a whole class and that's it.' In order to reach all kids, we need to do small-group or individual help." Further, MTSS is established on the values of helping students and improving one's skills, as explained by S11: "You have to create a culture where you want to help kids … That desire to continuously improve as a school and as a faculty [is a big part of MTSS], so we can get better at helping kids." A school culture of transparency and mutual understanding is also necessary for the success of MTSS. S14 stated that, "Everyone in these teams needs to be vulnerable and

[have] confidence with each other that we can just be open and talk and try to start slowly by building a culture of that type of environment."

While MTSS slowly becomes a part of the building's culture over time, it also often initiates and brings about changes within the culture when implemented. S15 explained how MTSS helped transition the school culture from a punitive one to that of a growth mindset for students: "There were … about 40 kids that missed recess every day because they [did] something wrong. Students lied [to avoid getting] in trouble. It [took] years to change that culture to 'Everybody makes mistakes …. We're going to fix this.'" Participant S4 discussed how MTSS impacted the culture in terms of ownership of students: "The culture of the school before was: if they're not your [student], leave them alone …. [MTSS] was asking kids to look differently at adults in the building and it was asking the adults to [take ownership]." Another aspect of school culture was that MTSS is closely linked with other school initiatives that are part of the school's culture.

Another code within this category was that of scope for improvement. This referred to the idea that MTSS necessitates continuous improvement over time. Schools must establish practices to review the fidelity of MTSS interventions and evaluate effectiveness. S1 discussed this evolving nature of MTSS: "It improves every year. I don't think we see it as a "We've arrived" yet …. It's gotten better over the years and only continues to get better." S2 also discussed the scope for improvement within MTSS: "It is a program that's not just set in stone that will last forever. It does need to be improved as time goes by." Several participants addressed the length of the MTSS process. S12 emphasized this by stating: "Go a step at a time, and it's going to take some years. It's not something that can be done in a few months but celebrate those changes that you see as you go." S9 compared the growth and evolution of MTSS to the cycle of teaching and

intervention the model: “The cycle of MTSS is that you teach and then intervene. And then you reteach and then intervene. I think the MTSS implementation process would be remiss if it stopped intervening on itself and stopped reteaching and stopped growing.”

The last code in the category of culture and established practices was explicit instruction of behavioral expectations. MTSS involves systematic, explicit, and clear instruction of behavioral expectations. These expectations must be a critical part of a school’s culture. It is also important that a clear and explicit system for academic and behavioral interventions is set up so that all staff members are on the same page. For example, school-wide rules, expectations, and consequences are often established as part of a Tier 1 school-wide positive behavior intervention system, wherein students are rewarded for expected behaviors. S13 explained that it is important to “solidify 3 to 5 school rules that everyone can get on board with that are simple to remember and understand.” S4 explained that the priority after establishing the rules is to get everyone on the same page: “Everyone understanding exactly what the expectations are, and exactly what we are going to do if kids do follow the rules and if they don't …. Because we all had a different mindset as to what that looked like.”

Explicit instruction of expectations was another big idea among participants. S4 elaborated on the strategies used to establish and reinforce these expectations, such as trainings and posters in various locations around the building (e.g., classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, and bathrooms). Ensuring that expectations are modeled and frequently reviewed was also key to success of Tier 1 behavioral instruction, as discussed by S6: “A big component is making sure that we are teaching [and modeling] the behaviors. We're reviewing it for them frequently and we're rewarding throughout the year, not just at the beginning of the year.” S5 also emphasized the role of reteaching expectations in “hotspot” locations, such as the playground or hallways:

"We just finished our second term reteach of expectations. I [focused on] the playground, because it's … always a hotspot, so that I could be sure to make the expectations clear and explicit for the kids." S15 further added that explicit language within the MTSS process is key to its success: "I need to make sure that the language we're using throughout the school is similar, so that students recognize what being respectful [or being kind] looks like and sounds like … and feel successful in following those."

