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Leading and Learning: Principal and Instructional Leadership Team Implementation of a District Multi-Tiered System of Support Initiative

Jennifer Rinck
University of South Florida, jrinck2001@yahoo.com

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Leading and Learning: Principal and Instructional Leadership Team Implementation of a
District Multi-Tiered System of Support Initiative

by

Jennifer Rinck

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a concentration in Educational Leadership
Department of Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career, & Higher Education College of Education University of South Florida

Major Professor: William Black, Ph.D.
Leonard Burrello, Ed.D.
Judith Ponticell, Ph.D.
Liliana Rodriguez-Campos, Ph.D.

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DEDICATION

To the memory of my maternal grandfather, Bob, you taught me that character and how you treat other people is more valuable than any monetary wealth.

To the memory of my maternal grandmother, Ruth, you taught me how to live life in the age of how you feel regardless how old you may be.

To the memory of my paternal grandfather, Frederick, you taught me, through my Father, to be generous to others and always take care of family.

To the memory of my maternal grandmother, Mildred, you taught me how to be a strong, independent woman.

To the memory of my uncle, Alvin, you taught me that no matter what life hands you that you always can determine the type of life you will lead, and that nothing comes before your family.

To my mother, Nancy, you taught me how to appreciate the different gifts that are inside of others and to always go after your dreams.

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To my daughter, Chanel, you have taught me how to be a better person each and every day! Thank you for changing my life in the best way possible! You are my joy!

I am so blessed to have my family! This is because of and for you!
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ABSTRACT

There are gaps in the literature between implementation research and organizational learning describing how local school systems successfully implement initiatives that change practices within school sites. Until recently, there has been a pattern for federal and state policies to overlook the role of the local school district in impacting school reform efforts (Honig & Copland, 2008; Knapp, 2008). With the importance of the school district gaining attention from researchers and policy makers, research on various aspects of district based reform efforts is expanding (Knapp, 2008). However, there is limited research on the influence of district reform strategies and the transfer of organizational learning through school leaders to the school site.

The purpose of this study was to discover the ways in which principals and their instructional leadership teams identified as successful in implementing a district initiative have come to understand, interpret and mediate the purpose, resources, and knowledge of the MTSS initiative. This study investigated transfer of knowledge as it relates to organizational learning, sociocultural learning, and policy implementation. This inquiry researched a district’s MTSS initiative implementation process to better understand the topics of learning school leaders require as well as the types of supports that have been provided. This study was designed as a multiple case study that explores ways in which principals and their instructional leadership teams identified as successful by district leadership lead the implementation of a district-based initiative over the course of two years. The frameworks guiding this investigation were an
integrated conception of organizational learning and sociocultural learning theories, a synthesis of effective district reform concepts, and implementation science competencies. Data from semi-structured interviews, document reviews, memoing journal, and researcher reflexive journal were utilized to analyze the findings within and across cases. There were several areas of commonalities across schools with some unique instances within schools that are discussed within the frame of the research questions. In addition, there were 4 major concepts that emerged which can be considered for a new heuristic model: ethic of care, attention to the nature of relationships in schools, purposeful development of joint work in a community of practice, and building and sustaining trust. Through the discoveries of this study, implications for further research may entail considerations for a new heuristic model that could encompass the complexity of policy implementation through an inclusive perspective that acknowledges the humanistic dimension to educational policy practice and research.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

As a district administrator of professional development in a large sub-urban school district I grapple daily with understanding the processes of learning and knowledge transfer within the varying contexts of individuals, schools, and systems. My ongoing dilemma is how to impact change in practice based on district initiatives that result in increased knowledge, improved practices, and ultimately increased student achievement. Throughout my professional research and experience, the common thread to enacting change and improved practices sustainably relies on the role of those in leadership positions. In considering the position that maintains the most influence on the life and breath of a school, the principal is responsible for shaping school culture, building capacity for practices, and enhancing performance regardless of the conditions inherent to the context of the school. Given the layers of accountability between the school and principal combined with the pressures between the district (system) and principal, the role of leadership in schools requires a knowledge base that continually adapts and remains fluid in order to mediate and advocate positive change. Within this nexus of principal leadership, the types of knowledge cultivated and enacted through the varying forms of learning experiences guides actions and behaviors, which are both explicit and implicit. As a professional developer working with principals for the past five years, I began to observe differences between schools with improving student
performance and higher rates of change of professional practice in relation to the types of and scope of knowledge possessed and enacted by the principal.

Through my observations and evidences, I became very interested in learning more about places where practices were more aligned with district initiatives. The places where I did notice high degrees of functioning towards district goals there were teams of people working in high degrees of collaboration and shared mutual accountability for contributing to the success of the team and the school. The principal leadership practices I observed often involved facilitating conversations, collaboratively establishing and maintaining clear expectations of the initiative, empowering others decision-making, and willingness to do the work side-by-side with the teachers. In essence, the principals in those situations modeled the practices of the initiative and how the teachers are to engage in and adopt as their own. This leadership approach became consistent with not only the school administration but also with the instructional leadership team. In addition, the passion to learn and build the capacity of others was clearly threaded in the daily practices and operations throughout the school.

These observations made me curious in how these leaders, principals and instructional school leaders, come to know (individually and collectively) an initiative that requires a shift in ways of work. How do school leaders come to understand what is needed to happen in the context of their school, and how that knowledge then transfers to daily practice. My intention with this dissertation was to better understand how school leaders who are identified as successful in implementing a district initiative came to learn, interpret, and mediate initiative goals and practices given the specific conditions within their school context. Even though the primary unit of analysis is the district level participation of the initiative implementation, principal and their instructional leadership team, this study was designed to also examine the
principal and instructional leadership team participation of initiative implementation that influences school leadership participation that contributes to a change in practice of teaching and learning.

**Research Problem**

Perpetual change within the education profession maintains a constant tension between the preparation and development of educators to implement mandated curriculum, policies and effective practices. In attempts to change what counts as teaching and learning, “reformers are using public policy to press for fundamental and complex changes in extant school and classroom behavior” (Spillane, Resier, & Reimer, 2002, p. 387). For local school districts, the ability to decipher the intentions of policy and develop coherent implementation approaches is critical to achieve desired outcomes leading to school improvement (Spillane, 2002). Within this enduring cycle of reform, educators’ professional knowledge, capacity to evolve, and willingness to change are persistently challenged.

The implementation process in reform efforts is the “crucial link between the objectives and outcomes of policies, programs, and practices” (Smylie & Evans, 2006, p.187). Over the past several decades much of the literature on implementation has focused on identifying and understanding factors that explain its success or failure (Datnow, 2006; Honig, 2008; Smylie & Evans, 2006). These explanations focus on a wide spectrum of points from the design of policy to the resistance of those implementing policy in local jurisdictions (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). More recently, implementation research has increasingly illuminated that the problem in implementing educational policy lies with the process of teacher learning and school leadership (Coburn & Stein, 2006). Local school districts are situated between state policymakers and schools and act as a buffer and mediator of federal
and state initiatives, as well as designers of local policy initiatives (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003).

Historically, individual school sites have been the primary unit of analysis in implementation research, as well as receiving the most attention for federal and state policy (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003; Honig & Copland, 2008). Local school districts were previously viewed as an obstacle of school improvement by federal and state policymakers attempting to enact school reform resulting in failure, particularly in larger districts (Copland, 2003; Knapp, 2008; Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003). In more recent years, studies have suggested that district central offices play a considerable role in the implementation of policies aimed at improving teaching and learning as policies come to be mediated through local context, history, and capacity (Burch & Spillane, 2003; Honig & Copland, 2008). Findings are showing that reform efforts fail to change practice in classrooms without substantial support from the district office (Honig & Copland, 2008). This support traditionally has been considered through structures of accountability, compliance, and resource allocation. Research suggests that the districts that play active roles in learning improvement engage in more than just managerial activities; rather, that they form more learning centered approaches to reform through partnership relationships that promote collaboration, coherence, and collective commitment to building capacity (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003; Hannay & Earl, 2012; Hightower, 2002; Honig & Copland, 2008; Spillane, 2002).

This focus on districts and system learning has been growing attention amongst education implementation researchers (McLaughlin, 2006). Attention to capacity building has been more prevalent from organizational theorists and policy researchers have given sporadic
thought to how ideas travel, but the concept of studying system learning is relatively new in education research (McLaughlin, 2006). With the increasing demands from federal and state policies, districts are now being required to focus leadership and resources on capacity building strategies as the predominant means to school improvement (Gallucci, 2008). In addition, local school district efforts in developing clear and cohesive implementation practices and processes that support school improvement are a critical factor in the success of the principal in carrying out those practices at the school-site (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Gallucci, 2008; Honig & Copland, 2008; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Knapp, 2008; Malen, Rice, Matlach, Bowsher, Hoyer, & Hyde, 2015; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). Principal instructional leadership is assumed to depend on the principal’s own beliefs and value preferences and on organizational and political variables associated with the school and community context (Heck, 1993; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009).

Supported through a growing body of educational leadership research, the influences of principals have large effects on school improvement and student achievement (Bryk et al., 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Sun & Youngs, 2009; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Waters & Kingston, 2005). Furthermore, recent studies have illuminated that the principal cannot enact change alone, that improvement also relies on school leadership teams to advance initiatives (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, & Daly, 2008; Waters et al., 2003). The knowledge of the collective leadership team on purpose and expectations of policy initiatives as well as knowledge of implementation processes and practices is priority to carry out the multifaceted leadership roles necessary for district and school reform (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, and Friedman, 2005). This
investigation explores the influence of local school systems’ policy implementation approaches on the development of school leadership knowledge and practices that lead to changes in practice at the school level. The findings of this examination contribute to the existing body of knowledge and strengthen understanding of the nexus among school leadership, system learning, and policy implementation.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to discover the ways in which principals and their instructional leadership teams identified as successful in implementing a district initiative have come to understand, interpret and mediate the purpose, resources, and knowledge of the initiative. The study investigates transfer of knowledge as it relates to organizational learning, sociocultural learning, and policy implementation. The inquiry researched the district’s initiative (policy) implementation process to better understand the topics of learning school leaders require as well as the types of supports that have been provided.

This investigation does not serve as a comprehensive review of all-things-implementation research. Rather, it explored the lived experiences of those directly involved in implementation processes with the intention to build capacity over a 2-year period. In particular, I was interested in capacity building through processes of learning and knowledge transfer. Capacity is a key lever in reform due to its power to help or hinder change and development (Stoll, 2013). In the research of Stoll (2013), she defines capacity “as a quality of people, organizations or systems that allows them routinely to learn from the world around them and apply their learning to new situations so that they continue on a path towards their goals, in an ever-changing context” (p.565). The aim of this study was to better understand the
practices and processes of implementation of district-wide capacity building initiatives and how leadership knowledge influences implementation.

**Research Questions**

Based on the research on understanding the implementation of policy through learning and how that knowledge is transferred to practice, the following research questions guided this investigation.

**Primary Question:** In what ways do principals and their instructional leaders identified as successful lead the implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) initiative at their schools over the course of two years?

**Sub Questions:**

- What do principals and instructional leaders understand about the district’s expectations for the MTSS initiative? (Purpose)
- In what ways does a principal’s and instructional leaders’ knowledge of MTSS and knowledge of school context impact the utilization of district provided resources at the school site? (Supports)
- In what ways does a principal’s and instructional leaders’ knowledge of MTSS initiative influence the knowledge transfer of the initiative in school? (Learning)
- In what ways does a principal’s own knowledge of implementation processes impact how the principal sought to strategically implement MTSS in order to change instructional staff practice? (Understanding of Implementation processes)

**Significance of the Study**

There are gaps in the research between implementation research and organizational learning describing how local school systems successfully implement initiatives that changes
practices within school sites. Until recently, there has been a pattern for federal and state policies to overlook the role of the local school district in impacting school reform efforts (Honig & Copland, 2008; Knapp, 2008). With the importance of the school district gaining attention from researchers and policy makers, research on various aspects of district based reform efforts is expanding (Knapp, 2008). However, there is limited research on the influence of district reform strategies and the transfer of organizational learning through school leaders to the school site. “Organizational theorists have examined questions of organizational learning and policy researchers have paid episodic attention to how ideas travel, but questions about how systems within the public domain learn are relatively unexamined” (McLaughlin, 2006, p.226). Additional research that focuses on policy implementation through the process of organizational learning is important for further development of improving district capacity building efforts.

Recognizing the persistent challenges that school districts face in school improvement efforts, scholars and reformers have begun to use the construct of learning to embrace and target those challenges (Knapp, 2008). This construct of learning is not only in regard to individual learning but also a collective learning: “the organization itself needs to ‘learn’ new ways of working, coping with uncertainties, and managing the tensions that ambitious reform entails” (Knapp, 2008, p. 524). Federal mandates dictating change in school improvement efforts to close achievement gaps have incised district office operations to achieve reform through a system-wide approach to instructional improvement (Hannay & Earl, 2012). This requires a systemic approach to have all change efforts grounded in student outcomes with new conceptions of system learning that will provide explicit instruction on the demands of the reform and create structures for professional dialogue and networks to promote the knowledge
transfer in classroom practice (Desimone, 2002; Honig & Copland, 2008; Knapp, Copland, Ford, Markholt, McLaughlin, Milliken, and Talbert, 2003; McLaughlin, 2006). The local district plays a critical role in setting the tone, expectations, and priorities for the reform as well as modeling the practices in which school leaders will need to engage at their school sites to enact change according to the intention of the initiative (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Desimone, 2002; Honig 2008; Spillane, 2002).

Another critical factor to school improvement and the change it necessitates is principal leadership (Bryk et al., 2010). An extensive amount of literature on educational leadership has focused on leadership attributes, change theories, leadership styles, and perceptions that others have on principals to develop a better understanding on what contributes or constitutes effective leadership practices (Knapp et. al., 2003; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Goldring, Spillane, Huff, Barnes, & Supovitz, 2006; Rallis & Militello, 2010). However, there is not much research that examines the role of types of leadership knowledge and the transfer of that knowledge to practice (Goldring, et al, 2006; Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008). School leaders are most effective when they can adjust their behavior according to ability and confidence of themselves and their followers (Goldring, et al., 2008).

While there is extensive research on the practices of effective principals, there is little that examines the role of content and practical knowledge of these school leaders, especially when faced with challenging policies and issues (Goldring, et al., 2008; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Smylie, Bennett, Konkol, & Fendt, 2005). Nor do we have sufficient understanding about how leaders use knowledge to work with and through others to improve their schools (Goldring, et al., 2008). In efforts of school improvement, the role and influence of the principal is crucial and that leadership is contingent on expertise (Goldring, et al., 2008).
Principals are more likely to impact student achievement “if they have the knowledge and expertise to engage in key leadership functions and roles related to” implementing of policy for improving student achievement (Goldring, et al., 2008, p. 2). Despite a more solid research base about the leadership functions that support student learning, we still know very little about the knowledge and expertise school leaders need in order to practice in ways that contribute to school improvement through policy implementation (Goldring, et al., 2008).

Local school district efforts in systemic policy implementation through processes of strategic organizational learning structures and conditions, which become leveraged through school leadership is essential to achieve success towards the initiative goals. However, there is limited research on the district implementation strategies and the knowledge needed by school leaders to influence change of practice that works towards policy goal attainment (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). Negotiating competing beliefs and mental modes of teaching and learning of multiple stakeholders through the narrow linkage of the principal can lead to misunderstandings and lack of coherence to the initiative goals (Chrispeels, et al., 2008). This supports growing recognition that the principals cannot enact change alone and that it requires a leadership team to work collaboratively to carry out the multifaceted tasks involved in initiative implementation (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Chrispeels, et al., 2008). This indicates a need to explore ways that principals and their school leadership teams might serve as a wider and cohesive unit in understanding the interaction of district-based strategies and the knowledge and practices of school leaders that can lead to successful policy implementation (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Chrispeels, et al., 2008; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). Based on the gap revealed in the literature, this study is guided by the following primary research question: In what ways do principals and their leadership teams identified
as successful lead the implementation of a district-based initiative at their schools over the course of two years?

**Research Design**

This study’s qualitative research design was intended to discover how individuals’ perceptions make and interpret meaning of a district led initiative to transfer within their school’s context. The research design combined ethnographic methods (interviews) with an interpretivist and social constructivist lens in order to draw upon the realities of the participants in their context (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Through this analysis, the aim was to capture a deep explanation of individual lived experiences of a situation centered on implementation, learning, and transfer of knowledge through leadership practices.

Prompted through an interpretivist and social constructivist lens, this research was guided by three frameworks that emphasized varying and overlapping constructs to policy implementation. First, an integrated conception of district central offices as learning organizations intertwined aspects of organizational learning and sociocultural learning theories to frame district office participation in initiatives to strengthen teaching and learning (Honig, 2008). Second, a synthesis of research that highlights the roles of districts in improving achievement and advancing equity through systemic reform (Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich, 2008). Third, an interactive framework of Implementation Drivers that categorize and describe processes of organization change involved with policy implementation (National Implementation Research Network, 2018). These frameworks were utilized to frame the study and analysis as well as to consider conceptions of a more holistic and inclusive approach to district reform.
Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process included three main methods: individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. The study consisted of three interviews with each identified principal, two interviews with the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools, one interview of a MTSS specialist of the district, and one focus group interview followed up with brief individual interviews with five to six instructional leaders at each school. In addition, key initiative implementation documents as well as school specific documents and implementation evidence was collected and analyzed to add to the context of the study and analysis of implementation. Those documents were identified through the interviews of the participants and the background knowledge of the context from the researcher. In addition to the organizational documents that were collected and analyzed, I documented my thoughts and observations throughout the interviews and observations through memoing and reflexive journaling. The act of memoing and journaling serves as a method to extend the narrative data through the researcher’s reflections and thinking processes of the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The analytical memos focused on collecting and recording additional data that reflected what I heard and observed at the time of the interview (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017). The reflexive journal contains data that is of direct reflection of the content of the interviews and of the personal thoughts of myself (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The data was analyzed to gain understanding of the phenomena through interpretation. This study engaged in iterative analysis processes to uncover meanings and understandings that constitute the findings of the research questions. Due to the study designed as a case study with multiple elements, a constant comparative analysis that was both inductive and comparative was the primary analytic approach (Merriam & Tisdell,
The data involved within-case analysis first and then followed by a cross-case analysis to discover emerging themes across the two schools as well as interpretations to meaning that were both unique to a school or trends across schools (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2009). The data analysis process was guided from Creswell and Poth (2017) data analysis spiral framework combined with four guiding principles described by Yin (2009) for case study analysis (Hays & Singh, 2011). The spiral framework is guided by specific activities that occur in a fluid, ongoing process. The activities incorporated in the framework consist of: managing and organizing the data, reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, and representing and visualizing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Through the framework’s depiction as a spiral, it is noted that the movement in the spiral is fluid in an ebb and flow motion allowing for continuous reflection and expansion of the emerging data. After each interview, the transcripts and analytical notes data collected along with the coding process were analyzed to inform the next series of interviews.

Due to the case study design of this research, there are limitations of generalizability. In addition, I recognize that my role as an employee of the district being studied has influence to the interpretation of the data. In Chapter 3, I explain in detail my position as the researcher and strategies that I utilized to minimize and acknowledge my influence on the data analysis.

**Definition of terms**

For the purposes of this study, these definitions were used for the following terms:

- **Capacity Building**: a two-dimensional construct that encompasses (a) full range of foundational resources to implement initiatives effectively and (b) the systemic
conditions that allow those resources to be used effectively (Malen, Matlach, Bowsher, Hoyer, & Hyde, 2015).

- **Implementation**: a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005).

- **Organizational Learning**: the organization as the collective learns and that individuals learn from each other or the group in a way that manifests changes in collective thinking, organizational design and behavior, or organizational potential for behavior (Gallucci, 2008; Knapp, 2008).

- **Policy Implementation**: a process of learning that involves the gradual transformation of practice via the ongoing negotiation of meaning among professional educators and the organizational and societal forces that create conditions of meaning-making (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Malen, 2006).

- **Shared Leadership**: Focuses on forging organizational structures and cultures that encourage the exercise of leadership across role boundaries, creating opportunities for leadership and leadership development, facilitating collaborative processes, promoting individual and organizational learning, and building shared vision and beliefs (Ishimaru, 2013).

- **Sociocultural Learning**: knowledge is constructed through the experiences of an individual’s engagement with others and various artifacts or tools and learning occurs through the acceptance of abilities and practices within a community (Honig, 2008; Spillane, 2002; Spillane et al., 2006).
• **Systems Learning**: the assembling and interpreting of information about the system as a whole and developing new policies, practices, and structures that alter and enhance its performance (Knapp et al., 2003).

**Overview of the Research Study**

This study examined how principals and their instructional leadership team enact the implementation of a district initiative through knowledge transfer within the context of the school. The next chapter will provide a detailed review of literature that expands on the concepts of policy implementation, district reform, and learning theories. The third chapter offers a thorough outline of the design and methodology of the study. The fourth chapter describes the context of Pasco county and the history of previous efforts used with MTSS implementation along with descriptions of the study participants. The fifth chapter presents the findings of the study as they relate to the research questions. The sixth chapter offers a discussion of the findings and implications to a new conceptual framework, as well as implications to educational research and practice.

**Overview of the Research Findings**

The findings that emerged through this study were discussed in two ways; (1) prevalent categories framed by the research questions in chapter 5, and (2) the major findings that emerged that supported a new heuristic model for district reform through engagement with the literature in Chapter 6. The components of a newly conceptualized model that surfaced include: ethic of care, attention to the nature of relationships within schools, purposeful development of joint work in a community of practice, building and sustaining trust. In addition, implications to educational research and practice is describe and explored with a
particular focus on the tension between a technical approach versus humanistic approach to the MTSS initiative implementation.

Summary

The role of leadership is critical in educational policy implementation. The ability to understand and decipher the intention of policy to strategically plan and coordinate implementation processes and practices across a local school system is contingent on the expertise and knowledge of district and school leadership. However, there is limited research on the district implementation strategies and the knowledge needed by school leaders to influence change of practice that works towards policy goal attainment (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). This study of two successful schools’ implementation of a district’s MTSS initiative explored the ways in which principals and their instructional leadership teams came to understand and enact changes in practice based on the district’s goals and expectations. The district strategies employed to support leadership knowledge and changes in practice are discussed to gain deeper understanding of the influence of district practices with school practices in efforts towards district reform.
CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this review of literature is primarily three-fold: to explore the historical approaches to educational policy implementation and to explore the influence of learning theories on implementation practices, and to briefly review the history of MTSS. Through this review, concepts of implementation methods and processes of building capacity for district-wide initiatives, as well as concepts of school improvement, knowledge transfer, and organizational and sociocultural learning provide a framework for this study. In this chapter I: (a) briefly summarize the history of education policy through implementation research, (b) synthesize trends and themes from studies on implementation of district capacity-building initiatives (district and school reform), (c) describe policy implementation frameworks (d), explain concepts of organizational learning and sociocultural learning theories, and (e) briefly review of the history, purpose, and practice of Problem-Solving/Response to Intervention (PS/RTI) and Multi-Tier System of Support (MTSS) will be discussed as it relates to the context of the study.

Policy Implementation and Knowledge of Leaders

Through the review, studies that explore change processes within the context of district initiative implementation in schools will be analyzed, looking particularly at the implementation approach and process, frameworks used, outcomes, and methods and
methodologies of the studies. In addition, insights into leadership practices that are likely contributors to successful implementation will be highlighted. Supported through a growing body of educational leadership research, the influence of principal leadership is seen to have large effect on school improvement and student achievement (Bryk et al., 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Sun & Youns, 2009; Waters et al., 2003; Waters & Kingston, 2005). Principal instructional leadership is informed by the principal’s own beliefs and value preferences and on organizational and political variables associated with the school and community context (Heck, 1993, Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). Furthermore, recent studies have illuminated that the principal cannot enact change alone, that improvement also relies on school leadership teams to advance initiatives (Chrispeels, et al., 2008; Waters, et al., 2003).

The knowledge of the collective leadership team on purpose and expectations of policy initiatives as well as knowledge the leadership team has about implementation processes and practices is important in order to carry out the multifaceted leadership roles necessary for district and school reform (Chrispeels, et al., 2008; Fixsen, et al., 2005).

This chapter does not serve as a comprehensive review of all-things-implementation research and practice. Rather, it explores literature regarding implementation processes with the intention to build capacity for school improvement. Capacity is a key lever in reform due to its power to help or hinder change and development (Stoll, 2013). In the research of Stoll (2013), she defines capacity “as a quality of people, organizations or systems that allows them routinely to learn from the world around them and apply their learning to new situations so that they continue on a path towards their goals, in an ever-changing context” (p.565). The aim of this review is to better understand the practices of implementation of district-wide capacity building initiatives and how knowledge of leaders influences those practices.
Brief History of Educational Reform and Implementation Research in the United States

Education policy emerged with the conception of public education in the 1840s. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, debates that dominated education policy mainly pertained to pedagogical approaches of teacher-centered versus student-centered classrooms, curriculum mandates between academic and practical designs, and the concept of centralizing or decentralizing government authority in schools (Cuban, 1990). The value-laden perspectives of those in political power combined with “economic, social, and demographic changes that create social turmoil” cause public opinion and support to shift across the lines of dissension which generates momentum for a change in policy (Cuban, 1990, p.8). Cycles of liberal and conservative viewpoints ebb and flow producing varying attention on fixing the ills of social issues (liberal) or emphasizing individualism and private interest (conservative) (Cuban, 1990). Reflecting on the conflicting stances of policy in the beginning era of public education, history has illustrated the endurance of those same ideological perspectives that continue to endure and rise like the rebirth of a phoenix.

The next age of education reform began at the end of World War II, which marked a time of increased state and federal governance (Cohen et al., 2007). During this era (1960s – 1980s) researchers consider reforms as integrative and overlapping, but also characterize them as separate waves of reform as reflected through implementation research (Desimone, 2002; Honig, 2006). Much federal attention was given to providing resources and funding to schools, reshaping of teacher licensure and certification requirements, regulating curriculum, and increasing student attendance (Cohen et al., 2007). During this ‘Great Society Period’, education policy habituated in governance and regulation that focused on resource inputs to achieve broad societal goals (Cohen et al., 2007; Honig, 2006). Policy designs were aimed to
spread particular resources to categories of students who met particular criteria (Honig, 2006). As a provision to ensure student opportunities, the notion of federal supervisory oversight of public schooling was manifested. This new construct of public schooling “shed light on the importance of developing programs of education that would provide services for large numbers of students” (Pazey & Yates, 2012, p.19). Many federally initiated reforms were created with intention to advance social equities, broaden curriculum to address cultural diversity, and reduce burdensome requirements of students (Ravitich, 2010). The launch of these series policies was guided by a technical-rational perspective to policy implementation which dominated the educational political landscape resulting in multiple educational reforms based on the premise of planning, organization, command, coordination, and control (Datnow, 2006). The overlying assumptions to this technical-rational approach to educational reform during this era were that policy implementation occurs in a linear, causal process that begins with strategic designers flowing to passive, pragmatic implementers (Datnow, 2006). This perspective, combined with the continual criticism of population inequities, teaching quality, access to schooling, and resource allocation ensued across several decades resulting in federal policies which were unanimously reported as not successful in reaching the full goals of the policies. In other words, as implementation failure (Cohen et al., 2007; Honig, 2006).

During this time period (1960s -1980s), policy implementation research emerged which triggered the production of policy studies and evaluation (Honig, 2006; McLauhglin, 1987). Implementation research, which many scholars posit was conceived through work from Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), shed light on the failures of popular implementation approaches (McLaughlin, 1987; McLaughlin, 2006; Smylie & Evans, 2006). Pressman and Wildavsky were the first of implementation analysts that showed that even the best planned
and supported policy initiatives depend on what happens as individuals through the policy system interpret and act on them (McLaughlin, 1987; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). Findings from studies indicated that the dominant disciplines advising education policy in the 1960s and early 1970s were economics and sociology, which reflected the dominant beliefs regarding implementation frameworks (Honig, 2006; McLaughlin, 1987; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). Economists encouraged markets and incentives and sociologists emphasized scientific management and hierarchical and bureaucratic control (McLaughlin, 1987). Policy evaluations and research presented evidence that the focus of resource allocation as an implementation approach was not achieving improvement in student outcomes (Cohen et al., 2007). Researchers attributed these results to the conflicts between policy designers and policy implementers (Honig, 2006). However, many policy architects, including economists and sociologists, viewed it as market failures and inadequate organizational control rather than with issues of the policy design (McLaughlin, 1987). As a result, coalitions formed among implementers and policy designs began to include stronger incentives and punitive measures with more explicit expectations and instructions on implementation (Honig, 2006; McLaughlin, 1987).

Riding on the wave of the Great Societal Period policies, the 1970s persisted the same policy design and expanded distributive, categorical, and regulatory policy implementation to reach other students and programs such as special education (Honig, 2006). For example, the landmark federal law signed in 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, also known as P.L. 94-142) created a commitment that all students should receive an appropriate education in the ‘least restrictive environment’ (Boscardin, 2005; Pazey & Yates, 2012). The passage of EAHCA, which was later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities
Education Act (IDEA), signaled a change to rethink educational practice and delivery, as well as the ways in which educational leaders are prepared to meet the requirements of the provisions. The premise of this law was to require each state to submit a plan that illustrates adherence to IDEA through states’ policies and procedures to educate students with disabilities. Such a plan was required to be in place in order for states to receive federal funding. The consequences generated actions that unintentionally aligned practices for compliance or proceduralization rather than the intended outcomes of the policy goals, which in part were to ensure equal access to education (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Yell, Thomas & Katsiyannis, 2012). Policy evaluation questions continued to focus on implementation fidelity promoting the technical-rational, linear mindset approach with the determining factor of failure or success residing on the implementers actions (Datnow, 2006; Honig, 2006). However, other research studies began to cast a different light on implementers which contributed to the notion of implementation complexity and its dependence on both policy level and implementer level influences (Honig, 2006; Malen, 2006). Through this discovery the notion of “mutual adaption” emerged and established awareness to the negotiations and meaning-making processes that occur within the context at the micro (district and school) levels to accomplish the demands from the macro (federal and state) level (Honig, 2006). The recognition of local actors’ influence on implementation led to a growing body of research aimed at exploring the “will and skill” of individual actors but neglected the broader social and cultural contexts in which reform plays out (Smylie & Evans, 2006).

By the 1980s, growing criticism of the overwhelming failing results from policy implementation coupled with the publications of reports, such as A Nation at Risk in 1983, manufactured a heightened state of an educational crisis thereby legitimatizing as a more
active federal and state role in education regulations (Cohen et al., 2007; Cuban, 1990; Elmore, 1997; Honig, 2006). Reports issued warnings of the decline of the American educational system through low exceptions, mediocre instructional practice, and excelling foreign competition (Elmore, 1997; Ravitch 2010). During this period, more responsibilities were placed on districts by governors, state legislators, and state departments of education states by raising graduation standards and increasing testing requirements in efforts to produce more tangible results through student achievement measures (Datnow et al., 2002; Elmore, 1997). Lessons from implementation research during this time echoed some sentiments from the past of the misalignment of policy makers’ intentions and ground-level implementers interpretations (Honig, 2006). Implementation research began exploring the more nuanced aspects of policy implementation around mandates; incentives, capacity building, and systems change in efforts to help reveal the complexities of policy implementation (Honig, 2006). Even with the more narrowed approached to implementation research during this era, the units of analyses tended to remain as broad categories and neglected the differences among individuals and context within those categories (Honig, 2006). Yet, the educational system continued to prevail in an authoritative approach to reform prescribing mandates, curriculum, and pedagogy to local systems while yielding the same results: implementation failure (Cohen et al., 2007; Desimone 2002).

Following the political fervor of the Nation at Risk, another era of educational reform was established that advocated for a whole school system approach rather than the previous practice of focusing on particular populations of students within schools (Datnow et al., 2002; Desimone, 2002; Honig, 2006). The whole school system reform approach, deriving in part from effective school literature, placed emphasis on school improvement strategies such as,
goal setting, school climate, district and principal leadership, curriculum, capacity building, and parent involvement (Desimone, 2000; Desimone, 2002; Elmore, 1997; Honig, 2006). During this time, the political perspective of federal and state policy-makers with school-wide improvement strategies supported the notion of standards-based reform and efforts to establish national goals and standards emerged (Datnow, et al., 2002). With the perspective of a whole-school system approach with improved teaching and learning, the next wave of education reform ushered in the standards-based movement to establish a systemic approach to reform that has endured over the past decades (Desimone, 2000; Datnow, et al., 2002; Spillane et al., 2002).

Education policy during this time targeted individual actors system wide and employed multiple policy tools to advance the goals of the intended legislation (Honig, 2006). An initial effort to national standards-based reform was attempted through the Goals 2000 initiative, which did not pass the floor of the Senate (Elmore, 1997). Less than a decade later, accompanying a political shift to embrace standards-based accountability policy, the federal role increased with passing of the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB) in 2002 (Ravitch, 2010). The state and federal educational accountability policies came to permeate every level of the education system reaching every classroom. This reform effort created a fury in states to create large-scale accountability systems to enact the prescriptive measures, consequences, and incentives for the actions and outcomes of local districts and schools (Datnow, et al., 2002; Fullan, 2009).

Eventually, after causing shockwaves and intended and unintended collateral damage, NCLB was ineffective in accomplishing its many goals, some of the shortcomings can be understood through implementation research that posit that technical-rational approaches to
educational policy implementation neglect the ecological nature of the educational system that is grounded in social interactions and the culture within schools (Datnow, 2006; Eisner, 1988; Firestone, 1989; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). Despite decades of policy implementation research suggesting the strong influences of social constructs and the nature of organizational change, some authors have argued that large-scale federal and state led reform efforts continued to design policy through a mechanical process falling into the traps of structural determinism which minimizes the professionalism of local actors and the context in which they perform (Datnow et al., 2002; Datnow, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006).

Contemporary policy implementation research has been moving in new directions that explore various perspectives of policy implementation and utilize various methodological tools to analyze influence of policy initiatives. The purpose of this brief history on educational policy and implementation research is to provide context to where the field has been in setting the stage to discuss the current state of policy implementation as it relates to district capacity building initiatives.

**District and School Reform Trends**

Over the past couple of decades, federal mandates dictating change in school improvement efforts to increase performance for all students, while closing achievement gaps have incentivized district office operations to embrace a system-wide approach to instructional improvement (Hannay & Earl, 2012). School district leaders are considering new ways of employing capacity building strategies to attend to the issues in providing all students with the opportunity to engage in high levels of learning (Hannay & Earl, 2012; Hightower, 2002). This requires a systemic approach to have change efforts grounded in student outcome goals with new conceptions of system learning that provide explicit instruction on the purpose and
demands of particular reforms and create structures for professional dialogue and networks to promote knowledge transfer to classroom practice (Desimone, 2002; Honig & Copland, 2008; Knapp et al., 2003; McLaughlin, 2006).

In a narrative synthesis of previous studies, Rorrer, Srkla, and Scheurich, (2008), proposed a theory of districts as institutional actors in educational reform. They argued that there are four primary roles for districts “(a) providing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and (d) maintaining an equity focus” (p.307). Building on the work of Rorrer et.al (2008), I reviewed additional empirical studies that investigated implementation processes and outcomes of district-wide capacity building initiatives. I found an overarching theme of district policy implementation has been shifting towards the notion of maintaining a focus on teaching and learning. Within that theme more specific categories emerged, including: (a) policy coherence, (b) organizational and professional learning, (c) reorienting organization, and (d) collective participation. In the subsequent sections, each concept is further discussed.

**Policy Coherence.** Coherence within a district requires an examination of all the policies and initiatives that exist and making decisions on which ones are complementary or distract from the goals of the system (Desimone, 2002; Knapp et al., 2003; Honig, 2009). Rorrer et al. (2008) explains that this type of examination requires alignment with external demands of federal and state policy with the internally generated demands of district initiatives and programs. Districts that can maintain a common focus on teaching and learning, manage multiple initiatives, and create opportunities to align the actions and components within and across schools develop organizational coherence supporting implementation (Hannay & Earl, 2012; Malen et al., 2015).
A study on organizational capacity reform conducted by Malen et al. (2015) analyzed the strategies used by a large district to address capacity building initiatives. In their investigation, issues centered on the lack of alignment of the multiple, simultaneous initiatives. Principals reported lack of understanding of the goals, lack of knowledge of the different language of each initiative, feelings of being overwhelmed, and lack of resources to assist in supporting implementation. Some of the principals stated that they felt like “ringmasters” to juggle the multiple demands and needed to be “multilingual” just to have discussions on all the initiatives. Multilevel capacity challenges of implementing all the program components and aligning the various components of an initiative with one another as well as with other initiatives resulted in high variance across the district with actors predominantly taking a compliance approach to implementation. Malen and colleagues (2015) study aligns with other existing research that suggests that developing the organizational capacity to implement initiatives may depend on coming to terms with the numerous initiatives within a district as well as the need to create alignment of those initiatives and coherence through shared, explicit goals across the system (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003; Knapp et al., 2003). Through alignment, district leaders can reimagine structures that allow more opportunities for people across the system by engaging in professional learning and dialogue, rather than revert to compliance behaviors to maintain a focus on school improvement.

**Professional Learning.** Implementation research has increasingly illuminated that a problem in successfully implementing educational policies and reforms lies with the process of educator learning (Coburn & Stein, 2006). A case to illustrate this point is from a large-scale study conducted by the Consortium of Chicago School Research (CCSR). The extensive
study occurred during a period of sharp reform efforts to improve the declining performance of the Chicago school system. With this study, Bryk et al., (2010), undertook a highly complex quantitative analysis to identify the most significant indicators and supports for the success or failure of school improvement efforts. Through their investigation, fourteen indicators were predominant in contributing to the outcomes of the organization. Six of the fourteen indicators corresponded to professional development design and implementation: teacher background, frequency of professional development, quality of professional development, work orientation, professional community, and basic skills (Bryk , et al, 2010). When creating structures and methods for teacher professional learning, designers should take into consideration a myriad of factors which amalgamate and influence the development of educator’s knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

The impact of effective professional learning opportunities coupled with ongoing engagement in the learning is documented throughout the district reform literature (Desimone, 2000; Gallucci, 2008; Hannay & Earl, 2012; Honig, 2006). In order to address and alleviate barriers to the implementation of educational policy, it is imperative that a high-quality professional development system is aligned with the initiative, delivers systematic and ongoing support, and is systemic throughout the organization. The design of professional development is essential in fostering the conditions that allow teachers to adapt and apply the taught concepts in their own way and in their own classrooms (Cuban, 1998; Datnow et al., 2002). If teachers are not able to make sense of the learning and accept it into their value-laden schema to adapt into their practice, then any change effort will render ineffective (Datnow et al., 2002). When teachers are engaged in quality professional development, then “change in the
classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students” can be achieved (Guskey, 2002, p.381).

