Distributed Leadership: Leadership Teams and Implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

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by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Education Specialist Department of Educational and Psychological Studies College of Education University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:
September 9th, 2020

Keywords: school based leadership, system implementation

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the following people who have pushed, supported, and celebrated with me during this long journey of writing. I owe them tremendously and I would not be where I am without them. First, thank you Mom for pushing me to my fullest capability and always being the guiding light in times of uncertainty. Next, thank you Dad for making me smile during times of stress and seeing my full potential as an educator. For my siblings, (Ryan, Carlee, Ben and Anna) thank you for being that midnight call to ease stress, that boardgame after a long day of work and my biggest fans. Finally, thank you Makenzie for being the one who never gave up on me, my anchor, sail and compass. I dedicate this research study to all of your unconditional support and faith in me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research study would have never been completed without the support and guidance of multiple individuals. First, I have to speak to my incredibly committed, patient and knowledgeable Major Professor, Dr. Jose Castillo. Dr. Castillo constantly encouraged, challenged and accompanied me throughout this research study. He was able to advance my current knowledge of leadership and system change as well as advance my skills in academic writing and school-based research. I am forever grateful for his flexibility, mentorship and leadership that lead to the completion of this research study. I must also recognize Dr. William Black’s dedication to this research project and his service on my committee. I greatly appreciate Dr. Black’s willingness to work within the realm of school psychology, however, still bring his educational leadership knowledge. I am thankful Dr. Black was able to expand my perspectives and build my capacity as a writer, researcher and leader. Next, I am indebted to Dr. Leia Cain for teaching me (a novice qualitative researcher) how to create a high quality qualitative research study. Dr. Cain accepted my quantitative background at the beginning of this process and developed my qualitative background throughout the process. Last, I want to acknowledge the members of my graduate school cohort, who struggled, learned and achieved with me during this research study. I would have not completed this study without the constant reinforcement, reassurance and remarkable support.
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ABSTRACT

Contemporary educational legislation in the last 30 years has reflected the age of accountability in which positive student academic outcomes and yearly student progress are the main goals of the school system. In addition to accountability legislation, schools are mandated to implement multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to provide a continuum of services for all students. To implement MTSS and the necessary system changes, many schools are using distributed leadership models and practices such as leadership teams to maximize the human and material resources available. This study examined the conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership in a school that is implementing MTSS. The study used a qualitative embedded single case study format with a leadership team in one elementary school. Interviews, observations, existing documents, and school data were used to explore distributed leadership in the participating school. Data gathered from these sources were analyzed using thematic analysis with a constant comparison technique. The findings yielded four major themes of conceptualization, which were collective responsibility, specific leading qualities, communication strategies, and student guided practice. Also, the findings yielded four major themes of enactment, which were a rich data culture, strength-based approaches, systemic coherence and empowerment of staff. The findings from the study can advance current distributed leadership literature on implementing MTSS, provide practitioners, school leadership
and researchers a narrative for future facilitation of MTSS and raise additional questions
regarding leadership team functioning, distributed leadership and MTSS implementation.
CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

One of the most consistent challenges faced by schools each academic year is the push for increased student overall (academic, behavior, social-emotional) achievement. Increasing student overall achievement in the general and special education settings is a complex task. Educators face this task in the context of federal legislation that has called for inclusive, proactive, and responsive methods for supporting students. Although federal legislation has numerous implications for how educators serve students, I will focus on legislation and regulations that exert pressures on educators to implement multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS).

MTSS, Federal Legislation, and Student Outcomes

MTSS often is defined as multiple tiers of instruction and intervention that increase in intensity based on student needs identified through data-based decisions (Batsche et al., 2005; Batsche, 2014; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Although MTSS is based on public health models of service delivery that originated decades ago, many scholars attribute the mainstream adoption of MTSS in schools to the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004. Before IDEIA (2004), scholars, educators, parents, and other stakeholders raised concerns about the existing system for identifying students with a Specific
Learning Disability (SLD) and for providing services once identified. To address these concerns, The President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (PCESE, 2002) was established. Central to the findings of the PCESE was the fact that the discrepancy model (based on the discrepancy between a student’s measured IQ and measured achievement) that was being utilized resulted in delays in identifying and serving students, and that the current special education system focused too much on compliance with procedures and too little on their contribution to improving the outcomes of students, including Students with Disabilities (SWDs). The PCESE recommended there should be a focus on student outcomes, identification models that are proactive and reactive to students’ educational needs, implementation of evidence-based instruction and intervention, and integration of special and general education efforts.