Category Three: Need and Purpose of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

This category focused on awareness of the need and purpose of MTSS. Participant S7 focused on the importance of being aware of the need for MTSS, "You have to help the school recognize that there is a need [for MTSS]. If there is no perceived need, they [will] view it as something they [have] to do to get you off their back." S8 emphasized the importance of "selling" the idea of MTSS to staff: "You [have] to … sell people on why [MTSS] is a good idea. Do you have data and evidence from other schools that was successful and why? They [need] a "why" or … they're not going to do it." Part of this category also included sharing the vision and mission of MTSS with staff members. It was not only important for administrators to identify this vision, but also to be able to communicate it with their team. S12 emphasized the importance of identifying the "why" with the MTSS team: "Why are we looking at data? Why do we meet for PLCs? Why do we worry about it? Why do interventions? Why follow MTSS? It comes down to what's best for kids." S14 also discussed the importance of sharing the goals of MTSS: "Give [teachers] a vision of 'We need to create supports for kids. We need to make sure that we're helping kids learn and not fall behind.'"

It was also essential for participants to discuss the effectiveness of MTSS with staff, through evidence and data, success stories, and other anecdotal information. S5 explained this by

stating: “Just keep showing [teachers] how it's making a difference at your school because they may or may not see right away in their own class, but hopefully they'll see [it] in the school, especially if you point it out.” S7 explained ways to incorporate MTSS into school communication: “[I] always incorporate MTSS themes into our communication, like our bulletin for the month. Also, when we have our faculty meeting, devoting time to our team to share how things are going with everybody.” Finally, the category also included the positive impact of MTSS, in that it has direct benefits for administrators. S7 elaborated on how MTSS saves time for administrators: “Less time is spent on being a disciplinarian, one of the many facets of being a school administrator …. That's what drove me to do this, is because I’m benefiting from it too … helping me be a more effective educational leader.”

Theme Four: Contextual Factors

The theme of contextual factors referred to any relevant impacting factors that did not fall within the other themes. This theme included the following categories: impact of COVID-19 pandemic and student factors.

Category One: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

This category focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on school-based MTSS implementation. This included the following codes: socio-emotional impact, improvements in behavior problems, and impact on MTSS implementation. Concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on the socio-emotional health of students and staff were coded as socio-emotional impact. For example, S12 discussed the difficulties for teachers due to COVID-19: “My teachers are … teaching the kids, worrying about their mental health, and struggling with our own mental health, yet we're required to do these interventions and we're required to teach and they [just] want a break.” S4 also elaborated on the impact of COVID-19 for students and teachers:

“Teachers and students are … just wound up to here (gestures). They're just ready to snap … from all of the changes and the stresses that have come since last spring. It's been really rough.”

COVID-19 also resulted in reduced behavior concerns in schools. Several participants discussed improved behaviors due to guidelines related to social distancing and mask-wearing. For example, S4 elaborated on the improvements in behavior concerns due to COVID-19: “The behaviors, honestly, are fantastic this year. And I think that's because kids are in masks and they're far away and so it's not as easy to disrupt each other and to talk and goof off together.” S5 added that the structure already in place from the MTSS framework made it easier to adjust to COVID-19 distancing guidelines: “With COVID, it was easier because [students] already knew, ‘Oh, this is how we do this.’ So instead of quietly walking on one side, now we quietly walk down the hallway zombie arms so that we have our space.”

The final aspect of this category focused on the overall impact of COVID-19 on MTSS. One factor that was addressed was the limited amount of time to focus on MTSS, as noted by S6: "This year, … COVID has monopolized everybody's time.” Several participants emphasized the “survival mode” that school staff and students were in during the pandemic. S8 noted that “COVID-19 makes [MTSS] a challenge. We're dealing with a pandemic so any initiatives … get put on pause, like we’ve just got to get through the day, and through the week.” S10 added that: “I think with COVID-19, it's really taken a lot out of our resources and people and things like that. And so, I think MTSS got put on the backburner, especially at the beginning of the year.”

Participants discussed the many changes in the implementation of MTSS interventions due to the pandemic. For instance, S5 explained how COVID-19 altered the way reinforcements are provided to students: “We used to do Principal’s 200 club … But this year, not wanting to have paper tickets being passed around, and kids coming in and out of the halls to draw their

number from the bucket….” With these changes came innovation, with an increased use of technology to support new ways of implementation. For example, S5 discussed the use of a mobile-based application called PBIS rewards: “We switched to using an app … called PBIS rewards, where the kids wear a barcode on their lanyard and you can scan them, any staff member can scan them with a phone, to give them points.” Due to COVID-19, there was also limited district support with regards to training and regular meetings. S12 discussed the change of priorities that occurred due to COVID-19: “All of our meetings are … being cut. I don't attend as many meetings. Teachers don't have as much [professional development]. Somehow, we need to bring that back to the forefront. Before COVID, it was always being talked about.” S7 elaborated on the lack of meetings and professional development due to COVID-19: “They tried to [meet] virtually [last year] just to have something take place, but … not everyone participated, and it wasn't a set time … So, I don't feel like there was a lot of new stuff introduced.”