This change in practice demands deep, subject-focused, transformative learning on the part of many people in the system, from superintendents to the front-line classroom teacher (Gallucci, 2008; Spillane, 2002). This often requires a sustained focus on teaching and learning with new conceptions of what teaching and learning looks like for students and teachers (Knapp, 2008; McLaughlin, 2006). In Desimone’s (2002) literature review of comprehensive school reform (CSR) efforts, she consistently found that teachers viewed unsuccessful implementation as attributed to the lack of training needed to provide the knowledge and concrete examples of what exactly teaching and learning should look like in their classrooms. The research on professional learning in instructional reform initiatives suggest “that learning environments for teachers need to offer powerful images of teaching and learning, engage teachers as active learners, challenge teachers intellectually, reinforce learning over time, and ensure that learning is relevant to the problems teachers face” (Gallucci, 2008, p.544).

In addition, the results from the CCSR study indicated evidence to support the importance of the subsystems within the organization that most directly tied to classroom instruction (Bryk et al, 2010). The researchers discovered a key component in this regard was the quality of professional development in tandem with a supportive professional work environment (Bryk et al, 2010). These findings support the growing body of research and attention that focuses on the social aspects of teaching and how those patterns of interactions shape the ways in which teachers learn (Coburn & Stein, 2006). In response to reform, traditional practices of working in isolation has proven ineffective due to the variance of teachers’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions and discrepancies in interpretation of reform
purpose and processes. Many researchers suggest that process of change requires rethinking of traditional individual practices by taking action in a community of practice with professionals working together to adapt their practice (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Elmore, 2004; Hannay & Earl, 2012). Collaborative interactions help people define and build up their own self-concepts, which results in reducing anxiety and fear regarding change (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). When professional learning networks are purposefully constructed with shared norms and practices, they become powerful vehicles to influence both teacher and student learning which then results in the enactment and sustainment of the reform (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). In order to engage in well-designed professional learning network, district leaders should strive to reorient the culture, structures, and resources within the system that support a coherent focus on teaching and learning. This notion of reorientation is elaborated upon in the next section.

Re-Orientation. Drawing upon a literature analysis on policy implementation by Rorrer et al., (2008), suggests that the concept of reorientation plays an essential role in district initiated reform efforts. In their synthesis, reorientation is referenced as the actions districts take to “refine organizational structures and processes and alter district culture to align with their educational reform goals” (p.318). A study conducted by George Peterson (1999), which was highlighted by Rorrer and colleagues, shared findings from five California superintendents whose districts achieved greater than average test scores. One of the superintendents accounted his success to organizational structured changes that included: collaborative involvement in decision making and reform implementation, increasing attention to professional learning and resources to the curriculum and instruction, hiring or replacing persons to support the mission, and monitoring the technical core (Rorrer et al., 2008). The concept of purposely striving to
reorient the culture and structures within districts provides for the coordination of structures necessitated by reform in order to maintain a focus on teaching and learning.

Restructuring involves new conceptions of organizational architecture that promote collaboration, enhances communication, and fosters professional learning. This process requires innovative energy that is harnessed throughout the implementation process and builds interconnectedness across the system (Datnow et al., 2002; Rorrer et al., 2008). An essential component to restructuring is the prolonged attention to the teaching and learning aspect of reform versus a traditional approach driven from a compliance perspective (Coburn & Stein, 2006).

In a study conducted by Stein & Coburn (2008), the authors explored the implementation of a mathematics curriculum in two urban school districts. Through their investigation, they discovered that differences in structural aspects within each district led to differences in implementation processes and outcomes. One primary structural difference was the approach to professional learning. One district’s professional development required instructional coaches to attend trainings at the district office through a traditional “sit-and-get” design. This approach required participants to leave their schools to receive piecemeal information, which eventually produced fragmented outcomes with a focus on procedural concerns. The other district engaged in a job-embedded approach with mathematic coaches located at each school site creating small professional networks within and across schools. In those professional networks, district staff provided job-embedded professional development and coached the instructional coaches as they were engaged in coaching practices. This approach centered on a teaching and learning perspectives leveraging structures for cross-community interactions to mediate meaning-making with ongoing opportunities to collectively
engage and reflect. Through their analysis, they describe the importance of district restructuring:

This suggests that levers for instructional improvement might be located in places that leaders are not necessarily predisposed to look. By scanning their districts with an eye toward “structures of participation” rather than formally designated role groups, leaders can be better positioned to support opportunities for learning—not only by creating new communities but also by identifying and building on groups with a shared history (p.618).

Realization that traditional models of implementation, bureaucracy, policy making do not provide the appropriate guides to create change in teaching and learning spurs consideration of new ways of thinking and acting; it begins to generate changes in district structure and culture (Honig, 2008; McLaughlin, 2006; Rorrer, et al., 2008). Stein and Coburn (2008), highlighted how cultural changes in engaging in professional learning “created new possibilities for learning among district staff about how best to support meaningful opportunities for teacher learning that would be aligned with” the district reform efforts (p. 614).

Given the ecological nature of schooling, culture is inherently embedded in every actor, relationship, structure, and process within the system (Datnow, 2006; Firestone, 1989; Weaver- Hightower, 2008). Challenges of change through educational reform gets to the heart of fundamental beliefs on education and forces educators to wrestle with their beliefs and values (Datnow, et al., 2002). In addition, broader cultural belief systems that exist among educators and the surrounding community contribute to the social norms, habits, routines, and the explicit and tacit ways of interaction that shape reform in local contexts (Datnow, et al.,
Changing district culture requires a new way of working through altered norms, expectations, and values (McLaughlin, 1987; Rorrer, et al., 2008). Often times, this change requires a blended “top-down” and “bottom-up” approach that supports collaboration and people working and learning together (Datnow, et al., 2002; Rorrer, et al., 2008; Weick, 1976). Rorrer, et al. (2008), cited McLaughlin’s research in which she argued for the importance of the changing of district culture as a means to support reform: “The relationships between teacher and districts that are powerful influences on teachers and teaching have little to do with hierarchical structure and controls and everything to do with the norms, expectations, and values that shape the district professional community” (McLaughlin, 1992, p. 35). Allowing for a non-linear, hierarchical approach to the redesigning of the system fosters progress to redefining organizational cultures that are flexible to the needs of the system as well as to the needs of the individual schools while simultaneously maintaining engagement in specific practices that promote clear goals for improvement (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, & Daly, 2008; McLaughlin, 2006; Weick, 1976).

In Hightower’s report (2002) on district reform in San Diego, she found that one district approached restructuring and reculturing through the changing of district leadership and design of its system of schools. In this particular study, the district leadership took a swift approach in reform, which initially caused alarm amongst members of the school board and greater community. Despite the abrupt changes in the system, district leadership was able to accomplish change in teaching and learning within three years due to the restructuring and reculturing of the district and schools. Hightower (2002) describes this process:

Quickly and with great force and purpose, San Diego City Schools’ reformers reoriented their district bureaucracy to focus on instruction and bring coherence across
programs, policies, and instructional agendas. They simultaneously attended to instructional quality across their system of schools and to the organizational details of the central office that reinforced the system’s larger instructional vision. …. However, they simultaneously attended to creating a professional learning culture throughout the district in which members interacted with others around research, performance data, and teaching practice and through which the larger system learned to incorporate feedback it received. As such, the San Diego case illustrates how a district’s bureaucratic and learning features not only can co-exist but also how they can be mutually reinforcing. (p.18)

Documented in the San Diego study, the process of restructuring and reculturing a system requires inevitably difficult decisions and challenges. However, when grounded with clear goals of teaching and learning nested in a culture of collaboration where norms, expectations, and values are established to promote mutual adaptation and reciprocal accountability, district reorientation is possible (Knapp, 2008; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). This research supports the critical role that districts have in fostering the success of reform by setting the tone for change, establishing priorities and expectations, and creating structures and conditions that promote professional dialogue and collective participation (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Desimone, 2002; Honing, 2009; Spillane 2002).

**Collective Participation.** Implementation research has given much attention to the notion of collective participation through processes of co-construction and mutual adaption over the past several decades (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Datnow, 2006). Researchers reference the RAND Change Agent study in the late 1970s as one of the initial studies to investigate complexities of social organizations rather than just focusing on
individuals (Datnow et al., 2002; McLaughlin, 1987; Smylie & Evans, 2006). Subsequently, implementation research has consisted of a large body of literature exploring social organizations, social interactions and networks, and how they influence policy implementation (Smylie & Evans, 2006; Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau, & Polhemus, 2003). More specifically, focus on the collaborative process and collective participation in effecting change is of particular interest to this study. To engage in effective collaboration, trust, communication, and mutually agreed upon norms are foundational and are considered the essential components of the theory of social capital (Smylie & Evans, 2006). Smylie and Evans (2006) state, “social capital is used to describe the nature and function of social relations and their capacity to support individual and collective development and behavior” (p.188). Scholars posit that local human and social capital is pivotal in affecting implementation and the processes and quality of organizational work (Bryk, et al., 2010; Marsh, Stunk, & Bush, 2013). With that, sustained, deliberate, and relentless attention from district leaders to broaden professional dialogue, cultivate social networks, and create inclusive stakeholder participation in meaning-making and decision making is critical to establishing social trust and the vitality of reform efforts (Hannay & Earl, 2012).

Research has suggested that involvements of actors within an organization must be personally and professionally motivated to support implementation of policies that seek to reform or change practices (McLaughlin, 2006). This entails collective participation throughout the implementation process allowing for opportunities of co-construction. Through the strategic design of structures and processes that promote co-construction of meaning and application of reform through both top-down and bottom-up approaches, trusting relationships are more easily garnered and sustained (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003; Datnow, 2006). Through
co-constructed policy, implementation becomes a joint accomplishment of participants in different places within an organization (Mehan, Hubbard, & Datnow, 2010).

To highlight this concept, a study conducted by Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) investigated the linkages between the central office and schools for reform, they found that the research on trusting relationships is essential for successful reform (Bryk et al., Datnow, 2006; Smylie & Evans, 2006). They posited that relational linkages between the district office and schools and within school is foundational for “enhancing commitment and professional accountability, ensuring a coherent instructional focus, and promoting organizational learning in the process of change” (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010, p.765). In their study one district’s strategy to garner collective participation through the development of teams that focused their work on enhancing their content knowledge, using data effectively, and focusing on pedagogy. Through this team commitment, they were able to co-construct the reform with district leaders, school leaders and teacher team members. Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) explained that “the reform was based on the assumption that developing leadership and grade-level teams, providing tools and processes guided by conceptual frameworks, and aligning the curriculum focus of the professional development with district goals and school needs would lead to improved student learning” (p.752). They further elaborated on a study conducted by Hubbard, Mehan, and Stein (2006), of San Diego City Schools to describe reform as a messy process and that goodwill, cooperation, and willingness to participate by all individuals involved is critical to successfully move reforms forward.

The findings of those studies support the literature on social capital and implementation regarding the recognition of differing layers of social structures and how those layers influence each other. Stoll (2013) refers to this type of collective engagement as “lateral learning”
through networking across the system. Through this approach all layers within the district work collaboratively and accept collective responsibility for improving teaching and learning (Stoll, 2013). District reform is a complex, multilevel system of relationships that exist not only among individuals within schools but also between schools, central offices, external change agents, policy-making bodies, and other entities (Malen, et al., 2015; McLaughlin, 2006; Smylie & Evans, 2006). District leaders need to consider the degree to which social structures are open and closed as well as the information that flows through and is enforced within those interactions (Smylie & Evans, 2006).

As an integral aspect of collective participation, clear and effective communication is imperative in the adoption, initiation, and sustainment of any reform effort. In a study conducted by Marsh, Strunk, and Bush (2013), school turnaround and portfolio district management strategies were implemented in Los Angeles Public Schools in an effort to improve student performance. Their findings confirmed literature on the importance of stakeholder involvement through clear communication that achieves a collective understanding through transparency and professional learning regarding the reform (Marsh, et al., 2013). Districts in the study initially reported misunderstanding and confusion amongst stakeholders due to the lack of time planning and preparing for the initiative, which was a contributing factor to unsuccessful implementation. Based on the results of the research, recommendations for added time for planning prior to public dissemination combined with time for preparation of the adoption of new policies, processes, and practices may improve the consistency of messaging, social trust, and collective participation (Marsh, et al., 2013).

Over the past couple of decades, implementation research has suggested that developing strong professional networks and communities with the focus on sharing ideas and
pedagogy, planning and analyzing student evidence, and building strong, positive connections is a reform strategy that can foster positive changes in instructional practice, (Coburn & Russell, 2008; McLaughlin, 2006; Shulman, 1987; Spillane, 2002). Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau, and Polhemus (2003) conducted a study of Los Angeles Public Schools that focused on building capacity for reform implementation through the use of professional networks. They found that the groups in the district that designed professional learning through cross-school networks and encouraged active, collective engagement were more successful with implementation. Their finding indicated that the district office staff coordinating and facilitating between-school professional networks built organizational structures that “fostered members’ participations by dispersing power broadly and building trust among schools” (p.423). Consequently, the groups that did not encourage collective, active involvement and led authoritative approach of disseminating information did not achieve the same level of success. Wohlestetter et al. (2003), research suggests that professional networks offer districts opportunities to develop connections and communities with others who share similar goals, promote the co-construction of meaning, and boost collective capacity for reform. The findings also suggest that how district leaders strategize on crafting those routine interactions can shape work roles and work flow, which influence the patterns of interaction between and within professional networks. This study added to the concepts of social capitol in that districts strategizing on how to leverage social capital for policy implementation need to consider various methods in generating social interactions such as creating the conditions for professional dialogue to be more conducive for learning the intentions and applications of the reform initiative.
**Summary of District and School Reform Trends**

As evidenced through the various frameworks utilized within the literature, capacity building strategies to implementation are multifaceted, complex, and incorporate aspects of the collective organization. In Knapp et al.’s (2003), *Leading for Learning sourcebook*, the authors identified five practices for system-wide instructional improvement: focus on learning, professional development, environmental engagement, strategic action, and coherence. Through those practices, they highlighted the “learning agenda” that flows throughout the organization through processes of student, professional, and systems learning as well as the influences of organizational, family and community, and policy contexts (Knapp et al., 2003). Through Rorrer, et al.’s (2008) literature synthesis, they developed a theory of systemic reform through the role that districts play as institutional actors. Within the theory, the authors describe four essential roles that districts serve in reform: (a) providing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and (d) maintaining an equity focus (Rorrer, et al., 2008). In Malen, et al. (2015) study, the authors utilized a framework for identifying and assessing capacity-building strategies. Within this framework, capacity building strategies are a two-dimensional construct; resource dimension and productivity dimension. Foundational resources are identified as human, fiscal, social, cultural, and informational. Productivity refers to alignment, intensity of workload, and the degree of organizational fragmentation. Malen, et al. (2015) describe that the interactions between the various forms of resources and the coordination of the system effecting productivity and impact a district’s ability to enhance the system’s capacity to implement reform. Examining just those three frameworks, it is easy to see overlapping of practices and processes that create conditions for successful implementation.
Policy Implementation Moving Forward: Implementation Science

With the advancements of implementation research, there are still many other conceptual and theoretical frameworks that are utilized in understanding, analyzing, and engaging in district-wide capacity building initiatives. One particular concept that is receiving growing attention from scholars and governmental agencies is implementation science, which focuses on two outcomes of reform; implementation and intervention (Blase, Fixsen, Sims, & Ward; 2015).

Implementation outcomes focus on changes of professionals and organizational practices and process; intervention refers to the support students receive based on their educational and social needs and influences. Implementation science is based on a stage approach explaining that implementation is a process that occurs over time, and each stage requires specific activities to occur at right times throughout the process. Fixsen, et al. (2005) suggests that there are 6 key stages in the implementation process consisting of: 1) Exploration and Adoption; 2) Program Installation; 3) Initial Implementation; 4) Full Operation; 5) Innovation; and 6) Sustainability. In addition to the stages of implementation, implementation science elaborates on the processes required to move change within each stage. Those processes are defined as drivers consisting of organization drivers, leadership drivers, and competency drivers. Encompassed within those drivers are the capacity building processes and strategies that were illuminated throughout the review of literature. (See Figure 1)
The concepts that implementation science addresses is the “how” of implementation and situates it within a change process in efforts to conceptualize the complexity of educational settings to engage in strategies that work to sustain reform (NIRN, 2018). It seeks to advance takes capacity-building strategies by framing capacity building as a continuum throughout the implementation change process. Implementation Science is also interested in building structures to assess the effect of the continuum of strategies. The iterative cycles of implementation appear most successful when a prolonged attention to the goals of the initiative is maintained with clear measures of success criteria that are continually assessed and reflected on to adapt and adjust to the needs of the system (Blase, et al., 2015). This purposeful attention requires using evidence-based and evidence-informed implementation strategies to improve
educators’ knowledge and confidence, to create hospitable system environments for new ways of work, and to engage in a focused leadership approach for the diverse challenges that occur through any change process (Blase, et al., 2015; NIRN, 2018).

**Learning Theories and Theoretical Frames**

As noted earlier, research on policy implementation has been shifting focus from a technical rational perspective to a collective learning and participation approach. This shift is partly due to the types of reforms and policies that have been mandated to address purported educational systems poor outcomes. In order to address those reforms, school districts are being called to reorganize into learning organizations and systems (Bryk, et al., 2016; Honig, 2008). With the current state of school districts pushing towards developing learning systems approaches and educational researchers leaning on learning theories in social situations, this study draws upon organizational learning and sociocultural learning theories to highlight, enhance, and elaborate on ways in which district offices can operate as learning systems (Fauske & Raybould, 2005; Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008).

Organizational learning theory is based on principles from sociology, political science, and economics (Honig, 2006). The current philosophy driving organizational learning is grounded in situated, sociocultural, and cognitive theories. Within organizational learning perspectives, knowledge is constructed and reconstructed through opportunities of reflection on practice (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996; Spillane, 2002). In a situated theory approach, learning is grounded in internalizing the meaning of something new using knowledge previously constructed coupled with participation in the collective and individual efforts in transferring the new concepts into practice (Spillane, 2002; Spillane, et al., 2006). In this stance, leaders’ visions for their organizational learning maintained an identity of both
knowers and learners within their community (Spillane, 2002). Socicultural theorists posit, “that the physical and social contexts in which an activity takes place are an integral part of the activity, and that the activity is an integral part of the learning that takes place within it” (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 4). This suggests that organizational learning should be referenced in terms of the “organizational environments within which individuals think and act (Argyris & Schon, 1996, p.7). The cognitive approach involves leaders reconstructing their existing knowledge and beliefs through reflection and inquiry, which are strategies to drive change in classroom practice (Greeno et al., 1996; Spillane, 2002). Cognitive theorists treat knowledge as the manipulation of ideas and applying those skills through useful and appropriate settings (Greeno et al., 1996, Putnam & Borko, 2000).

**Cognitive Theory**

Cognitive theory “emphasizes understanding of concepts and theories in different subject matter domains and general cognitive abilities, such as reasoning, planning, solving problems, and comprehension of language” (Greeno et al., 1996, p.16). In variation of behaviorism, cognitive theorists are interested in the workings of the mind and the reconstruction of a learner’s knowledge (Spillane, 2002). It is maintained that behavioral changes resulting from new learning stems from a cognitive component (Spillane et al., 2002). Within this standpoint, “learning is understood as a constructive process of conceptual growth, often involving the reorganization of concepts in the learner’s understanding, and growth in the cognitive abilities such as problem-solving strategies and metacognitive processes” (Greeno et al., 1996, p.16). Practitioners that hold this orientation to learning believe that teacher learning and change of practice are enabled through opportunities to reflect on existing knowledge, experience, and practice (Spillane, 2002; Spillane et al., 2006).
Sociocultural Learning Theory

The sociocultural perspective “views knowledge as distributed among people and their environments, including the objects, artifacts, tools, books, and the communities of which they are a part” (Greeno et al., 1996, p.17). Within this viewpoint, knowledge is constructed through the experiences of an individual’s engagement with others and various artifacts or tools and learning occurs through the acceptance of abilities and practices within a community (Honig, 2008; Spillane, 2002; Spillane et al., 2006). Some scholars have emphasized that “joint work” grounds those engagements and that they unfold in a community of others, or a “community of practice” (Honig, 2008; Wenger, 1998). This perspective has deep roots in the socioconstructivist philosophy regarding human learning and cognitive development.

The socioconstructivist approach, which was advanced primarily by Vygotsky (1896-1934), a scholar of psychology, who was motivated to “carefully and critically” scrutinize the conceptions of learning and development that were pervasive during his time period (Saljo, 2010, p. 498; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky posited that the “genuinely psychological understanding of phenomena such as learning and development must grapple with the specifically human modes of thinking and acting, where language and other cultural tools play a decisive role” (Saljo, 2010, p. 498). The socioconstructivist perspective suggests that educators’ learning takes place in a community “that enables them to develop a vision for their practice; a set of understandings about teaching, learning, and children; dispositions about how to use this knowledge; practices that allow them to act on their intentions and beliefs; and tools that support their efforts” (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p.385). This approach to learning and development is the cornerstone to sociocultural learning theory,
which further elaborates the influence of the collection of individuals in a community and how that shapes what is learned and how it is transferred into practice.

The underlying foundation of sociocultural learning theory locates human learning in social interactions, views learning as inseparable from the relations between individuals and their social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Knapp, 2008). Shifting from management approaches to learning systems requires the participation of people who are fully engaged in the process of creating, refining, communicating, and using knowledge in communities (Wenger, 1998; Coburn & Stein, 2006). Within this perspective, learning is defined “as the ways in which individuals and communities gradually transform their practice through the ongoing negotiation of meaning” (Knapp, 2008, p.527).

Knapp (2008) outlines the constructs from sociocultural learning theory that can potentially be useful for understanding school district reform as:

- **Participation in activity** – Learning is fundamentally social and inseparable from participation in activities.
- **Practice** – Engagement in situated behaviors that include the activities as well as the historical and structural context for work.
- **Communities of practice and joint work** – A context for learning is communities of practice, collectives in which members share joint work, and have developed a common language for approaching the work.
- **Reification and tools** – Reifying involves making abstract concepts concrete and easily accessed by others. The tools constructed by participants in the organization goes through processes of reifying which are products of participation as well as central elements in participation.
• Appropriation and the transformation of participation – Participants

“appropriate ideas” by actively internalize and embody them in daily practice.

This learning involves change through processes that transform participation in activity settings.

These particular constructs of sociocultural learning theory are highlighted to focus on processes of district reform and to illustrate a conceptual vocabulary for describing those processes (Knapp, 2008).

Elaborating on these concepts in terms of communities of practice within district reform, Honig (2008) suggests these supports include assistance relationships between multiple layers of participation within and between schools as well as between schools and district office. Here, Honig (2008) draws on sociocultural learning theory to frame “assistance as a relationship in which participants more expert at particular practices model those practices and create valued identity structures, social opportunities, and tools that reinforce those models for more novice participants” (p. 634). This concept of assistance relationship will be discussed further in the section that integrates organizational learning and sociocultural learning theories.

Organizational Learning Theory

Organizational learning theory derives from an overarching organizational theory, which developed a lens for examining human organizations (Fauske & Raybould, 2005). There are a multitude of conceptions of organizational learning theory and scholars argue that there is no one model or coherent view of what counts as organizational learning (Honig, 2008). Organizational learning serves as a label for multiple strands of theory designed to capture organizational phenomena (Knapp, 2008). Across the strands of thought, most theorists “treat
the learning of an organization as a collective, often ‘intelligent’ response to events and conditions inside or outside of the organization, manifested in changes in collective thinking, organizational design and behavior, or organizational potential for behavior” (Knapp, 2008, p. 525). Knapp (2008) offers central constructs of organizational learning theory through synthesis of the multiple strands noting that no one strand subsumes them all:

- Information flow and management (Search, storage, retrieval, interpretation)
- Inquiry, interpretation and sense-making
- Organizational embedding, encoding, and memory
- Collective “intelligence”
- Organizational response to experience under conditions of ambiguity

Within these constructs, a reflection of structural technical (system-structural) and social cognitive systems (interpretive) is dually emphasized (Fauske & Raybould, 2005). In these dimensions, “system-structural considerations include organizations’ structures and systems for decision-making as well as sharing data and information, and interpretive dimensions involve the meaning that is assigned to the data and information’ (Fauske & Raybould, 2005, p.23).

For this study, I will draw on Honig (2008) focus of organizational learning theory in terms of learning from experience and learning under conditions of ambiguity. As described previously, organizational learning theory has roots in fairly technical and impersonal information-processing activities (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Fauske & Raybould, 2005; Honig, 2008). More recently theorists have begun to reveal and incorporate the influence of interpretation and the social construction of meaning into the fundamental processes in organizations search for and use of evidence from experience and other
sources (Honig, 2008). This blending of technical and adaptive structures and processes offers a more comprehensive frame in utilizing organizational learning in terms of educational reform.

**Integrating Theoretical Frameworks: Policy Implementation, Sociocultural Learning, and Organizational Learning Theories**

Despite the origin of sociocultural and organizational learning theories deriving from different contexts and purposes outside of public education systems, the evolution of each theory sheds light on particular dimensions of local district office operations fundamental to contemporary policy demands (Fauske & Raybould, 2005; Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008; Saljo, 2010). Due to emergence of these theories across organizational contexts, they possess some concepts that overlap and parallel each other. At the same time, they have strands of theory that when isolated have limitations when applying to the work of districts with instructional reform (Honig, 2008). In efforts to integrate concepts of sociocultural and organizational learning theories that are relevant in understanding and enhancing district reform processes and practices in teaching and learning efforts, Honig (2008) developed an integrated conception of local district offices as learning organizations.

In this model, concepts of sociocultural learning theory are primarily rooted in assistance relationships with schools with trajectories into organizational learning theory. You will notice the overlap with the constructs of sociocultural learning that Knapp (2008) outlined with the assistance relationships activities highlighted by Honig (2008). Drawing on the research trends of policy implementation as previously described as policy coherence, organizational and professional learning, reorienting organization, and collective participation, this illustrates overlying consistencies with the concepts of the learning theories and enhances
those theories to include systems operations. This study will rely on the concepts highlighted in
this review of policy implementation, sociocultural learning theory, and organizational
learning theory in analyzing the data collected and discovering emerging trends and themes.

Figure 2: An integrated conception of central offices as learning organizations (Honig, 2008)

Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS)

Multi-Tier System of Supports is defined as an evidence based model of schooling
that uses data-based problem-solving to integrate academic and behavioral instruction and
intervention (“Florida’s Multi-Tiered System of Supports”, 2017). Within this broad
framework of data-based problem solving are many other initiatives that share common
elements of MTSS, one of which being Problem Solving/Response to Intervention (RTI). In
this section, I will mainly discuss MTSS in terms of RTI to provide history and purpose as well
as build context to Pasco’s implementation of the initiative.
Response to Intervention (RTI)

RTI is defined as a school-wide problem-solving approach that uses a multi-tiered system of interventions, selected by a team, that can address multiple students’ needs prior to identification of interventions that target each individual student’s needs (Batsche, Elliott, Graden, Grimes, Kovaleski, Prasse, Schrag, & Tilly, 2006). This includes providing high quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying student-response data to important educational decisions (Elliott & Morrison, 2008). In a report presented from the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2005), RTI is described to consist of the following core assumptions:

1. The educational system can effectively teach all children
2. Early intervention is critical to preventing problems from getting out of control
3. The implementation of a multi-tiered service delivery model is necessary
4. A problem-solving model should be used to make decisions between tiers
5. Research based interventions should be implemented to the extent possible
6. Progress monitoring must be implemented to inform instruction
7. Data should drive decision making

The RTI service delivery model consists of 3 Tiers, which are defined by Fuchs & Fuchs (2006) and Florida’s MTSS as:

- Tier 1: Instruction that “all” students receive with focus on the implementation of district’s core curriculum and state standards
• Tier 2: Instruction that “some” students receive in addition to Tier 1 instruction based on student data. Tier 2 services are more “intense” by providing more time with targeted instruction.

• Tier 3: Instruction that a “few” students receive and is the most intense service level. Instruction is provided in very small groups or to individual students in order to help students overcome significant barriers to learning academic and/or behavioral skills required for school success.

To build understanding of MTSS, the next section will describe a brief history of RTI, which manifests to comprehensive MTSS approach.

**Brief History of Response to Intervention (RTI)**

Prior to the broader MTSS framework becoming widely recognized, RTI was politically framed as a national movement and supported in federal legislation that sought for higher accountability and targeted, evidence-based instruction for special education and at-risk students. (Gresham, Reschly, & Shinn, 2010). The concept of RTI was “initially conceived as a prevention framework providing early intervention to students at risk of reading failure” (Mellard, Stern, & Woods, 2011, p.1). After early implementation, advocates of special education soon began to see the contributions of RTI frameworks in providing information to the identification of specific learning disabilities (SLD) (Mellard et al., 2011).

During this time, the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001 pushed through and mandated a paradigm shift of K12 education. Even though NCLB does not directly address the eligibility process of students and special education, it has created a high-pressure climate of accountability, measurement, and data-based decision making (DBDM). In 2004, IDEA went through a reauthorization that aligned with NCLB’s foundational premise of accountability and
measurement specifically in relation to eligibility requirements pertaining to the exceptionality of specific learning disability (SLD) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). IDEA’s revision of SLD eligibility criteria involved a change of analysis from the previous practice of significant discrepancies in performance on formal evaluations to a problem-solving, data-driven approach; in other words, a response to intervention (RTI) framework of special education identification. (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). One reason behind this shift is the fact that the SLD exceptionality has been the most prevalent special education label (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). In efforts to reduce over identification, IDEA revised the criteria and supported implementation of an RTI approach. Additionally, the concept of RTI, the prevention of students falling significantly behind expected norms through the delivery of research-based interventions and ongoing progress monitoring to evaluate the effect of the intervention, received national attention to implement across the country partly due to overlapping policy consistent with NCLB (Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Mellard, Stern, and Woods, 2011).

**Brief Overview of Research Studies on RTI Implementation**

As RTI implementation swept across the country, researchers were in route to study the implementation process and outcomes. In briefly reviewing case study literature, the predominant research focus is more on the effectiveness of the varying RTI models with improving student outcomes (Balu, Zhu, Doolittle, Schiller, Jenkins, & Gersten, 2015; Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005; VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson; 2007). However, the research implications frequently addressed the issue of implementation practices even though it was not the focus of the study. Some frequent findings of the research include the lack of clearly defined implementation practices, limited research of successful long-term
implementation, and the use of pilot schools provided with extra resources (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Hoover & Love, 2011; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011; Zirkel & Thomas, 2011).

When researching Response to Intervention (RTI) articles, the search results primarily consist of school studies conducted at the elementary level (Balu et al., 2015; Burns et al., 2005). Based on one of the core assumptions to RTI, early intervention, it was a common trend to begin implementation in the early learning years (Elliott & Morrison, 2008; Mellard et al., 2011).

Another trend in the research was the allocation of resources, primarily human resource (Castillo, March, Tan, Stockslager, & Brundage, 2016). In many cases, schools received an RTI coach/consultant/expert to assist in developing the foundational understanding of RTI, assist in ensuring the integrity and fidelity of the school’s participation, and assist in providing coaching, professional development, and modeling of components to RTI implementation (Castillo et al., 2016). Even with additional resources, there is research that indicates that successful and sustained RTI implementation is lacking due in large part to educators’ beliefs, knowledge, and skills (Castillo et al., 2016; Stuart, Rinaldi, & Averill, 2011; Wang & Eversole, 2015). Consistent throughout the literature is the critical role that professional development plays in building educators’ capacity to enact the change necessitated in system reform (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Bryk et al., 2010; Fixsen et al., 2005; Castillo et al., 2016).

RTI and MTSS

As RTI and other similar data-based decision making models, such as Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS), broadened in application beyond special education, there was a shift in research and practice to encapsulate these models into an overall approach
identified as MTSS (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011). Within the last decade, districts and states began to adopt an MTSS framework with the aim to more cohesively and comprehensively meet the various needs of students (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011). MTSS leverages the principles of RTI, PBIS, and other similar models and “integrates a continuum of system-wide resources, strategies, structures, and practices” (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011, p. 91). In addition to offering a multi-tier approach to assessing students and providing interventions for academics and behaviors, MTSS integrates structures to activate home-school-community relationships and bring together partners from all social service domains (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011). Within this system, MTSS promotes collaborations from those partners in conjunction with educational leadership at the district and school levels, which plays a critical role in shaping strong relationships (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011; Ishimaru, 2013). In order to implement this system-wide approach of MTSS, district staff must often change their traditional concepts of schooling. Professional development and technical assistance are critical components to systemically implementing MTSS through facilitating understanding of MTSS and the development of consensus around MTSS practices, establishing the necessary infrastructure, and evaluating implementation fidelity to celebrate progress and understand results (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011).

**Pasco and MTSS**

Similar to the research trends presented in this section the site for this study, Pasco County Schools, has experienced multiple iterations of RTI and MTSS implementation. Pasco has engaged in pilot school implementation approaches, strategic resource allocation strategies, and targeted professional development opportunities in efforts to create sustainable change in educator practice. More recently, Pasco has shifted their approach to encompass the broader
MTSS framework in efforts to refocus implementation system-wide. Pasco’s system-wide MTSS implementation was a gradual process that included attention to new curriculum standards and PLCs as well as experiencing changes in senior leadership positions. A detailed description of Pasco’s history and work with MTSS implementation is discussed in Chapter 4.

Summary of Review of Literature

This chapter provided an overview of the literature of policy implementation, district reform practices, sociocultural and organizational learning theories, and brief description of the history and purpose of RTI and MTSS. In addition, it provided theoretical frames in which the data collected will be analyzed and interpreted. In Chapter 3, I turn to a discussion of methodology and methods.
CHAPTER THREE:

METHODOLOGY

This research is designed as a case study of multiple elements that explores ways in which principals and instructional leadership teams in two schools identified as successful by district leadership lead the implementation of a district-based initiative over the course of two years. The study took place in Pasco County Schools, a large school district in Florida. For this study, I investigated ways in which principals and instructional leaders come to understand the purpose of MTSS initiative and its construction, how principals’ and instructional leadership teams’ knowledge of MTSS combined with knowledge of school context impact the use of resources, and how school leaders learning and knowledge of MTSS implementation influences change at the school level.

A case study method is used to obtain an in-depth examination of the particular cases of district policy implementation (Lichtman, 2013; Yin, 2009). The research design combines ethnographic methods (interviews) with an interpretivist and social constructivist lens in order to capture the realities of MTSS implementation as the participants perceive it in their context (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This chapter presents the research methodology as influenced by the research problem. The chapter is organized by the following sections: (a) research questions, (b) research design, (c) epistemology, (e) position of the researcher, (f) participant recruitment and selection, (g) data collection procedures, (h) analysis reporting, (i) credibility and trustworthiness, (j) limitations, (k) ethical considerations, and (l) summary of methodology.
Research Questions

Based on the research on understanding the implementation of policy through learning and how that knowledge is transferred to practice, the following research questions guided this investigation:

**Primary Question:** In what ways do principals and their instructional leaders identified as successful lead the implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) initiative at their schools over the course of two years?

**Sub Questions:**

- What do principals and instructional leaders understand about the district’s expectations for the MTSS initiative? (Purpose)

- In what ways does a principal’s and instructional leaders’ knowledge of MTSS and knowledge of school context impact the utilization of district provided resources at the school site? (Supports)

- In what ways does a principal’s and instructional leaders’ knowledge of MTSS initiative influence the knowledge transfer of the initiative in school? (Learning)

- In what ways does a principal’s own knowledge of implementation processes impact how the principal sought to strategically implement MTSS in order to change instructional staff practice? (Understanding of Implementation processes)

Research Design

This study’s qualitative research design is intended to discover how individuals’ make meaning of a district led initiative as it was implemented within their school’s context. The design of this investigation is qualitative in nature due to the seeking of answers to questions about people in a particular social context experiencing a particular phenomenon.
in which quantifiable data cannot richly describe and build understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research provides a systematic way to investigate phenomenon and the human behaviors that impact that phenomenon within a social context (Lichtman, 2013). Through this analysis, my aim was to capture a deep explanation of individual lived experiences of a situation centered on implementation, learning, and transfer of knowledge through leadership practices. Table 1 provides a summary of the research design.

Table 1

Summary of Research Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Question</th>
<th>In what ways do principals and their leadership team identified as successful lead the implementation of a district-based initiative at their schools over the course of two years?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data Sources</td>
<td>Individual and Focus Group Interviews, Documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis Strategies</td>
<td>Coding, Memoing, Inductive and Comparative analysis (Thematic)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Validity Checks</td>
<td>Journaling, Triangulation, Member Checks, Critical Friend Feedback</td>
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**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to discover the ways in which principals and their instructional leaders identified as successful in implementing a district initiative have come to understand, interpret and mediate the purpose, resources, and knowledge of the initiative. Through this discovery, the aim was to describe richly how a district-led initiative was implemented. In addition, this study sought to understand how knowledge is constructed of initiative implementation and how school leaders transfer that knowledge into practice.
Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is primarily on the district implementation practices. In addition, the study focused on how the principal along with school instructional leaders perceive and mediate, and lead the implementation of the three key priorities of a district-wide initiative in Pasco County, Florida. For this particular investigation, the district being studied is implementing MTSS. To be clear, this study was not about the MTSS initiative itself, rather it was focused on the practices and processes of school-level implementation of a major district-led initiative, which was the roll out of the MTSS initiative over 2 years. I am interested in how school leaders perceive and interpret the district provided goals, expectations, practices, and resources of the initiative to transfer to their school site through means of the principal and instructional leaders. Given that focus, there is not extensive information about MTSS itself. Instead, this study sought to provide insight into school-level implementation processes and district level supports that are most likely to support meaningful school-level implementation and learning. In addition, this study offers contextual understanding to the conditions that promote and counteract implementation efforts. My research seeks to further add to the field of implementation research, school improvement, and leadership development.