Recommendations from the PCESE (2002) informed the reauthorization of IDEIA (2004). This reauthorization outlined that a student’s response to scientifically based instruction and intervention could be used by Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to determine eligibility for special education services under the SLD category. IDEIA also allowed LEAs to use up to 15% of their special education funding to provide early intervention services to students at-risk for academic failure for being identified with a disability. Following the reauthorization, the literature makes it clear that these changes in IDEIA were interpreted as the need for school districts to serve all students, regardless of need, on a continuum based model of service (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Gresham, 2002; Reschly & Ysseldyke, 2002). This shift was the start of widespread adoption of Response to Intervention (RTI), "the practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals and applying child response data to
important educational decisions” (Batsche et al., 2005). RTI later evolved into what is now referred to as MTSS, a model that attempts to integrate academic (RTI) and behavioral (Positive Behavior and Intervention Supports [PBIS]; Higgins-Averill & Rinaldi, 2013; Batsche, 2014; Lane, Menzies, Ennis, & Bezdek, 2013; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016; Sugai & Horner, 2009) multi-tiered approaches to serving students.

MTSS also is included in the Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015), which replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). ESSA includes mandates that schools, districts, and states are accountable for improving student outcomes. Although ESSA does not explicitly mandate MTSS, it does provide mechanisms for school districts to access funds to support MTSS implementation (e.g., professional development) to improve student outcomes. Thus, federal legislation reinforces schools for implementing MTSS to ensure the academic progress of all students, regardless of special education eligibility. Despite the major shift in ideology and practices reflected in the general and special educational policy, criticisms of MTSS exist. For example, Kavale (as cited in Batsche, Kavale & Kovaleski, 2006) as well as other researchers have voiced that utilizing MTSS for identifying students who are at risk and subsequently intervening to address skill gaps weakens the importance of the diagnosis of SLD. Specifically, it is a less precise framework for SLD identification, that can create an atmosphere where students are not serviced accurately and pressures teachers to follow an arbitrary model (Batsche, et al., 2006; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006). Other researchers have argued that adoption and enactment of MTSS can recreate the status quo of fragmented services through a continued focus on deficit-based assessment and intervention services rather than a universal education system designed for all students (Artiles, Bal & Thorius, 2010; Blanchett, 2006; Sabnis, Castillo, & Wolgemuth, 2020)
However, other researchers argue that MTSS, when implemented with fidelity, improves the outcomes of students. In fact, research has shown that MTSS has positive effects on student achievement within multiple settings (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005; Crone, Hawken & Horner, 2015; Hattie, 2015; Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Yet, school districts continue to struggle with the conceptualization, implementation, and sustainability of MTSS. MTSS requires high fidelity of implementation to be effective for increasing student achievement. Schools often do not have the resources or staff to implement MTSS effectively and efficiently with high fidelity (Alonzo, Tindal, & Robinson, 2008). One of the major factors that influence the effectiveness of the implementation of MTSS is the role of leadership within a school (Eagle, Dowd-Eagle, Snyder, & Holtzman, 2015; Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Duda, 2013; Freeman, Miller & Newcomer, 2015; Stockslager, Castillo, Brundage, Childs, & Romer, 2016).