Category Two: Student Factors

This category addressed the relationship between MTSS implementation and student-related factors. The interview data indicated that MTSS is influenced by student factors like their needs, success, buy-in, and external circumstances. The codes within this category included: student needs and understanding of MTSS. The most frequently mentioned idea within this category was coded as meeting students where they are and prioritizing students’ needs. The implementation of MTSS helps to meet the needs of various types of learners, as explained by S1: “I don't think a school can run without MTSS because if you really want all of your students to learn, you have to have some kind of system in place to meet the needs of all levels.” An important consideration is that MTSS applies to both academics and behavior. Participants brought up the shift in mindset associated with this new focus on behavior within the MTSS

framework. For example, S4 explained that staff can teach and intervene for behavior in the same way as academics:

> If a student … isn't successful with addition, we … practice and teach [in] a different way …. We had never looked at behavior that way– [it] is also something we're teaching. If a student isn't successful … we retrain in a different way [or] add some supports.

Student needs were also met through MTSS in other ways. MTSS provides students with various levels of support in academic and/or behavioral instruction. S5 discussed the benefits of a tiered system to help meet the varying needs of students through different methods of instruction. While discussing the high number of DNQ's or "Did Not Qualify" for special education, they commented: "[Your] tier work isn't going the way you need it to go. Because if … [it was], once you get to [Tier] three, kids who are qualifying are [those] who have a … disabling condition getting in their way." Further, MTSS allowed students to maximize the benefits of instruction. S7 illustrated how MTSS ensured increased amount of time spent on instruction: "I think the students are benefiting from [MTSS] because they are spending more time receiving instruction versus receiving discipline from the office or, you know, whoever it is that's taking care of their misbehavior." Another aspect of this category was that MTSS encourages a whole-child perspective, as explained by S9: "I think it really is a worthwhile venture for schools because it really is about educating and supporting the whole child and allows us to look at beyond just learning." MTSS also provided students with the opportunity to receive instruction in their Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), as explained by S15:

> Our students with disabilities were mostly in a pull-out situation where they were self-contained …. I really believed that [they] – and I feel like it's a no-brainer, but I feel like [they] are never gonna get on grade level if they're never taught on grade level. We as a

> system were causing more harm [to] students with disabilities …. So I got rid of our self-contained model. Our special education teachers [now] do mostly push-in, and the Tier two that is happening looks a lot like the Tier two for general education, but it is specifically designed instruction for those students. When we say that they need specialized instruction, that's what they're getting based on what their disability is.

Finally, student buy-in and understanding of MTSS practices is an important factor when it comes to MTSS implementation. This code addressed student understanding about the multiple tiers of instruction and the adaptability of instruction to meet their needs. As explained by S9, students often struggle with adapting to changes, like those that would come along with MTSS implementation: "There's real challenges when trying to implement things with children because sometimes children don't like change. Sometimes children don't adapt well to change." S10 emphasized the value of trying to gain student buy-in during the initial stages of MTSS implementation, especially during the first year: "[Getting] the students on board took a lot the first year, the second and third year have not been that bad …. It's just teaching new [students] that come in about our system and after that it goes smoothly."

Since the findings of this study were presented based on the prevalence of ideas within the data, there were some less frequently mentioned ideas that were insightful and can help to inform the field. One such idea was the importance of information dissemination and communication with politicians or legislators, as explained by S2: "If I were to talk to a leader, it would be legislators [to] help them see … what my teachers do … and appreciate that … you are affecting the lives of kids."