Epistemology

This study utilized a case study with multiple elements design with a social constructivist lens. Social constructivism, which is linked to interpretivism, seeks understanding of the world through highlighting and extending meanings of individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). These meanings, even though multiple and varied, leads researchers in understanding the complexities of the phenomena rather than narrowing perspectives to a few categories or concepts (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Social constructivism acknowledges that even
though elements of knowledge are shared across groups, that multiple realities of that knowledge exist due to the individual meaning making of knowledge, which is influenced by the different experiences and interpretations that each individual possesses (Crotty, 1998; Hatch, 2002; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). In addition, social constructivism recognizes the process of meaning making is negotiated within the historical and social contexts in which the phenomena occurs (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The goal of research through a social constructivist lens is to uncover patterns that exist amongst individuals in a shared situation whose different experiences; through social instructions, historical contexts, and cultural norms construct meaning.

In this investigation, the construction of meaning of two elementary school principals and their instructional leadership team was explored to capture their experiences of a district implementation processes and how they have come to transfer their knowledge of those practices within the context of their school. The process of gathering information involved general and open-ended questions that allowed the participants and researcher to develop meaning through discussions and/or interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which is consistent with social constructivism perspective. The gathering and interpreting of information is a mutual engagement between the participants and the researcher due to the subjective nature of meaning and knowledge (Hatch, 2002). This stance also aligns with organizational learning and sociocultural learning theories, which were the guiding theoretical frames of this investigation.

Within this perspective, knowledge and learning occurs through the shifting movement of experiences that people individually and collectively share (Gallucci, 2008; Haskell, Linds, & Ippolito, 2002; Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008). Organizational learning theorists believe that
organizations learn through the individual learning of its members, which develops the organizations collective knowledge (Fauske & Raybould, 2005). Sociocultural learning theorists posit that learning occurs through the individual’s engagement with others and various tools in organizational activities (Honig, 2008). The overlapping foundations of these frames rests on the individual interactions with others and various artifacts to construct meaning and develop processes and habits that contribute to a community or culture (Fauske & Raybould, 2005; Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978; Wegner, 1998).

Through utilizing this research paradigm, I recognized the influence of my own background in shaping the interpretation of information and I worked to be cognizant of my position and communicate how my interpretation flows from personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Due to the inherent nature of the co-construction between participants and researcher in social constructivism research, this study’s design incorporated methods such as reflexive journaling, member checks, and critical friend feedback, in efforts to account for the role of the researcher and demonstrate credibility and trustworthiness in the findings.

**Position of the Researcher**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) reference Maxwell (2012) explanation of qualitative research as being “concerned with understanding how a particular researcher’s values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusion of the study” (p. 249). One characteristic of good qualitative research is that the inquirer makes her position explicit (Creswell & Poth, 2017). My influence on the research design and analysis was demonstrated through my selection of the theoretical frames of organizational learning and sociocultural learning theory that guides this study, wherein, the organizational context and patterns of social interaction
influence sense making and the construction of knowledge (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Honig, 2008). These frameworks are of interest to me due to the alignment with my epistemological stance of social constructivism. In addition, my own experiences within Pasco have partly shaped the research questions, design, and interpretation of the data. As a Special Education Teacher and Professional Development District Administrator, my curiosity in the way people learn and interact with each other in learning processes has motivated me to continue to explore methods, structures, and conditions that promote learning in various contexts.

I have been employed in Pasco for 18 years of service. I worked at the middle school level for 13 years with 9 years as an Exceptional Student Education (ESE) self-contained teacher of students identified as emotionally handicapped and varying exceptionalities, 2 years as an ESE instructional coach, and two years as an ESE inclusion teacher. In addition to those instructional positions, I held a teacher leader positions as ESE department chair in middle school level for ten years, problem-solving committee co-chair for four years, and district trainer for Individual Education Plan (IEP) development for six years. For the last five years, I have worked as a district administrator in Pasco’s Professional Development department. Along with being employed by Pasco, it is also important to note that I was a student in the school system and both of my parents lead full careers in the district serving as teachers and administrators.

In my role as a district administrator, I served on strategic planning teams that assisted in the construction of Pasco’s initial implementation plan of their MTSS initiative, including collaborating on principal survey development to gain understanding of current practices and knowledge and participated in discussions that lead to the emergence of the priorities, goals, expectations, and supports. Throughout the two years of MTSS system-wide implementation
(2015-2017), I have participated on teams that collected and analyzed data on current practices related to the initiative, provided support to schools with aspects of the initiative, and facilitated professional development that addressed components of the initiative.

One primary method of collecting data on the initiative was through instructional walk-throughs. The tools utilized during walk-throughs are the Instructional Practice Guides designed by Student Achievement Partners. In the position as a district administrator, I attended trainings to build knowledge on the tool and how it is used to collect data and build capacity. I participated on walk-throughs of several schools in the district and assisted in facilitating school teams debrief the process and data collected. In addition, I was included in district “Calibration” meetings where representatives from all district departments would examine all the walk-through data to determine system trends and consider responsive supports. Other points of data were analyzed during these meetings as well that included other aspects of the initiative and work of the system.

As described in previous sections of this chapter, a part of MTSS is Problem Solving/Response to Intervention (PS/RTI). PS/RTI initiative implementation was piloted in selected elementary schools in the district in 2007-2012. Moving beyond elementary schools, in 2009-2011 Pasco created some secondary cohorts to be provided professional development to all schools on the basic structures and processes of PS/RTI. During those years, I was in the position of ESE teacher and problem-solving committee co-chair. I participated on the team at my school that attended the professional development with the purpose to bring back and implement at my school. Knowing that PS/RTI had roots in special education, being in the position of ESE department chair and PS/RTI committee co-chair, I was partly responsible for providing supports and guidance in developing structures and processes for the school.
Since I have previously established professional relationships with the participants of this study and have had an active role in components of Pasco’s MTSS implementation, as a researcher I approached this investigation as a type of participant-observer. In qualitative research, there is a continuum to the roles of observer and participant that can change throughout the investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This role fluidity relates to perceptions and actions of being an “insider” or “outsider” of what is being studied. For me, I am insider due to the experiences I have in Pasco’s MTSS implementation and the access to information and resources. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explains that the observer as participant approach means that my activities are known to the participants and that I have access to people and information, however the level of information being revealed is still controlled by the study’s participants.

With the knowledge that I have on the district’s MTSS implementation, I am able to utilize that knowledge in my research design, data collection, and analysis processes. In addition, I have had the opportunity through my length of employment to build relationships with a large number of district personnel. As a researcher, I am able to leverage those relationships to gain access and quickly establish trusting relationships with the study’s participants. However, I do acknowledge that even through establishing trusting relationships, I will still be perceived in some degree as a district administrator, which imparts notions of power. Through this study, I recognized that my identity is multiple and varied (researcher, administrator, and colleague) and shifted during the research process (Apple & Buras, 2006). With this recognition, I tried to remain in constant reflection on how my knowledge and work experience of the initiative influences the messages I am sending and receiving (Lichtman, 2013). For example, when engaged in the interviews, I would be cognizant of
moments where I would lead or interrupt a participant’s statement to knowledge that I have regarding a particular implementation activity. During those moments, I would make note of my comment or question in my field journal and consider other lines of questioning that I already prepared and/or questions that prompted further thought on a previous participant response. As I engaged in my analysis of the data, I took notice of my notes in my journal when I noted my insertion and would consider how that might have or might not have influenced the immediate responses. Along with maintaining constant reflection of my influence on the messages I was sending and receiving, I made a point to clearly articulate the research design and analysis in efforts to establish transparency and maintain a mutually supportive relationship to minimize concerns with power and trust (Haskill et al., 2002).

In addition, due to the primary unit of analysis as the district’s efforts with MTSS implementation to support the principals and their instructional leadership teams, my professional role as a district administrator embedded in the district’s work allows the opportunity to shed light on work of the district over the two years of implementation. In this aspect, my role was more of a participant. In terms of the participants of the study, the lived experiences of two elementary principals and instructional leadership teams, I was not directly engaged in MTSS initiative implementation at their schools. I maintained a research observer position in my study by not being directly connected to district implementation activities with the participants as well as communicating to all participants prior, during, and after every interview my purpose as a researcher.

In acknowledgment of my experiences with Pasco and MTSS implementation, I sought to maintain awareness of my orientation and disposition towards this research. Having a professional investment through previous and current work, I was cognizant that I bring bias in
ways where I can influence interpretation of findings with a positive perspective, I can bring assumptions of individuals based on previous encounters, and I can lead responses to questions based on my knowledge on the district efforts of MTSS implementation. Through the strategies of reflexive journaling and critical friend feedback, I maintained acute attention to any bias or predisposed thought that occurs during analysis. Reflexive journaling promoted self-awareness and critique of my questions, thoughts, and interpretations as well as to my beliefs and assumptions of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Grbich, 2013; Lichtman, 2016).

This constant reflection through journaling prompted necessary self-talk during the research process in a way that steered my thoughts to lean back into the researcher role with acknowledgment of the influence of my background and professional experiences (Mruck & Breuer, 2003). In addition, reflexive journaling will add to the data analysis by highlighting how my “values and expectations influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 249).

Critical friend feedback involves a colleague not engaged in the study to review my research process. Through their review, the critical friend was able to provide an outside perspective which allows other vantage points to the process and checks for researcher bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, when sharing my interview process and protocol, my critical friend provided feedback in ways to describe my purpose and strategies to meta-cognitively engage in the interviews while capturing notes in my journal of those moments. To ensure that I gained an accurate understanding of the intention of the participants’ recollections, I engaged in multiple readings of my data. In addition, I engaged in member
checks with the participants to ensure that the data transcribed accurately reflects the messages they wanted to convey.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

For the purposes of this study, a purposeful intensity sampling was utilized. With purposeful intensity sampling, participants who exhibited high or to very high characteristics of the research topic are identified for the focus of the investigation (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). This research design investigated a districts’ MTSS implementation with two principals and instructional leadership teams of elementary schools that exhibited characteristics that are considered high performing in relation to the district policy (MTSS) implementation. The purpose to explore principals and instructional leadership teams identified as successful was guided by concepts of organizational learning and implementation research wherein individuals that experienced success can be positioned to build human capabilities system-wide that are necessary for the learning of the initiative and its implementation to spread (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015; Honig, 2008). The number of principals to include in this study is based on principles of qualitative research of having a smaller sample size to allow more in depth investigation (Lichtman, 2013). The rationale for the sample to consist of elementary schools was due to the length and breadth of work with the initiative at elementary level schools. This work stems back to the pilot PS/RTI implementation that occurred in 2007-2009. The next sections will describe principal and instructional leadership team selection criteria. In addition to the following sections, further detail regarding the study’s participant selection processes is described in Chapter 4.

**Principal Selection Criteria.** The criteria for high performing principal was based on: (a) years of service at the current school of employment, (b) review of district-collected data,
and (c) recommendations from the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools of principals that have been successful at MTSS implementation. Principals who have served less than 5 years at the school were not be included in this study. The rationale of this exclusion draws on implementation research, which suggests that the evolutionary nature of policy implementation is a continuous process, proceeding overtime as resources, issues, and objectives develop and transform (McLaughlin, 1987; Honig 2006). Pasco collected data included: district lead walk- through data addressing the key priority of High Impact Instruction and PLC facilitator self- assessment using a district-created rubric that addresses the key priorities of Data-Driven Decisions and Collaborative Culture. The recommendations from the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools relied on concepts of organizational learning and sociocultural learning theory in that relationships and engagement in joint work influence how individuals interpret and use information in decision making (Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008).

**Principal Selection.** The Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools identified two principals who meet the participant criteria described in the above section. Through his review of potential candidates, Ms. Thompson, principal of Eagle Elementary School, stood out immediately as a candidate for the study. He described her as one of the strongest principals he has in terms of her work with her teams and systems within her school. He identified other principal candidates who had similar strengths and stories of their principalship. However, he believed that Ms. Thompson would be the best fit for the focus of the study.

Through further discussion, the Assistant Superintendent identified Ms. Anders, principal of Falcon Elementary, as another candidate for the study. He explained that Ms. Anders is a very strong leader but she has had a different experience in leading her school compared to
Ms. Thompson. He described that Ms. Anders has worked with a staff whose culture was previously established prior to her becoming principal. The type of leadership that Ms. Anders has had to enact requires a different approach to that of Ms. Thompson. Even though the schools of the two principals have similar demographics, the Assistant Superintendent believed that the principals would provide different experiences to leadership and initiative implementation that could provide rich details to the research questions and further opportunities for the district to learn.

**Instructional Leaders Selection Criteria**

Five to six instructional leaders at each school site were interviewed to gain insight on the ways the principal lead the implementation of the initiative and how they engaged in learning and enacting the initiative. The instructional leaders were recommended by each of the principals. Principals were asked to select instructional leaders that (a) have been in their leadership position for the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years; (b) participated in activities related to MTSS implementation (e.g. school and district professional development, leadership meetings, implementation planning meetings); and (c) possess insight that will add to the understanding of the ways in which the principal lead the transfer of the processes of the three key priorities (High Impact Instruction, Data Driven Decisions, and Collaborative Culture) to the school. The identification of the instructional leaders involved a snowball sampling procedure.

With snowball sampling, the principal referred 5 to 6 instructional leaders who they believed would provide rich information related to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2017). The instructional leaders consist of teachers, administrators, and/or coaches as long as the principal perceives them as key influencers to the implementation
process. Similarly, to the selection of principals through Assistant Superintendent recommendations, the principal selection of instructional leaders was guided through core concepts of organizational learning and sociocultural learning theories which emphasize the influence of relationships in interpreting information to inform decision making (Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008).

**Data Collection**

The data collection process included three main methods: individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. Case study research is strengthened by the use of multiple sources of data in order to address a broader range of historical and behavioral issues (Yin, 2009). This process of triangulation of data develops converging lines of inquiry, which provides corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of the study’s findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin 2009).

The study consisted of three interviews with each identified principal, two interviews with the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools, one interview with a MTSS specialist of the district, and one focus group interview followed up with brief individual interviews with five to six instructional leaders at each school. Prior to interviews with the principal participants, there was a pilot interview conducted to assist in refining the principal interview protocol. The participant of the pilot interview was identified by the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools as another strong principal in MTSS implementation. Through the principal interviews, instructional leaders were identified to participate in focus group interviews to gain insight on how the initiative is being transferred within their work. In addition, key initiative implementation documents as well as school specific documents and
implementation evidence were collected and analyzed to add to the context of the study and analysis of implementation.

Those documents were identified through the interviews of the participants and the background knowledge of the context from the researcher. Through this use of multiple sources of data, it increases the internal validity of the study and provides richer descriptions that address the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2009).

**Interviews**

This study utilized a series of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews offer guiding questions that frame conversations according to the research questions while allowing flexibility in the discussion to gain insight and richer information on the experiences of the participants (Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview process was a combination of both intentional questioning and responsive questioning based upon data gathered in the field (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In preparing and conducting the interviews, the researcher followed the procedures described by Creswell and Poth (2017), which are summarized below:

- Determine the research questions that will be answered by the interviews
- Identify interviewees who can best answer these questions based on a purposeful sampling procedures
- Collect data using adequate recording procedures
- Design and use an interview protocol or guide
- Refine the interview questions and the procedures through pilot testing
- Locate a distraction-free place for conducting the interview
- Obtain consent from the interviewee to participate in the study
• Follow good interview procedures by staying within the bounds of the study, using interview protocol, remain professional and courteous, and demonstrate good listening skills

• Decide transcription logistics ahead of time

Throughout the interview process, I reflected on the interview procedures and the interview experiences to ensure consistency within and across schools. This involved reflexive journaling to capture my thoughts and ideas on the interview experience as the flow of the interview process. I considered my process in establishing and maintaining supportive and trusting relationships. In addition, I was mindful that through my questioning that all participants had the opportunity to share their perceptions in the fullest extent that they feel comfortable.

Principal Pilot Interview. Prior to conducting the principal interviews, I practiced my interview protocol through a pilot interview process. The person that engaged in the pilot interview currently serves in the role of an elementary school principal whom which I have a professional relationship and was willing to engage in a pilot interview. In addition, this principal has engaged in implementation of the three key priorities of MTSS in the district and meets the criteria for participant recruitment of this study. However, due to the focus of the study, this principal better served in providing feedback to the interview protocol and on ways the questions can better elicit information pertaining to the research questions, such as the use of initiative language and district supports. This principal has also served in other district leadership positions and was an administrator during the PS/RTI pilot implementation in 2007-2009.
**Principal Interviews.** During the data collection process, the principals engaged in a series of 3 interviews over the span of two months. The rationale for the interviews to be conducted in a minimum of a three-part series was to help develop a relationship between researcher and participant, check for internal consistencies, more in depth sampling of phenomena, and time for the researcher to analyze and reflect on the current data to inform the next round of data collection. The questions for the first round of interviews were primarily based on the research questions of the study (See Appendix J). The questions for the second and third cycle of interviews were developed from a combination of the research questions and literature as well as from previous responses from the instructional leadership team and principals that the researcher believed was relevant to explore further. During the principal interviews, the researcher used probing questions to explore some responses for further understanding and meaning.

**Focus Group Interviews.** During the first set of principal interviews, the principal identified five to six instructional leaders, based on the previously described criteria, to participate in a focus group interview. There was a total of 11 instructional leaders identified to participant in the study. Focus group interviews allows for group interaction, which may trigger thoughts and ideas among participants that do not emerge during an individual interview (Lichtman, 2013). The focus group interviews also followed a semi-structured format and was centered on gaining insight on the transfer of the initiative into their practice (See Appendix K). After the focus group interviews, I asked each instructional leader for a brief follow-up interview to ensure that they were able to entirely share their perceptions and if they had other thoughts emerge after the focus group interview that would add to the case. Based on the concepts of organizational learning, sociocultural learning theory, and
implementation research, the process of reform is comprehensive relying on the continuous and collective engagement from all constituents (Bryk, et al., 2016; Chrispeels, et al., 2008; Honig, 2008; Spillane, et al., 2006).

Even though this study’s primary unit of analysis was the district’s efforts in supporting MTSS implementation by the principal and their instructional leaders, it is acknowledged that change does not happen alone and teacher leaders are essential in the change process (Chrispeels, et al., 2008). The retrieval process defined in organizational learning and sociocultural theories emphasize that the involvement of organizational members ongoing participation in joint work deepens the ability to engage in particular activities and apply or transfer their developing knowledge in different contexts (Honig, 2008, Knapp, 2008). The aim of the information gained from the focus groups interviews was to offer granular insight of the more nuanced aspects of implementation and knowledge transfer through leadership practices.

**District-level Interviews.** The Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools and MTSS Specialist interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. The purpose of those interviews was to gain further insight on the historical context of the district, current practices and resources, and the identification of the principals to participate in this study. The Assistant Superintendent identified the participants and then I asked questions to gain insight to reasons why the participants are viewed as successful; such as, types of decisions made through the process and evidence of change towards initiative goals. As noted previously, the process of the Assistant Superintendent to identify two principals viewed as successful in leading implementation draws on aspects of organizational learning and sociocultural theories in that interpretation and use of information through relationships and joint engagement of the work.
influence decision making (Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008). Both the MTSS specialist and Assistant Superintendent interviews sought information to build the historical and contextual components of the district’s PS/RTI and MTSS implementation as well as add any other pertinent information to the study. The principals and instructional leaders participating in the study were informed of those interviews and have access to the context report.

Each interview was audio recorded using my personal electronic device. In addition to the audio recording, I took notes during the interview to capture non-verbal expressions of the participants and personal thoughts and questions that emerge. For the principal interviews, each participant’s interview responses determined questioning format of their next interview. Within hours after each interview, I took notes in my journal to reflect on emerging data and search for alternative explanations.

Interviews took place at the most convenient time for the participants, which was during regular work hours. During the interviews, the participants were able to share any pertinent documents of their work, which include both conceptual and practical tools and resources. Principal and instructional leadership team focus group interviews were conducted in 90-minute time increments. Instructional leader individual follow up interviews occurred in 15 to 30-minute time increments. Table 2 provides concise information on the interviewees and number of interviews.

**Interview Procedures.** At the beginning of each interview (individual and focus groups), I reviewed the purpose, research questions, and the rights of the participants in the study. Reminders that interviews were to be audio recorded and that the notes I would be taking were provided. The interview protocols were not given to the participants as the sequence of the questions could change and the emergence of new questions could develop.
Creswell and Poth (2017) reference the work of Rubin and Rubin (2012) describing this process as responsive interviewing in that “the sequence is not fixed, allowing the researcher to change questions asked, the sites chosen, and the situations to study” (p. 165). The nature of semi-structured interviews is to provide a general structure for all individuals being interviewed while allowing some variance depending on what arises in the situation (Lichtman, 2013).

After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and those transcriptions were provided to the respondents. The participants were given the opportunity to review the transcriptions to check for any inaccuracies and to make any corrections. In addition, respondents were invited to make any additional comments and afterthoughts regarding the topics discussed in the interview. The strategy of member checking is used to ensure credibility and trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Member checking was utilized throughout the course of the study for multiple purposes. This process of member checking interview transcripts is to ensure accuracy of what was stated and to gain any further data that is reflected from the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once each participant was given the opportunity to review the transcripts and provide any additional thoughts, the completed transcript was maintained for analysis. I engaged in the instructional leadership team member checking of the focus group interviews during my follow up individual interviews. This was conducted by the restating some of their responses and asking clarifying and probing questions to become clear on the meaning and intention of their statements.
Interview analysis occurred between each interview in order for the data to help inform and shape the next series of principal interviews. Based on the emerging trends from the interviews, questions were developed to go deeper on specific concepts and/or to elicit other information that the previous interview questions did not prompt discussion of or lead to further discovery of the research questions. During the first interviews with recruited principals, I asked them to identify 5 to 6 instructional leaders that they believed would be able to provide insight on the school-level implementation of the three key priorities of MTSS.
Documents. Organizational learning theorists and sociocultural learning theorists refer to these documents as tools, which are the manifestations of ideas (Honig, 2008, Knapp, 2008). Both have converged on the importance of these tools to the learning process (Honig, 2008). These theorists suggest that documents can serve as sense making and negotiating tools that have the potential to create different types of actions for different people while leading to initiative implementation (Honig, 2008). Many sociocultural learning scholars define tools as conceptual (principles, frameworks, and ideas) and practical (specific examples of practices, strategies, and resources) (Hoing, 2008). Other implementation researchers refer to these documents as resources for the purposes of building capacity (Malen et al., 2015). In terms of resources for building capacity, they can be thought about in an expanded view of both productivity and availability (Malen et al., 2015). The integration of analysis through the ideas of productivity and availability as well as identification of conceptual and practical will addresses implementation concepts of communication, alignment, and learning.

A review of relevant district-based document resources was collected and analyzed to add to the context of the study and assist in the development of interview questions. These artifacts consisted of, but not limited to, guiding documents of the purpose, goals, expectations, supports, and processes of the district initiative. Further document resources were collected and analyzed based on participants’ response and reference through the interview process. These documents were specific to a particular school, group of teachers, or classroom including student data or data based inquiry processes. Table 3 below outlines the type of documents and their sources. The majority of the organizational documents were public documents that have been shared with various stakeholders. Any documents that are not available through public domain can be accessed since the study has district IRB approval.
Table 3

Document title and source

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tr>
<td>Monitoring of the Key Priorities</td>
<td>District</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common Vision of Instructional Excellence</td>
<td>District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of Action</td>
<td>District</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Based Teams</td>
<td>District</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLC Rubric</td>
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<td>Tiers of Support Rubric</td>
<td>District</td>
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**Journaling and Reflecting.** In addition to the organizational documents that were collected and analyzed, I documented my thoughts and observations during the interview process and document review through memoing and reflexive journaling. The act of memoing and journaling serves as a method to extend the narrative data through the researcher’s reflections and thinking processes of the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The analytical memos focus on collecting and recording additional data that reflects what I heard and observed at the time of the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Miles et al., 2014). The reflexive journal contains data that is of direct reflection of the content of the interviews and of the personal thoughts of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Both analytical memoing and reflexive journaling will be discussed further in the data analysis section.

**Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed to gain understanding of the phenomena through interpretation. Data analysis involves the fluid movement back and forth between “concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between descriptions and interpretation” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). This study engaged in iterative analysis processes to uncover meanings and understandings that constitute the findings of the research questions. Due to the study designed as a case study with multiple elements, a constant
comparative analysis that is both inductive and comparative was the primary analytic approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data involved within-case analysis first and then followed by a cross-case analysis to discover emerging themes as well as interpretations to meaning that are both unique to a school or trends across schools (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2009). A process of breaking down data into smaller parts that described the experiences through themes, categories, and codes were utilized to seek patterns and gain understanding of the experiences of the participants (Grbich, 2013). For this study, the data analysis and interpretation involved categorical aggregation in which I looked for a collection of instances that describes emerging issue-relevant meanings to the cases (Stake, 1995). In addition to categorical aggregation and cross-case analysis, I sought to discover naturalistic generalizations that people can learn from and apply to populations with similar context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews and document reviews were analyzed multiple times in order to achieve the deepest understanding of the data. Through the data collection and coding process, themes that emerged became clarified and lead to a deep, contextual description of the experiences of the two principals and their leadership teams with implementation. The data analysis process was guided from Creswell and Poth (2017) data analysis spiral framework combined with four guiding principles described by Yin (2009) for case study analysis (Hays & Singh, 2011).

Throughout and in between the data analysis process, I reflected on the following four guiding principles of qualitative analysis which were outlined by Yin (2009) and highlighted by Hays & Singh (2011):
• Ensure that all data relevant to the case is subject of analysis by asking, “What data have I ignored and/or neglected to analyze that might contribute to the understanding of the cases?”

• Be open to findings that are congruent as well as incongruent between cases by asking, “What in my analysis of this case is indicating a finding that appears to go against any major identified findings?”

• Highlight the most significant and meaningful findings of the cases in the process of analysis to avoid veering down paths that can guide you further away from understanding the boundaries of your case.

• Rely on and use your previous knowledge about the case to drive analysis forward by asking, “Where am I leaving my expertise as a researcher out of the data analysis?”

The spiral framework is guided by specific activities that occur in a fluid, ongoing process. The activities incorporated in the framework consist of: managing and organizing the data, reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, and representing and visualizing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

This process of data collection, analysis, and writing are interrelated and go on simultaneously throughout the research investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The data analysis spiral emphasizes the process of the researcher moving in analytic circles that enter with data and exit with an account or narrative while using multiple analytic strategies working towards specific analytic outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Through the framework’s depiction as a spiral, it is noted that the movement in the spiral is fluid in an ebb
and flow motion allowing for continuous reflection and expansion of the emerging data.

After each interview, the transcripts and analytical notes data collected along with the coding process were analyzed to inform the next series of interviews. The next sections discuss the data analysis activities and analytic strategies that were utilized in this study.

Figure 3: Spiral framework to qualitative data analysis

**Managing and Organizing Data.** For all audio recorded observations and interviews, external transcription partner and myself transcribed the data. The transcripts were maintained in Microsoft Word documents and organized in folders labeled by participant pseudonym name, date, and type of activity (observation or interview). All data was stored only on my computer, which is password protected and was backed up after new data sets are saved.
**Reading and Memoing.** This study is positioned in a social constructivist lens, which lends to the co-construction of data through analysis of the interview transcripts, document reviews, and the thoughts of the interviewer. The process of reading and memoing provided opportunity for me to deeply reflect on multiple aspects of data.

**Analytical Memoing.** Analytical memoing offered a space to record my thoughts, impressions, and notices about the participants and the phenomenon through an iterative process of thinking and writing (Saldana, 2016). The advantage of analytical memoing is that it not only reports the data, but it ties together different pieces of data into a recognizable cluster (Miles et al., 2014). Analytical memoing is a concurrent process with coding due to the relationship between developing a coding system and the thought processes of understanding a phenomenon (Saldana, 2016). Within my analytic memos, I recorded observational notes on the behaviors that occurred during the interviews, such as voice intonations, facial expressions, hand gestures, and other nonverbal messaging. In addition, I took notes on the interview process and procedures to refine and focus the next set of interviews to elicit information that addresses the research questions.

**Reflexive Journaling.** In qualitative research, the researcher is the conduit through which all information flows and becomes interpreted, mediated, and constructed into meaning (Lichtman, 2013). The researcher’s background, life experiences, values, and epistemological position filters information through those frames (Grbich, 2013). Reflexivity is a process of self-examination through which the researcher can pay conscious attention to the effects of their own position, their own position in relation to others, and how that could influence the data (Lichtman, 2013). Reflexive journaling allowed the opportunity to deeply think about and question my personal assumptions, values, and beliefs to help reduce researcher bias (Grbich,
Being that I have direct connections to the work of the district, maintaining constant consideration of my role as the researcher through reflexive journaling provides credibility to the research findings (Grbich, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I utilized self-prompts to record moments and thoughts that I identified as being influenced by my personal experiences and beliefs. In addition, periodic (about every 2 months) conversation with my critical friend provided reminders to remain cognizant of personal influences of questioning during interviews and the interpretation of the data.

**Document Analysis.** In this study, two types of documents were analyzed: district and school based resources, tools, and evidence captured in organizational documents and researcher’s journals (Creswell & Tisdell, 2017). The organizational documents were analyzed in terms of communicating purpose, goals, expectations, and resources and supports. In addition, any other documents provided during school-based interviews, such as documented evidence of implementation were included in the analysis. The findings of the organizational document analysis were compared to the participant interview and observation data to uncover any trends or patterns with the relevance and relationship of the documents to the experiences of the participants. My journals were analyzed in terms of code development, monitoring for researcher bias, and important details that add to the interpretation of the data. Analysis of my journaling occurred throughout data collection and data analysis phases of this investigation.

**Interview Analysis.** After each interview, I analyzed the data using coding methods while simultaneously engaging in analytical memoing and reflexive journaling. The coding methods evolved during the three-part series of interviews with each principal and focus group interviews with the instructional leadership teams. The overall process includes preparing for the data by selecting appropriate coding method, developing initial codes, creating categories,
clarifying codes and categories, creating themes, and representing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Saldana, 2016). The coding process is iterative and constantly informing the next series of interviews. This process is described more thoroughly in the next section.

**Describing and Classifying Codes into Themes.** In efforts to remain open to emerging data, I conducted a “generic” approach to the study’s first cycle coding methods (Saldana, 2016). Through this approach, I used both In Vivo and Process coding techniques. InVivo coding highlights the participants’ voice by drawing out actual language found in interview transcripts and observations (Saldana, 2016). Process coding identifies observable and conceptual actions within the data and is used to search for patterns or routines (Saldana, 2016). After first cycle coding, I reviewed the initial codes and begin to develop code categories, selected new coding methods for reanalysis of data, and reorganized the data to gain a better focus for the next cycles of data collection and analysis (Saldana, 2016). Throughout the data collection process, the coding techniques inductively evolved and help shape second cycle coding methods to create categories that could lead to themes (Lichtman, 2013; Saldana, 2016).

Another layer of the coding process was analyzing the emerging codes to categories with concepts from policy implementation, sociocultural learning theory, and organization learning described in Chapter Two. This process is more deductive in that predetermined codes or code categories developed through the study’s guiding theoretical frames are utilized.

**Developing and Assessing Interpretations.** Throughout the multiple coding iterations, I engaged in processes to identify strands of information into codes, make connections between information and codes that develop themes, and discovering of themes that emerge as more prominent between case elements (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In order to compare codes
across case elements, I maintained a table that represents the two schools codes throughout the different levels of analysis (Yin, 2009). During this process, the categorical and thematic organization of the data were further developed into a smaller and more select list of broader categories and themes (Saldana, 2016; Stake, 1995). With each cycle of coding, the process of reorganizing and condensing initial coding progressed toward major themes or concepts that richly described the detail of the cases (Saldana, 2016). In addition, notes through my reflexive journaling and memoing were systematically reviewed in conjunction with the interview data analysis to examine influences on the interpretations of the data.

**Representing and Visualizing the Data.** The data is reported in multiple formats to serve the purposes of the targeted audiences of this report. The composition of the data include extensive descriptions of the cases and visuals to create the most comprehensive picture of the cases (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The visuals consisted of tables and illustrations of the frameworks guiding this study. In Chapter 4, the data is represented through description of the study’s context and participants. Rich detail is provided to assist readers in understanding the demographics and experiences of the participants. In Chapter 5, the data is represented in a research question and answer format (Yin, 2009). This reporting approach allowed the individual case elements to be represented as well as highlighting the similarities and differences across case elements. The question and answer formatting approach is targeted primarily for my dissertation committee and academic readers. In Chapter 6, the data is presented through discussion of implications of a new conceptual framework as well as implications for educational research and practice with connections to the literature. In addition, an executive summary highlighting the essence and significance
of the findings, which includes visual representations, will be reported. This report will be provided to Pasco to allow facilitate immediate access to the study’s findings.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, credibility is a criterion in being able to trust the research results and assess the rigor of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Credibility “refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings” (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). This study is positioned in a social constructivist perspective which views meaning as co-constructed between the realities of individuals through mutual participation and agreement (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The applied nature of this research makes it important that the study was conducted in a manner in which provides confidence to readers, practitioners, and other researchers that the findings are credible and trustworthy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the strategies I used to promote credibility include triangulation, member checking, reflexive journaling, and critical friend feedback.

Triangulation is the process of using multiple sources of data to compare and cross check between what is described and what is observed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Convergence of different methods of data collection can yield confirmation of emerging findings that produce similar conclusions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2010). For this study, data was collected through individual interviews, focus group interviews, and documents seeking to discover patterns across sources and participants.

After all interviews, respondents were asked to review the transcripts to check for any inaccuracies and reflect if any other information or insights should be added. In addition, throughout analysis of the data and producing the research report, participants were invited to review the findings to provide feedback on the accuracy of meaning that was conveyed and
discovered. This strategy, known as member checks and reflections, allows for sharing and
dialoguing with the participants and provides opportunities for questions, feedback, critique,
affirmation, and even collaboration (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2010). These practices
aimed towards demonstrating correspondence between my findings and understandings of the
participants as well as opportunities to yield new data that could add deeper understanding or a
new perspective on the investigation (Tracey, 2010). There were no instances that participants
shared that the data was inaccurate. There were a couple of instances that participants added
more detail to their initial statements. Details included specific numbers as it relates to staff
and students, elaborations on previous statements, and reasons for phrasing statements in a
particular way. Through this validation and reflective processes, I sought to enhance the
credibility of the research findings.

Another strategy that I utilized to enhance credibility is being transparent and
critically reflective on my role as the researcher within this study. Acknowledging that in
qualitative research, the researcher is the filter in which data is interpreted and made
meaning of, it was imperative for me to explain and dig into potential questions,
dispositions, background experiences, and assumptions regarding the study (Merriam &
Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2010). Tracy (2010) refers to this as sincerity, which “means that the
research is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher’s biases, goals, and
foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the
research” (p.841). Part of the criteria is self-reflexivity, which is a practice that occurs from
the early stages of the study through data collection, analysis, and reporting results (Tracy,
2010). Prior to conducting the data, I assessed my motivations through introspection and
provided transparent descriptions of my role as a researcher in this study. Throughout data
collection, I continuously recorded my reflections on the data and the process of the investigation through reflexive journaling. Being able to engage in reflexive journaling helped with self-disclosure and transparency regarding my role as well as maximized my engagement in the research process (Lichtman, 2013).

Along with the intent of self-reflexivity, critical friend feedback, or peer review as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) refers, is another strategy that I utilized to receive feedback on the plausibility of the findings and soundness of the methods. I have identified a colleague who has background and interests in a similar field of study and who is also in the final stages to earning a PhD. We have mutually agreed to serve each other as critical friends in our research.

Throughout the process of the investigation, we arranged times to meet to discuss our research and provide critical and meaningful feedback. These meeting times occurred monthly in the beginning stages of the study and decreased in frequency to once every other month after data collection. The feedback sessions were conducted face-to-face, over the phone, or through email correspondence. During these sessions, notes and reflections were recorded in my analytical journal and were used to reflect on and revise any influences with interpretations, research methods, and interview protocols. In addition, these interactions served as motivation and encouragement throughout this dissertation process.

This investigation seeks to discover plausible findings to the questions being explored. With the use of these strategies, as well as the ethical considerations discussed previously, this research induced credible and trustworthy descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants.
Limitations

Case study research derives from the desire to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2009). Case study methods allows the researcher to become immersed in one or a small number of cases to explore the holistic and meaningful characteristics of lived experiences within a specific situation (Yin, 2009). Due to the inherent nature of case study research, this study is not generalizable. With having a small sample size, it allows the researcher to go into depth with each case element to discover the complexities and nuances. The participants of the study are intentionally selected through criterion-based purposeful sampling. Case study research requires the use of a purposeful sampling technique to gather enough information about the case to provide an in-depth picture of the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2017). With the limitation of having a small sample size reducing the ability for generalizability, it does provide the opportunity to better understand the complexities of the individual cases to broaden our knowledge of implementation processes and knowledge transfer.

Another limitation of the study is the role of the researcher. The social constructivist position of this study relies on the mutual engagement of both the participant and researcher. With case study research, the researcher is an instrument whose subjectivity and interpretations are required to make sense of the actions, intentions, and understandings of those being studied (Hatch, 2002). It was important for me to recognize and to engage critically my perceptions and interpretations of the data that leads to inaccuracies of meaning. Reflexive journaling, member checking, and critical friend feedback are some strategies that were used to monitor the potential of research bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, I am an employee of the district involved in this study and have a professional relationship with the participants. Due to the professional nature of my relationships with the participants, I
continually attended to establishing and checking for understanding of clear guidelines and explanations regarding the study as well as developed and maintained a rapport as a researcher for the purposes of the study interactions.

The selection process for the principals and instructional leaders that participated in this study is another limitation. The criteria for the selection of principals asked for recommendations from the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools, in addition to quantitative criteria of being at the school for at least 5 years and review of school-wide data. The recommendation component of the selection process is recognized as being subjective and is be influenced by the personal perspective of the Assistant Superintendent. Similarly, the selection process for the instructional leaders was designed in the same format. The criteria of working at the school for the two years of MTSS implementation and participation in activities related to MTSS implementation were objective. However, the third criteria in possesses insight into the school’s process of MTSS implementation was subjective based on the perspective of the principal.