The Role of Educational Leadership in MTSS Implementation

Leadership within a school setting is critical to the implementation of new practices, initiatives, or system-wide changes including MTSS. Educational leadership typically engages in actions such as setting the mission, vision and expectations for change, building staff competencies, implementing models for monitoring progress, providing supports or resources for new practices, and problem-solving techniques that guide the necessary system change (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Sharatt & Fullan, 2009). Even though educational leadership varies by level (e.g., school, district, state) within the educational system, the same principles apply. Within this study, the focus was on school-based educational leadership (e.g., principals, school leadership teams). Throughout the paper, I refer to school leadership as educational leadership to align with the literature’s non-specific definition of educational leadership. Educational leadership must also be committed and actively engaged in
implementation efforts (Fixsen et al., 2005). Considering that any implementation of MTSS involves many different, dynamic components (e.g., screening, assessment, instruction, problem-solving, progress monitoring) that requires active educational leadership (e.g., vision setting, planning, professional development, resource allocation), the implementation process may be too cumbersome for a sole leader (e.g., school principal). This notion likely contributes to the pervasive use of school leadership teams throughout the literature on implementing MTSS (Freeman, et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2011; March, Castillo, Batsche & Kinacid 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). However, little attention has been paid to how school leadership teaming for MTSS implementation relates to research on distributed leadership models.

Distributed leadership is understood as decision-making and influential practices performed by school-based staff at multiple levels instead of by one predominant leader at the top of the organizational chart (Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2009; Hartley, 2007; Lashway, 2006). Distributed leadership rejects the idea that educational leadership comes solely from one formal position (e.g., principal). It outlines leadership as a practice that involves a variety of individuals (e.g., teachers, support staff) to facilitate processes of instructional change, intervention implementation, and school improvement (Harris, 2005; Spillane, 2005; Timperley, 2005). For example, school leadership is often consisting of those whom the principal believes have specific knowledge, attitudes, or skills (e.g., teacher leaders, content specialist) that can contribute to the school’s mission or vision for improvement (vonFrank, 2011). Distributed leadership enables educational leadership (e.g., principal) to understand and leverage the relationship between collaborative leadership and school-wide systems, school vision, and culture (Elmore, 2000) by identifying and building the capacity of people within a school to implement innovations (Mayrowetz, Murphy, Seashore-Louis, & Smylie, 2007; Murphy, 2003; Spillane, Camburn, &
Lewis, 2006). Thus, distributed leadership means creating a school-wide system in which those with distributed leadership responsibilities are accountable for components of implementation and school functioning (Harris, 2005).

Three main models are widely cited throughout the distributed leadership literature derived from the work of Spillane (2006), Gronn (2008), and Leithwood and Jantzi (2006). Each model has similar features such as (1) emphasizing the work of multiple and differing educators (instead of just a few administrators) in efforts to promote positive change, (2) focus on the interactions between the leaders, followers, and situations, (3) provide multiple examples of the different patterns or actions the model can take and (4) express that the model changes over time and along with each situation. Researchers have provided evidence that schools with distributed leadership models have seen improvements in staff capacity, student outcomes, and school improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Hulpia, Devos, & Rosseel, 2009a).

Although there is evidence that distributed leadership models contribute to improvements in educational outcomes, others have noted that distributed leadership, if not created organically, can be somewhat of a deterrent (Holloway, Nielsen, Saltmarsh, 2018; Lumby, 2013; Youngs, 2009). For example, if a sole leader enforces a distributed leadership model, it does not guarantee that teachers will meaningfully engage in the model for daily functioning (Lumby 2013; Youngs, 2014). In some cases, distributed leadership becomes more of a prescribed framework to match the needs of the age of accountability, instead of a valued way of work (Holloway et al., 2018; Lumby 2013; Youngs, 2014). Lumby (2013) outlined that distributed leadership can provide an ideal framework that promotes a “everyone is a leader” mindset, yet individuals within systems are often restricted by power dynamics and organizational pressures (e.g., age of accountability).
Given these realities, sole leaders such as school principals remain key in the implementation of new practices. School principals are the most influential contributors to leading instruction and transforming practices and influence the organic or manufactured adoption of distributed leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Holloway, et al. 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Lumby, 2013; Youngs, 2009). For example, Leithwood et al. (2007) examined distributed leadership models, principals, and organizational effects and found that (1) coordinated patterns of distributed leadership only occurred for tasks that the principal gave specific attention to, (2) principals heavily influenced school structures, cultural norms, and opportunities for staff to build their leadership knowledge, (3) staff members aligned the idea of leadership with characteristics of administrative leaders (e.g., principals and superintendents), and (4) principals were still expected to enact critical direction-setting leadership functions (e.g., vision setting, creating performance expectations, providing support, allocating resources). Thus, although distributed leadership models appear to have positive effects on schools and move away from the idea of one central leader (Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2009; Hartley, 2007; Lashway, 2006), formal leaders (e.g., principals) remain critical catalysts for improving and sustaining practices.