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

As a more preventative approach to academic and behavioral concerns is becoming increasingly common in schools across the nation, there is limited existing research in the literature about the needs and experiences of school building leadership teams while implementing a MTSS framework. Further, district leadership has a valuable role in guiding the implementation of MTSS in schools (Freeman et al., 2015; George & Kincaid, 2008; Rorrer et al., 2008). The purpose of this study was to learn more about the needs of school teams during various stages of MTSS implementation to know how to best support them through this process. Fifteen building administrators from a mountain western state in the United States were interviewed about their perceptions of impacting factors that arise during MTSS implementation. The findings of this research provide an understanding of the needs of school teams with regards to MTSS. The results of this study also elucidate various factors that impact MTSS, which allow readers to gain insight into effective implementation for schools. Table 2 presents a summary of the ways this study contributes to the already existing research literature.

Participants reported that MTSS implementation requires access to resources, such as personnel, time, training and professional development, financial resources, intervention programs and materials, supplies, physical space, and data. Previous research shows that the lack of access to resources such as those needed for assessment and intervention, hinders successful implementation of MTSS (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Mason et al., 2019). Participants in this study echoed this sentiment and emphasized that resources play a substantial and irreplaceable role in MTSS. One key idea observed in the findings was the overlap and interrelation between the need for resources. While all resources are important, one cannot exist without the other. For

instance, participants emphasized their need for district-wide forms or rubrics that provide consistency and ease of implementation: “So the forms we have right now, there's lots of steps involved and I think teachers get overwhelmed. So really simplifying the process to [its] basic components is important” (Participant S6). This quote emphasized the integration between the needs of district-wide forms and time. While access to district-wide forms for MTSS is one important need, having complex forms with too many steps will lead to teachers being overwhelmed due to the lack of time. Thus, such forms need to be structured while keeping in mind teachers’ access to time. Moreover, initial and ongoing training will be required to ensure staff is familiar with ways to complete the forms in an accurate manner.

Table 2

Contributions to the Literature

Review of the literature	*Findings of this study*
A lack of **access to resources** hinders successful implementation of MTSS (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Mason et al., 2019)	Overlap and interrelation between the need for resources (e.g., training is closely linked to staff buy-in or collaboration is related to school culture).
Teachers stated a need for ongoing and frequent **training** about implementation, paperwork, and expectations (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Fleury, 2018).	More extensive training in data analysis: “They've given us the tools, but just helping [us learn] how to interpret that.” (Participant S13).
There is a need for **collaboration** across tiers, among building staff members, and between building and district teams (Freeman et al., 2015; Handler et al., 2007).	MTSS must involve dispersed leadership so that responsibilities are shared by multiple individuals within the team. Further, inclusion of and collaboration with families and the community is important.
District-level support and commitment directly impacts the quality of MTSS in a school (Freeman et al., 2015; George & Kincaid, 2008; Rorrer et al., 2008).	There are many factors beyond district control (like competing initiatives, multiple priorities, as well as limited budgets, personnel, and resources) that may impact district involvement and support.

Similarly, training and professional development are tied to personnel. Having access to personnel to implement MTSS can contribute to its effectiveness with the help of training and professional development for staff. The literature supports this finding; lack of sufficient and ongoing training may result in inaccurate or inconsistent implementation of MTSS. Research indicates teachers' need for ongoing and frequent training about implementation, paperwork, and expectations (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Fleury, 2018). The findings of this study also indicated a need for more extensive training in data analysis: "I would talk about data analysis. They've given us the tools, but just helping [us learn] how to interpret that" (S13). Buy-in towards MTSS was another significant idea that is closely interconnected to training. The lack of staff buy-in may result in resistance, fear, hesitation, negative attitudes, or lack of willingness to participate in MTSS (Dulaney et al., 2013; Rinck, 2018). Participants identified "fixed mindsets" or past ways of doing things as one of the biggest barriers for MTSS. Participants also emphasized that MTSS involves a learning curve, as it necessitates new ways of reacting and responding to students. MTSS also requires teachers to take ownership and accountability for all their students. Teacher involvement in MTSS may also bring up thoughts about personal inadequacies or fear of change. This change in thinking, while a monumental effort, can be facilitated by training and professional development. Our data indicated training can also remind staff of the "why" and facilitate the "how" of MTSS, thus helping to change the perception surrounding MTSS from that of a chore or hindrance.