As a district administrator, I have a unique perspective on the implementation and the resource development of the district initiative. While this position can be a limitation, at the same time it can be a strength of the study. In terms of research bias, the strategies mention previously will served to minimize any personal influence to the interpretation of the data. However, with my role in the district, it positions me to understand more fully background knowledge of the district efforts in implementation.

**Ethical Considerations**

Credible and trustworthy research relies on the ethical stance of the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ethical research ensures the “protection of subjects from harm, the
right to privacy, the notion of informed consent, and the issue of deception” are all considered and planned for prior to and throughout the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 261).

Attending to the right of privacy, all participants of the investigation were given pseudonyms for personal names and school locations. Demographic descriptors are discussed in context descriptions of the district and schools. However, no specific names or identifiers were included in any reporting results. In efforts to eliminate any issues of deception or inaccurate reporting, I asked the participants to review reporting results (member checking) from their interviews to receive input on the accuracy of the data and ensure that the data maintains anonymity. All participants received a letter of informed consent and have the opportunity to deny participation in the study. In addition, the consideration of district and participant benefit from this investigation remained highly important throughout this research process. I am an employee of the district and maintain a position that is not in a supervisory or evaluative position of the participants of the study.

**Summary of Methodology**

This chapter provided specific information on the rationale, benefits and methods for this proposed research study. The contents of the chapter include description of research design, participant recruitment and selection criteria, data collection methods, and data analysis processes. Due to my professional connection with the context of the study, my position as the researcher was described as well as analytic techniques, such as reflexivity, were outlined. The next chapter provides the context and history of Pasco’s MTSS implementation along with a thorough description of the schools and study participants.
CHAPTER FOUR:
STUDY CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, details on Pasco School District context and the history of Pasco’s Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) implementation will be explained. Second, contextual and descriptive information on the study participants and the schools where the instructional leaders are located will be depicted. This chapter is organized by the following sections: (a) Pasco context, (b) Pasco’s history with MTSS implementation, (c) District-based participants, (d) Selection process of school principals, (e) School-based participants with school context, and (d) summary of context and participants.

Pasco School District Context

This investigation originates in a large, suburban school district in the state of Florida. The school district is the 11th largest district in Florida and the 50th largest district nationally (USDOE, 2015). Pasco serves approximately 73,340 students with a total staff over 10,000. There is a total of 89 schools with 75 traditional schools, 3 education centers, 1 virtual school, and 10 charter schools, with 17% of the student population enrolled in exceptional education programs. Pasco has 55.5% of their students qualified for free and reduced meals.

In the last reporting year (2016-2017), Pasco has an 81% graduation rate compared to the state average of 80.7 (FLDOE, 2016). Similar to all districts in Florida, implementation of new curriculum standards has been occurring since 2010. This new standards-based
movement, Common Core Standards, was a national initiative that was not a federal mandate, however, it received attention and support from the USDOE and other national organizations and educational foundations. Florida adopted the Common Core standards with some modifications and reference the standards as Florida Standards. Along with new curriculum standards, Pasco has been systematically implementing a MTSS initiative since 2015, which encompasses implementation processes of new curriculum standards along with other processes to support learning for all students.

**Pasco’s History with MTSS**

Table 4 below provides a summary of the initiatives that Pasco has implemented that have contributed to the context and development of the system-wide MTSS initiative implementation.

Table 4. Pasco’s MTSS Initiative History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Initiative</th>
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<tr>
<td>2006-2011</td>
<td>Local RTI pilot with university partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012-2015</td>
<td>PLC District-wide implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2017</td>
<td>MTSS District-wide implementation</td>
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**National Initiative.** Pasco’s MTSS initiative has been evolving over the past 2 years. In the beginning stages of implementation, the focus was primarily on the aspect of MTSS that emphasizes Problem Solving and Response to Intervention (PS/RTI). During this time, districts across the country maintained a similar focus due to the reauthorization of Individual
with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA) in 2004 and the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002.

**Local RTI pilot with university partner.** In 2006, Pasco received a federal flow through state grant in partnership with a local university on a state-initiated RTI project. The goal of the project was to shift from a needs-based approach to a risk model which was theorized to result in less students being identified as needing ESE supports and less students at risk of school failure. This project was designed as a pilot approach designed to span across 5 years with a cohort design that began with elementary schools with plans to span across all levels K12. In 2006-2007, the project began with a small “pre-pilot” of 2 elementary schools. Two RTI coaches were assigned to each school and they worked mainly with Kindergarten teachers to implement literacy screeners. Literacy screeners is a type of universal screener that assesses student ability with specific literacy skills. Based on the results of the assessment, teachers determine the instructional needs of students. In 2007-2008, the project expanded to 9 elementary schools with 6 RTI coaches providing direct supports to those schools. The principals at each school were advised by district staff to start small with implementation focusing on only one to two grade levels at a time, beginning with grades K-1, with goals to expand to other grade levels each subsequent school year. Due to the nature of the grant, the state provided professional development training on RTI structures and processes to those schools during the first two years of the project. Accompanying the professional development, Pasco utilized state based monitoring tools requested by the grant to measure implementation fidelity and project outcomes. During the 2008-2010 school years, all elementary schools receive professional development and supports for RTI implementation. Elementary schools were provided targeted professional development and school-based coaching from district-
based RTI coaches that facilitated scaling up school support team procedures to focus on tier 2 and tier 3 interventions for students identified at-risk\textsuperscript{1}. According to Mr. Davis, one of the RTI coaches involved with the project, those strategies resulted in pockets of schools implementing the initiative with various levels of success.

In the 2010-2011 school year, the project began to incorporate select secondary schools in professional development trainings. Mr. Davis reported that it was intended to have all secondary schools involved in RTI professional development during the 2011-2012 school year, however due to converging political, instructional, and resource management factors, the RTI implementation project ended. Mr. Davis shared some positive outcomes that he believes resulted from the project. Those outcomes include some of the practices in using from a systems perspective remained, leaders became more directly involved in student outcomes, and leaders developed a stronger knowledge base around aspects of student data and making instructional decisions with student data.

**PLC District-wide Initiative Implementation.** Prior to the implementation of district-wide MTSS initiative, Pasco placed emphasis on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as the way of work for all schools and all teachers. The district-wide PLC initiative implementation occurred from 2012-2015. Through this initiative, all schools were expected to establish formal structures that placed all teachers within a PLC. For those three school years (2012-2015), district efforts of support were delivered through series of professional development programs.

\textsuperscript{1} Tiers of Support: (a) Tier 1 refers to core curriculum delivered to all students, (b) Tier 2 provides supplemental instructions to students who struggle with core curriculum, and (c) Tier 3 provides targeted intervention to students struggling with specific, foundational skills (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011; Batsche et al., 2005; Buffman, Mattos, & Malone, 2018)
development offerings in which school administrators were asked to attend as well as their
defined PLC facilitators. The first year of implementation (2012-2013) emphasized
establishing what was termed “Step 0” processes which consisted of PLC structures, norms of
engagement, and consensus on the focus of PLCs being grounded in standards-based
instruction and inquiry cycles. In the second year of PLC implementation (2013-2014), the
focus was grounded in the guiding PLC questions that framed conversations on developing
assessments aligned with the standards and strategies to assist struggling and accelerating
students. The last year of district-wide targeted PLC implementation (2015-2016) shifted
focus on increasing PLC Facilitator knowledge of core content standards and how to facilitate
conversations of understanding the intention of standards in their PLCs.

Along with the PLC initiative, an important shift to mention is how Pasco
intentionally changed the language of RTI into MTSS. Mr. Davis explained that with the
growing body of research and top leadership reflection on previous RTI implementation, that
concepts of MTSS encompass the intent of RTI and broadens the scope to include all aspects
of instruction and system design. In addition, the intentional shift of language that references
MTSS was to reorient the work of tiered supports within teacher teams (PLCs) rather than a
singular focus of the work residing within student services support. Pasco’s intent was to
redefine the RTI initiative to a more inclusive and broader perspective in which all
stakeholders have responsibility with participation.

**MTSS District-wide Initiative Implementation.** With a change in some senior
leadership positions, a systemic approach to MTSS initiative implementation was introduced in
the summer of 2015. During this time, Pasco’s senior leadership approached MTSS
implementation by defining three key priorities, providing goals for each priority, and detailing
school and district actions that when enacted work to achieve the goals. In addition, the ongoing implementation of the new curriculum standards since 2010 was framed within the redesigned MTSS initiative.

As mentioned, the MTSS system-wide rollout was organized into three key priorities, which contained goals, actions, monitoring tools, and support. (Appendix A). The overarching framework to the implementation is a Vision of Instructional Excellence (Appendix B). A theory of action was created in efforts to move the vision and key priorities into behaviors (Appendix C). The Assistant Superintendent of Student Achievement explained that the “Vision” was constructed based on definitions from principals on what they believe are characteristics of instructional excellence. The key priorities to accomplish the vision are High Impact Instruction, Data Driven Decisions, and Collaborative Culture. Within each priority are annual goals and actions that are believed to lead to goal attainment. Monitoring tools and other supports were created specifically based on the goals and actions. Pasco’s intent with the design of the system was to provide a model how schools should design their instructional systems with the MTSS framework in mind. For this study, the district documents designed to communicate initiative goals and expectations as well as the tools and resources used to assist and monitor implementation were analyzed. The document and resource analysis assisted in the development of interview and observation protocols, as well as data in addressing the research questions.

Since 2015, Pasco continually referenced the vision, goals, actions, monitoring tools, and supports through a system of ongoing data collection and analysis throughout the school year. This process of integrating the multi-faceted initiative into a tightly articulated focus provided consistent language across the system and lead to an increase leader confidence in
being able to translate the initiative back at their schools as perceived by the MTSS specialist. Some of the challenges articulated by the district based participants consisted of the district not being completely set up to support the work of the school-based teams directly. Pasco defined three types of school-based teams with expected actions of those teams (Appendix D). In efforts to collect implementation data, Pasco employed multiple methods to collect a variety of data sets. Out of those methods, two were emphasized more frequently; quarterly checks and instructional walk-throughs. Quarterly checks are a district created assessment system that assesses student proficiency of grade level standards in every course. Instructional walk-throughs are conducted by district staff using a tool created by Student Achievement Partners that focus on the core instructional practices of ELA and Math. The intention of those two methods was to collect data as it relates to Tier 1 academic instruction within the MTSS framework.

In 2016-2017 school year, Pasco continued with the supports from the previous school year and designed more supports to continue the next phase of MTSS initiative implementation. Professional development and other supports emphasized building school teams of support and defining the type of work that those different teams engage in and the outcomes that should be achieved to support MTSS implementation (Appendix D). Due to the Pasco’s previous PLC initiative, the professional development and district supports focused mostly on the School-based Leadership team and School Intervention Team. Some of the district supports included working with external partners to consult and deliver professional development and follow-up supports to school-based leadership teams, provide structured support to school administrator teams on the development of School Improvement Plans,
design and distribute guiding documents on MTSS processes and monitoring, and increasing frequency and number of schools participating in Instructional walk-throughs.

This study took place at the end of the 2016-2017 school year, which is approximately after two years of system-wide MTSS initiative implementation. Based on implementation research, large-scale system-wide initiative implementation requires several years of continual supports and efforts (Blase et al., 2015; Rorrer et al., 2008). Due to Pasco’s history with RTI implementation primarily with elementary schools coupled with findings of implementation research regarding length of time required with implementation, the two principals participating in this study are those that have engaged in MTSS implementation stemming from the pilot PS/RTI work Pasco conducted in years 2007-2012 and have been at their school sites engaging in this work for five or more years. Discussion on participant recruitment and selection is described in Chapter Three. Description of each participant of the study is discussed in the following section.

**Study Participants**

This study consisted of 15 participants; two district based personnel, two elementary principals, and 11 school based elementary instructional leaders. The two district based personnel were a district administrator, Mr. Roberts, and a Multi- Tiered System of Supports Specialist (MTSS), Mr. Davis. The two principal participants were Ms. Thompson, principal of Eagle Elementary, and Ms. Anders, principal of Falcon Elementary. A total of 11 school based instructional leaders were interviewed; six from Eagle Elementary and five from Falcon elementary.

The intent of the interviews with the district based personnel was to gather information on Pasco’s history with MTSS implementation, insight on the district’s efforts
with MTSS implementation, and other information that is relevant to the purpose of this study. Both district based personnel engaged in one individual interview that lasted for approximately 90 minutes.

The MTSS specialist interviewed occurred prior to the school based interviews. The district administrator interview was conducted after the completion of the school-based interviews. In addition, to the semi-structured interview, Mr. Roberts met with me prior to the initiation of the study for the purposes of identifying the two principals to participate in this study.

**District-based Participants**

**District Administrator.** Mr. Roberts is a tall white male, in his early sixties, and exudes a calm and kind personality demonstrated through smiles and a soft toned voice. He was dressed in a business professional style wearing a shirt and tie. He is salt and pepper hair color and wears corrective glasses. We met at a local coffee shop. He was at the coffee shop by the time I arrived and was drinking a cup of coffee. As I walked to where he was seating, he greeted me with a big smile and asked me if I wanted any coffee. I graciously declined and sat directly across from him. Throughout the interview, Mr. Roberts was very attentive which was displayed by his body leaning forward, constant eye contact, and occasional comments of “this is fun” or “this is making remember things that I didn’t realize I remembered”.

Graduating with a school psychologist degree, Mr. Roberts worked in Pennsylvania and West Virginia for several years as a School Psychologist. Then, he was presented with an opportunity to work overseas as a guidance counselor and school psychologist blended role. He worked a total of 10 years outside of the United States in private, international schools in the countries of Zambia, Saudi Arabia, and Japan. When he returned to the states, he moved to
Pasco County, Florida and took a job as a Behavior Specialist at a small elementary school. After two years serving in that role, Mr. Roberts became an assistant principal at another elementary school in the district. While serving in this role, he began his M.Ed. program in Educational Leadership at a local public university. After completion of his second masters’ degree, he continued his education with pursuing his Ed.D in Educational Leadership at the same higher education institution. During his studies, he served as an assistant principal at two elementary schools over 5 years and then became appointed as principal at a third elementary school. He worked as a principal for three years before being promoted to the Director of Research and Evaluation. After serving 3 years as Director, he was promoted to Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools and has remained in that position for the last 11 years. During his years’ as Assistant Superintendent, he has experienced the leadership agendas of 3 different elected superintendents.

MTSS Specialist. Mr. Davis is a white male, approximately 5’10 and in his late thirties. He wears glasses and dressed in khakis with a polo shirt during the time of our interview. Mr. Davis has a calm demeanor and spoke in a soft tone. We met in his office which was a small room with a small conference table. During the interview, we sat side-by-side on one side of the conference table. Mr. Davis was very attentive during the interview and very knowledgeable in the history of RTI/MTSS and the current efforts of system-wide implementation of MTSS as he has played a central role in the facilitation of supports towards those initiatives.

Mr. Davis earned his Ed.S in School Psychology for a local public university. He began working in Pasco as a school psychologist. In 2006, he became one of the two RTI coaches that were working on the state-funded RTI project with Pasco. In 2012, with the shift of
language from RTI to MTSS, his position title change to MTSS Specialist and has continued to serve in that role.

**Selection Process of Principals to Participate in Study**

The selection of the principals to participate in the study was primarily based on the viewpoint of Mr. Roberts and the criteria established in this study. As described in Chapter 3, the criteria for identifying a high performing principal was based on: (a) at least 5 years of service at the current school of employment, (b) review of district-collected data, and (c) recommendations from the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools. When I met with Mr. Roberts for the selection process, he presented a document that outlines all the principals at each elementary school. He already marked off the names of the principals that did not meet criteria (a) and met criteria (b). For the names that were remaining, he discussed different aspects of their performance as a principal based on information he has gathered through conversations and through school performance data. School performance data included district walk-through data that focuses on teacher instruction, state assessment data for student performance, and district-based rubrics that focus on PLC functioning and implementation of tiers of support. Other information he gathered through conversation considered principal engagement with staff, students, and community; ability to connect and build relationships with others; maintaining a student achievement orientation; ability and willingness to empower others through shared decision making processes; excellent communicators; and ability to strategically think and plan for implementation change. Through that discussion, Mr. Roberts narrowed the potential participants to three principals. In thinking about those three principals, he believed that two of them would have similar stories based on their experiences. In that thought, he believed it would be best for the story to have two principals with different stories.
of their experience to add richness to the investigation. The other principal that was not selected for the actual study was then identified to be the principal that engaged in the pilot principal interview to provide feedback on the protocol and process prior to me engaging with the two principals that were the focus of the study.

**School-based Participants**

The two elementary principals selected for this study, Ms. Anders at Falcon Elementary and Ms. Thompson at Eagle Elementary identified five to six instructional leaders that met the study criteria to participate in the study; combining for 11 instructional leaders. Ms. Thompson identified six instructional leaders from Eagle Elementary; Ms. Coleman, Ms. Marino, Ms. Timmons, Ms. Taylor, Ms. Hughes, and Ms. Miller. Ms. Anders identified 5 instructional leaders from Falcon Elementary; Ms. Matthews, Ms. Birch, Ms. Little, Ms. Green, Ms. Romano, and Ms. Torres. The instructional leaders from each school participated in a focus group interview at their school site that lasted approximately 90 minutes. The focus group interview was designed in a semi-structured format to allow the flow of conversation to be natural and allow for probing questions to build on shared responses. The instructional leaders engaged in individual follow-up interviews approximately 4 to 5 days after the focus group interview. The follow-up interview questions were developed based off shared responses that the researcher wanted to explore further, research questions of the study, and to allow the participants to think if there were other experiences they believed were relevant to the study that they did not share during the focus group interview. The responses from the focus group and individual follow-up interviews helped to determine subsequent principal interview questions.
**Falcon Elementary School**

**School Context.** Falcon Elementary School (FES) is located in the east area of Pasco and is a large elementary school serving 816 students. Similar to Eagle, Falcon Elementary is situated in primarily middle socioeconomic class neighborhoods with pockets of low and high socioeconomic housing. Falcon Elementary student ethnicity demographics consist of 51% White, 21% Hispanic, 10% Black, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 5% multiple races in grades Pre-Kindergarten through Fifth. There are 17% of students identified to receive special education services and 34% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Since 2012, Falcon Elementary has earned a school grade of ‘A’ three years (2012, 2013, 2015) and a school grade of ‘B’ for two years (2014, 2016). The staff is comprised of 62 teachers, 10 instructional assistants, 34 non-instructional, and two administrators.

Ms. Anders has been at Falcon Elementary since 2011. She took the position after the previous principal retired. Ms. Anders inherited a staff culture that prioritized the teacher in their way of work versus maintaining a focus on students. In discussion with Mr. Roberts in identifying the principals for this study, he expressed his perceptions of Ms. Anders as a strong leader based on her persistence to improve the school culture through the development of systems, team structures, and ways of work that prioritizes students. The challenges that face Ms. Anders are different from being able to hire every staff member in that she is working to reorient a staff to believe and behave differently from their traditional belief system. The Assistant Superintendent explained that even though the level of implementation is not as high for Falcon Elementary compared to other schools, the progress that Ms. Anders has made in moving her staff in the cultural shift necessary for MTSS implementation has been significant.
Ms. Anders, Principal of Falcon Elementary School. At the time of the interviews, Ms. Anders just completed her fifth year as Principal of Falcon Elementary School. She was appointed principal at the school after the previous principal, who opened the school, retired.

Prior to the interviews with Ms. Anders, we had a conversation over the phone about the identification of her instructional leaders. We discussed the selection criteria and I answered any clarifying questions. She provided me the names of those teachers through an email two days later. The interviews with Ms. Anders, two of the three were conducted in her conference room, which is connected to her office. The other interview was conducted at another elementary school, in the conference room connected to the principal’s office. Ms. Anders was covering that elementary school for the day in the absence of their principal. Both schools’ conference rooms are in between the principal and the assistant principal offices. At both ends of the conference room were doors that lead to the principal and assistant principal offices. On one side of the conference room was a door that opened to a hallway that lead to the front office. On the opposite side of the conference room were windows that faced the entrance of the school and the media center. Ms. Anders would close the door that lead to the assistant principal office, kept the door opened that lead to her office, and would open or close the door that lead to the hallway depending on the situation. She would leave the door open if she knew that someone was on the way to ask her a question that she needed to immediately attend to. She would close the door during moments of the interview that she shared more confidential information. The conference table had multiple piles of different documents. At times during the interview, she would address some of the piles of documents as they related to responses she was sharing. The interviews were conducted during the summer months when schools are planning the upcoming school year improvement plans and actions.
Every time I came to the school to interview Ms. Anders, I was greeted by the front office staff with a smile and with an immediate response to inform Ms. Anders of my presence. Within no more than 5 minutes, Ms. Anders would walk out and greet me with a smile and hand shake. She would then lead me back to her conference room engaging in polite conversation with a soft voice. For each interview, we sat side-by-side at the conference table. We started each interview with conversation about our day, our morning, and what is coming up later that day. Every interview was scheduled in the morning and I would bring Ms. Anders a cup of coffee from a local coffee shop.

Ms. Anders is a white female in her mid-forties. She is about five feet eight inches tall with mid-length brown hair. She dressed in business casual clothing due to the interviews being conducted in the summer months. She consistently interacted with me displaying a smile and would ask me questions about my personal studies and areas of interest. She sat in relaxed positions in her chair during most parts of the interviews and spoke with a soft tone. During moments she was talking about things that were very passionate for her, she would sit up, lean forward, eyes widen with more direct eye contact, and speak with a louder and stronger tone. Ms. Anders would ask me questions about what I was going to do with the findings and expressed interest in reading my findings when they were complete.

Ms. Anders: Pathway to Principal. Ms. Anders was born and raised in Pasco County and attended Pasco County Schools. She has worked in Pasco County Schools for 27 years, her entire professional career. Ms. Anders served 13 years as an elementary school teacher, 3 years as a district coordinator of the PLACE program, 6 years as an Assistant Principal of the elementary school where she previously taught, and the last 5 years as the principal of Falcon Elementary school. During her years as a district coordinator, she earned
her Master’s of Educational Leadership and entered the Assistant Principal pool. While serving as an assistant principal, she entered the district’s principal preparation program, which partnered with a local university. A component of this program was to engage in a year-long project that focused on aspects of principal development. Having spent some time away from instructional practices within schools serving, she decided to explore a project that would deepen her knowledge on instructional leadership. Through her studies, she found resources on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), specifically those written by the DuFours (2013). She explained the concepts within these resources centered on the work of PLCs and Response to Intervention (RTI) resonated within her and sparked a passion for her work as a principal.

**Falcon Instructional Leaders**

There were five instructional leaders selected by Ms. Anders to participate in the focus group interviews. The focus group interview was conducted at Falcon Elementary School in a small conference room located in the back of the media center. There were boxes of books and resources along the sides of the room for end-of-the-year inventory check purposes. As each instructional leader entered the conference room, I greeted them and thanked them for being willing to participate in the study. Everyone responded with a smile and conveyed that they were happy to be a part of the study. In beginning the focus group interview, the room was quiet and the participants were waiting for me to begin and listened quietly and intently as I begin to describe the process of the interview. I felt the need to build a relationship quickly and expose personal information regarding my personal and professional journey in efforts to “break the ice”. The instructional leaders responded to my story in a positive manner by smiling, laughing, and asking further questions. After a few minutes of conversation, the
participants seemed to be more relaxed and more apt to talk openly. At the end of the focus group interview, all participants agreed upon a date for me to return and conduct the individual follow-up interviews.

**Ms. Little – Kindergarten Teacher.** Ms. Little teaches Kindergarten and serves as the Kindergarten PLC Facilitator. She has been a teacher for 7 years and has only taught at Falcon Elementary School. Ms. Little is a white female in her late 20s. She has brown eyes and brown medium to long length hair. She would smile a lot when she spoke and would contribute a thought to almost every question asked. She would fidget with her hands often when speaking and would go back and forth with her eye contact from her hands to the speaker. She expressed passion in working with her students and goals to continue to become better at looking at different data points to help inform instructional decisions for all Kindergarten students.

Ms. Little experienced leadership under the direction of the previous principal and Ms. Anders. She commented that she first expressed an interest in gaining leadership experiences after Ms. Anders became principal. Ms. Little conveyed that Ms. Anders was supportive of her interest and partnered her with the Learning Design Coach (LDC) to co-lead a Humanities committee. Soon after co-leading that committee, the Kindergarten team had an opening for a PLC facilitator and Ms. Little was placed in that leadership position. She shared that Ms. Anders stated that she believed that Ms. Little’s strengths were better suited for this particular position and that is would be a “strong point” for her.

**Ms. Matthews – First Grade Teacher.** Ms. Matthews is a first-grade teacher and the first-grade PLC facilitator. She has been teacher for 10 years, all of which serving at Falcon Elementary School. She has been at the school since it has opened. Ms. Matthews is a white female in her early 30s. She has brown eyes and light brown medium to long length hair. She
contributed to some of the questions, typically adding on to a point that someone else had shared. She showed encouragement to others by looking at them and nodding her head as they spoke. Whenever we made eye contact, she would smile. She described her role as the PLC facilitator being that she attends district trainings, conducting trainings back at the school, attend school leadership team meetings, and bring back information to the team that helps to prepare them for the next steps of their work.

Ms. Matthews worked under the leadership of the prior principal and Ms. Anders. She describes the prior principal’s approach was mainly focused on the community and creating a sense of family within the school. She describes Ms. Anders’s approach to also incorporate a community aspect to the school culture but emphasized more on instructional practices and what is being done for the students. Ms. Matthews conveyed that she shared the same ideal in working for the best interest in the students.

**Ms. Birch – First Grade Teacher.** Ms. Birch is a first-grade teacher and the Positive Behavior System (PBS) committee chair. She has been teaching for 11 years. Her first year was at a nearby elementary school where she meets and worked with Ms. Torres as a teacher. She shared that she felt that Ms. Torres was a strong teacher and would go to her if she had any questions. After her first year, Falcon Elementary School opened and she transferred schools. She has been at Falcon Elementary since it opened 10 years ago. Ms. Birch is a white female in her early 30s. She has brown eyes with blondish brown hair medium length. She actively contributed to the questions and conversation. She displayed a serious affect and an interest to the work of PLCs and PBS. She shared that once becoming the committee chair of PBS at her school, she attending more district meetings and trainings that sparked her interest
and passion even more in collecting and using data to design interventions and systems to help students perform better.

Ms. Birch worked under the leadership of three different principals; one principal at her previous school, the previous principal of Falcon Elementary, and Ms. Anders. She describes Ms. Anders as being very open to questions and supports her ideas for different strategies to implement PBS at the school.

**Ms. Romano – Third Grade Teacher.** Ms. Romano is a third-grade teacher and shares the third-grade PLC Facilitator position with another teacher on her team. She has been a teacher for 15 years and has been teaching as a third-grade teacher at Falcon Elementary since it opened 10 years ago. Her first five years was at a nearby elementary school where she taught 3rd and 4th grades. Ms. Romano is a white female in her early 40s. She has blue eyes and blondish brown hair at medium length. She displayed a serious affect throughout the interview but had moments where she would crack jokes and share light humor sarcasm with the group in which they all responded by laughing. During the individual follow up interview, Ms. Romano smiled more frequently and displayed interest in my personal and professional life. She spoke the most during the focus group interview but also prompted others to speak when she believed she shared enough or wanted to give others opportunity to share.

Since the Falcon Elementary School opened, Ms. Romano has served in a leadership role in some capacity. She shared that initially she was placed on the school RTI team. She was not a team leader but more of a school representative for the district’s RTI trainings and a member of her school leadership team. With the implementation of PLCs and MTSS, the school leadership role has shifted into PLC Facilitators.
Ms. Romano has worked at Falcon Elementary under the leadership of the previous principal and Ms. Anders. In addition, she worked with Ms. Anders when she was both a teacher and an assistant principal at another elementary school in the district. She describes the previous principal as not very hands-on with the work of the teachers which conveyed to the staff feelings that she trusted them and their work. Ms. Romano believes that through the previous principals hiring of staff she selected really strong teachers and did not have to be hands-on in their work.

As the staff came and left, the culture of the school shifted. When Ms. Anders became principal, Ms. Romano shared that others perceived her as intimidating because she attends all of the PLC meetings and displayed a serious affect. Over the past recent years, Ms. Romano stated that Ms. Anders demeanor has changed in that she has become softer in her interactions with staff. Through this perceived change in demeanor, she believes the staff have become more willing to share ideas and engage in the work of PLCs and MTSS. Ms. Romano states that she believes Ms. Anders honestly cares about her staff and the students and wants to stay aware of what is going on within her teacher teams to be able to assist in anyway. She describes Ms. Anders to give her instructional leaders “as much information as possible” in order to keep them “ahead of the game”. Ms. Romano describes Ms. Anders as being very open to the needs of her teacher teams. Ms. Romano describes her own leadership style as advocacy leadership. She conveys the importance in having teachers informed and working together in teams. She emphasizes the value of all voices being heard and all perspectives are considered.

**Ms. Torres – Learning Design Coach.** Ms. Torres is a Learning Design Coach and works closely with all PLCs, the school leadership team, and school administration. She has been a teacher in elementary schools for 22 years. She has taught as a Kindergarten teacher for
three years at an elementary school on the west side of Pasco and 12 years at a nearby elementary school as a Primary grades teacher. Ms. Torres has worked at Falcon Elementary School for the past seven years and was hired as Literacy Coach by the previous principal. Ms. Torres is a white female in her mid 40s. She has brown eyes and brown hair medium length. Ms. Torres was the first one that I met at the focus group interview. She displayed a positive affect indicated by her smiling, nodding, and sitting upright. She appeared very interested to participate in the study and was highly engaged through both the focus group and individual follow-up interviews. Through her discussion, it is very easy to see her strong passion to the work of PLCs and MTSS. Her peers describe her as a tremendous resource for them. She describes her role first as a type of guidance counselor for teachers to come and share with her their concerns and struggles, and then as an instructional coach second.

Ms. Torres stated that the previous principal did not have a strong presence in the instructional aspect of the school and left more of that work with the previous literacy coach. She described that she had to work hard in shifting the way of work of the previous Literacy Coach to her way of work with the staff. She shared that previously, the role of the district was perceived in a way that was conveying to teachers that they were not doing their job correctly, thus leaving the staff with a negative perception of the “district”. Ms. Torres said she wanted to change the staff’s perception of them not doing their job correctly by taking it upon herself along with the support of Ms. Anders to build their knowledge and confidence of their work. During the interview, Ms. Torres conveyed passion for student learning and teachers engaged in work centered on student learning by sitting upright while leaning forward at times, constant eye contact with researcher, detailed responses, and comments consisting of words “must”, “we have to”, “I will do it”, and “it’s my job to provide all teachers that support”.

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She shared that she worked closely with Ms. Anders in ensuring that teachers’ voices are heard and that they were all in the work together.

During the individual follow up interview, Ms. Torres was more candid in her responses particularly when it came to her work with specific teams and teachers. She explained she was somewhat hesitant to share certain things in the focus group interview due to her relationships she has with teachers and wants to make sure to respect their confidentiality in order to maintain their trust. Those topics she refrained from sharing during the focus group was regarding specific examples of teacher interactions she shared that were teachers on one of the instructional leader’s team and also strategies that she has used to assist in getting some of the instructional leaders on board with the principal’s direction for the school.

**Eagle Elementary School**

**School Context.** Eagle Elementary School (EES) is located in the central area of Pasco and is a very large elementary serving 1,158 students. The surrounding neighborhood is primarily considered middle socioeconomic class with pockets of low and high socioeconomic housing. Eagle Elementary student ethnicity demographics consist of 55% White, 18% Hispanic, 3% Black, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% multiple races in grades Pre-Kindergarten through Fifth. There are 18% of students identified to receive special education services and 32% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Since 2012, Eagle Elementary has maintained a school grade of ‘A’ for with the exception of earning a ‘B’ grade in 2014. The staff is comprised of 79 teachers, five instructional assistants, 29 non-instructional, and two administrators.

Ms. Thompson has been the principal at Eagle Elementary since it opened in 2006. As the principal of a new school, she had the opportunity to personally hire every teacher since 
the school has been established. Ms. Thompson is considered a very strong leader in terms of her leadership skills, knowledge on creating and maintaining systems and structures, and her ability to establish effective school teams.

**Ms. Thompson, Eagle Elementary Principal.** Prior to the interviews with Ms. Thompson, we met in person to discuss the design of the study and for her to identify her instructional leaders to participate in the study. We discussed the selection criteria and I answered any clarifying questions. She provided me the names of those teachers by the end of our meeting. All three of the interviews with Ms. Thompson occurred at Eagle Elementary.

The series of interviews occurred during the summer months of June and July. The first interview took place in the front office. I was sitting near the doorway of the front office secretary’s office and Ms. Thompson was sitting near to the doorway while positioned behind the front office desk. She was the only one in the front office and needed to be present in that location in case of any parents coming by with questions. There were two occasions that we stopped the interview; one instance due to a staff member with a question and a second instance due to a parent with a question. After addressing the questions, Ms. Thompson immediately refocused her attention on our interview. I did stop the interview after 50 minutes due to the time of day and the need for Ms. Thompson to focus on other issues. The second interview was conducted in Ms. Thompson’s office. She sat behind her desk and I sat in front of her desk. She had the door open to the conference room that connects her office with her Assistant Principal’s office. The third interview was conducted in the School Psychologist’s office located in the front office. It was a small office and Ms. Thompson sat behind the desk while I sat in front of the desk. Ms. Thompson closed the door during this
interview and expressed a couple of times her hopes that she is providing me what I need for the study.

Every occasion that I came to meet with Ms. Thompson, she greeted me with a warm welcome and smile while immediately directing me on where we would conduct the interview. Occasions that I came and she was not in the front office, the front office staff greeted with smiles and professionalism. If children were present, the staff would attend and greet them prior to assisting me. Once informed of my presence, Ms. Thompson would personally walk out to the front office and convey pleasantries of me being there while simultaneously maintaining a slight degree of seriousness. Once we arrived to the location for the interview, we engaged in light, pleasant conversation while I got my computer and notepad ready and she finish or closed something she was working on. The interviews were conducted at different times of day depending on both of our schedules. There was one time that Ms. Thompson had to reschedule an interview due to a medical appointment.

Ms. Thompson is a white woman in her late fifties. She is about five feet five inches tall with brown hair that barely passed her shoulders. She dressed in business casual clothing due to the interviews being conducted in the summer months with a more casual dress code. She genuinely conveyed interest in my study by stating comments such as, “I hope I am providing you with what you need”, and “I hope upper leadership hears the outcomes to your study”. She also expressed interest in my own professional path by asking questions, “What are your plans after you get your PhD?”. She usually sat in an upright position with a slight forward lean towards me. She would make eye contact when listening to my questions and sometimes look off when thinking and providing her responses. At the end of every interview, she discussed what she was doing later that evening or a recent interaction she had with her
family and new grandbaby. At the time of the interviews, Ms. Thompson was completing her twelfth year as principal of Eagle Elementary. She was appointed principal in 2005 to open the school in 2006.

**Ms. Thompson: Pathway to Principal.** Ms. Thompson has worked in Pasco County Schools for 34 years, his entire professional career. She started her experience in Pasco as a student intern for a guidance counselor at Hawk Elementary School. At the end of her internship, she was hired at Osprey Elementary School, which was newly opening, as a guidance counselor. She served fourteen years at Osprey as guidance counselor and Assistant Principal.

While working at Osprey, she had the opportunity to partner with a local university program that focused on Response to Intervention. She worked closely with a professor that would come to her school to provide trainings, work with teacher teams, and consult with administrative team on the processes of identification of students needing services and interventions. Ms. Thompson expressed that the partnership with the professor and university was highly beneficial in developing her knowledge and experience pertaining to working in teams, using data, and strategies for assisting all students. After working at Osprey, she moved to Merlin Elementary School and served three years as an Assistant Principal. During her time at Merlin, she had the opportunity to work summer school at Owl Elementary School which was a Title 1 school serving students that were more socio-economically disadvantaged compared to the other schools that she worked. Ms. Thompson emphasized how that experience helped her widen her perspective on schooling and further confirmed her beliefs in that all children can learn and become successful. From Merlin Elementary, she became appointed Principal at Hawk Elementary where she began her experience in Pasco as a
guidance counselor intern. She served as Principal at Hawk for four years. Ms. Thompson described her experience at Hawk as challenging in terms of implementing structures and processes that promoted inclusive practices and collaborative teams. The dynamics of the staff consisted of a large percentage that were members of the teacher’s union and possessed the mindset of traditional expectations of students identified as special education. The next professional opportunity for Ms. Thompson was when she was appointed principal to open a new school, Eagle Elementary.

With the circumstance of opening a new school and hiring all staff, Ms. Thompson shared that she was particular when interviewing by asking questions that would evoke responses that would reveal beliefs around all students’ ability to learn and the importance of working in teams. She shared that if a potential teacher candidate demonstrated high knowledge of the curriculum and answered questions well, if the candidate did not convey beliefs in working as a team player that she would not hire that person. Ms. Thompson maintains a strong belief that she can teach and provide resources to someone who may not have full understanding of the standards or teaching practices, but she cannot teach someone how to be a team player if they do not value the importance of working in teams. Throughout her 12 years as principal of Eagle Elementary, Ms. Thompson continues her expectations of inclusive school practices and beliefs in all students can learn and collaborative working processes.

**Eagle Elementary Instructional Leaders**

There were six instructional leaders selected by Ms. Thompson to participate in the focus group interview. The focus group interview was conducted at Eagle Elementary School in the conference room located between the principal and assistant principal offices. During
the time of the focus group interview, neither the assistant principal or Ms. Thompson were in their offices. There were tables aligned to the walls of the conference room that had papers and boxes stacked on them. The focus group interview took place two weeks prior to the end of the school year. As each instructional leader entered the conference room, I greeted and thanked them for being willing to participate in the study. The group was highly talkative and was engaged in many side conversations as they entered and sat at the conference table. The room was filled with high energy and laughter. The instructional leaders made me feel very welcomed and they displayed much interest in my PhD pursuit and the study being conducted. Due to the energetic and positive atmosphere in the room, rapport between the participants and myself was established quickly. There were several times during the focus group interview that the participants would speak at the same time due to excitement of the questions and the work that they have engaged. During those moments, I would interject stating, “wait, one at a time” and the leaders would respond with laughter and making gestures to others on who should speak first and then next. At the end of the focus group interview, all participants agreed upon a date for me to return and conduct the individual follow-up interviews. Several participants commented on how they appreciated the questions of the focus group interview because it made them reflect on all the hard work that they have accomplished and what they want to keeping working on to improve.