Past research has indicated a need for collaboration across tiers, among building staff members, and between building and district teams (Freeman et al., 2015; Handler et al., 2007). Further, teachers benefit from active involvement in MTSS and collective responsibility for student outcomes (Rinck, 2018). The findings of this study corroborate that MTSS decision-

making between the team must be collaborative and further adds to it, in that MTSS must also involve dispersed leadership. MTSS responsibilities must be shared by multiple individuals within the team, “because one person can’t have all the answers” (Participant S12). Thus, the MTSS vision and values must be a part of the school’s culture, which is an underlying value in effective collaboration, and a nuance identified in this data set. Participants also valued home-school collaboration as an impacting factor for MTSS. Inclusion of and collaboration with families and the community forms a part of school culture, which participants noted has a considerable impact on the effectiveness of MTSS.

People were identified as a major component of MTSS; however, the availability of personnel links back to financial resources. Thus, access to resources overlaps with the theme of people capacity or administrator and district support. Some participants emphasized that money is limited and hard to come by. A district leadership team is responsible for district wide MTSS implementation and must be able to commit necessary resources for MTSS efforts (George & Kincaid, 2008). District-level interest and commitment directly impacts the quality of MTSS in a school (Freeman et al., 2015; George & Kincaid, 2008; Rorrer et al., 2008). Both building and district leadership teams must be able to collaborate efforts to enhance MTSS success and fidelity, which can be done by a “district coordinator” or the first point of contact for MTSS (George & Kincaid, 2008; Vekaria, 2017). An important finding of this study was that participants often recognized that there are several factors that are beyond districts’ control that could influence the quality of collaboration. While districts are willing and ready to provide support to their buildings, they are often limited by the realities of competing initiatives, numerous priorities, as well as restrictions within budgets, personnel, and resources.

Participants also discussed the difficulties of understanding the balance between the district's desire to maintain autonomy for schools to implement MTSS in a way that addressed each school's needs. This created challenges in adapting district support to meet the range of needs of various schools. While participants stated the value of consistent district support, they added that the district often leaves it up to the school team to reach out and ask for support. One participant described MTSS as a bottom-up approach that requires them to ask for help when needed. While some participants discussed that limited district follow-up may result in the current implementation across schools being ineffective, others wondered whether this lack of coordinated follow-up was because they were already currently implementing it and thus the district believed that they did not require follow-up.

Implications

The findings of this study can inform practice in several ways. It provides knowledge of key impacting factors to be considered during the process of MTSS. Also, it emphasizes the needs of school teams while implementing MTSS. This knowledge can act as a guide for buildings or districts with their present or future MTSS efforts to make their implementation more effective and efficient. Further, the research emphasizes facilitators and barriers of MTSS. Thus, it can help school teams alleviate these barriers and improve their facilitators. Overall, the goal is that these findings will act as an implementation guide for building and district teams to strengthen their MTSS practices.

The research findings are a call to action for districts to prioritize MTSS efforts through ongoing training, provision of resources, and consistent support to their buildings. The findings will allow district leadership teams to focus their best efforts on what matters most to school teams to help gain staff buy-in and ensure successful MTSS implementation. For example, the

findings indicated that some building administrators perceived shortcomings in their own ability to interpret and analyze data. Districts may use this knowledge to plan extensive data analysis training for their building teams. By focusing on these pertinent areas, the collaboration between building teams and district leadership teams can be strengthened and improved. Regular district follow-up can also increase fidelity and consistency of MTSS efforts. For example, one participant discussed the feeling of accountability their team feels when there is a regularly scheduled meeting. Thus, having district involvement leads to greater accountability, thus increasing motivation for team members.

Finally, this study can help to gain insight into the difficult realities of day-to-day implementation of MTSS through semi-structured interviews with building administrators. The study also brings to light the research-to-practice gap within MTSS. While MTSS appears to be a straightforward process with a clear and defined structure, the real-life experience demonstrates multiple contextual and impacting factors that must be considered during its implementation. While factors like staff buy-in and district leadership support are essential for MTSS, other factors such as limited time, financial constraints, and lack of prioritization of MTSS initiatives, seem to be out of one's control, and yet pose, significant influence on the process.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was that the participants of this study were more involved in MTSS leadership duties, rather than implementation. Due to time constraints, other members of MTSS school building teams could not be interviewed as part of this study. Another limitation to consider is that this study did not employ any direct measures to determine the extent of MTSS implementation that was occurring in the participants' schools.