Ms. Coleman – Former Assistant Principal. Ms. Coleman is a white female in her mid 30s. She has brown eyes and brown hair medium length that she keeps pulled back in a ponytail. Ms. Coleman displayed excitement in participating in the study and would consistently smile when speaking with others conveying a positive affect. During the time of the interview, Ms. Coleman recently was hired as an Assistant Principal at a nearby elementary
school that was opening new for the 2017-2018 school year. However, due to her deep involvement with MTSS implementation at Eagle Elementary, Ms. Thompson believed that she would be a good participant for the study. Ms. Coleman began her at Eagle Elementary since it opened. She had prior teaching experience in North Carolina as a 4th grade teacher for one year and at Hawk Elementary as a K-1 teacher for two years and while Ms. Thompson was principal. Ms. Coleman served as Kindergarten teacher and Assistant Principal at Eagle Elementary. As a Kindergarten teacher, she piloted RTI at Eagle Elementary when it opened and worked with the staff on expanding implementation throughout the forthcoming years. She earned an administrative internship position in 2013 and then hired as an Assistant principal, serving three years in that role at Eagle Elementary.

Ms. Coleman describes her leadership style as a servant leader and stated that through mentoring and modeling of Ms. Thompson, she has grown in her ability to be a servant leader. She also describes Ms. Thompson as a strong servant leader. Her peers described Ms. Coleman as a good resource for them as she would participate in some of their PLCs and offer guidance and modeling with the MTSS process.

**Ms. Marino – Learning Design Coach.** Ms. Marino has been a Learning Design Coach at Eagle Elementary for two years. Prior, she worked at Eagle Elementary as a K-3 grades teacher with 1 year as a 4th grade teacher since the school opened. She has worked as a teacher for 16 years with her first year as a 2nd grade teacher at an elementary school in Tennessee. Her last 15 years has been in Pasco County Schools with one year at Owl Elementary and five years at Hawk Elementary. Ms. Marino is a white female with brown hairs and brown hair with short length. She is in her mid 30s. During the focus group interview, Ms. Marino spoke often and provided responses to every question asked. She
displayed energy and excitement during the interview and a genuine passion of the topic of the study and the questions being asked. She described her experience in adopting the RTI and MTSS process and how she went through personal reflection to understand the initiative and how to apply it to her own practice as a third-grade teacher. She contributed her change in beliefs about ways of teaching to Ms. Thompson and her relentless inspection and questioning of student data.

Ms. Timmons – Exceptional Student Education Teacher. Ms. Timmons is an Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Teacher at Eagle Elementary. Her role is to work with other teachers and push in their classrooms to provide additional supports to students that are identified as needing ESE services and students that are struggling with standards and skills. She works in collaborative partnerships with teachers in planning and delivering instructions. Ms. Timmons serves as the committee chair on the PBIS team. She has brown eyes and dark brown hair with medium length. She is in her early 50s. Ms. Timmons displayed a positive affect and initially was quiet but became more actively participatory during the focus group interview. She expressed excitement in regard to the work that has been accomplished over the last 2 years as well as her own professional development in understanding and implementing MTSS. Through her responses, she conveyed a deep passion in helping students learn and succeed.

Ms. Taylor – Fifth Grade Exceptional Student Education Teacher. Ms. Taylor is a fifth-grade ESE teacher and serves as the unofficial fifth grade PLC Facilitator. She came to that role of PLC facilitator as a result of the two fifth grade PLC facilitators stepping down due to frustration and not knowing how to facilitate an effective PLC. Ms. Taylor was asked to facilitate due to her knowledge on MTSS and her passion in helping students learn. She serves
as the fifth-grade ESE teacher by providing additional supports and interventions to students and is actively involved in the planning process with the teachers on her team. Ms. Taylor began her teaching career as an ESE teacher, then worked as general education teacher for 11 years, and then decided to go back to working as an ESE teacher. She explains that decision derived from her personal experiences in being a Mother to a son that is identified to need ESE services and supports. Ms. Taylor has brown eyes and blondish-brown hair with long length. She is in her mid 40s. She began the focus group interview with a quiet tone, not speaking up as much as the others. As the interview progressed, she spoke up more often and was prompted by some of her peers to respond to specific questions based on knowing her experiences. Ms. Taylor was very engaged and appeared excited with the conversation. During the individual follow-up interview, Ms. Taylor spoke with a more confident tone and affect. She added more details to her work on the fifth-grade team and her own personal story.

Through her personal experiences, she has developed a strong passion for working with students with ESE needs. In her work facilitating the 5th grade PLC, she stated that she had to step out of her comfort zone in wanting everyone to be happy to begin pushing people to engage in the necessary work of PLCs in looking at student data and making instructional decisions to meet individual student needs. She described this experience to be challenging due to strong beliefs of some of the team members. However, she said that she knew once they saw the success of the work in PLCs in student outcomes that it would create more buy-in. Ms. Taylor stated that now that team has seen some success and their PLC is working more effectively. She describes Ms. Thompson as very supportive and always available to listen and provide suggestions and resources when necessary.

**Ms. Hughes – First Grade Teacher.** Ms. Hughes is a first-grade teacher and has worked at Eagle Elementary School since it opened. She has also taught Kindergarten at Eagle
Elementary. She is one of the PLC Facilitators for the first-grade team. Ms. Hughes displayed a positive affect by consistently smiling, nodding, laughing, and actively participating in the focus group interview. She has brown eyes and brown hair with medium length. She is in her mid 50s. She conveyed pride in being at her school since it opened and shared how she enjoys the staff at the school. During the focus group interview, she generally added on to other participants’ thoughts rather than initiating conversation. During the individual follow-up, Ms. Hughes displayed excitement and shared more specifics of her work with MTSS implementation and the work of the school.

**Ms. Miller – Third Grade Teacher.** Ms. Miller is a third-grade teacher and has worked at Eagle Elementary School since it opened. She has also taught second grade at Eagle Elementary. She is one of the PLC facilitators for the third-grade team. Ms. Miller speaks with a quiet and calm voice. She was actively engaged in the focus group interview and displayed a serious affect when discussing the work of her team and her own instructional practices. She did smile often when another participant made a joke or the group was laughing about an experience they were referencing.

She describes her PLC facilitation approach as being straightforward in the sense of when bringing back new information or ways of work with the PLC that she simply expresses that this is what is needed to be done. Ms. Miller describes the third-grade team as having more pressure to perform due to the state testing system in that third-grade students are administered the Florida State-wide Assessment (FSA) for the first time and have retention requirements if they do not perform at specific criteria levels. Due to these pressures, Ms. Miller expressed that the third-grade teachers do not pushback on new ways of work especially as it relates to using student data to make instructional decisions.
Ms. Miller described the leadership of Ms. Thompson in being very consistent across the years of her principalship at Eagle Elementary. She stated the Ms. Thompson has an open door for whenever a teacher made need some advice, support, or provide suggestions. Ms. Miller describes Ms. Thompson having the ability to make others feel safe and confident that she has their back and that she is always willing to provide suggestions and supports when needed.

**Summary of Context and Study Participants**

This chapter provided detailed information on the context of Pasco along with the district’s history with MTSS implementation. District efforts with the last two year of system-wide MTSS implementation were described in terms of strategies and challenges. In addition, this chapter provided descriptions on the 15 participants of the study as well as contextual information on the schools where the instructional leaders served in their roles. The next chapter will provide the findings that emerged through the interviews. The organization of the findings will be explained through the study’s research questions.
CHAPTER FIVE:

STUDY FINDINGS

In this chapter, findings related to the research questions are provided to highlight the experiences of learning, leading, and implementing a policy initiative. Accompanying the research questions findings across and within the case elements, I also illustrate common barriers that were experienced coupled with intentional strategies that were successful in overcoming those barriers. The findings are presented in this manner for a couple of reasons. First, given the design of the research study, each sub question was aim to glean insight on different aspects related to implementation. Those aspects of implementation that I was exploring consisted of: 1) Learning - What do principals and instructional leaders understand about the district’s expectations for the MTSS initiative? 2) Knowledge influence on utilization of resources - In what ways does a principal’s and instructional leaders’ knowledge of MTSS and knowledge of school context impact the utilization of district provided resources at the school site? 3) Knowledge transfer to practice - In what ways does a principal’s and instructional leaders’ knowledge of MTSS initiative influence the knowledge transfer of the initiative in school? and 4) Knowledge of implementation practices - In what ways does a principal’s own knowledge of implementation processes impact how the principal sought to strategically implement MTSS in order to change instructional staff practice?
In an effort to present the findings across the 2 schools as they relate to the crucial nuances of implementation, framing participant voices with relevant connections to the analyzed documents within each question creates a more orderly approach to understanding an intricate process. In addition, due to the inherent nature of reform implementation, participants often reported implementation barriers and the strategies they undertook. I present those findings after the research question and each sub question in efforts to share the experiences of the participants in strategically dealing with implementation challenges. In the next sections, I present the participants’ interview responses as related to the research questions.

**Research Question Findings: Within and Across Case Elements**

Numerous findings emerged through the focus group interviews, individual interviews, and document reviews. Through the iterative coding and analysis process, themes were identified as aligning to the research questions as well as presenting through tensions. In addition, a few meta-themes surfaced that are over-arching concepts to the focus of this research study. The findings in this chapter are described related to the research questions with connections to the literature reviewed in this study.

**Participants’ Understanding of the Expectations of MTSS Initiative**

Through the interviews with the principals and instructional leaders, questions relating to how they have come to know and understand the expectations of the MTSS initiative were asked guided by a semi-structured protocol. Participant responses lead to the identification of two themes; connecting to prior knowledge and learning through internal and external opportunities.

**Connecting to prior knowledge.** It was evident through participant responses that connections to prior knowledge of concepts of MTSS helped contribute to their understanding
of the expectations of the MTSS initiative. Through past personal experiences, work prior to year one and year two MTSS implementation, and the use of common language according to school context created connections to the initiative for the participants. Utilizing prior knowledge into new ways of work helps organizational members to deepen their work practices; however, the needs to be a balance of how much reliance is placed on prior knowledge to not limit member response to new situations (Honig, 2008).

*Principal Prior Knowledge.* Both principals described their professional experiences that lead to their understanding of MTSS and how that contributed to their implementation of the initiative at their schools. Ms. Thompson shared her experience as Guidance Counselor and Assistant Principal at Osprey Elementary as providing the foundational knowledge and belief systems around the concepts of MTSS. During her time at Osprey, she had the opportunity to partner with a professor at a local university who focused on the importance of prevention. She shared her experience with the university partnership in developing her knowledge on MTSS. Ms. Thompson explained, that with her opportunity to connect with others in partnership with the university she had exposure “with different types of leaders, really just listening to them and the stories of what they did in their schools.” Combined with her deeper learning from the university partnership, her work as a guidance counselor at a school that served students with emotionally and intellectually challenges provided a rich experience.

I think my background being in guidance you know I’ve always been about the whole child and looking at the whole child. So, I think (MTSS) just resonated for me because at Osprey there were emotional disturbed, severely emotionally disturbed kids, so a different clientele also and working so closely with those kids many times it was
academic, many times it was other types of interventions and preventions you needed to put in place so that was good first school for me also because I really got attached to the learning of the emotional side.

Ms. Anders described her initial understanding of MTSS concepts developed during her experience as Assistant Principal. During that time, she was engaged in a principal preparation program that was provided through the district in partnership with a local university. A component of the program was to identify an area of focus and develop a project at her school related to that focus area. She shared that through that experience of research into her practice, she developed a better understanding of the foundational concepts and the role of PLCS in MTSS implementation. At that time, her school was beginning with PLC implementation. She stated, “So we started with PLCs and honestly that is where we began to develop the understanding of what MTSS is.”

Both principals shared how their prior knowledge was constructed through university partnerships coupled with their own professional experiences.

**Instructional Leader Prior Knowledge – From Pilot RTI Implementation.**

Participants discussed the work that they were engaged in prior to the district-wide implementation of MTSS. There were three previous initiatives described which contributed to the knowledge constructs of MTSS. The first was Pasco’s pilot implementation of RTI that began in 2007. The second was the implementation of the common core standards which began in 2010 and continued throughout the next several years. The third was district-wide implementation of Professional Learning Communities which began in 2012. Participants at both schools discussed their participation in the pilot RTI implementation.
MTSS is a larger framework that encompasses RTI and shares similar concepts and processes. One participant from Eagle Elementary related that her understanding of MTSS came directly from her previous experience with RTI and shared that she would explain to others “MTSS is the same thing as RTI, but it just changed names”. By explaining the initiative with that language helped to clarify general understanding of MTSS.

Through participants’ accounts from Falcon Elementary school, the outcome of the pilot RTI implementation resulted in feelings of being overwhelmed and lack of clarity of the work. They could recall knowing that the intent was to look at student data to provide extra support to students having the most need. During this time, the concept of tiered instruction was established but how to go about providing that support was unclear. However, they shared by attending several district-based trainings they were able to build initial knowledge of RTI. As the district-wide MTSS implementation was rolled out, some of the foundational components of RTI such as, recognizing the “triangle” that depicted tiered instruction, lead to teachers feeling more comfortable and allowed them to move deeper in their understanding of the specific expectations of the initiative. Ms. Romano agreed with Ms. Torres that due to the previous knowledge the teachers are able to focus more on the particular definitions and work between tiers of instruction.

And [Ms. Torres] I think I heard you say in the last two years that those waters have become more clearly defined, tier two and tier three. Yeah and thinking on that triangle or whatever it was and the key parts of it or whatever, where now I don’t even feel we look at that. There was a lot of knowledge there because before that I had no idea what RTI or MTSS was. It was a brand-new world, so I feel like those initially helped me to understand what it was and what it meant.
**Instructional Leader Prior Knowledge – with New Standards.** Ms. Torres, the Learning Design Coach at Falcon Elementary, shared that her exposure to understanding the standards prior to Pasco’s MTSS implementation allowed her to connect that knowledge to the work of MTSS. She explained that understanding the curriculum standards is an essential part of providing tiered instruction. Ms. Torres’s story also includes how the opportunity by a district leader to learn in a variety of settings within and outside of Pasco bolstered her understanding of the standards.

So, I went with her to all these major meetings where I learned about standards. So, I had that behind me already, so when I came here I was able to go right into that and be able to build that foundation with teachers.

The instructional leaders from both schools explained how previous initiatives created an initial knowledge base around concepts of MTSS which assisted in the first year of Pasco’s district-wide implementation of MTSS.

**Connecting Learning Between Years of Implementation.** After engaging in year one of the systemic implementation, more learning occurred which influenced implementation for year two. Participants from both schools commented how after year 1 of implementation, that the next year has “been a bit easier” and they are able to make more shifts in their practices which align to the expectations of the MTSS initiative. Ms. Marino, Falcon Elementary, explained “each year we grow further and further, every single year, and this current year we were able to make the shift of flexible tier 2.” Ms. Little, Falcon Elementary, added on to say “I do feel like this year has been the one where okay this is making sense now.” Ms. Timmons, ESE teacher at Eagle Elementary, shared how her instructional role has shifted and become more clarified between the years of implementation.
We were looking at the data with the teachers but I was mostly making groups and the IA's [Instructional Assistants] were doing a lot of the work with them and I would collect the data. This year that shifted to teachers actually looking at the data and making the groups. I think that helped a lot. They could see it was not just the kids that struggle, that we're looking at every single kid in that grade level. It was just standards based now it wasn't foundational.

Both principals spoke about the learning and gradual progress that occurred between years of implementation. Within the first year, they emphasized how the learning focus was primarily on establishing the conditions and expectations of MTSS through building collective responsibility and collaborative ways of work. Through that focus, the principals recognized that they can move their teams into more detailed practice of the initiative.

Ms. Thompson, Eagle Elementary Principal:

Last year (year 2 of implementation) was that whole collective responsibility. The MTSS was more you know just building the knowledge the year before, but last year was more about the collective and really focusing on re-teaching the standard.

Ms. Anders, Falcon Elementary Principal:

I feel like we've really changed this year. We understand the difference between them (tiers of instruction). It’s become a more natural thing. If someone says the tier 2 or tier 3 groups we're not like oh my god are we doing this right? What student is it? We've built on each team, such a natural flow to how we do it to us it doesn't feel like it’s this big.
Learning through external and internal opportunities

Participants at both schools explained how learning through external and internal experiences contributed to their understanding of MTSS. External and internal refer to outside of (external) and within (internal) Pasco school district. The external experiences that were emphasized were attending conferences. The internal experiences were primarily Pasco county professional development opportunities coupled with school-site support to understanding the implementation of the learning in relation to school context. Even though instructional leaders at both schools shared how external and internal experiences assisted in building their understanding, leaders at Eagle emphasized more so the external experiences and leaders at Falcon focused more so on the internal experiences.

External Opportunities: The Importance of Conferences. Ms. Timmons, ESE Teacher, Eagle Elementary

It was DuFour conference. And to hear talk about oh this is not something that is just happening at Pasco it's a nationwide thing and to hear the whole discussion of we're not looking at those kids who need help and how we can help them, we're looking at what’s everyone doing and that was the big eye opening piece for me.

Ms. Coleman, Assistant Principal, Eagle Elementary

I would say the DuFour conference was definitely the most useful. Part of it just because I feel like it was so - it provided so much knowledge and understanding and really built a common language among the team that went of an understanding of or what MTSS really should look like in a school.
Ms. Thompson, Principal, Eagle Elementary:

Sending them to conferences helps. You know I took some people to different types of conferences just because I think that's valuable because you hear it from different people. …Its people you don't see every day and they're experts and they don't just talk the talk they walk it.

Ms. Anders, Principal, Falcon Elementary: I did attend the leadership conference through Solution Tree. I talked to my supervisors and I said, you have to trust me on this I have to take my PLC Facilitators and I need you to give me the money to do it. It was the best thing we ever did.

The opportunity to engage in learning from those considered national experts in a setting outside of the school district and with other educators across the country was conveyed by the participants who attended as having an influence in their understanding of purpose and practices of MTSS. In particular, the leaders of Eagle Elementary discussed the impact of attending conferences in much detail and conveyed much excitement about the learning they experienced through those opportunities.

**Internal Opportunities: The Importance of District Trainings.** Ms. Thompson, Principal, Eagle Elementary:

I did training (district) with the facilitators, with the teams, did PD. We took different people for follow up trainings so we had a few of the key people that went to all of the trainings and then we brought different people different times. One time we even brought someone that we purposely said we need to take this person because she doesn't truly believe that all kids can learn. So, we purposely brought her to some training that we were hoping if she saw the bigger picture she would maybe understand
it. We had people (district) come and help us look at data, and break that data apart and talk about what that meant. We had people who came and helped us look at interventions. We also use each other. Teachers are great resource and we have some great teachers here so looking at teacher’s practices and those teachers who do well, replicating those practices.

Ms. Little, Kindergarten teacher at Falcon Elementary shared how Ms. Torres’ professional development assisted in understanding foundational components of the MTSS initiative.

We spent a lot of time with (Ms. Torres) after that with unpacking standards at PD in the morning. Really understanding those standards and what we were teaching. That was huge I think.

Ms. Timmons, ESE teacher at Eagle Elementary, commented that the combination of the external and internal learning experiences is what helped her understand MTSS.

Interestingly, pretty much the Austin Buffman combined with Pasco’s collaborative teaching PD, with those kind of things converging together I would say was how the understanding of MTSS really clicked for me.

The combination of prior knowledge with similar concepts and practices with learning experiences within and outside of the district lead to participants’ understanding of the MTSS initiative. These findings suggest that a multipronged approach in learning about an initiative influences the convergence of ideas that build a more tangible understanding of a complex reform.

**Participants Utilization of Resources**

In relation to constructing knowledge of an initiative, participants were asked questions regarding the resources they utilized to assist in understanding and implementing MTSS. Below
are some of the questions that were asked to elicit information on participants’ utilization of resources:

- What resources/supports do you rely on to learn about and implement practices of MTSS?
- What resources/supports do you believe were the most useful? Why?

The interview protocols provided in Appendices J and K detail all the questions that were asked. For this topic, participant responses gathered around 3 primary areas consisting of assistance relationships (experts outside of school site), school-based human resources, and monitoring tools.

**Assistance Relationships** - “People are the best resources.” For the purposes of this study, I referenced the concept of assistance relationships as defined by Honig (2008), that “frames assistances as a relationship in which participants more expert at particular practices model those practices and create valued identity structures, social opportunities, and tools that reinforce those models for more novice participants” (p.634). To be clear, this study is identifying assistance relationships as district-based staff supporting school-based staff. In accounts from all participants, a form of assistance relationship was present and had impact in developing understanding and implementing practices of MTSS. More specifically, all participants at some point during the interviews shared how their district-based MTSS specialist contributed to their understanding and implementation of MTSS practices. Below are just a few participants’ statements that share how the specialist assisted them.

Ms. Coleman, Assistant Principal, Eagle Elementary:

Having conversations that clear up misconceptions and being able in a small group to just say now do you mean this? Is this what you’re saying or what do you think of this?
Is this the vision we were thinking and getting that feedback?

Ms. Thompson, Principal, Eagle Elementary:

I mean sometimes if I'm discouraged I'll send him an email and say can you call me. He always, always - he maybe doesn't have a lot of time to give you to come to your school but he'll call you and talk you through something.

Ms. Romano, Third Grade Teacher, Falcon Elementary:

So, every teacher wants to act like they know what they're talking about but we're like, what is this unit about? So, I think going through having him take us through that process and that was recent but a lot of us were like oh my god thank you.

School-based Human Resources. Participants at both schools discussed the impact that people at their schools have made in developing understanding of and implementing practices of MTSS. All participants referenced at least one person at their schools that have supported their work. Falcon Elementary instructional leaders really emphasized the work of their learning design coach, Ms Torres, in having a huge influence in helping them understand and improve their practices. Ms. Little, Kindergarten teacher, Falcon Elementary related:

(Ms. Torres) is one that's in every PLC, does our PD you know, so she kind of has, kind of knows where every grade level is at and knows what we're ready for and a lot of us feel comfortable going to her and saying, hey listen I don't think my teams ready for this. She's kind of the bridge between us and administration to say like, mmm not yet and then she can sometimes put the teacher lens back on.

Ms. Romano, Third Grade Teacher, Falcon Elementary added:

I would say support… definitely (Ms. Torres). That was the first thing that came to
mind, is (Ms. Torres) definitely. She would provide us with any resources we need to understand that I think.

When asked about what she believes as her purpose as the Learning Design Coach, Ms. Torres emphasized her belief of being a support to all of the teachers.

But my purpose really is to make sure that teachers are comfortable in what they're teaching, number 1. Feel supported and know that I'm there to help them get to that next level for them professionally and for their kids.

At Eagle Elementary, the instructional leaders described supports with their PLC Co-Facilitator relationships. Due to the school having a large student body, the PLCs are large as well allowing for two teachers to be PLC Co-Facilitators. They shared how those relationships supported the work of PLCs in MTSS implementation. In addition, the instructional leaders all agreed that the support for the administrative team, which includes the principal, assistant principals, and learning design coach has assisted in developing their understanding of and implementing practices of MTSS. Ms. Thompson, Principal, describes how she initially works with her administrative team to provide the support needed for her teachers.

They (administrative team) all have strong curriculum backgrounds. Using them and the other piece is because you know their background; they were all good in the classroom. So, you know they were good instructional leaders in their classroom, they're good instructional leaders in their current role, so really tapping into them. Asking their advice, asking them to lead different groups. When we discuss data, when we talk about MTSS, they're all a part of that discussion so we never leave them out of anything. Probably involve them too much, they probably wish we'd leave them out sometimes.
The principals at both schools emphasized the importance of having a community of people engaged in joint work within the school as well as within the district that can be accessed to share knowledge through supportive relationships. Having a solid network of human resources was emphasized by Ms. Anders when she stated, “People are the most important resource that you can have”. The instructional leaders were able to identify specific people that have provided them with new knowledge and support as well as shared ways in which they promote involvement from others to share, participate, and access resources. The notions of social network and community of practice align with perspectives of sociocultural learning theorists in that they posit the construction of knowledge is through the experiences of an individual’s engagement with others and tools and through the acceptance of abilities and practices with those in the community (Honig, 2008; Spillane, 2002; Spillane et al., 2006; Wenger 1998).

**Tools – District and School Created.** Conceptualizing the purpose of tools in district reform, both socioculturalists and organizational learning theorists converge on the importance of tools to learning processes (Honig, 2008). Identifying the intention of tools, sociocultural theorists consider two primary function of tools (Hoing, 2008). Tools can be utilized for conceptual intentions which provide principles, frameworks, and ideas (Honig, 2008). Also, tools can be identified as practical in that they provide specific examples of practices, actions, strategies, and resources that have immediate utility in a local context (Honig, 2008). In this study, participants reference primarily tools that would be identified as practical more so in terms of what they considered meaningful to MTSS implementation. These tools were both district created (PLC rubric) and school created (PLC data spreadsheets).
**District Created.** Ms. Little, Kindergarten teacher, Falcon Elementary

Because of that I know that meetings more towards the end of last year and the beginning of this year teams were asked to look at the collaborative culture matrix (PLC rubric) rate your team. So, we referenced that several times over the last 2 years, in planning meetings, to identify where your team is. And I believe that was useful. I think, as a facilitator it makes me go back and think about my practice and team. You reflect on what we've done and where we've come from. And it's good because then at the beginning of the year we can say okay, this is a new start.

Ms. Thompson, Principal, Falcon Elementary:

On the PLC Rubric and that's really tapping into all of those systems and practices that are in place for sure. I think that's probably our biggest data collection tool. The second would be the actual practices in the classroom which would be the walk-through tool (IPG). When you start talking about evidence of effective tier 2 or tier 3 systems, we're building that. Just building that.

**School Created.** Participants at both schools shared the development of spreadsheet that organizes classroom data to assist with data analysis and PLC discussions pertaining to instructional decisions to meet the needs of students. Interestingly, both schools created a similar database and shared reflections on strategies that garnered the utilization of the tool by all PLC members. In addition, participants discussed the impact of the spreadsheet in facilitating data-based discussions and analysis. Ms. Miller, Third-Grade teacher, Eagle Elementary shared:
I mean having a specific database has helped because they know every Tuesday that's our data day. We send out an agenda. It’s very specific, this is the data you need to have entered, it’s going to be scored this way.

Ms. Little, Kindergarten teacher, Falcon Elementary stated:

So, that's been nice for particular standard we can have 2 or 3 data points to one standard to watch throughout the year and we keep those in a spread sheet. For each teacher, we’ll write the assessment; the skill it was assessing and the date it was given and we'll put each students score. So, we can kind of see that ‘oh yeah they've been doing really well with identifying characters and setting’ but then when we ask them to compare and contrast kind of falls apart there. It’s been really nice to see all that in a spreadsheet and see all those data points for each standard.

The resources described by the participants as being productively utilized were people, both district-base and school-based, and tools for monitoring practices and collecting data. According to Malen and King (2004), those resources contribute to 4 resource bases that support education reform; human capitol, social capitol, cultural capitol, and informational resources.

The participants reflected on the importance of people sharing knowledge, working together, and fostering relationships that mediate differences through open communication. In addition, the district and school created tools offered opportunities for people to work together within and across school communities to develop clearer definitions and facilitate processes related to specific MTSS practices.
Participants’ MTSS knowledge transfer to practice

In discussions aimed to reflect on the participants’ MTSS knowledge progressed through a transfer into their practice, findings highlighted several key methods in which this transfer developed and was enacted. Those practices include; PLC facilitation, modeling, monitoring, embedding into existing practices, creating comfort, through risk taking, through gradual learning, and seeing student results.

**PLC Facilitation.** Participants from both schools discussed the importance of selecting, working with, and supporting PLC facilitators in the implementation of MTSS. Instructional leaders shared strategies that built knowledge around MTSS practices and gained full participation of PLC members. The principals’ responses focused on selection of PLC facilitators, strategies to support facilitators in gaining team participation, and strategies to continue to build the capacity of facilitators in how and what to facilitate for the purposes of MTSS implementation.

Ms. Marino, the Learning Design Coach at Eagle Elementary, shared how having the PLC facilitators engaged in learning focused on how to facilitate PLCs in the practices of MTSS assisted in the facilitators being able to transfer that knowledge into practice.

I think it was hard too to understand what it looks like so [we put] the leaders of the PLC’s in the position to see it, work with it, manipulate the data and try it out.

Ms. Romano, Third Grade Teacher, Eagle Elementary, discussed a strategy she uses when facilitating her PLC to gain full participation in the work.

If I notice a teacher on my team who sits in planning every time and doesn’t share or doesn’t say anything I might say, hey do you mind if you type the notes as we talk so that we capture everything? So, then that person as they’re -- instead of sitting there
zoning out or sitting there like I don't know what to say they're typing and then they'll stop and say ‘hey now what did you say about this’, and then they’re starting to get into the conversation and then their work becomes where they're owning it more, talking more and feeling more comfortable.

The principals at both schools discussed the importance of selecting the instructional leaders and ways to build their capacity in facilitating the practices that needed for MTSS implementation. Ms. Anders, Principal, Eagle Elementary shares the importance of selecting PLC facilitators that are collaborative and know how to facilitate the process.

You also have to be very selective of your facilitators. But we've had people we thought would be really great facilitators but when they get in there they just don't have the skills.

Ms. Thompson, Principal at Falcon Elementary, discussed how she works with her leadership team to build their capacity in implementing MTSS processes and practices.

I pull them a half day every month, it's a consistent thing. Every time we leave it’s what we are talking about next. There’s part of development that has occurred, they're building knowledge. Then the next question is how we are going to do that. What are our planning structures for next year going to look like? Are we talking about data during our PLC's, during specials time? PLC's are about data.

Ms. Thompson went on further to emphasize the important role that PLC Facilitators play in MTSS implementation and how she continues to invest time in building their capacity as facilitators. She acknowledges that each PLC is functioning a varies levels and emphasizes that as long as everyone is moving towards the same goals then that it is what is expected.
A critical piece is the PLC facilitators, there’s always a work time in our meetings. So, for example when we’re talking about common formative assessments and we started to use learning targets to write common formatives so we could better respond to kids’ needs. There was time for them to work with their grade level with their peers. Talk to me about what that looks like then the facilitation questions from us would be what are your next steps. We know where you want to be but what’s the one thing you need to do to try to get your team moving in that direction. As long as we’re moving in this direction its ok- you're not going to be all at the same place and I don't expect you to. It looks so different at each grade level.

**Modeling.** Sociocultural and organizational learning theories incorporate the action of modeling as an integral component in building knowledge that can transfer to practice. Through the observation, it can develop a mental conceptual model that assists in task execution (Honig, 2008). Honig (2008) stated that “some theorists argue that those conceptual models are essential to execution, particularly at deep levels of participation” (p.635). In this case study, participants at Falcon Elementary discussed how they have used modeling strategies to assist in MTSS implementation.

Ms. Birch, First Grade teacher, discussed how she would help teachers on her PLC build understanding on how to transfer MTSS concepts to classroom practice. She shared that when she facilitated discussion around instructional practices that she would also offer opportunities for her teammates to come observe how she is implementing those practices in her classroom.
Ms. Torres, Learning Design Coach, shared that she would go into teacher classrooms to model instructional practices after she spent time building foundational knowledge with teachers on the practice.

When interviewing Mr. Roberts, the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools, one of the examples he highlighted in providing reasons in how he selected Ms. Anders to participate in this study is how she was able to model effective PLC facilitation skills with her instructional leaders. He shared that when she began her principalship at Falcon Elementary, many of the staff where not held accountable for instructional and data focused PLCs. As a result, Ms. Thompson was “willing to get in the trenches and model it to build that capacity with her instructional leaders”. He reflected,

[Ms. Thompson] knew she had to literally be - early on - she had to be in each PLC and she had to almost direct teachers because they didn't know how to function in a collaborative way. Then she had to pull back like the next year and the next year. He shared that due to her expertise and knowledge with MTSS implementation through PLC facilitation, that the district videoed her modeling how to effectively facilitate PLCs.

**Monitoring through instructional walkthroughs.** Participants at both schools discussed the monitoring strategy of instructional walk-throughs. These walk-throughs were initiated by the district office, where district staff would come into schools and engage in walk- throughs to look for specific instructional behaviors that indicate components of MTSS implementation as it relates to Tier 1 instruction. During year 2 of MTSS implementation, schools engaged in the walk-throughs with their staff. Participants shared how their active engagement in this monitoring practice helped shaped their understanding of MTSS by seeing teachers in action. More importantly, participants shared that the discussions after the
walk-throughs provided more insight on not only what MTSS is but what it looks like in practice.

This social engagement through monitoring practices increase the individual and collective knowledge of the initiative (Honig, 2008). Ms. Coleman, Eagle Elementary, shared that when they started walk-throughs to monitor Tier 1 instruction that they noticed students being pulled out during instruction to work with an ESE teacher. She shared that through their discussions of the observations a better understanding of Tier 1 instruction and how that should look in practice was developed.

After the walk-throughs, we just began the conversation with leadership teams and with PLC's saying how will they ever catch up if we're constantly pulling them out of tier one? At first the conversations didn't go well because many of the teachers thought it’s not at their developmental level. They’re struggling too much they can't handle the tier 1. But then we had the conversation of if you're never letting them have that instruction how will they ever catch up? I think it was kind of a light bulb that went on for a lot of people including us.

Ms. Little, Kindergarten teacher, shared similar experiences with the walk-throughs at Falcon Elementary:

Walkthroughs led to some really great conversations too. I will say that because it’s interesting to see when we would meet to talk about the walkthroughs and the data just to see well what did you do. How did you teach PA (phonics) or how did you teach this particular skill? It was really nice to see the different ideas on the team and I don't think we always necessarily get to talk about those things. But it was really nice to be able to sit and talk about it or people to be able to ask questions. Hey listen, your kids seem to
do really well you know you only have 2 in a tier 3 group. I have a couple, how are you
teaching this to them? Or can you work with these kids for a couple weeks? I feel
between the PD and the walk through it really was some great conversation about what
was going on in each classroom and sharing ideas. It was really nice.

**Embed into existing practices.** Participants at Falcon Elementary emphasized how
embedding MTSS practices into their existing practices assisted in building understanding,
creating buy-in, and implementing the practices of the initiative.

**into the PLC.** Ms. Anders, principal of Falcon Elementary, shared how she was
intentional in making it clear that the work of the PLCs in planning and analyzing data was
the work of MTSS. She stated, “When you say MTSS, it is the work, the work of the PLCs.
It’s not anything different.” She expressed that by focusing on ensuring that PLCs are
engaged in specific processes that teachers will not feel like they are doing something extra
which creates buy-in and bolsters confidence in the work. Ms. Birch, first grade teacher,
shared “In the end, they (PLC teammates) realized it wasn’t much different than what we
were already doing so, I think that’s where the buy in came in.” Ms. Torres further explained:

It’s layered into the planning process here so much that it’s just a part of how we plan.
It’s not something completely separate. It’s not an extra piece, we just automatically do
it. So, when you say how is MTSS here, we don't even probably look at it that way
because it’s so layered in already.

Ms. Romano, third grade teacher, shares how embedding the work of MTSS into PLCs assists
in the staffing process of student identification of ESE services:

Teachers still might get somewhat intimidated by that [student services team] but at
the same time they know they're doing the right thing because we're doing it as a
school, we're doing it in PLC, we're doing it in our planning, together as a team.

**into the master schedule.** Ms. Matthews, first grade teacher, shares how embedding the work of MTSS into the master schedule helps facilitates the process:

When they make our master schedule before we even come back times already put in for it. So, it’s not like, oh great we just tested all these kids at the beginning of the year and I have seven kids who don't know this, where am I going to do this? We already had time built in.

**into the work of all school processes.** Ms. Green, second grade teacher, further elaborates how MTSS has been embedded into all practices and is an ongoing, natural function of the work:

And it’s not one thing that happens at a monthly PD or it’s something like is aid that everything we do. It’s everything we do here is based on student growth and student achievement and how we're going to help the students. Whether they're above or below grade level. That’s what we're discussing at all times.

**Creating Comfort: building on previous initiatives.** Participants at both schools discussed the concept of becoming comfortable with MTSS. The way they expressed gaining this comfort was through risk-taking and gradual learning. Risk-taking involves stepping out of what is comfortable to create a new sense of being comfortable as it relates to initiative implementation. Gradual learning allows the time to incrementally process and implement information to build confidence and comfort. In response to reform, traditional practices of working have proven ineffective due to the variance of teachers’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions and discrepancies in interpretation of reform purpose and processes. Many researchers suggest that process of change requires rethinking of traditional individual
practices by taking action in a community of practice with professionals working together to adapt their practice (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Elmore, 2004; Hannay & Earl, 2012). The release of routine practices requires conditions that create comfort for people to being willing to try something new with assurance of a gradual learning process in a community.

**through risk-taking.** Ms. Taylor, Fifth Grade ESE teacher at Eagle Elementary shared how she recognized that to facilitate her PLC to implement MTSS that she needed to take a difference approach in her leadership:

> It took me stepping out of my comfort zone because I'm a let’s make everybody happy kind of person and I don't like to call people out, it took me getting to the point where I was willing to call people out before we ever got accomplished what needed to be accomplished.

Ms. Romano, third grade teacher, Falcon Elementary:

> I think it’s still happening depending on the teacher or the team. I think that being comfortable with something and having the, I don't know if nerve is the right word, but being able to take chances sometimes and find success I think that's when you start taking ownership.

**through gradual learning.** Ms. Matthews, first grade teacher at Falcon Elementary shares how the previous work in building knowledge around the curriculum standards and resources lead to teachers becoming more comfortable in implementing other aspects of MTSS:

> I think as we become more comfortable with the standards, I think the conversations naturally happen now. You know we might pull open an assessment from 2 years ago that wow we definitely didn't understand the standard at that time. We were on the right
track but let’s reword the question to actually meet the standards so we know the kids are truly understanding it. We kind of have a different view on that now.

Ms. Romano, third grade teacher, Falcon Elementary:

Where now people are much more comfortable with the resources we have, like Readygen. Much more comfortable with the standards. With we've taught it once or twice before so they're like, oh this didn't work well or remember when the students... there's just a lot more comfort that comes with time.

**Seeing Student Results – creates momentum.** Ms. Hughes, first grade teacher at Eagle Elementary, stated “There are some people that need to see results before they’re going to do it.” Instructional leaders at both schools discussed seeing student results after initial implementation practices created the momentum to continue with implementation practices and motivated other teachers to buy-in to the implementation. Ms. Hughes elaborates,

I have to see that this is going to work because it’s just the nature of the beat. Lots of things that we try and then the next year we don't do them because they didn't do what they would do. So, a lot of things come across as its one more thing and next year we won't do it we'll do something else. So, a lot of people need to see it and then look at the data and go oh my god that really did show me something!

This notion of seeing student results is supported by Guskey’s (2010) model of teacher change. According to Guskey’s (2010) model, “significant change in teachers’ attitudes and beliefs occurs primarily after they gain evidence of improvements in student learning” (p. 383). This surfaces an important point that it is not the professional development alone that results in change; rather, the experience of successful implementation of a new practice that
change’s beliefs and willingness to continue to actively participate in the initiative (Gallucci, 2008; Guskey, 2010). Ms. Little, Kindergarten teacher at Falcon Elementary shares,

I think once they saw how the kids were doing with it there was buy in then. This year everybody was willing to teach PA (phonics program), we’re comfortable with it, do tier 3 groups, everybody was much more on the same page and comfortable with doing it this year.

Ms. Marino, Learning Design Coach, Eagle Elementary:

Teachers would say this is way too hard for our kids but now that its end of the year assessment, I'm hearing ‘oh my god they did so much better than I thought’. It’s like, yes because we're asking them to learn this so they're all learning up to here and this is the expectations but if you only teach to here they’re all going to be down here. So, because we pushed them so hard they're exactly where they need to be.

The findings that emerged through exploration of this research question connect with the frameworks guiding this study. Honig’s (2008) conceptual integrated framework illustrates the components of modeling, social engagement in learning, joint work (PLC facilitation), and search (monitoring). Rorrer et al. (2008) research synthesis refers to building capacity (learning, modeling) and refining organizational processes and structures (embedding into existing practices).

Participants’ knowledge of implementation practices

To gain further insight into reform implementation, questions regarding the explicit actions of implementation were deeply probed through multiple layers of questioning. Interestingly, as initial questions focused on implementation practices were asked, participant responses reflected more of the outcomes of implementation. I found
that I had to reword questions or emphasize parts of the questions to have participants think specifically on the actions of implementation. Through this questioning, practices of implementation that emerged included; previewing of district initiatives and trainings, selection of new staff through hiring strategies, keeping the big picture in mind, strategically breaking down into pieces, opportunity to see it work in other places outside of the school, alignment of district strategies into school processes, differentiated approach, building a leadership team, and learning through failure.

**Previewing of district initiatives and trainings.** Participants at Falcon Elementary emphasized the strategy of the principal of previewing upcoming information regarding MTSS implementation. The instructional leaders all agreed that through previewing, it allowed them to go to district trainings feeling confident and prepared into taking the next steps of MTSS.

Ms. Green, Second Grade Teacher, Falcon Elementary:

> What’s really nice of what she (Ms. Anders) does is we get previews a lot of what’s coming ahead of time. It’s not always an after, its sometimes a lot of times we go to those district meetings and they're talking and we’re like we're already doing that or we already know about that so I think she's giving it to us ahead of time.

Ms. Anders, Principal, Falcon Elementary, shares how she understands the influence of previewing with initiative implementation:

> I think first and foremost making sure the facilitators were one-step ahead…. and then keeping their knowledge around where we were going with PLC's one-step ahead.
Ms. Anders elaborates how she carries out the strategy of previewing:

I would do pre-work with my team. So, any time we were sitting in any of those district trainings it was not new knowledge. They are not stuck in the new knowledge and if I needed to build connections with common language and things like that we took care of that on the front end. So, as they're sitting there they're ready for that next level.

**Selection of new staff through hiring strategies**

The principals at both schools discussed the importance of the selection of new staff through hiring strategies they have used in identifying people who possess dispositions that can help move MTSS implementation forward. Selection is a component of the competency drivers within the implementation science framework (Fixsen et al., 2005). The framework highlights that the selection of new staff should consider aspects beyond academic qualifications or experience, rather, focus on characteristics that are difficult to teach such as social justice, willingness to learn, willingness to work on a team, and good judgement (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Both principals discussed how they engaged in staff interviews looking for those types of characteristics. Ms. Anders, Falcon Elementary Principal, shared 3 components that she ones in on during interviews,

One, how do you support students that don't fit inside the tier 1 box. Two, I spend a lot of time talking about the collaborative planning. I'm not necessarily looking for the person with the deepest skillset I'm looking for the person who can complement the team. The third thing is being open to learning.
Ms. Anders elaborates further on interviewing:

I know when I interview I don't ask content questions. I spend a lot of time asking people about how they've handled feedback from their administrators and what they've done with it. I'm looking for people who are constant learners but honestly it's the ability to work as a team. I'll sit like [leaned back in chair in relaxed position] and engage in conversation to just try to get them talking.

You’ll hear the passion build for sure. Usually they'll say, I'm so sorry I just got off on a tangent and I'm like no it’s really okay. That’s what I was listening for. That’s always a good sign.

Ms. Thompson, Principal, Eagle Elementary, discusses her interview questions:

I spend a lot of time when I interview; I can send you for ReadyGen training. I can send you for Eureka training, but I can't teach you to really like kids, and love kids. I can't teach you to be a team player. That's more important to me.

Both principals share similar perspectives on the characteristics that are needed within individuals to move MTSS implementation forward. The viewpoint of selecting staff through identifying dispositions that reflect a willingness to learn, capability to work in a team, and possessing a passion for the work clearly outweighs academic and content-based knowledge as criteria in the selection process.

**Keeping the Big Picture in Mind.** Both principals shared the importance of presenting and maintaining the overarching purpose of the initiative, ‘the big picture’, in the forefront to assist with implementation. Ms. Anders discussed her methods in using this strategy with her staff.
Often times what I will do is I will share the big picture with them and then talk. Typically, I start with our PLC Facilitators and I'll allow them to formulate in a way that their team will accept it. They know best how their team communicates and deals with stuff like that. Then we just talk about like if this is where we need to be where are you and what are our next steps? We address everything that way right.

Ms. Anders elaborates on other aspects of ‘Keeping the Big Picture in Mind’ through sharing the ‘compelling why’ of the initiative and then discussing the manageable steps that are involved in getting to that Big Picture.

For me I think it’s - people they need to know where an organization is going. You have to build the compelling why so that can exist a lot of different ways. So why and then they do want to see how but you can't live in the big picture so you have to create it but then bring it back down to this is what we're working on right now but you constantly have to connect it back to the big picture.

Both principals shared how every year they talk about the purpose and intention of the initiative. In addition, they shared that they use this strategy when dealing with teachers who may not by implementing MTSS practices. Ms. Thompson said that she knows that “Sometimes they don't see the bigger picture of their team because they become very focused on their class. So, I ask how do you see the bigger picture that these are all our kids. We do that every year, every year that happens.” In addition, the principals discussed that during these conversations is when they utilize the district’s documents of the key priorities, goals, and actions. The use of those documents creates a mental visual and connection for the teachers in the work that they are doing with the larger organizational goals.
Strategically breaking down into pieces. Implementation through a gradual process by strategically breaking down implementation actions into smaller, focused pieces was mentioned as an important strategy at both elementary schools. Ms. Thompson shared her strategy of breaking MTSS into smaller pieces while providing ongoing supports with building knowledge.

So, I remember specifically when we really began to roll that out we broke it down into pieces. Sometimes we'd go over an article together, sometimes it would be PD we talked about, sometimes it was something we put in their box. Delivering it in different ways but a lot of tools there to help us with that. So, those that are done best are the ones that are rolled out slowly.

Instructional leaders at Falcon Elementary shared their perspective on Ms. Anders approach to MTSS implementation through strategically focusing on one piece at a time. Ms. Birch, first grade teacher, stated that through Ms. Ander’s roll out of teacher planning processes that it allowed teams time to process and focus on “one piece at a time”. Ms. Little, Kindergarten teacher added her observations of Ms. Anders process of working with her leadership team to build their knowledge first and then for the instructional leaders “to slowly infuse that knowledge into their PLCs so it wasn’t this big overwhelming thing and that it was chunked out.” Through the perspective of the principal, Ms. Anders shares her approach with strategic, gradual implementation within the context of her school,

I think one of the strengths I have is being able to chunk things out so it’s not overwhelming. I know what it needs to look like, but there’s a developmental process in there. It’s not just a skill set it's the social emotional adjustment to change. We have to be really aware of it, so I’ve always kind of been slow and steady. I’ve been
fortunate to work in a school that typically gets really good results and so I have the option to take the slow and steady approach.

**Opportunities to see it work in other places outside of the school.** Another strategy that emerged through the interviews is the opportunity for people to see aspects of the initiative work in similar situations outside of the context of their own school. Ms. Marino, Eagle Elementary, shares an experience she and other instructional leaders had during an external professional development opportunity.

It was hard to understand what it looks like so putting the [instructional leaders] in the position to see it, work with it, manipulate the data and try it out [was beneficial]. We were struggling. We would think that we can never do this with teams our size and then we got to see the data with another team our size. We saw that they did it so we thought we can do it! The [instructional leaders] were seeing that so then they were able to bring it back and tell the team this is how we're going to do this.

Ms. Thompson, Eagle Elementary principal discussed the benefit of going to other schools within the district to see their implementation approaches,

I also have gone to other schools and see how different schools do things. We took teams of teachers to different schools in the beginning to see what they were doing and how they were doing it. Any time teachers want to learn about something we're try to provide that for them. It’s best when you can go see it.

Ms. Anders, Falcon Elementary principal shares that when she is wanting to implement another aspect of MTSS and trying to make sense of how to operationalize that aspect, she asks her colleagues and supervisors for schools that are already practicing that aspect of MTSS so she can connect with them to see it in action. She also shared how her school was requested by
district to be that support for other schools in seeing how her PLCs were advancing MTSS implementation. By being the example for other schools, it also worked to empower her staff to continue with improving their practices and strengthen their self-efficacy.

Honestly, for us because we were kind of ahead of other schools, that was helpful. So, when (district director) reached out to me because we were a little ahead and said can I come look at one of your teams. They felt very empowered - success breeds success so we were able to say we already have this, we're ready for the next step.

The strategy of seeing it work in other locations outside of the school context adds to the concepts of modeling. Within modeling, leaders rely on the strengths of the members within the school to leverage effective practices that can be shared in the moment. Providing opportunities to see implementation practices in other contexts outside of the school assists in building the capacity of the leaders in an area that they have limited experience so that they can bring that new knowledge back to their teams.

Alignment of district strategies into school processes. Participants shared strategies on how they intentionally aligned district processes, documents, and language to the work of their school. This notion is highlighted in Rorrer et al. (2008), research synthesis in terms of establishing policy coherence. The authors describe policy coherence with two attributes of mediating local policy and aligning resources (Rorrer et al., 2008). In Rorrer et al. (2008) synthesis, the authors cite Honig and Hatch (2004) in describing the process of establishing policy coherence requires a negotiation of district policy demands and the school’s goals and strategies and the use of the district demands to strategically inform and enable school implementation. Ms. Thompson, Eagle Elementary principal discussed the importance of
having the school’s initiatives, goals, and monitoring strategies align with those of the district to assist in communicating that all processes are “working towards the same goals.” She also adds how the context of the school is important to consider to make tweaks within the parameters of the goals in order to meet the needs of the school.

But you do have to tweak them based on your school when it comes to the different areas because again some areas of your school might be out performing or underperforming significantly to the district.

Ms. Thompson elaborates further on alignment with school and district documents:

When we do our [school plans], we do it in the same format so when we hand this out to teachers we do our goals and our [actions] in the same way. So, it’s not a different tool, it’s not something else they have to learn it all fits into each other.

Ms. Torres, Learning Design Coach, Falcon Elementary shares how she works with Ms. Anders on connecting work at the school to the direction of the district:

We worked really hard on it – (Ms. Anders) and I worked really hard to make sure that everything connects, that were doing one of those 3 priorities. So, that it doesn't look as something as extra, so that everyone sees the integration piece and the connection so that it’s still building in the way that district wants it to be and that it’s not just a [Falcon Elementary] thing.

**Differentiated Approach: Willing to try it in different ways.** Using a differentiated approach with teams and teachers was a strategy that both principals shared. This strategy aligns with concepts of sociocultural learning theory in that “various supports or scaffolding help learners shorten the distance from their current reality and deepen their engagement in a particular activity” (Honig, 2008, p.632). Ms. Thompson, Eagle Elementary, states:
You have to be willing to try it different ways. Maybe a conversation isn't the way to do it; maybe using data is the right way to do it. I have some teachers who don't like us to put the data up okay so they get conversation. So, it’s learning how that person responds to information to help them grow.

Ms. Torres, Learning Design Coach, Falcon Elementary comments on the use of differentiation by Ms. Anders:

I know that (Ms. Anders) has said that 100 times but I sit in every grade level, we're not going to go it, if they're not ready. We're not. Where are you, where’s your team. We can talk about it and each team she will do what’s best for the team.

**Differentiation based on readiness: compliance is one step in the right direction.**

Ms. Anders, Falcon Elementary principal:

So, most of them, 90% of them will tell you just tell me what to do and I'll do it. Now I'm okay with that, some leaders have a hard time with that because it's a compliance response. I'm like; compliance is one-step in the right direction. At least you're willing to comply with a request. So, I'm fine with that if that's where you are. At this point I don't feel like I have anybody who’s just doing it for compliance. I do feel I have people who have different levels of value in what we're doing but I don't think I have anyone who’s just complying with it anymore.

The aspect of readiness requires an understanding that teams function at varying levels of implementation as well as ensuring that progress is occurring to support expectations within a differentiated approach. With the monitoring by principal and district staff, decisions regarding readiness levels and types of supports needed for a differentiation that meets the
needs of each team assists in gaining the willingness of teachers to practice implementation activities.

Building a Leadership Team: Selecting and Growing. With Ms. Anders, her principalship began at a school that was already established. She shares her experience with strategies she used to create a leadership team that would assist with MTSS implementation school-wide.

Honestly I would say that I'd love to tell you it's this really great massive plan, I think I just got lucky. I selected the right people, so this will be the beginning of the 6th year (of her principalship). I haven't had to transition anyone out because they're not the right person. I've been able to grow everybody. My motto is I'll take you where you are as long as you're moving in the right direction.

Ms. Anders elaborates further on constantly tending to the leadership team to leverage MTSS school-wide implementation:

I think the powerful piece establishing and developing them was in bringing [instructional leader] group together often. So, it was a minimum of once a month. That teacher leader collaboration is essential. If people aren't doing that they're missing the boat with that too. You'll build islands of that. I don't want spots of excellence. I want excellence everywhere. If you don't - cross collaborate like that that's exactly what’s going to happen. You're going to have one team rocking it out and nobody else is benefiting.

Ms. Little, Kindergarten Teacher, Falcon Elementary discusses strategies that Ms. Anders uses to build leadership capacity:
She wants us to be the experts and then wants talking to our team. So, then our teams are comfortable with us so then as we talk about it they are like, oh it’s not such a crazy thing. You know as [instructional leaders] we go to each other all the time. I’m having trouble with this; my team is struggling with this and we help each other.

Participants at both schools discussed strategies to build leadership capacity with those already on the team and with those that demonstrate characteristics that would benefit the team. The principals in this study shared insight to the importance of building leadership capacity within their team and across the school. The concept of building capacity relates to instructional leadership in that it reflects the principal’s ability and capability to enact initiative implementation (Rorrer et al., 2008). Ms. Thompson, Principal, Eagle Elementary shares her strategies in building leadership capacity with her teachers that demonstrate skills and attributes which would assist with MTSS implementation:

> You sometimes look at those leaders that are you know powerful but quiet, sometimes - it depends on what it is. You try to coach others. So, you're kind of grooming those people on the sidelines while you have leaders already in place because honestly good leaders are going to fly somewhere else because that's what they're meant to do. So, you're constantly looking for who’s going to be that next person that I'm going to start mentoring and grooming to take over that role. You got to build them up.

Ms. Anders, Principal, Falcon Elementary, explains specific areas that she focused on in efforts to building leadership capacity with her team and dealing with conflict and planning:

> We did some training with them on how do you deal with team members that are not engaged or not compliant. Kind of that continuum of personalities within a team. We actually did tiers with the work around that to develop the [instructional leaders]. The
other major piece was we spent a lot of time in step zero. It’s still something that has to be looked at consistently but I would say for 2 years the majority of work was probably around step zero. So, determining the norms was a huge component. That started with things like be on time, the kind of things and today you would see things a little different. Adhere to new commitments; make sure you come prepared with your data. Doing your homework prior to coming. You’ll see much more meat to the norms.

Ms. Anders shares a specific example in working with a teacher on the leadership team to build her leadership capacity:

So, on the side, I would kind of coach her, we would talk about situations and barriers, would you be comfortable sharing a little… let’s try to get that door open.

**Learning through failure.** Ms. Anders highlighted the importance of allowing people to fail in order for implementation to occur. Through her previous experience as an Assistant Principal, she learned the strategy of learning through failure and allowing people time to deal with change. Ms. Anders shares a specific example of the strategy in allowing learning to occur through failure:

I think you just have to understand that there’s learning failure. The piece is allowing them to make mistakes even when you know there’s going to be mistakes. It can be something as simple as shifting resources, using a certain type of assessment, end of last year we working with our 1st grade team and they were writing some common formative assessments and you know our kind of standard language, what do the standards say, what do the standards say. There’s a standard! They had designed a formative that was not standards based right. You know I'm kind of – (Ms. Torres) and
I across the table like we're eye balling each other. What are we going to do with this?
She also, we've just built this understanding sometimes you got to let them make mistakes.

**Implementation Barriers and Strategies**

Throughout the interviews, participants shared issues that cause barriers to implementation and strategies that were used to work through those issues. The issues that were discussed centered around fear, time, lack of resources, and alignment of processes. In addition to those issues, participants shared ways through engaging in hard conversations with those resisting implementation and support from administrators were important strategies that advanced MTSS implementation. In this section, participant voices will be highlighted as it relates to those issues and strategies.

**Fear.** The stories of the participants illuminated different issues that generate the emotional feeling of fear which paralyzes actions or works against practices of implementation. Fear is illuminated through emotional responses in having a lack of knowledge and lack of confidence. Participants described having a conscious and unconscious lack of knowledge and a lack of confidence results in fears of being judged which is reflected as the unwillingness to try something new. Ms. Thompson, Eagle Elementary Principal, describes different causes of fear that she has observed.

Fear and time are the two things that keep people from moving forward. It is. The fear can be lack of confidence, it can be lack of knowledge, it can just be fear of change. It can be just environmental. I have a crisis in my house right now, normally I'm 100% on board, but I just can't right now. Sometimes it’s not. They're people.
**Fear from lack of knowledge.** Ms. Matthews, first grade teacher, Falcon Elementary shares an experience with her PLC team member implementing a new instructional practice that assists with MTSS:

I think another one thing they didn't really want to verbalize was ‘I don't know how to do this’ and ‘I don't feel comfortable doing this’. ‘You're talking to me about PA (instructional practice) and I don't think I truly understand what PA’.

Ms. Little, Kindergarten teacher, Falcon Elementary added on to share:

They weren't quite sure what they were supposed to be doing so they kind of needed (Ms. Torres) and I to be like, no, no, no, it’s okay. You’re on the right track; this is what we're looking for. This is what we want the kids to be able to do. Then I think they were better with it. It came across as no I don't want to do it but the true fear behind it was I'm not sure I know exactly what I'm doing.

Ms. Torres, Learning Design Coach, Falcon Elementary discusses how she goes about working with teachers that lack knowledge of the initiative causing fear:

We can always assume it’s about; I don't want to do it. There’s usually a reason like something has happened or its - I hate to use this again but knowledge is power.

**Fear from lack of confidence.** Participants discussed how issues related to having a lack of confidence caused fear with MTSS practices. Ms. Anders, Falcon Principal, shared how confidence looks differently within various instructional practices. “It’s so interesting, you watch teachers teach and they are in the classroom with the kids they are the most confident person ever right. They, also in a lot of other situations lack confidence.” She further
shared how she uses having a lack of confidence as a strategy to motivate her teachers to overcome the fear by learning more about the initiative.

**Fear of being judged.** Another issue that emerged through discussion was how having a lack of confidence conjures fear of being judged. During the focus group interview at Eagle Elementary, participants discussed a particular school-wide practice that was being implemented and how it generated fear of judgement. Ms. Hughes, first grade teacher shared:

> I mean that was a fear, we were all not sure what our data would look like compared to everyone else so there was some apprehension and all my scores compared to somebody else and the judgement that might go on with that. That was a piece we had to get over. That it wasn't about us as individuals it was about the grade level as a whole and those kids that needed support. That was a hard one.

Ms. Miller, third grade teacher, elaborated how this practice generated fear of judgement and the strategy that was used to reduce those feelings of judgement by creating a sense of safety through anonymity:

> So, those were all things but I will say when they first started sharing data they did ease us into it. There were no names attached to it. It was based on - we're numbered, there’s a number. So, you knew your number but no one else did so you were truly just looking at trends you weren't looking at people and I think that was a good way to ease into because it made you feel like okay we're literally just looking at students and what they look like and not looking at teachers and this teacher performed really well. Yeah the anonymous of anonymity I think was good.

Through the participants' recounts of experiencing fear personally or witnessing others demonstrating fear, several strategies were shared in how they were able to help others push
past the paralyzing effects of fear. In efforts to be explicit with those strategies from the stories shared above, participants described strategies of having their instructional coach present during PLCs, the use of encouraging statements followed by actions of support, initially creating anonymity to teacher and student data, and engaging in difficult conversations to ensure that members of the leadership team are capable in carrying out the tasks that are needed for MTSS implementation.

**Time.** Participants discussed the barrier of time in a couple of ways. One aspect of time as a barrier is in the sense of the time required for processing of information prior to implementation. Ms. Birch, first grade teacher at Falcon Elementary shares, “I think a lot of people need time to process too; you have to give them time then come back to the conversation again after they've had time to process it.” Another aspect of time as a barrier is in the perspective of implementation practices will require additional work time. Ms. Marino at Eagle Elementary shared a strategy that Ms. Thompson used to move past implementation resistance due to teacher perspectives on additional time:

I think she did a great thing in offering to take the load off by saying ‘I will enter the data just give it to me and I will enter it for you so we can analyze it’ because ...

Unfortunately, there’s that particular team has a lot of resistors. Some because of personal reasons, some just other things going on they don't feel like they have the time. It does take time. But I think by her taking that on it opened the door to them. So having a team where she maybe had one or two people who would support her, she got the rest of them on board because the data was there and displayed.

**Lack of resources.** Ms. Thompson, Principal, Eagle Elementary, discusses lack of resources as it relates to having a system-wide database to implement MTSS processes in
PLCs. She shared how she created a template of a database for her school and the levels of implementation across teams.

So, every team had their own system and their own way, the expectation was though that every team would have that. I can honestly say every team did but how effective they were... So, there were some teams really good at it and some that weren't. So, our goal is to have a system this year where we all - and part of that too was it had to be shared.

Most of them did it on google docs which we're trying to move away from so that everyone can have access to it.

Ms. Thompson further shared the intent behind the school creating a template database but the challenges in not having a system-wide database as a resource:

So, the thought behind it was we would all be on the same page and all sharing data.
In reality, if you must really know, every team did their own thing. So, Sandy and I are actually meeting with the district to come up with a common database because we didn't have one.

**Hard Conversations to Get on Same Page.** The principals at both schools discussed the necessity of the strategy of having hard conversations with teachers that may be struggling with MTSS implementation. They share different approaches they use and the specific examples when they had to engage in hard conversations. Ms. Thompson, Eagle Elementary principal:

Sometimes pulling those people in and just saying I feel like we're not on the same page, what’s it going to take? Sometimes we can't get on the same page and we talk about that and its okay to disagree but this is how we're going to do things here.
Sometimes those conversations are hard. I'm not afraid to have hard conversations with people at all. I'll do it respectfully and in private but I'm not afraid to do that with them. If I don't think kids are growing and learning and their best interests are at hand, I'm not afraid to have a conversation with someone. I don't wait to do it. I'll just do it.

Ms. Thompson describes strategies, in addition to having hard conversations, that she uses when teachers are not following through with implementation practices:

I mean we do a variety of things from sitting next to those people in our PLC like moving different places where we sit, to walking into classrooms. I'm just going to say maybe as teacher isn't following a schedule so we're using Eureka and she's using Go Math. They play on Eureka, they do everything, but then you go in that room. So maybe making sure we walk through math and see it so that it’s not something that the PLC told us about, it’s something we saw.

**Alignment of System Processes.** A common trend that was shared from participants at both schools is the barrier of not having system processes aligned. This issue primarily surfaced when discussing the work of student intervention teams versus the instructional practices that occur in the classroom. The student intervention team consist of student service staff members, many of which have never had classroom teaching experience. Participants share experiences and strategies that were used in efforts to reduce this barrier by more closely aligning system processes. Ms. Torres, Learning Design Coach, Falcon Elementary:

(Ms. Anders) had spent so much time explaining to the teachers their voice will be heard, that then when they sat at the table, and they walked away feeling like they were told to do one more thing that they were missing the opportunity to build a relationship. I think that was our goal with the whole trying to do the meetings with the SBIT
(school intervention) team and the grade level team was to build a relationship and an understanding that we're all in it together.

Ms. Torres further shared:

One of the things that (Ms. Anders) did do is she did have a little meeting with a couple people on that team and explained the importance of validating the tools that we're using.

So, they did help with that piece. As a result of us just kind of saying and pushing back a little bit. If that's not what you want them using, then tell us what to use.

This notion of validating tools is a resource issue that was resulting in fragmentation of school system processes. This fragmentation and disjointing of tasks may dilute capacity and reduce resource utility (Malen et al., 2014). Participants at Falcon Elementary discussed the impact of resource fragmentation for the alignment of system processes and how it was a barrier to MTSS implementation. With that recognition, the leaders worked on strategies to move beyond that barrier. Ms. Matthews, First grade teacher, Falcon Elementary,

I feel the confidence with the SBIT like you were mentioning is because we're planning the interventions together. It’s not some random concept you thought up on your own it was developed as a whole team so you feel that you know this is a legitimately intervention for using so don't disqualify it.

Both principals discussed strategies to incorporate their Support Facilitator teachers (ESE) to help create alignment between the school intervention team and classroom teachers.
Ms. Thompson, Principal, Eagle Elementary:

Truly getting our support facilitators on board as the key outreach of admin and student data. Having them look at quality interventions, quality data collection tools, quality documentation. Getting them all on the same page is truly a great strategy.

Ms. Anders, Falcon Elementary principal also shared the strategy of working with their support facilitator teachers to help bridge the gap with the work of the SBIT teams,

I think the other part we worked on really strong this year and at the beginning of last year we worked to have regular SBIT (School-based Intervention team) - The support facilitators have tried to become a little more active in assisting the teacher if they’re going to bring up a student. So, I had recommended that we tag each one of them (support facilitator) to be the point contact for classroom teacher.

**Administrator Support.** Instructional leaders at both schools commented on how the support of their administrators has been an effective strategy for MTSS implementation. Participants interpret administrator support by the principals being visible and present during team meetings, being accessible to listen to issues and provide feedback, and maintaining trusting relationships Ms. Miller, third grade teacher, Eagle Elementary

During our PLC meetings, there’s usually an administrator in there once a week, so it’s nice to have them right there when things come up to answer them, and sometimes she's on their helping us look for common formatives and things like that. She’s very willing to jump in and help us with that kind of thing.

Ms. Thompson, Principal of Eagle Elementary discusses strategies she uses to support her instructional leaders:
I can tell you some conversations that I’ve had with [instructional leaders] if a problem comes up they don’t want you to solve it for them but they want to know what strategies should I take to solve this problem and this is the situation, what would you recommend, help me moving forward. So just helping build their toolbox for facilitating skills and they have awesome facilitators that already come with such a strong bank of skills but really working to support them when situations arise of have you tried this strategy or did you consider this conversation.

Ms. Taylor, Fifth grade teacher, Eagle Elementary:

My team has struggled the most with the whole process. Admin has given me the leeway to have conversations with other PLC's that are going through the process and doing it well and visit and sit in and watch. I think that's been key just to know that when you go to speak to admin that things are going well. Rather than getting in trouble you're going to get supported. I think that's truly the key to the reason of why many PLC's are run well and we are doing better.

Ms. Anders, Principal, Falcon Elementary shares strategies she uses to support her instructional leaders:

We’re so present in PLC’s I can support some of those works of the [instructional leaders] without anyone ever even knowing that I might be aware of the dysfunction. So, if I show up with the PLC they're not freaking out because I'm there almost every time right.

Ms. Anders elaborates further on different support strategies:

They know two things; I'm only going to ask them to do the things, in that case things we have to do. I'm not going to add things in just for the fun of it. If things are listed as optional I'm not making the decision for them, they're going to make the decision as a
team. We will take as much of the work off their plate and put it onto ours so it doesn't impact instructions. They would rest their head knowing that we would try to have minimal impact on them as much as possible.

The barriers of MTSS implementation that were discussed were similar at both schools. These findings indicate that within different school contexts, implementation barriers are a common thread that can be anticipated. Through the experiences of the participants, several strategies were shared in how to attend to those issues that cause barriers to maintain progress towards the goals of the initiative.

Summary

In this chapter, my analysis of the participant’s experiences and perceptions of MTSS implementation was described framed through the research questions. The codes that emerged were mainly similarly between the participants at both schools, however there were a few that emerged within one school. Those data points occurred within question three (participant MTSS knowledge transfer to practice) and question four (participant knowledge of implementation practices). For participant MTSS knowledge transfer to practice, the case study at Falcon Elementary elicited the categories of modeling and embedding into existing practices. The other categories within that question was shared across cases. Within the question focused on participant knowledge of implementation practices, categories that emerged from Falcon Elementary were previewing and learning through failure. All the other categories within the data of this question was shared across case elements.

In the next chapter, I present my discussion framed by implications for a new heuristic model of implementation as well as implications for educational research and practice. There are major components that emerged which are considered in the development of a new heuristic
model: ethic of care, attention to the relationships in schools, purposeful engagement in joint work in a community of practice, and building and sustaining trust. Through discussion of those implications, I engage with the literature to illuminate connections with current research and highlight findings that extend the research to consider added details or further conceptions of the utilized frameworks. The chapter is concluded with a discussion of the implications to further practice in the field of district reform implementation.
CHAPTER SIX:

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The implementation process in reform efforts is the “crucial link between the objectives and outcomes of policies, programs, and practices” (Smylie & Evans, 2006, p.187). Over the past several decades much of the literature on implementation has focused on identifying and understanding factors that explain its success or failure (Datnow, 2006; Honig, 2006; Smylie & Evans, 2006). These explanations focus on a wide spectrum of points from the design of policy to the resistance of those implementing policy in local jurisdictions (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). In more recent years, studies have suggested that district central offices play a considerable role in the implementation of policies aimed at improving teaching and learning as policies come to be mediated through local context, history, and capacity (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig & Copland, 2008). Findings are showing that reform efforts fail to change practice in classrooms without substantial support from the district office (Honig & Copland, 2008). In addition, implementation research has increasingly illuminated that the problem in implementing educational policy lies with the process of teacher learning and school leadership (Coburn & Stein, 2006).

Supported through a growing body of educational leadership research, the influences of principals have large effects on school improvement and student achievement (Bryk et al., 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Sun & Youngs, 2009; Waters,
Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Waters & Kingston, 2005). Furthermore, recent studies have illuminated that the principal cannot enact change alone, that improvement also relies on school leadership teams to advance initiatives (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, & Daly, 2008; Waters et al., 2003). The knowledge of the collective leadership team on purpose and expectations of policy initiatives as well as knowledge of implementation processes and practices is priority to carry out the multifaceted leadership roles necessary for district and school reform (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, and Friedman, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to discover the ways in which principals and their instructional leadership teams identified as successful in implementing a district initiative have come to understand, interpret and mediate the purpose, resources, and knowledge of the initiative. This study investigates transfer of knowledge as it relates to organizational learning, sociocultural learning, and policy implementation. I researched the district’s MTSS initiative process to better understand how school leaders learn through implementation of an initiative as well as the types of supports that have been provided by district departments and personnel. Based on the research on understanding the implementation of policy through learning and how that knowledge is transferred to practice, the following research questions guided this investigation.

**Primary Question:** In what ways do principals and their instructional leaders identified as successful lead the implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) initiative at their schools over the course of two years?

**Sub Questions:**

- What do principals and instructional leaders understand about the district’s expectations for the MTSS initiative? (Purpose)

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In what ways does a principal’s and instructional leaders’ knowledge of MTSS and knowledge of school context impact the utilization of district provided resources at the school site? (Supports)

In what ways does a principal’s and instructional leaders’ knowledge of MTSS initiative influence the knowledge transfer of the initiative in school? (Learning)

In what ways does a principal’s own knowledge of implementation processes impact how the principal sought to strategically implement MTSS in order to change instructional staff practice? (Understanding of Implementation processes)

In Chapter 5, I discussed the findings of the study derived from focus group and individual interviews, memoing, and reflexive journaling of the participants (n=15). I presented the findings in light of each research question with connections to the literature and highlighted similarities and distinctions across cases. Then, I presented findings that related to implementation barriers and used strategies that were similar across cases. Table 5 below illustrates a summary of the themes that emerged categorized by the research questions. The question is represented by the concept in which I was seeking to explore.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings in light of three conceptual frameworks that guided this study. I will provide a synthesis that integrates the findings as well as illuminate patterns that emerged that are not clearly represented within the frameworks. Then, I will share implications for a new heuristic model of implementation, implications for further research, and implications for educational leadership and policy practice.
Table 5

Summary of themes by research question topic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Supports</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Implementation Practices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecting to prior knowledge</td>
<td>Assistance Relationships</td>
<td>PLC Facilitation</td>
<td>Previewing of district initiatives and trainings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecting learning between years of implementation</td>
<td>School-based Human Resources</td>
<td>Modeling</td>
<td>Selection of new staff through hiring strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning through external and internal opportunities</td>
<td>Tools – District and School Created</td>
<td>Monitoring through instructional walkthroughs</td>
<td>Keeping the big picture in mind</td>
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<td>Embed into existing practices</td>
<td>Strategically breaking down into pieces</td>
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<td>Creating comfort: building on previous initiatives</td>
<td>Opportunities to see it work in other places outside of the school</td>
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<td>Seeing student results – creates momentum</td>
<td>Alignment of district strategies into school processes</td>
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<td>Differentiated approach: willingness to try it in different ways</td>
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<td>Differentiation based on readiness: compliance is one step in the right direction</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Building a Leadership Team: Selecting and Growing</td>
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<td>Learning through failure</td>
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Discussion of Findings in Light of Conceptual Frameworks

This study relied on the integration of three frameworks that guided the design and analysis of this study: (a) an integrated conception of district offices as learning organizations (Honig, 2008); (b) a narrative research synthesis of districts as institutional actors in systemic reform (Rorrer et al., 2008); and implementation science active implementation drivers (Fixsen et al, 2005). The frameworks guiding this study combined aspects of systems learning with technical and adaptive features of policy implementation to explore dimensions of implementation that focus on learning; learning about a policy, learning about implementation practices and strategies, and learning about leadership practices and strategies. The perspective of learning was framed through organizational learning and sociocultural learning theories. The frameworks emphasize aspects of implementation that consist of concepts that overlap and concepts that are distinct from each other. Here, I will provide a brief overview of the three frameworks to focus the discussion and implications.

Figure 4. Integrated conception of central offices as learning organizations (Honig, 2008)
In efforts to integrate concepts of sociocultural and organizational learning theories that are relevant in understanding and enhancing district reform processes and practices in teaching and learning efforts, Honig (2008) developed an integrated conception of local district offices as learning organizations. Within this integrated framework, “ideas of sociocultural learning theory and theories of organizational learning from experience under conditions of ambiguity” are emphasized to frame district office activities and participation with initiative implementation (Honig, 2008, p.631). Despite the origin of sociocultural and organizational learning theories deriving from different contexts and purposes outside of public education systems, the evolution of each theory sheds light on particular dimensions of local district office operations fundamental to contemporary policy demands (Fauske & Raybould, 2005; Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008; Saljo, 2010). In particular: “sociocultural learning theory amplifies the importance of central office administrators working with schools to support their teaching and learning improvement efforts; organizational learning theory highlights how central office administrators might use evidence from various experiences, including their school assistance relationships, to inform district operations” (Honig, 2008, p.631). Due to emergence of these theories across organizational contexts, they possess some concepts that overlap and parallel each other. At the same time, they have strands of theory that when isolated have limitations when applying to the work of districts with instructional reform (Honig, 2008).

Through Rorrer, et al.’s (2008) literature synthesis, they developed a theory of systemic reform through the role that districts play as institutional actors. The proposed theory was developed through a research synthesis and the use of processes described by Dublin (1976) and Weick (1995) which focuses on ordering the relationships among elements and activities involved in drawing on prior research (Rorrer et al., 2008). Rorrer et al. positions
the theory with three assumptions: (1) in order to understand the roles of districts that researchers set aside the notion of looking for “one best solution” by abandoning ideas of isolated efforts; (2) recognize that districts have an “indispensable role as institutional actors with educational reform”; and (3) “change at a systems level is nonlinear and complex” (p.336). Within the theory, the authors describe four essential roles that districts serve in reform: (a) providing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and maintaining an equity focus (Rorrer, et al., 2008). Through the authors analysis, each essential role is further defined through prevalent elements that emerged in their findings. In the discussion of this study, those elements will be highlighted in relation to the findings that emerged.

Figure 5. Districts as institutional actors in educational reform (Rorrer et al., 2008)
A concept that is receiving growing attention from scholars and governmental agencies is implementation science, which focuses on two outcomes of reform; implementation and intervention (Blase, Fixsen, Sims, & Ward; 2015). Implementation outcomes focus on changes of professionals and organizational practices and process; intervention refers to the support students receive based on their educational and social needs and influences. Implementation science is based on a stage approach explaining that implementation is a process that occurs over time, and each stage requires specific activities to occur at right times throughout the process.
National Implementation Research Network (2018) suggests that there are 6 key stages in the implementation process consisting of: 1) Exploration and Adoption; 2) Program Installation; 3) Initial Implementation; 4) Full Operation; 5) Innovation; and 6) Sustainability. In addition to the stages of implementation, implementation science elaborates on the processes required to move change within each stage. Those processes are defined as drivers consisting of organization drivers, leadership drivers, and competency drivers. Encompassed within those drivers are the capacity building processes and strategies that were illuminated throughout the review of literature.