Further, the participants were employed at four school districts in one mountain west state in the United States. There was also little representation of demographic diversity in this study. Due to these factors, the findings of this study may differ from the experiences of MTSS teams in other parts of the state or country. Thus, readers must consider demographic and other contextual factors while applying these findings to other settings. Naturalistic generalization is a process where a reader gains insight on whether the findings of a study may be applicable to their own context, based on their personal understanding of direct and vicarious life experiences. Thus, readers may reflect on the details in this study to ensure naturalistic generalizability to their own contexts (Trumbull, 1998).

Another limitation to consider was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted between September and December 2020. Due to this timeline, participants had a lot more on their plate than they may have had during a different year. While the interviewer was able to gain significant information about MTSS, several participants echoed that staff and students were overwhelmed with the pandemic. Thus, MTSS was likely not at the forefront of people's minds at the time and may not have been implemented at all or with fidelity.

Finally, researcher bias may have impacted the results of this study. While the researcher involved in this study had no prior experience of implementing MTSS in schools, they were well versed in research surrounding MTSS. Data analysis may have been impacted by confirmation bias, or the researchers confirming what they already knew about the topic through the literature review. Steps (e.g., member checks, thick descriptions, and audit trailing) were taken to address trustworthiness of the data, which may have reduced the impact of any researcher bias.

Future Research

Due to the variations in ways MTSS is implemented across school districts in different states, future research could be done in other states or across the nation to gain more knowledge of impacting factors. The current research study included building administrators who worked in a building that was involved in school-wide tiered implementation of academic and/or behavioral interventions as part of its MTSS implementation. Further, researchers could examine the needs and impacting factors for teams that focus solely on academic or on behavioral interventions, or on a combination of the two. Another interesting path to explore in future studies would be the perceptions of district and state leadership team members, with regards to state and/or federal support provided to them, to understand their needs and experiences.

This study consisted of interviews with building administrators who were members of MTSS building leadership teams and self-reported their involvement in overseeing and implementing the MTSS framework in schools. All participants had earned a degree beyond the undergraduate level, with a Master's, Education Specialist (Ed. S.), or Juris Doctor (J. D.) degree. In upcoming research, it would be interesting to ask participants about how their educational programs prepared and trained them for MTSS leadership. Further, participants in this study were likely not involved in the day-to-day implementation of MTSS interventions (e.g., interventions, progress monitoring.) Further research should focus on the needs and experiences of other members of school teams who directly implement MTSS interventions, such as general and special education teachers, interventionists, paraprofessionals, teaching aides, instructional assistants, school psychologists, and counselors. It would be worth exploring whether these individuals have differing perceptions, and if so, what impacting factors arise based on their experiences.

Finally, while the researcher in this study coded for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not specifically addressed by a research question. Future researchers may choose to explore how the pandemic affected MTSS interventions. Some areas to investigate include: the ability of school personnel to keep up with MTSS during a pandemic, the effects of virtual learning on interventions, and the scope of such interventions to help with any learning losses due to the pandemic. Research may also address potential ways to adapt MTSS interventions to a virtual learning environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study was conducted to learn more about the needs of MTSS school teams. Building administrators were interviewed, as they play a key role in MTSS leadership. Results from this study showed that they are knowledgeable about several factors that impact MTSS implementation in their building. These impacting factors act as facilitators or barriers based on their presence or absence in the schools. First, MTSS implementation is reliant on the provision and prioritization of resources including personnel, time, training, data, physical space, financial resources, and intervention supplies and materials. Second, MTSS depends on support and partnership among people, including support from administrators and district-level personnel, as well as collaboration between staff. Another factor MTSS will benefit from is that of stakeholder buy-in and disposition. Overall staff perceptions and awareness of the need for MTSS, as well as the building's culture and practices can add to the value of MTSS. Finally, other contextual factors in the building can also influence MTSS. This study adds to the extant literature by emphasizing the needs of school teams during MTSS implementation, which can aid all MTSS stakeholders to strengthen current implementation practices.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Memorandum

To: Ellie Young
Department: BYU - EDUC - Counseling, Psychology, & Special Education
From: Sandee Aina, MPA, HRPP Manager
Wayne Larsen, MAcc, IRB Administrator
Bob Ridge, PhD, IRB Chair
Date: August 07, 2020
IRB#: IRB2020-317
Title: Exploring the Perceptions of Educators Who are Implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

Brigham Young University's IRB has approved the research study referenced in the subject heading as exempt level, Category 2. Please note the comment about data sharing and submit a modification if necessary to change the consent language.