The concepts that implementation science addresses are the “how” of implementation and situates it within a change process in efforts to conceptualize the complexity of educational settings to engage in strategies that work to sustain reform (NIRN, 2018). It seeks to advance takes capacity-building strategies by framing capacity building as a continuum throughout the implementation change process. Implementation Science is also interested in building structures to assess the effect of the continuum of strategies. The iterative cycles of implementation appear most successful when a prolonged attention to the goals of the initiative is maintained with clear measures of success criteria that are continually assessed and reflected on to adapt and adjust to the needs of the system (Blase, et al., 2015). This purposeful attention requires using evidence-based and evidence-informed implementation strategies to improve educators’ knowledge and confidence, to create hospitable system environments for new ways of work, and to engage in a focused leadership approach for the diverse challenges that occur through any change process (Blase, et al., 2015; NIRN, 2018).
Integrating the frameworks

As noted earlier, research on policy implementation has been shifting focus from a technical rational perspective to a collective learning and participation approach. This shift is partly due to the types of reforms and policies that have been mandated to address purported educational systems poor outcomes. In order to address those reforms, school districts are being called to reorganize into learning organizations and systems (Bryk, et al., 2016; Honig, 2008). The linking of the relationships with individual and systems learning and improvement efforts has been overlooked in both policy and research (McLaughlin, 2006). In order to gain deeper understanding of the tacit and nuanced aspects with implementation, this study’s research questions focus on elements involved with implementation aimed to siphon specific features out of a complex process. Those elements are understanding the purpose, utilization of resources, learning of the initiative, and learning how to implement change. Similar to the research questions, the three frames of this study highlight aspects of implementation that encompass learning processes (purpose and learning), system structural design and communication flow (utilization of resources), technical and adaptive competencies in leading and facilitating implementation (implement change). The intention of the utilization of these frameworks for this study is to discover how the integration of these frameworks can better illuminate the important aspects of implementation through an inclusive, comprehensive approach that draws on technical, adaptive, learning, and humanistic dimensions to implementation through systems learning and improvement perspective.

New conceptions for a heuristic guide to district reform

More recently, there is an emphasis on considering ways to focus on system learning in implementation studies which examines the relationships of the enacting systems and inter-
organizational networks and how they learn from experience, acquire and use new knowledge, and adapt and sustain positive outcomes in addition to the structures and processes involved in technical aspects of implementation (McLaughlin, 2006). This type of research explores broader societal influences on education policy and practice which contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexity of policy implementation (McLaughlin, 2006).

This case study highlighted practices and strategies that were successful with implementation. Some of these practices merged across the frameworks, which suggests that these actions are predominant and necessary for reform efforts. Policy implementation is a highly complex phenomenon. By identifying the major aspects that exist across frameworks, can advance research through a more narrowed focus of what matters most in terms of local district reform efforts. An example of a cross-cutting aspect is at both schools, participants discussed strategies that attend to concept of reorientation that through Rorrer et al. (2008) narrative synthesis defines as refining “organizational structures and processes and alter district culture to align with their educational reform goals” (p. 318). This concept is also illustrated in Honig (2008) and National Implementation Research Network (2018) frameworks. Within the combination of these frameworks, reorientation attends to the processes and structures of the organization’s ways of work, the norms, beliefs, and value systems; and the ways in which those attributes become embedded and encoded in the collective memory of the organization.

Another concept, joint work, spanned across all frameworks in terms of collective intelligence, collective participation, social engagement, and facilitative administration. The notion of joint work within policy implementation acknowledges response to policy through interactions with organizational members forged through mutual engagement, sharing expertise, and co-constructing meaning through negotiations of sense-making (Coburn & Stein,
The overlap of this concept, despite the differing terms, is another example of a possible prioritized feature that can shape future re-conceptions of policy implementation frameworks to guide research and practice.

The discussion of the findings highlight aspects of district educational reform that are not explicitly reflected within the frameworks utilized in this study. Those overarching concepts included enactment of leadership driven by an ethics of care where passion and high expectations permeates to the collective community; highly collaborative professional relationships, attending to mutually agreed upon norms and reciprocal responsibility structures and behaviors; engagement in joint work through learning in communities of practice that occurs collectively, though highly collaborative networks, and designed in a gradual, ongoing process; and building and sustaining a culture of trust. The table below outlines the components to newly conceptualized heuristic model for understanding district reform implementation.

In addition to those concepts, the underlying notion of the overemphasis of the technical aspects of implementation has demonstrated a need to attend to the adaptive aspects involved with implementation. With attention to the learning of implementation, both the policy and practices needed to implement, as well as the strategies in which leaders can tend to teams and individuals in moving towards the intention of the policy are important elements to be considered for district efforts with educational reform. The following sections discuss those findings in relation to the literature with particular concepts highlighted that could be utilized in reimagining a new heuristic model for understanding the roles, responsibilities, and practices for districts engaged in educational reform.
Table 6

Newly conceptualized components of a heuristic model to district reform

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<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Supports</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocating for and ethic of care through moral purpose</td>
<td>Attention to the relationships in schools</td>
<td>Purposeful development of joint work in a community of practice</td>
<td>Building and Sustaining Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Passion</td>
<td>• Reciprocal Responsibility</td>
<td>• Collective Experience</td>
<td>• Transparency and Openness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High Expectations</td>
<td>• Mutually agreed upon norms</td>
<td>• Collaboration</td>
<td>• Trusting Relationships</td>
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**Ethic of Care through moral purpose.** “The bottom line is that we just have to advocate for kids, that’s our job. Our job is to educate kids and to show years’ worth of growth so we have to make sure that everyone truly believes that inside and out.” That statement was shared by Ms. Thompson when asked what are the most important attributes of a leader. Maintaining an ethic of care focused agenda through a deep-seated moral purpose surfaced like a mantra throughout all the interviews with school-based and district-based participants. This ethic of care focuses on the demands of relationships among persons, from a standpoint of absolute regard (Starratt, 2009). An ethic of care reaches beyond concerns with procedures and processes, rather it focuses on creating a culture of respect and caring between and among all those involved with the school (Starratt, 2009). This ethic of care is driven by an individuals’ moral purpose. Each individuals’ moral purpose becomes activated in different ways (Fullan, 2010). Some people have this ethic innately from the beginning of their careers, some generate it
through personal experiences, and others slowly cultivate it through ongoing experiences where
others have exposed inequities over time that bring about awareness and transparencies of how
those inequities persist. This act of bringing awareness of inequity, by calling attention to
inequities, persevering to counteract those inequities, and motivating others to engage together
in confronting the conditions that cause those inequities are characteristics of advocacy
leadership (Anderson, 2009). The concept of advocacy leadership was prevalent in both school
cases and present in all participants’ voices in some particular aspect. Those aspects associated
with advocacy leadership that surfaced in participants’ stories include passion and high
expectations. Advocacy leadership focuses on transcending the current thought of schooling to
empower others to engage in a caring culture of open leadership in order to upset the status
quo to challenge inequities (Anderson, 2009). The stories and perceptions of the participants
overwhelming articulated facets of equity focused agendas through enactments of advocacy
leadership in both their professional and personal experiences and contribute those beliefs in
being the driving purpose for their agency in public education. Due to the intensity of emotion
that was conveyed related to an ethic of care driven by a moral purpose, this section will draw
more so on the voices of the participants.

**Passion from an ethic of care—This is just very personal.** I think that some of that
is just very personal. I have a child that is ESE and a struggler and I see the importance
for him to have these small groups and these interventions. So, I was very passionate
about making sure the kids that we have get those same interventions and those same
small groups. Then being the ESE teacher I just want to make sure kids are getting
what they need.
Ms. Taylor, an instructional leader at Eagle Elementary, shared her story where her passion of ensuring that all students receive the supports they need derived. Similarly, to all the participants, this passion to advocate for students is a personal story that is different for each individual. Regardless of how the passion evolved, the dominance of this emotion through the enactment of their actions is a compelling force that resonates within all the participants of this study.

Both principals, in all of their interviews, conveyed passion for their work and advocacy for their students. They both discussed how they believe it was their duty to bring awareness are the importance of particular ways of work that provide the means to ensure that all students receive what they need in order to be successful. Ms. Anders discussed her strong belief in the work of PLCs and that through that process, when facilitated with the intention of its design, can be the vehicle of MTSS implementation. When asked about her focus in PLCs in terms of student data, Ms. Thompson’s passion for providing all students with what they need exuded.

**High Expectations.** Through the voices of the principals, a resolute to genuinely believe an unwavering in maintaining high expectations for all students and all staff resounded in their vision of what the purpose of their role is to be. Understanding that mediocre education will not suffice or be acceptable, both principals shared ways that they have communicated the necessity in maintaining high expectation for all. Ms. Thompson shared how she begins this conversation every year during planning week before the school year begins.

That’s a conversation that we in pre-planning we had a lot of that, do not lower your expectations. If you... you put the expectation here, you're decided that's as far as the students are going to go. Don’t make that decision for them. You put it here and if they
rise to it great, if they don't they may be at least they will get closer than if you already decided for them. I think the importance of allowing all students the access to rigor, that it doesn't mean this student gets easier instruction it means that we are providing extra layers of the same rigorous expectations to help all students.

Ms. Anders elaborates on the inequities of high expectations on the school system, focusing on what is expected of the adults and the accountability structures that persist this notion of mediocrity. Maintaining high expectations on a daily basis is one dimension of these leaders’ ethic of care in striving for equity within their schools and across systems. Multiple examples of actions and strategies these principals use to communicate this advocacy was echoed in all of the instructional leaders’ voices. Statements included, “She is all about what’s best for kids”, “she will never expect something of us that she doesn’t believe is right for kids”, and “she pushes us to think differently about our work and how we look at our data”.

**Advocating for an ethic of care driven from a moral purpose.** As stated in the beginning of this section, the resound of these principals’ ethic of care driven from a moral purpose in their work was omnipresent in every interview. When I asked the Assistant Superintendent his reason for selecting these principals to be a part of this study, his descriptions of these principals emanated ethic of care through advocacy leadership with terms such as, “passionate”, “connected to the people”, “student achievement focused”, “goal oriented”, “empowering”, “excellent communicators”, “committed to the belief”, “they get excited about the work”, “they support people to become better teachers”, and “they are inspirational leaders”.

This particular theme is presented slightly different from the other themes due to the inherently personal and emotional nature in which it originates. Reviewing the literature of
organizational learning, sociocultural learning, and implementation research, the notion of moral purpose in terms of district reform is has not been highlighted until more recently and even then not discussed in the way in which I discuss in this study (Rorrer et al., 2008). Due to the prevalence of this theme in all participants’ voice, this notion of ethic of care and how to look for and cultivate in others will be further discussed in the subsequent implications section. However, before we transition, I must share this final quote from Ms. Thompson sharing what she believes is her duty in advocating for the belief and actions that all students can learn.

You have teachers who say they truly believe all kids can learn but then you find you have teachers who don’t really believe that. They believe an average kid can learn, but there are people in the school system who truly believe not every kid can learn. So, I'm not afraid to move a kid to a different teacher. If I see it’s not a good fit I move them. I don't want to try to hurt the teachers’ self-esteem but on the same token we're here for kids and if the kids are not learning and growing in your room then it’s my job. When parents drop off their kids, that's what they expect of me. It’s my job to make sure that every kid is learning.

**Attention to the nature of relationships in schools**

District reform is a complex, multilevel system of relationships that exist not only among individuals within schools but also between schools, central offices, external change agents, policy-making bodies, and other entities (Malen et al., 2015; McLaughlin, 2006; Smylie & Evans, 2006). The recollected perceptions of the participants echoed sentiments of the importance of relationships through feelings of a “family atmosphere”, “genuine care for others”, and “honestly wanting to know others’ thoughts”. These feelings derived from actions
such as “walking by with a smiling face”, “asking where we currently are in the process and starting with us there”, “not making us feel that we are doing this wrong”, “asking my thoughts”, and “spending a lot of time on defining how we work together collaboratively”. Those accounts pertained to stories of relationships within the schools and between district staff. The actions described by the participants that lead to trust through relationships are the same regardless of professional position. With a focus on central office and school relationships, Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) investigated those linkages and found that the research on trusting relationships was essential for successful reform (Bryk et al., Datnow, 2006; Smylie & Evans, 2006). They posited that relational linkages between the district office and schools and within school is foundational for “enhancing commitment and professional accountability, ensuring a coherent instructional focus, and promoting organizational learning in the process of change” (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010, p.765). The participants at both schools emphasized the relationships and accessibility with knowledgeable district staff in building understanding of MTSS that lead to changes in practice.

The participants shared multiple structures that fostered networking within and across teams, schools, and district staff which lead to positive, professional relationships reducing barriers of fear and judgement. The structures consisted of different types of teams, such as PLCs, leadership teams, and committee teams; as well as district teams that would be tagged to specific schools as resources to continue to build MTSS knowledge and practice through assistance relationships. The continual and deliberate engagement in these teams through regularly and frequently scheduled meeting times; administrator support and reflection on what is working and what needs improvement was the norm. With on-going external, district, and school-based professional learning followed by debrief meetings and/or informal discussions;
and demonstrations of reliability by following through with what was agreed upon nourished the development of positive, constructive relationships as perceived by my analysis of the participants’ accounts.

**Reciprocal responsibility through relationships and perceived notions of a collective.** Contributing to the building and sustaining trust, participants recollected different instances where they described the people that led to their learning and a change of their practice as having this sense of responsibility for the work and the outcomes of students. Several participants noted exposure to national external experts benefited in their knowledge of MTSS which lead to changes in practice. The expertise of those individuals created a sense of collectiveness of their work which influenced perceived notions of trust that the work of the MTSS is what is necessary for positive student outcomes. In regard to the impact of district staff, participants attributed their openness to receive the support of district specialists through their perceptions of expertise of particular MTSS practices as well as the conveyed sense of responsibility to the work. Through the assistance of key district staff, both principals and instructional leaders developed professional networks with each other and across schools. These networks lead to initiative implementation progress with opportunities to develop connections and communities with others who share similar goals, promote the co-construction of meaning, and boost collective capacity for reform (Wohlestetter et al., 2003). In additions, these networks open spaces for reciprocal responsibility of people between schools and across the system. The findings of this study accompanied by other studies of district reform add to the concepts of social capital in that districts strategizing on how to leverage social capital and district assistance relationships for policy implementation need to consider various methods in generating social interactions such as
creating the conditions for professional dialogue to be more conducive for learning the intentions and applications of the reform initiative (Honig, 2008; Wohlestetter et al., 2003).

These types of interactions are supported through Honig’s (2008) work on district reform efforts through assistance relationships. She frames assistance relationships “in which participants more expert at particular practices model those practices and create valued identity structures, social opportunities, and tools that reinforce those models for more novice participants” (Honig, 2008, p.634). Reciprocal responsibility driven from perceptions of a collective reduces implementation barriers through engagement of joint work and demonstrations on what effective practices should look like and the results they can produce. Collective responsibility is a major focus to the work and practices of MTSS (Buffman et al., 2018). For the purposes of this study, reciprocal responsibility attends to collective responsibility and emphasizes the nature of relationships in working together with the same purpose which contributes to feelings of trust that promote continued engagement with MTSS practices.

Accompanying notions of collective through external and district relationships, participants at both schools emphasized the importance of having people at their school, other teachers and coaches that are able to provide support through coaching and modeling MTSS practices. The ability to demonstrate the initiative through modeling creates a reputation of those individuals as experts which leads to feelings of trust through reciprocal responsibility in that everyone is involved in building each other’s capacity to improve student results. Research on district reform illustrates critical aspects of change through having individuals at the school able to create powerful images of teaching and learning, engage other teachers as active learners, and challenge teachers intellectually (Gallucci, 2008). The efforts of the
principal to provide time and space as well as supporting the agency of instructional leaders while ensuring that their roles do not carry administrative or evaluative functions is essential. School leaders demonstrate supportive behavior through a consistent and authentic manner conveying a sense of safety and support for teachers working towards MTSS implementation.

**Mutually agreed upon norms for the use of data.** Another element with attention to the relationships in schools, was the enactment of mutually agreed upon norms for the use of data as a tool. Every participant spoke to this element in terms of tools or an instrument to guide decision-making and finding evidence of learning. Data as a tool to capture, analyze, and make decisions as they were implementing MTSS in their schools was an essential ongoing practice.

Starting and ending decision making conversations with their data became a mutually agreed upon norm in these schools. A challenge echoed by all the participants was incorporating the use of data in all processes, practices, and discussions as the way of work for MTSS implementation; as data is the central component in this system. In reorienting a system to engage in particular practices, there must be a coordinated effort to align practices with expectations in a way that is concrete and simple (Knapp, 2008; Rorrer et al., 2008). Both principals discussed developing tools to capture essential data points that push forward the pace and progress of implementation and building mutually agreed upon norms to support the tool use. This practice is illustrated in the constructs of organizational learning in terms of reification and tools (Knapp, 2008).

Reifying refers to the idea of making abstract concepts concrete through tools constructed by the participants of an organization (Knapp, 2008; Honig, 2008). Reification is an iterative process that engages participants in refining and aligning the tools with the goals
and expectations of the initiative (Knapp, 2008; Rorrer et al., 2008). Sociocultural theorists describe tools as conceptual in that they frame how people think about a particular concept, and as practical in that they provide specific examples of practices (Honig, 2008). The tools described within this theme serve as practical tools in that they define specific actions and focus attention on explicit data points.

**Purposeful development of joint work in a community of practice.** A construct of sociocultural learning theory is communities of practice and joint work which is defined as “a context for learning is communities of practice, collectives in which members share joint work, and have developed a common language for approaching the work” (Knapp, 2008, p.). Within organizational learning theory, there is emphasis collective participation in a community of practice for learning to occur that leads to changes in the collective intelligence of a community and changes to the behavior of the organization (Knapp, 2008). In my analysis of participants’ interviews, the emergence of a clear set of approaches and methods to develop and engage in joint work within a community of practice in order to learn how to implement a school based MTSS system became apparent. The participants’ recollections on their learning process included phrases; such as, “I learned from that experience”, “we’re talking about instruction together”, “we’re in this together and we will figure it out”, “it was that conversation with people”, “we will come back and talk about it so it’s like a development together”, “getting ideas from each other”, “through my personal work and research”, and “discussion is the most effective learning”. My perception of the findings here can be summarized in four ways of purposeful engagement of joint work in a community of practice for learning of and implementing an initiative; (a) learning through individual and collective experience, (b) learning through collaboration, (c) learning through
gradual transition process (from newly constructed knowledge through practice and application), and (d) understanding context of a collective intelligence.

**Though Individual and Collective Experience – “we will just figure it out together”**. The recollection of participants of learning through experience was expressed through recounts of individual and collective processes. Both principals described learning through previous experiences from serving in the role as assistant principal. They shared instances where they made leadership decisions that did not go well and how those experiences shaped their leadership knowledge through failed experiences. Ms. Anders described an experience she had as an assistant principal with attempting to implement PLCs and how she overlooked the critical processes and strategies to gain buy-in. She stated, “We're going to talk about instruction together and we did not have the buy in. People were truly hostile about it. They have since recovered from my mistake.” Within the implementation science framework, through Ms. Ander’s description of that experience, she was more focused on the technical leadership driver without equal attention to the adaptive aspect which tends to motivational aspects related to implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005). Through the reflection of her failed experience, learning occurred. She added, “If you are not failing, you are not growing.” The participants described a variety of experiences that centered on processes of individual sense-making which informed the assimilation of new experiences and information through their existing knowledge structures (Spillane et al., 2006). From this perspective, MTSS implementation depends on individuals’ repertoire of existing knowledge and experience (Spillane et al., 2006).
Participants shared perceptions of collective learning through experiences was a positive influence to MTSS implementation. Stories of teams attending targeted district-based professional development opportunities and bringing the new learning back to their school teams were frequent amongst the participants. These learning experiences spanned from attending professional development with instructional leader networks from other schools, attending with instructional leaders from the same school, and bringing those learning experiences back to their school-based teams. Participants perceived those experiences as having a positive influence in working collectively towards MTSS implementation through sentiments “it makes us feel that we are in this together”, “we will just figure it out together”, and “we were building knowledge every time we left a monthly meeting”. Reflecting with the implementation science framework, the district level trainings and use of national and local university experts provided the means for the developing of competencies of selected school based leaders to take their learning to infuse back within the context of their schools (Fixsen et al., 2005). The action of selecting the staff to attend was noted as strategic by the principals with their decisions guided by the attitudes towards MTSS, prior knowledge, and the ability to see a new role for themselves in serving the needs of the school and their classroom.

The perceptions of the participants of collectively learning through experience is positioned within the perspective of sociocultural learning theory. Within this viewpoint, knowledge is constructed through the experiences of an individual’s engagement with others and various artifacts or tools and learning occurs through the acceptance of abilities and practices within a community (Honig, 2008; Spillane, 2002; Spillane et al., 2006). Some scholars have emphasized that “joint work” grounds those engagements and that they unfold in a community of others, or a “community of practice” (Honig, 2008; Wenger, 1998). This
frame of reference was articulated by the participants in terms of taking those experiences and engaging in collaborative, generative discussions as another means of sense making.

**Through Collaborative Learning – a community of practice.** Through engagement of collective experiences, participants shared that the influence of collaboration with district staff, administrators, and peer colleagues provided opportunities for negotiation and sense-making was significant for them with MTSS implementation. Both organizational learning theorists and sociocultural learning theorists posit that sense-making is a dialogue-rich social process that is contingent on the negotiation of individuals’ prior knowledge into newly constructed knowledge (Honig, 2008). Both principals shared accounts on collaborative discussions with district staff and other principals as important activities in developing their understanding of MTSS and implementation. Ms. Anders stated, “Usually when I hear about something or I have a need to understand something better, I try to reach out to people who are experts in those areas to meet with them so I can understand it deeper.” She further elaborated on conversations with the MTSS specialists has greatly helped her in problem solving implementation issues and building her understanding of MTSS processes. Ms. Thompson discussed the value of discussions with other principals through processing MTSS implementation. She stated that there is not enough time creating to allow collaboration amongst principals and how that is a critical factor in the learning process. The lack of opportunities for educators to interact and develop shared understandings is a big obstacle with organizational learning in districts and schools (Fauske, 2005). Implementation research illuminates that building capacity for district reform requires coordination and aligning of structures that allow time and space for professional collaboration amongst various types of networks (Rorrer et al., 2008; Spillane et al., 2002). Both principals’ recollections converged
on how they valued the time in their principal PLCs and how the discussions during those times have benefited the work at their schools. Those actions are supported by sociocultural learning theorists in which it is emphasized “that negotiation involves individuals coming to adopt the actions of people whom they view as successful” (Honig, 2008, p.649).

The theme learning through collaboration was a prevalent concept throughout all participants’ recounts of their learning and implementing processes. Ms. Matthews shared, “I’ve honestly really enjoyed the collaboration the most; getting ideas from each other and seeing what works well for other people so that I can try it in my classroom”. Ms. Marino elaborated on how a major change in her beliefs about teaching changed through discussion. She shared, “It was through that collaborative conversation of ‘how do you think they will ever get caught up if they’re not working on targeted interventions’ that changed my entire understanding of MTSS.” Ms. Romano’s reflection emphasized how her learning and the learning of her fellow instructional leaders evolved through monthly collaborative meetings which provided opportunities to engage in discussions centered on problems of practice and the sharing of strategies. Organizational learning and sociocultural learning theorists draw attention to the act of generative conversations leads to individuals grappling of prior knowledge, identities, and other meaning structures to develop new understandings for the collective (Honig, 2008; Spillane 2006). The process of change requires rethinking of traditional individual practices by taking action in a community of practice with professionals working together to adapt their practice (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Elmore, 2004; Hannay & Earl, 2012). Collaborative interactions help people define and build up their own self-concepts, which results in reducing anxiety and fear regarding change (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002).
Through Gradual Transition Process within communities. Consistent among the participants was the notion of gradual actions in building knowledge, processing of that knowledge, and applying aspects of that knowledge to practice as essential in the implementation of MTSS. In this gradual process, participants shared the importance of how knowing the reality of the current knowledge base and skills of the collective group to use as the starting point assists with pushing through barriers of fear and feelings of being overwhelmed. Ms. Thompson shared strategies in working with her teacher teams through a differentiated approach based on the knowledge and skillset of the team. She described how she explains to every team that “we will work with you with where you are at in understanding MTSS.” Ms. Thompson elaborated by allowing extra time for some of her teams to process new learning assisted in their willingness to come back together in efforts to gradually implement aspects of that learning into practice.

Implementation research highlights the gradual process of knowledge transfer to practice and emphasizes that it requires leadership to recreate a complex, ambiguous set of routines in new settings by gradually honing on the ability of its members to process meaning through experience and repetition (Fixsen et al., 2005). The iterative cycles of implementation appear most successful when a prolonged attention to the goals of the initiative is maintained with clear measures of success criteria that are continually assessed and reflected on to adapt and adjust to the needs of the system (Blase et al., 2015). This gradual, iterative and prolonged attention to professional learning assists in reorienting the normative ways of work which moves past a managerial, compliance approach to implementation to an adaptive and socially accepted beliefs of professional practice (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Fixsen et al., 2005; Honig, 2008; Rorrer et al., 2008).
Sociocultural learning theorists suggest the shifting from management approaches to learning systems requires the participation of people who are fully engaged in the process of creating, refining, communicating, and using knowledge in communities (Wenger, 1998; Coburn & Stein, 2006). Within this perspective, learning is defined “as the ways in which individuals and communities gradually transform their practice through the ongoing negotiation of meaning” (Knapp, 2008, p.527). The instructional leaders at both schools expressed how they observed the intentional strategies of their principals in prioritizing essential components of MTSS to leverage gradual learning coupled with the act of embedding that learning into existing practices resulted in sustained changes of professional practice. By embedding into existing practices, teachers were able to assimilate to the technical aspects of MTSS within the routine practices that they were accustomed.

**Understanding context of a collective intelligence.** Sociocultural theorists posit, “that the physical and social contexts in which an activity takes place are an integral part of the activity, and that the activity is an integral part of the learning that takes place within it” (Putnam & Borko, 2000). This suggests that we should think of organizational learning in terms of the “organizational environments within which individuals think and act (Argyris & Schon, 1996, p.7). Participants at both schools discussed how they were able to understand how their established beliefs of teaching and learning related to the MTSS initiative through ways of understanding the intent of the goals and connecting their way of work at their schools with the actions of the initiative’s goals. At both schools, the instructional leaders noted strategies that they observed from their principals that helped to make those ongoing connections of their practice to the goals of the initiative. Some of the comments included; “she always brought it back to the big picture in why we are doing this”, “the questions she
asked helped make us think of how what we are doing is already connected to MTSS”, and “she had already built in the structures for us to be able to do this work so it’s already a part of our work”. Establishing structures and common ways of work for different groups within the school is an important part of sense making in that teachers within different groups often make different sense of the same messages (Spillane et al., 2002). In addition, both principals explained multiple times their intentional actions and reflections to maintain a vision of the “big picture” and ways that they would ground every conversation in the goals of the initiative. Considering these different contexts within the school while ensuring consistent messaging and connecting all work back to the goals of the initiative open spaces of negotiation by which individuals interact with and deepen their participation with and through others in that contextualized setting (Honig, 2008). Within this contextualized participation, a collective intelligence is developed where shared meanings of the initiative emerge that can alter subsequent patterns of actions that align to the goals of the initiative (Knapp, 2008). This process of attending to active participation in the work and the intentional flow of information intertwines constructs form organizational and sociocultural learning theories (Knapp, 2008).

**Building and Sustaining Trust**

An overarching theme that was present in every participant’s voice was the necessity of building and sustaining a culture of trust. Some research positions culture through the lens of establishing clear goals, defining norms, expectations, and values of collaboration which promotes mutual adaptation and reciprocal accountability as means of reorienting the culture (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Knapp, 2008). Implementation scholars posit that local human and social capital is pivotal in the implementation processes and quality of organizational work resulting from highly collaborative professional relationships (Bryk et al., 2010; Marsh, Stunk,
& Bush, 2013). Supporting this logic, social capital theorists suggest that to engage in effective collaboration, trust, communication, and mutually agreed upon norms are essential for organizational improvement (Smylie & Evans, 2006). The practice of cultivating social capital through inclusive stakeholder participation in meaning-making and decision making is critical to the vitality of implementation efforts (Hannay & Earl, 2012). Through my analysis of participant interviews, I found that their culture of trust was established and sustained through concepts discussed in other pillars that relate to notions of mutually agreed upon norms, highly collaborative professional relationships, and reciprocal accountability. The overlapping presence of trust within the other pillars of the newly conceptualized framework indicates the influence that trust has with implementation. In addition to those overlaps, the intentional behaviors of transparency and openness within and between the relationships of district and school teams with reliability of messaging were the most significant contributing factors in building and sustaining a culture of trust which is a crucial bedrock for educational reform.

**Transparency/Openness.** There was an emergence of similar patterns among participants’ experiences and perceptions of the transparent communication flow, feelings of openness with administration, inclusive engagement with others, and acts of vulnerability which cultivated feelings of trust. A barrier to implementation discussed in Chapter 5 was fear of judgment. Participants discussed the importance of transparency through open communication as a strategy to reduce those feelings of judgment or not knowing what was expected. Other aspects resulting from transparent and open communication were acts of inclusiveness. Participants relayed this sense of inclusiveness through phrases such as; “always involved”, “kept in the know”, “open to things I want to try”, “open door policy”, “always willing to listen”, and “honestly wants to know what’s going on”. Those particular
assertions were derived from the instructional leaders in reference to their principals. This notion of inclusiveness also involves participant perceptions of being valued members in the work being done or planning to be done. Sociocultural theorists “argue that individuals tend to increase their engagement in various activities when they see themselves as valued participants” which can lead to increased and strengthen engagement (Honig, 2008, p.636).

Inclusive participation not only values the members who are actively engaged in the work but also values and legitimizes the “peripheral participation” of members that are part of the school context and not currently actively engaged (Honig, 2008). For those teachers, they can be in different stages of the learning process where they may not feel comfortable or confident with active engagement. The concept of transparency and openness promotes the development of active engagement through inclusive practices that lead to increased capacity and learning together. With regard to the behaviors of transparency and openness noted by the participants, previous research illustrates that to build the capacity of others through an implementation process that it requires the active engagement and sensitivity to the perspective of others through open lines of communication (Rorrer et al., 2008).

**Trusting relationships.** Researchers suggest that actors within an organization must be personally and professionally motivated to support policy (McLaughlin, 2006). This entails collective participation throughout the process allowing for opportunities of co-construction of the meaning and purpose of an initiative. The strategic design of structures and processes that promote co-construction of meaning and application of reform through both top-down and bottom-up approaches, trusting relationships are more easily garnered and sustained (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003; Datnow, 2006).
Summary of newly conceptualized heuristic model. In light of the three frames, the discussion of the findings from this study lead me to suggest that a set of school-context sensitive guideposts need to be considered when implementing major district-led policy reform. The four I found in this study are: an ethic of care, attention to the nature of relationships in schools, purposeful development of joint work in a community of practice, and building and sustaining trust. The discussion of findings challenge the dominant rational-technical narrative around MTSS district-level reform, as I draw on knowledge of learning organizations, institutional norms, and implementation science, to illustrate how this reform represents co-constructed and mutually adaptive set of processes. It is recommended that further research consider the integration of these frameworks in terms of mergers, disconnects, and illuminations to discover ways in which educational policy implementation and leadership can advance our educational systems.

Implications for Educational Leadership Research

In addition to considerations of a reimagined heuristic model to guide and study district reform, other areas that would benefit from further research are the ways in which communities of practice and joint work can be established for learning of and implementation of policy as well as exploring the development and impact of teacher leadership.

Communities of practice and joint work. Over the past couple of decades, implementation research has suggested that developing strong professional networks and communities with the focus on sharing ideas and pedagogy, planning and analyzing student evidence, and building strong, positive connections is a reform strategy that can foster positive changes in instructional practice, (Coburn & Russell, 2008; McLaughlin, 2006; Shulman, 1987; Spillane, 2002). In response to reform, traditional practices of working in isolation has
proven ineffective due to the variance of teachers’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions and interpretation discrepancies of the reform by all stakeholders. The process of change requires rethinking of traditional individual practices by taking action in a community of practice with professionals engaged in joint work to adapt their practice (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Elmore, 2004; Hannay & Earl, 2012). Collaborative interactions help people define and build up their own self-concepts, which results in reducing anxiety and fear regarding change (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). When communities of practice are purposefully constructed with shared norms and practices, they become powerful vehicles to influence both teacher and student learning which then results in the enactment and sustainment of the reform (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

Improvement science emphasizes the use of networked communities to accelerate learning which the term as networked improvement communities (NIC) (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahiew, 2016). NIC is described by four essential characteristics: (a) focused on a well specified common aim; (b) guided by a deep understanding of the problem; (c) disciplined by the methods of improvement research to develop, test, and refine interventions; and (d) organized to accelerate the diffusion of interventions (Bryk et al., 2016). Through their work, they accentuate the influence of network communities of practice through specific protocols and guidelines for collaborative work aimed with clear goals to improve practice measured by agreed upon metrics and evidence (Bryk et al, 2016). The comprehensive aspects of improvement science incorporate several findings that emerged in this study, particularly those within a technical aspect, however, the concepts of trust, mutual adaptation, and nature of relationships is not explicit within the described characteristics of network communities. Combined with recent research on networked or communities of practice and the findings of
the study, I recommend further research in understanding the explicit and tacit aspects of communities of practice in hopes to discover ways in which districts can better focus their supports and efforts for district reform.

**Teacher leadership.** Another area to consider further research is exploring aspects of teacher leadership. The principals in this study shared strategies in building leadership capacity, characteristics they look for in teacher leaders, and considerations in selecting teachers for their leadership teams. This concept of selection is highlighted in the Active Implementation Drivers framework within the dimension of competency driver (Fixsen, et al., 2005). Recent studies have illuminated that the principal cannot enact change alone, that improvement also relies on school leadership teams to advance initiatives (Chrispeels, et al., 2008; Waters et al., 2003). The knowledge of the collective leadership team on purpose and expectations of policy initiatives as well as knowledge of implementation processes and practices is priority to carry out the multifaceted leadership roles necessary for district and school reform (Chrispeels, et al., 2008; Fixsen, et al., 2005). Through the findings of this study, the instructional leaders were instrumental in moving MTSS into school and classroom practice. In addition, the principals share the importance and intention they placed on the selection, training, and support of those leaders. With the findings of this study along with recent research on teacher leadership with policy implementation, it is recommended to continue explore the dynamics and influence of teacher leadership with school improvement initiatives.

**Implications for Practice in Educational Leadership**

Based on the responses of the participants, my analysis of their perspectives, and review of the study’s documents, the following are recommended areas of practice for districts:
the cultivation of an ethic of care with passion and high expectations; the development of practical tools that address the day-to-day activities of MTSS implementation; leadership preparation supports; selection of leadership team; attention to and engagement with supports for learning through networked, highly collaborative professional relationships within and outside of schools; a district focus that emphasizes adaptive leadership development; and the development of structures and practices that support mutual adaption and reciprocal accountability. Similarly, to the frameworks utilized in this study, these recommendations should be viewed as interwoven and not through an isolated menu of items to select. Policy implementation is highly complex and dependent upon the interactions of policy, people, and places which shape how implementation unfolds (Honig, 2006). Attention to these recommendations will offer other perspectives to district reform that can extend local practices to a more inclusive, comprehensive understanding of organizational improvement.

Table 7

Summary of implications for practice in educational leadership

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<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Supports</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
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<td>Cultivating an ethic of care with passion and high expectations</td>
<td>Practical tools for routine activities</td>
<td>Learning through experiences and highly collaborative networks within and outside of district</td>
<td>District focus that emphasizes adaptive leadership development</td>
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<th>Leadership Preparation Supports</th>
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<td>• Selection of leadership team</td>
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**Cultivating an ethic of care with passion and high expectations.** A major theme that emerged across participants in this study pertained to the development and attention to an ethic of care with passion and high expectations to the work with schools. Through the reflections of
the participants, this mindset, beliefs, value systems possessed within the leaders were
cultivated through both personal and professional experiences. The principals in this study
clearly articulated their focused ethic of care in their service to their schools through their
passion, high expectations, and clear messages of why they serve as principals and what they
believe there are responsibilities as principal. They both discussed ways in which they
continuously and relentlessly ground conversations in the belief and commitment to all
students learning and being successful. Consequently, they both discussed situations where
they had to intervene when it became apparent that a teacher was not acting on the shared
belief. They discussed how people will speak the rhetoric “all students can learn” but not show
consistency in their behaviors that align with that value set. The strategies the principals shared
with their relentlessly pursuit of equity were both explicit and implicit requiring keen
awareness through dialogue, observations, data analysis, and reflections. They have developed
ways to identify and notice even the most-subtle behavior that illustrates differing beliefs.
Once these actions are observed, they have developed skills in which to engage in difficult
conversations that challenges others to become retrospective in their behaviors and beliefs
while bringing about further awareness and definition towards an ethic of care focused agenda
driven by a moral purpose.

Along with a skillset to notice inequities as they occur through explicit and implicit
actions, these principals acknowledged the importance of modeling and continually speaking
about equity in various settings regardless if all present are actively involved in a particular
situation because they know that the messaging is being conveyed and reflected upon which
can eventually lead to others moving from passive to active involvement. This involvement is
termed by sociocultural and situated learning theorists as legitimate peripheral participation
(Honig, 2008; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Drawing on concepts of sociocultural learning theories and thinking about how it intertwines with implementation research, the notion and strategies of legitimate peripheral participation contribute to learning through a sense of community creating shared ownership through practices of shared leadership (Honig, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991). As people develop connections to the larger purpose, belonging of that purpose attaches to their personal identities resulting in a commitment to the change.

In addition, they have learned the direct connections of instructional processes have in pursuing practices and outcomes with students driven by an ethic of care. They shared strategies they have used to cultivate understanding of the importance of aligning learning targets with assessments, developing consistent teaching strategies, utilizing evidence-based strategies for planning and teaching, and maintaining high expectations for all students as ways to advance equity within the daily activities of schooling (Rorrer, et al., 2008). As stated previously, these principals have cultivated their knowledge, beliefs, and practices of educational equity through their own personal and professional development and experiences. Through this study’s findings and supported through implementation research, it is recommended that districts consider ways in which they can design, develop, and model an ethic of care through leadership preparation strategies; with many examples of those strategies being highlighted in this section. Most importantly, it is recommended that districts reconceptualize their roles and functions in reform as grounded in the commitment to educational equity. This value commitment becomes a tipping point for change and is the impetus and foundation for shifting the norms, policies, and structures as well as moving organizational members to a deeper understanding and awareness (Rorrer et al., 2008).
Through these recommendations, it is possible to counteract the formidable inequitable status quo to actively persevere educational equity through an ethic of care.

**Practical Tools for Routine Activities.** The findings from this study indicated that a barrier to the two schools’ implementation was the accessibility to practical tools needed to facilitate MTSS practices. Researchers suggest that tools help define and guide understanding on the actions that contribute to the goals of the initiative (Honig, 2008). In addition, tools can be viewed as enabling or limiting depending on the historical uses of a tool, not having a tool that is needed, or not aligned to the actions of the initiative (Honig, 2008). Within the cases of the two schools in this study, leaders from both schools indicated the need for a data collection tool that would help facilitate conversations and collection of evidence needed for MTSS implementation. Within the findings, discussion of this issue related to practical tools illustrated the importance of districts attending to the resources that affect productivity and enhance organizational performance (Malen et al., 2015).

The use of data within an MTSS implementation process requires attention to the tools used to collect and manage the data, including consensus on what data to collect, knowledge of what the data indicates, and the selection of instructional conditions needed to be used with individual and groups of students. Participants conveyed messages of confusion, uncertainty, and loosely defined methods and tools for data collection caused initial struggle and additional time for implementation based on the district’s criteria and expectations. Through the design of school-based tools, building knowledge of facilitation skills to lead discussions using the data, and creating strategic structures and routines to make data chats the new rule and expectation for PLC’s to engage in those data-based discussions, the participants were able to engage in essential actions of MTSS.
Participants did share how the district’s tools related to the key priorities and vision of instructional excellence as well as the rubrics that communicate levels of functioning within PLCs and school-based tiers of support were helpful during incremental times throughout the year. However, both cases presented the struggle of implementation in the day-to-day activities and the need for a tool or set of tools that aligned to and guide the facilitation of those practices. With this convergence between schools, it is recommended that districts consider development and utilization of tools that provide clear vision, expectations, and monitoring structures as well as tools that assist in the ongoing, daily practices that lead to the attainment and actualization of the initiative’s instructional and student learning goals. By districts providing and reifying tools that assist in making abstract concepts concrete provides clarity around MTSS practices as well as supporting learning of the reform by reducing conditions of ambiguity (Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008).

**Leadership Preparation Supports.** This case study illuminated aspects of leadership that were found to be successful in contributing to MTSS implementation at the school site. Research has indicated that school leaders are more likely to impact student achievement through reform efforts “if they have the knowledge and expertise to engage in key leadership functions and roles related to” implementation of policy for improving student achievement (Goldring, et al., 2008, p. 2). The leadership practices that emerged as highly influential to implementation and were reported by the principals to being learned through their own professional experiences include: human resources strategies, particularly related to hiring and selection of leadership team members; opportunities to engage in experiential learning, and the cultivation of an ethic of care driven by a moral purpose.
Selection of leadership team. Considering human resources, hiring and retaining school staff and distributing leadership positions that have the mindset that aligns to reform goals was an underrecognized element of the district’s role in leadership development for reform (Rorrer, et al., 2008). Both principals in this study discussed strategies with interviewing and hiring practices as well as the identification and capacity building for those in instructional leadership roles. In addition, the principals identified learning about these strategies through previous experiences in leadership positions. The research illustrates that the aligning human resources to the reform contributes to the development of capacity to enact reform and improves the likelihood of reform success and sustainability (Rorrer, et al., 2008). With this understanding, it is recommended that district leadership preparation and development programs address these concepts related to the alignment of human resources including how to nurture and coach aspiring leadership from lead teachers.

Learning through experiences and highly collaborative networks within and outside of district. This study’s participants all reflected on their learning of MTSS and implementation practices with emphasis on experiential learning opportunities. These experiential learning opportunities can be designed through a variety of structures including; observing successful practices, engaging in cross-network collaboration through internal and external partnerships, and high quality field experiences. Within these opportunities, attention to building knowledge of expectations and practices of the reform coupled with building capacity of implementation practices and strategies for diverse contextual factors is a priority to carry out the multifaceted leadership roles necessary for district and school reform (AACTE, 2018; Chrispeels, et al., 2008; Fixsen, et al., 2005). When considering clinical experiences, research has shown that expert principals have developed tacit knowledge which is grounded in experience and is the outcome of the actively reflecting and being shaped through experience in the pursuit of learning (St.
Germain & Quinn, 2005). To provide situations for leaders to face challenging issues within a field experience guided and modeled by a more expert leader contributes to the development of various dimensions of leadership knowledge and competency necessitated by the demands of a reform and the multitude of factors that manifest through change processes (Fixsen, et al, 2005; Stein & Nelson, 2003; St. Germain & Quinn, 2005).

A major theme of this study involves learning approaches through communities of practice and joint work created through experience, collaboration, and ongoing, incremental processes. Acknowledging the ways in which people learn through internalizing new information and participating in collective and individual efforts within and across locations of the organization, I suggest that local districts engaged in systemic reform consider creating conditions and opportunities for leaders to learn about implementation and change practices through multiple means and ways of participation (Greeno et al., 1996; Honig, 2008; Knapp, 2008; Spillane et al., 2006). Stoll (2013) refers to this type of collective engagement as “lateral learning” through networking across the system. Through this approach all layers within the district work collaboratively and accept collective responsibility for improving teaching and learning (Stoll, 2013). District reform is a complex, multilevel system of relationships that exist not only among individuals within schools but also between schools, central offices, external change agents, policy-making bodies, and other entities (Malen et al., 2015; McLaughlin, 2006; Smylie & Evans, 2006). District leaders need to consider the degree to which social structures are open and closed as well as the information that flows through and is enforced within those interactions (Smylie & Evans, 2006). Additionally, these learning opportunities should address topics of change processes and social and contextual dynamics that influence explicit and implicit implementation practices and especially leadership that
requires an adaptive mindset rather than a technical one in the management of human interactions.

**District focus that emphasizes adaptive leadership development.** A major focus of this study was to discover and describe ways in which leaders identified as successful in implementing a district’s initiative have come to learn and understand implementation practices and processes. The findings of this study illuminated that the leaders received no formal district learning around implementation and change processes. Rather, the majority of the learning centered on building knowledge around the initiative itself as well as monitoring and accountability tools and expectations of implementation. These topics of implementation align with what the research terms as the technical aspects of implementation. This perspective has “traditionally been the most extensively used approach for understanding policy implementation” (Datnow, 2006, p.106). With this approach, the attention is on the fidelity of policy implementation through objectified standards and promotes the ideas of standardization and replication (Datnow, 2006). Moving from a focus of policy implementation research towards operational practices of implementation, the implementation science framework highlights a technical approach as a competency within the leadership drivers (Fixsen et al., 2005). Within this viewpoint, a technical approach refers to the management, procedural, and programmatic dimensions of school leadership (Fixsen et al., 2005). In organizational learning theory, there are constructs that align with aspects of a technical approach which address structural technical dimension that encompasses organizational structures for decision making, sharing data and information, and ways to assign meaning to the data and information (Fauske, 2005). Through the voices of the participants, they expressed a technical approach in relation to compliance driven behaviors or requirements, procedural aspects of MTSS, data collection
and analysis processes, and school managerial operations. The common thread of these conceptual definitions of technical approach pertains observable actions that follow a particular process and can be measured for accuracy, fidelity, and objectified outcomes. The technical approach typically results from a top-down perspective which values outputs and mechanical processes that promote structural determinism which minimizes the professionalism of local actors and the context in which they perform (Datnow, et al., 2002; Datnow, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006). This linear view of reform suggests an input/output orientation that reflects the industrial revolution model and dilutes the complexity at the core of every teaching act (AACTE, 2018). The absence of the interplay with and influence of social constructs within this approach to policy implementation has been and continues to be a major tension within educational systems.

When participants were asked about the ways they have come to learn about implementation practices, most of the responses reflected strategies that were gained from personal experiences during implementation, observations of others involved with implementation, and individual research. There were some instances that located the district efforts in implementation that consisted of previewing next steps of MTSS, providing goals and actions with clear vision of the big picture, and modeling of specific strategies in which the school could align their practices. However, the majority of the implementation practices that school leaders utilized resulted from their personal learning and understanding related to change. The principals shared multiple instances where they engaged in formal and informal conversations with school staff that either encouraged or discouraged implementation. The learning that occurred through failed or successful attempts through dialogue resulted in the development of a repertoire of strategies that they would rely on with varying situations that
arise. This repertoire of strategies the principals referred to addressed aspects that involved responding, interacting, and influencing the social and contextual dimensions involved with implementation. Simply, the schools and their leaders and staff learned the how to after they came to believe in the worth MTSS efforts.

**Mutual adaptation and reciprocal responsibility.** Overwhelming, participants in this study conveyed the importance of trust throughout the implementation process. A culture of trust is cultivated through transparency and openness in communication with clear expectations, attending to the nature of relationships in schools, and reciprocal responsibility through notions of a collective. The participants discussed changes that occurred with the district’s top leadership a few years prior to the MTSS implementation. The change in leadership and some of the leadership practices resulted in the participants feeling unsure of their expectations which created barriers with trust. The ambiguity of the district’s priorities and expectations for their performance created a residual effect that required extensive time and concerted effort from top leadership to convey clear messaging on the initiative and expectations. The stories of the participants illuminated the need to have intentional connections to past work with new work to as well as consistency with those in top leadership positions to create a culture in which people feel valued and respected which can then be reciprocated back to the system. Through these findings, it is recommended for districts to develop clear goals and expectations, direct connections to previous work, monitoring strategies, and communication plans prior to systemic implementation of an initiative to ensure reciprocal responsibility conditions are established and maintained throughout the life of the reform.
More recently, implementation research has cast a light on policy implementation which contributed to the notion of implementation complexity and its dependence on the influences of all actors involved with implementation (Honig, 2006; Malen, 2006). Through this discovery the idea of “mutual adaption” emerged and established awareness of the strong influences of social constructs and the human dimension of organizational change. The concept of mutual adaption refers to the negotiations and meaning-making processes that occur within the context at the micro (district and school) levels to accomplish the demands from the macro (federal and state) level (Honig, 2006). Within strands of organizational learning, the actions of inquiry, interpretation, and sense-making is dependent upon the collective inquiry by organizational members that bring multiple interpretations and memories from events and conditions from both inside and outside of the organization (Knapp, 2008). Adding to this thought, sociocultural theorists suggest that the social construction of meaning to an initiative is fundamental to how organizations search for and use evidence in efforts towards organizational reform (Honig, 2008). From a learning perspective, this dependence of interactions between organizational actors and policy and organizational actors through mutual adaptation begins to acknowledge the complexity of policy implementation beyond the scope of a technical-rational approach.

Concluding Remarks

Synthesizing the multiple elements of this case study, illustrates the complex nature of policy implementation and how the systems and organizational members interact and influence reform through interconnected trajectories driven by technical aspects of processes, structures, tools, and outcome measurements as well as collective engagement of learning, creating culture, and focusing on an ethic of care. Through reflection of the participants’
stories and perspectives, I have found that the underlying, constant pattern involved in change efforts is the emotional, mental, and intellectual human nature of learning, teaching, and the practices and structures involved with schooling. In addition, the findings illuminated the importance of building and sustaining a culture of trust, attention to the nature of relationships, experiential and collaborative ways of learning, and enacting leadership with an ethic of care driven by a moral purpose in district reform. The frameworks utilized in this study individually highlight aspects of those conclusions. Further research is necessary to more deeply explore these concepts to consider other conceptions of educational policy implementation that can strengthen school improvement efforts as well as inform policy makers for considerations of what matters most; the people who participate in and for our school systems.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
Appendix A: 2016-2017 Monitoring for Key Priorities

As instructional leaders, it is imperative that we remain consistently focused on our key priorities. To prepare all students for college, career and life readiness, we need to ensure that student achievement data and classroom practices are monitored and supported. The following are expectations for Pasco County Leaders:

- School based administrators should minimally be in classrooms 50 minutes each day. District based administrators should minimally be in schools several times a quarter.
- Professional Learning Communities should be a way of supporting our work.
- Every student counts and should be given the supports needed to be successful.
- Florida Standards should drive instruction in all classrooms with student work reflecting the rigor of the standards.
- Student data must be analyzed regularly to plan and provide support to students.

In planning for our goals, which are included in this document, we request that each school respond to requests for monitoring documents quarterly.

**Beginning of Year Items (by end of August):**
- Master Schedule
- PLC Schedule
- SIP At A Glance
- Enrichment and Intervention Plan
- Plan for completing teacher evaluations (Teacher Names/Dates/Administrators)
- Leadership Team Structures (Meeting Time, Focus and Roles)
## Collaborative Culture

**Goal: Increase Staff and Student Engagement**

### Prioritized School Actions

- School leaders establish and monitor culture of collaboration and communication through PLCs and MTSS infrastructures. (4.15; 4.17; 5.20)
- School leaders respond to teacher and PLC actions through celebration and/or corrective feedback. (5.19; 5.24)
- School leaders develop and maintain effective working relationships with staff, colleagues and direct supervisor (parents, Board, etc.); deal effectively with conflict; keep others informed. (4.18)
- School teams meet regularly to lead and monitor mission, vision, core values, goals, strategic plans and intentional PD linked to district goals, school needs and the SIP. (4.15; 4.17; 4.18)

### Leadership Elements

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>Teachers have role in decision making</td>
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<td>4.17</td>
<td>Staff can provide input on school functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>Students, parents, &amp; community can provide input</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>Recognized leader of the school</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>Trust of faculty &amp; staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; Staff perceive a safe environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>Students, parents, &amp; community perceive a safe environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>Acknowledges success</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

- **By the conclusion of the 2015-2016 school year, 37% of Pasco County staff will be engaged and Student Hope will be at 53% and Engagement at 52%.**
- **By the conclusion of the 2016-2017 school year, 40% of Pasco County staff will be engaged and Student Hope will be at a mean of 4.38 and Engagement at a mean of 3.99.**
- **By the conclusion of the 2017-2018 school year, 43% of Pasco County staff will be engaged and Student Hope will be at a mean of 4.58 and Engagement at a mean of 4.19.**

### Monitoring

**Periodically (Q1 and Q3)**

- PLC rubric completed by PLC facilitator (Collaborative Culture section)

**Mid Year**

- Gallup Staff and Student data
- Success Plan reflection
Data-Driven Decisions

Goal: Increase Systems to Support Students

Prioritized School Actions

- Schools use a system that collects and organizes data to monitor proficiency and growth over time for all students matched to the rigor of the all standards. (1.3; 1.4; 2.9)
- School and teacher teams use data to identify, support, and monitor needs of at-risk students. (1.3; 1.4)
- School and teacher teams utilize time, staff, and resources to develop core, supplemental, and intensive, targeted interventions. (4.16)
- School and teacher teams engage in the problem solving process using data to monitor the effectiveness of core instruction and intervention supports. (4.16)
- School based intervention team (SBIT) engages in problem-solving at group and individual levels for at-risk students. (4.16)
- Monitor teacher & PLC behaviors (2.8)

Leadership Elements

- 1.4 Monitors progress on individual student achievement goals
- 1.3 Monitors progress on overall student achievement goals
- 2.8 Awareness of predominant instructional practices
- 2.9 Ongoing evaluations with multiple data sources
- 4.16 Teacher teams regularly address school issues

Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

- By the conclusion of the 2015-2016 school year, all Pasco County schools will implement problem-solving teams that identify tiered supports for at risk students.
- By the conclusion of the 2016-2017 school year, all Pasco County schools will implement tiered supports for at least one content area and/or grade levels.
- By the conclusion of the 2017-2018 school year, all Pasco County schools will implement tiered supports for multiple content areas and/or grade levels.
- By the conclusion of the 2018-2019 school year, all Pasco County schools will implement tiered supports for all content areas and/or grade levels.

Monitoring

Periodically (Q1 and Q3)
- Tiers of Supports Quick Screen

Quarterly
- Data regarding open cases, timelines and decisions

Updated 7.5.16
## Prioritized School Actions

- School leaders ensure understanding of instructional framework by establishing a system to guide, support, and monitor instruction. (5.23)
- Content/Strategy PLCs collaboratively plan to ensure instruction is rigorous and aligned with the progression of standards, using learning targets, KUDs and scales. (3.12)
- PLCs select and/or develop, administer, and reflect on common assessments aligned to the rigor of the standards. (1.1)
- District curriculum resources are utilized. (3.11; 3.12)
- Teachers deliver lessons that are aligned to the rigor of the standards and reflect the instructional shifts and integrate the Marzano instructional framework. (1.5; 3.13)

## Leadership Elements

### Envisioning the Future
- 1.1 Clear measurable goals for overall student achievement
- 1.2 Clear measurable goals for individual student achievement
- 2.6 Clear vision on instruction
- 3.12 Focused Curriculum
- 5.23 Focus on effective instruction & student achievement

### Achieving the Vision
- 1.5 Practices are in place to help all students meet achievement goals
- 2.7 Supports & retains teachers who enhance their skills
- 2.10 Relevant job-embedded PD
- 3.11 Adhere to state and district curriculum standards
- 3.13 Students have the opportunity to learn critical content
- 4.14 Teachers can observe & discuss effective teaching

## Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

- By the conclusion of the 2015-2016 school year, 30% of Pasco County instructional staff will demonstrate evidence that they are planning, delivering, assessing, and monitoring standards based instruction matched to the rigor of the standards.
- By the conclusion of the 2016-2017 school year, 60% of Pasco County instructional staff will demonstrate evidence that they are planning, delivering, assessing, and monitoring standards based instruction matched to the rigor of the standard.
- By the conclusion of the 2017-2018 school year, 90% of Pasco County instructional staff will demonstrate evidence that they are planning, delivering, assessing, and monitoring standards based instruction matched to the rigor of the standard.

## Monitoring

- Periodically (Q1, Q2 and Q4)
  - IRLA Accuracy Checks Quarterly
  - Review of district assessments (Q1 and Q3)

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**High Impact Instruction**

**Goal: All Student Learning Experiences Match the Rigor of the Standards**
Appendix B: Common Vision of Instructional Excellence

Imagine a day when ALL Pasco students ...

- Build strong content knowledge and apply learning to new contexts
- Think critically to understand and solve real world problems
- Take ownership for their learning and reflect on the learning progress
- Collaborate and communicate to learn within and outside of their school community
- Utilize a variety of tools and resources to enhance learning
Appendix C: Pasco’s Theory of Action

Theory of Action

If we create a unifying vision of instructional excellence for our schools,

define the behaviors we believe will lead to success in schools,

and provide the necessary supports from our teams,

then, staff efficacy and student achievement will increase.
Appendix D: Pasco’s School Based Teams

School Leadership Team (SLT)
- Team Membership: Principal, Assistant Principal(s), PSCF facilitators, Instructional Coaches, student services team members, and other school leaders.
- Recommended meeting frequency: Monthly.
- Essential Work:
  - Develop, implement, and monitor school success plan.
  - Support and mentor high-impact instruction (Core Subjects: Math and Language Arts).
  - Create Tier I and II infrastructure (time, schedule) for academic interventions and monitor effectiveness.
  - Monitor overall “health” of the school community using Early Warning System (EWS).

School Intervention Team (SIT)
- Team Membership: Administrators, Student Services Team, clerical staff, representation, PSCF facilitators.
- Recommended meeting frequency: Weekly, more often as needed.
- Essential work:
  - Create Tier III infrastructure for universal skill interventions.
  - Create school-wide infrastructure for Tier II behavior supports.
  - Universal skill screening, development, and support.
  - Identify significantly at-risk and off-track students using IEPs, universal skill screenings, and other data sources.
  - Monitor effectiveness of interventions.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
- Team Membership: Teachers who share content/standards.
- Recommended meeting frequency: Weekly, more often as needed.
- Essential work:
  1. What do we want all students to learn?
     - Ubiquitous tools
     - Create/revise learning targets using standards.
     - Create/value scales and rubrics.
  2. How will we know when they have learned it?
     - Create/revise student formative assessments.
  3. What will we do for students who do not learn?
     - Refine Tier III data.
     - Identify students who are at risk and need additional supports with essential standards.
     - Implement/monitor individualized and supplemental/Tier II supports.
  4. What will we do when some students have already learned?
     - Reflect on Tier II data.
     - Identify students who need enrichment and implement supports.

SIT develops infrastructure for PLCs
PLCs create and monitor Tier II support
SIT assists PLCs in problem-solving Tier III support
Appendix E: Pasco’s PLC Rubric

*Step 0 School Infrastructure - Diagnostic Tool for New/Struggling Professional Learning Communities*

This tool is intended to be used by administrators working with specific PLCs to determine what feedback and support is needed in order to move to success.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 - Beginning</th>
<th>2 - In Progress</th>
<th>3 - Developing</th>
<th>4 - Developed</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are staff members organized into PLC teams that will be most effective for maximizing adult and student learning?</td>
<td>Staff members are assigned to collaborative PLC teams</td>
<td>Staff members are organized into meaningful course-specific or grade level PLC teams.</td>
<td>Staff members have sufficient protected time to accomplish PLC work.</td>
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<td>Do staff members have protected time in the schedule to collaborate on a weekly basis?</td>
<td>Staff members have protected time to collaboratively work with PLC teams on a weekly basis.</td>
<td>Staff members have protected time built into the schedule on a weekly basis.</td>
<td>Staff members have sufficient protected time to accomplish PLC work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do teams have a common data source to use for instructional decision-making?</td>
<td>The team has not selected/developed common assessments and/or the PLC team only uses Benchmark/FOC assessments.</td>
<td>The team has selected/developed multiple common assessments that link to standards.</td>
<td>The team has selected/developed multiple common assessments that link to standards.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do teams collaborate on the “right” work and ask the “right” questions?</td>
<td>Team members meet to disseminate information or to plan for school events (e.g., planning for field trips, parent nights, important dates, etc.) and strategies for lessons.</td>
<td>Team members consistently utilize PLC guiding questions 1-4 during collaborative planning.</td>
<td>There is visible evidence of PLC/collaborative planning work (e.g., learning targets, common assessments), with a focus on increasing student learning of prioritized standards.</td>
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*This rubric reflects a progression of PLC growth. One level builds on the next; they are not viewed in isolation.*
### Professional Learning Community Rubric – Formative Tool for Team Reflection and Coaching

This tool is intended to be used by PLC Facilitators to reflect on and monitor the work of their PLC and determine what support is needed in order to move towards success.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>1 – Beginning</th>
<th>2 – In Progress</th>
<th>3 – Developing</th>
<th>4 – Developed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborative Culture</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do teams understand the</td>
<td>Team members work in isolation.</td>
<td>The team meets to share instructional practices or resources.</td>
<td>The team works together interdependently towards a common goal.</td>
<td>The team works together interdependently towards a common goal of increased student and staff learning.</td>
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<td>compelling why for</td>
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<td>collaborative work?</td>
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<td>Do teams have collective</td>
<td>No collective commitments have been developed.</td>
<td>The team has created collective commitments and/or norms. Roles are established.</td>
<td>The team reviews collective commitments and assesses their effectiveness periodically.</td>
<td>Collective commitments create an environment of trust and mutual respect. Violations of commitments are addressed proactively.</td>
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<td>commitments (norms/roles)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do teams collaborate on</td>
<td>The team meets to disseminate information or to plan for school events.</td>
<td>Team members meet to engage in collaborative planning of activities and strategies for lessons.</td>
<td>The team consistently utilizes PLC guiding questions 1-4.</td>
<td>There is consistent and pervasive evidence of increased student achievement as a result of the team’s work.</td>
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<td>the “right work” and ask</td>
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<td>the “right questions”?</td>
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<td><strong>Question #1:</strong></td>
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<td>What do we want all</td>
<td>The team identifies end of unit/chapter/quarter standards for students.</td>
<td>The team identifies end of unit/chapter/quarter standards utilizing district resources.</td>
<td>The team utilizes district created resources to prioritize standards and learning targets.</td>
<td>The team sets expectations for end of unit student learning that match the rigor of the prioritized standards. The team utilizes:</td>
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<td>students to learn?</td>
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<td><strong>Question #2:</strong></td>
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<td>How will we know if and</td>
<td>The team develops/utilizes common assessments.</td>
<td>The team utilizes common assessments, and analyzes the results.</td>
<td>The team utilizes common formative assessments linked to learning targets of the prioritized standards.</td>
<td>The team utilizes formative/summative common assessments that match the rigor of the standards and specifies exemplary and proficient student work.</td>
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<td>learned?</td>
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<td><strong>Question #3:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>How will we respond when</td>
<td>Participants review student data.</td>
<td>Participants analyze common formative assessment/student work data, and develop action plans.</td>
<td>Team-wide action plans are created based on common formative assessment results for students who need standards-based intervention and/or enrichment in at least one content area.</td>
<td>Student response to instruction is anticipated while planning common formative assessments. Team-wide action plans are created based on common formative assessment results for students who need standards-based intervention and/or enrichment in multiple content areas.</td>
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<td><strong>Question #4:</strong></td>
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Appendix F: Pasco’s Tiers of Support Rubric

Data Driven Decisions: Tiers of Support Rubric
This screening tool is intended for use by administrators and their leadership teams to reflect on the implementation of school structures within a system of tiered supports.

Goal: Increase Systems to Support Students

Short Term Goal: By the conclusion of the 2015-16 school year, all Pasco County Schools will implement problem-solving teams that identify tiered supports for at-risk students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1: Universal Screening for All Schools</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Team</strong></td>
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<td>Do you have a team that looks at core data?</td>
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<td>Do you have a team that looks at data for supplemental intervention?</td>
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<td>Do you have a team that looks at data for intensive intervention?</td>
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<th>Part 2: Diagnostic for Prioritized School Actions</th>
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<td><strong>Prioritized School Actions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitor Data Driven Decisions #1</td>
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<td>Data System Data Driven Decisions #2</td>
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<td>Core Intervention Data Driven Decisions #4</td>
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<td>Supplemental Intervention Data Driven Decisions #4</td>
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<td>Target Intervention Data Driven Decisions #4</td>
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Appendix G: Interview Principal Participant Notification and Initial Consent

Dear Elementary Principal:
I am a doctoral student at the University of South Florida in the Department of Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career, and Higher Education, conducting a research project under the guidance of Dr. Black. I am writing you to let you know that a research study is being planned that may be of interest to you. This qualitative, multiple case study seeks to understand the ways in which a principal and their leadership team comes to understand, interpret, and mediate the purpose, resources, and knowledge of a district initiative to successfully implement the initiative at their school. Based on the following criteria, you are have been identified as a potential candidate for participation: (a) serve in your current role at the school for at least 5 years, (b) demonstrate school growth in implementation through district based data, and (c) identified as successful by the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary schools.

Please be aware that your participation in this or any research study is completely voluntary. There will be no consequences to you if you chose not to participate, and you may withdraw from this study at any time. If you take part in this study, you will be asked to take part in 3 individual interviews at your school that will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews will be scheduled with at least 2 weeks in between each individual interview. This will allow time to reflect on the interview to inform the questions for the next interview. The interviews will be held in a semi-private area at your school site to make it as convenient for you as possible. I will work with you to secure an appropriate location. All interviews will be audio recorded based on your consent. I will be the only person who has access to these recordings.

In addition, I will ask you to identify 4 to 5 instructional leaders at your school to participate in a focus group interview. The criteria to identify those instructional leaders include: (a) have been in their leadership position for the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, (b) participated in activities related to implementation, and (c) possess insight that will add to the understanding of the ways in which the principal lead the transfer of the processes of the three key priorities.

There is minimal risk for participants involved in this research study. In order to minimize this risk, your privacy and confidentiality as a participant will be kept in a variety of ways. Pseudonyms will be used to keep your identity confidential. All data will be either placed in a locked cabinet and/or stored on a password protected computer. All recordings and data will be labeled with the pseudonym and will be stored in a different location than the consent forms.

Please note that I have attached an informed consent form for you to review. If you choose to participate, I will go over this form with you in-person prior to the interview and ask you to sign it at that time. If you are interested in participating contact me back directly at jrinck@mail.usf.edu

Sincerely,
Jennifer Rinck, Doctoral Candidate University of South Florida
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Pro#29959
Appendix H: Interview Instructional Leader Participant Notification and Initial Consent

Dear Elementary Instructional Leader:

I am a doctoral student at the University of South Florida in the Department of Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career, and Higher Education, conducting a research project under the guidance of Dr. Black. I am writing you to let you know that a research study is being planned that may be of interest to you. This qualitative, multiple case study seeks to understand the ways in which a principal and their leadership team comes to understand, interpret, and mediate the purpose, resources, and knowledge of a district initiative to successfully implement the initiative at their school. Based on the following criteria, you are have been identified as a potential candidate for participation: (a) have been in a leadership position for the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, (b) participated in activities related to implementation, and (c) possess insight that will add to the understanding of the ways in which the principal lead the transfer of the processes of the three key priorities

Please be aware that your participation in this or any research study is completely voluntary. There will be no consequences to you if you chose not to participate, and you may withdraw from this study at any time. If you take part in this study, you will be asked to take part in a focus group interview with 3 to 4 other instructional leaders at your school that will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Within 2 to 3 working days, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview that will last approximately 15 to 30 minutes. The purpose of the individual interview is to ensure that you were able to share everything you believed was relevant to the study. The interviews will be held in a semi-private area at your school site to make it as convenient for you as possible. I will work with you to secure an appropriate location. All interviews will be audio recorded based on your consent. I will be the only person who has access to these recordings.

There is minimal risk for participants involved in this research study. In order to minimize this risk, your privacy and confidentiality as a participant will be kept in a variety of ways. Pseudonyms will be used to keep your identity confidential. All data will be either placed in a locked cabinet and/or stored on a password protected computer. All recordings and data will be labeled with the pseudonym and will be stored in a different location than the consent forms.

Please note that I have attached an informed consent form for you to review. If you choose to participate, I will go over this form with you in-person prior to the interview. If you are interested in participating contact me back directly at jrinck@mail.usf.edu

Sincerely,

Jennifer Rinck, Doctoral Candidate
University of South Florida
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Pro#29959
Appendix I: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk

Pro # 29959

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called:
AMultipleCaseStudyofPrincipalandLeadershipTeamImplementationofaDistrictMulti-TieredSystem ofSupportInitiative
The person who is in charge of this research study is Jennifer Rinck. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. She is being guided in this research by William Black, Ph.D.

The research will be conducted in Pasco County at the sites of the two elementary schools selected for the study.

Purpose of the study

- Gain insight in the ways in which a principal and their leadership team comes to understand, interpret, and mediate the purpose, resources, and knowledge of a district initiative to successfully implement the initiative at their school
- In addition, this study seeks to understand how knowledge is constructed of initiative implementation and how school leaders transfer that knowledge into practice.

Why are you being asked to take part?
We are asking you to take part in this research study because of you have been identified by Pasco County district leadership as being highly successful in implementing district-based initiatives at your school site.
Study Procedures:

If you take part in this study, as the **principal**, you will be asked to:

- **Participate in 3-4 interview sessions**
  - The interviews will last for approximately one to one and a half hours and will be conducted at the most convenient time and location for you.
  - The interview session will be audio-recorded and transcribed. You will be asked to review the transcript for accuracy. The audio recordings will not be shared with anyone other than you, the faculty advisors, Dr. William Black, and a transcription service. The audio recordings and transcripts will be kept in a secure location and will be maintained for five years after completion of the study.
  - The interview will be scheduled at a time convenient to you between May 2017 and approximately August 2017.
  - The content of the interview will include your experience as a principal implementing the district-led MTSS initiative, your knowledge of the initiative, your knowledge of implementation, and strategies you used to transfer the initiative at your school.

- **Identify 4-5 instructional leaders at your school to be interviewed**
  - The instructional leader interviews will be conducted in a focus group and will last for one to one and a half hours. There will be one focus group interview. The interview will be conducted at the most convenient time and location for the instructional leaders between May 2017 and approximately August 2017.
  - The content of the interview will include their knowledge of MTSS initiative, ways in which they have used that knowledge in their practice, descriptions on how they experienced the principal implementing the initiative at the school.
  - Following the focus group interviews, no more than 48 hours after, you will participate in a brief follow-up interview to ensure that you were able to describe everything that you believe is relevant to the study based on your experience. This interview will last for 15 to 30 minutes.

If you take part in this study, as an **instructional leader**, you will be asked to:

- The instructional leader interviews will be conducted in a focus group and will last for one to one and a half hours. There will be one focus group interview. The interview will be conducted at the most convenient time and location for you between May 2017 and approximately August 2017.
- The content of the interview will include your knowledge of MTSS initiative, ways in which you have used that knowledge in their practice, descriptions on how you experienced the principal implementing the initiative at the school.
- Following the focus group interviews, no more than 48 hours after, you will participate in a brief follow-up interview to ensure that you were able to describe everything that you believe is relevant to the study based on your experience. This interview will last for 15 to 30 minutes.
Total Number of Participants
Two elementary school principals four to five instructional leaders at both school sites, and myself will participant in this study at USF. There will be two other interviews with the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools and MTSS Specialist in efforts to build context to the study but not to contribute to the findings.

Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal
You do not have to participate in this research study. You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. In addition, your job status will in no way be impacted by their decision to participate. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

Benefits
The potential benefits to you are:

- Increased understanding of your work and the impact upon your students, colleagues and school

Risks or Discomfort
This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation
We will not pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Costs
It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

Conflict of Interest Statement
There are no known conflicts of interest.

Privacy and Confidentiality
We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. Anyone who looks at your records must keep them confidential. These individuals include:
• The research team, which consists of myself as the Principal Investigator and my major professor, Dr. William Black.

• Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study, and individuals who provide oversight to ensure that we are doing the study in the right way.

• Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research such as the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).

• The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, including staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an unanticipated problem, call Jennifer Rinck at (813) 546-8381.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

Signature of Person Taking Part in Study __________________________ Date __________________________

Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study __________________________

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

Signature of Person obtaining Informed Consent __________________________ Date __________________________

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent __________________________
Appendix J: Initial Principal Interview Protocol

Principal Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me about your role in the school/district?
   a. How long have you been at this school?
   b. How long have you been employed in the district?

2. Can you tell me about your experience with work around RTI/MTSS?
   a. Prior to the system-wide implementation with the 3 priorities?
   b. After the system-wide implementation of the 3 priorities?

3. What do you believe is the purpose of the MTSS initiative and the 3 key priorities?
   a. How do you come to know the purpose of the initiative?
   b. How do you learn more about the purpose of the initiative?

4. What resources and/or supports do you rely on to learn about and implement practices to the initiative?
   a. What were those practices?
   b. What supports do you believe were the most useful? Why?
   c. What supports do you believe were the least useful? Why?
   d. What supports from the district did you utilize or not utilize?
   e. What supports from your school did you utilize or not utilize?

5. How have you come to learn about the initiative and the 3 key priorities? (Probe for 1 to 2 specific examples)

6. What types of actions have you taken to implement practices directly related to the 3 key priorities of the initiative?
   a. Why those practices?
   b. What struggles did you experience?
   c. What outcomes did you experience?
   d. What lessons did you learn through implementing those practices?

7. What have been some challenges to implementation of practices?
   a. How have you dealt with staff that resisted implementation?
   b. How did you mediate your own thoughts/ideas that questioned the initiative?

8. What resources have you created for MTSS implementation at your school?

9. What strategies have you used for your staff to learn about the initiative? (Probe for 1-2 specific examples)
10. What strategies have you used for your staff to implement the initiative? (Probe for 1-2 specific examples)

11. What is your perception of this school’s level of implementation of practices related to the 3 key priorities?

12. What are the biggest takeaways you have learned through your school’s MTSS implementation with the 3 key priorities?

13. What advice would you give others who want to implement MTSS and the 3 key priorities?
Appendix K: Instructional Leader Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me about your experience at the school?
   a. How long have you worked here?
   b. What grades have you taught?
   c. Is this the only school in the district that you have worked?
   d. How would you describe the culture of the school?

2. Can you tell me about your experience with work around RTI/MTSS?
   a. Prior to the system-wide implementation with the 3 priorities?
   b. After the system-wide implementation with the 3 priorities?
   c. How has the culture of your school changed or not changed?

3. What do you believe is the purpose of the MTSS initiative and the 3 key priorities?
   a. How do you come to know the purpose of the initiative?
   b. How do you learn more about the purpose of the initiative?

4. What resources and/or supports do you rely on to learn about and implement practices to the initiative?
   a. What were those practices?
   b. What supports do you believe were the most useful? Why?
   c. What supports do you believe were the least useful? Why?
   d. What supports from the district did you utilize or not utilize?
   e. What supports from your school did you utilize or not utilize?

5. How have you come to learn about the initiative and the 3 key priorities? (Probe for 1 to 2 specific examples)
   • Did you have to unlearn any aspects of MTSS based on your experiences with RTI in early implementation years?

6. What types of actions have you taken to implement practices directly related to the 3 key priorities of the initiative?
   a. Why those practices?
   b. What struggles did you experience?
   c. What outcomes did you experience?
   d. What lessons did you learn through implementing those practices?

7. What have been some challenges to implementation of practices?
   a. How have you dealt with staff that resisted implementation?
   b. How did you mediate your own thoughts/ideas that questioned the initiative?
8. What strategies have you observed your principal using for implementing practices related to the 3 key priorities?
   a. What do you perceive as the outcomes of those strategies?
   b. How do you use or not use those strategies in working with others? In your implementation of practices related to the 3 key priorities?
   c. Has there been a time when your principal gave you something to put into practice or incorporate that you had to think about?

9. What is your perception of this school’s level of implementation of practices related to the 3 key priorities?

10. What are the biggest takeaways you have learned through your school’s MTSS implementation with the 3 key priorities?

11. What advice would you give others who want to implement MTSS and the 3 key priorities?

12. Are there any other teachers you believe I should talk with that could add insight to this research project?