This category does not require an annual continuing review. Each year near the anniversary of the approval date, you will receive an email reminding you of your obligations as a researcher and to check on the status of the study. You will receive this email each year until you close the study.

The study is approved as of 07/21/2020. Please reference your assigned IRB identification number in any correspondence with the IRB.

Continued approval is conditional upon your compliance with the following requirements:

1. A copy of the approved informed consent statement can be found in iRIS. No other consent statement should be used. Each research subject must be provided with a copy or a way to access the consent statement.
2. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
3. All recruiting tools must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to use.
4. Instructions to access approved documents, submit modfications, report adverse events, can be found on the IRB website, iRIS guide: http://orca.byu.edu/irb/iRIS/story_html5.html
5. All non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within 2 weeks of the first awareness of the problem by the PI. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some modification of study procedures, protocols, and/or informed consent processes. Such modifications require the review and approval of the IRB. Please refer to the IRB website for more information.

APPENDIX B

Demographic Questions

This list of demographic questions will be asked to every interviewee in order to properly describe the sample of the study.

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What is your age?
4. What is your highest earned degree?
5. What is your official job title?
6. How long have you been in that role?
7. How many students are in your building?
8. How many school buildings are in your district?
9. Is MTSS a districtwide initiative or your school's choice?
10. Approximately how many members do you have in your MTSS team?
11. How long has the building been participating in MTSS for?

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

Introductory Comments

"Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. It should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. The primary goal of this interview is to learn about your experiences with what it takes or may take for school teams to implement MTSS. Please note that in this interview, MTSS is an umbrella term which can include RTI or PBIS, with a focus on addressing academics and/or behavioral needs. This interview is completely voluntary and if there is any question you prefer not to answer, you can skip it. Your answers will not be shared with the other interview participants and your name will be changed to protect your identity. There are no right or wrong answers so please answer with candor and honesty. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?"

Background

Broad Question: Let's talk about building-level MTSS implementation. What can you say about that?

Probe- What roles and responsibilities do you have in building MTSS implementation?

Probe- What are some day-to-day activities that you do to fulfill your role?

Probe- How do you feel MTSS implementation is going in your building?

Probe- Please give me specific examples of how MTSS implementation is going in your school.

District-level Support

Broad Question: How do you think district-level administrators perceive MTSS implementation in your school district?

Broad Question: Let's talk about support provided by district level administrators. Suppose you are somehow changed this very moment into a district level administrator charged with overseeing MTSS and I asked you about support provided by the district – what would you say?

Probe- What can you tell me about the resources used to support MTSS implementation that your school has access to?

Probe- Imagine a perfect world that would allow ideal MTSS implementation. What resources would make that happen?

Broad Question: How do you think building-level team members perceive MTSS implementation in your school?

Probe: What needs (if any) do you feel building level administrators have relative to MTSS administration?

Probe- Let's talk about resistance. What can you say about resistance relative to building team members and MTSS implementation?

Probe- What do you think about resistance? Where does their resistance come from?
Probe- What can you tell me about overcoming resistance in MTSS implementation?

Impacting Factors

Broad Question: What are the biggest impacting factors to implementing MTSS at the building level? Or in other words, what factors will determine whether MTSS will be easier or more difficult to successfully implement?

Probe- What indicators would let you know that effective MTSS implementation is taking place at your school? What evidence do you use to decide?

Probe- Suppose an administrator from another school district approached you asking about tips or strategies you would suggest to teams looking to implement MTSS at the school level. What would you tell them?

Broad Question: Let's revisit support for MTSS implementation. What factors do you see as the biggest supports, aids or facilitators to implementing MTSS?

Probe- What do you think district-level leaders see as the biggest facilitators to you?

Probe- Tell me more about any differences in perceptions.

Broad Question: If you had the opportunity to speak to one of *your* leaders about possible barriers to building implementation, what would you say?

Probe: How do you think the leader would respond to you?

Concluding Remarks

"Thank you so much for sharing your time and your thoughts with me. This will be very helpful in understanding MTSS implementation at the building level. Is there anything else you want me to know about your thoughts about MTSS? If after looking over my notes, I have any questions, may I contact you? Keeping convenience and confidentiality in mind, what form of communication would you feel most comfortable using?"