With the implementation of MTSS, the empirical support for distributed leadership models and the role of principals in facilitating system change is promising. For example, Eagle et al. (2015) discussed the importance of educational leadership (e.g., principals) strategically utilizing the staff and their expertise to coordinate efforts for the necessary systems change required to implement MTSS. However, having multiple school staff leading the implementation of MTSS might result in the modification of professional roles (Eagle et al., 2015). For example, distributed leadership models can encourage, facilitate, and reinforce staff to bring their expertise through the modifications of their professional responsibilities to work collaboratively in
implementing necessary systems change for MTSS under the direction of one formal leader (e.g., school principal). Although distributed leadership models encompass the collaborative approach to school leadership teams that aligns with the facilitation of MTSS (Freeman et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2011; March et al., 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003), little is known about how school-based leadership teams conceptualize and enact distributed leadership for MTSS.

Several issues must be considered when investigating the intersections among current educational legislation, MTSS, system change, and distributed leadership. First, Harris (2008) outlined that multiple terms are used interchangeably to describe distributed leadership (e.g., shared leadership, teacher leadership), which results in confusion and inconsistency. Second, the literature on distributed leadership is lacking research on the functions and voices of those within a distributed leadership model in a naturalistic setting (Angelle, 2010; Harris, 2003; Hulpia et al., 2009a; Ritchie & Woods, 2007; Tian, Risku, & Collin, 2016; Seashore, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010). Finally, no research examines the intersection between distributed leadership models, the implementation of MTSS, and leadership team functioning.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

To achieve these aims, a qualitative embedded single case study was used with a school leadership team involved in facilitating MTSS implementation. Specific research questions that were addressed in this Ed.S. Thesis project study included:

1) How does a school leadership team facilitating implementation of MTSS conceptualize distributed leadership?

2) How does a school leadership team facilitating implementation of MTSS enact their distributed leadership?
Significance of Study

Contributing qualitative research that connects the three major concepts outlined previously (e.g., MTSS, distributed leadership, and leadership teams) can bring advances for both future research and current practice. Considering that there is little known about the intersection of distributed leadership and MTSS implementation, the findings from the study can advance the literature on leadership for MTSS. Findings can inform how leadership team models evident in the literature on implementing MTSS may operate to promote implementation among educators. Additionally, findings may raise additional questions regarding leadership team functioning that can be explored through other research designs. Regarding practice, this study may provide practitioners a reference point for future facilitation of MTSS implementation. Specifically, the qualitative results from this study can provide a narrative for practitioners in leadership team roles that illustrate how teams distribute responsibilities to promote MTSS implementation.

Definition of Terms

**Distributed leadership.** “The sharing, the spreading, and the distributing of leadership work across individuals and roles across the school organization” (Smylie et al., 2007, p. 470).

**Multi-tiered systems of support.** The multiple tiers of instruction and intervention that increase in intensity based on student needs identified through data-based decisions (Batsche et al., 2005; Batsche, 2014; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Increasingly, schools are integrating a number of multiple-tiered system (e.g., RtI, PBIS) into one coherent system meant to address multiple content areas (e.g., academic, behavioral, social-emotional; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).
**School leadership team.** A group of school based individuals (e.g., administrators, teachers, support staff) who take responsibility for providing ongoing evaluations of a school’s educational programs, make school-based decision-making and activating the school improvement plan through school-based professional learning and the facilitation of school wide systems (Learning Forward, 2011). For the purpose of this study, the school leadership team will be the team responsible for facilitating MTSS implementation based on student needs identified through data-based decisions (Batsche et al., 2005; Batsche, 2014; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009).

**Implementation.** A specified set of planned and intentional activities designed to integrate evidence-based practice into real-world service settings (Fixsen et al., 2005; Mitchell, 2011).

**Principal.** Individuals who work within school districts, provide an array of school based services (e.g., organize staff hiring, allocate resources, manage budgets, provide professional development, facilitate daily operations, and make system wide decisions) and govern over non-administrative positions (e.g., teachers, school counselors, instructional assistants).
CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Each topic that was described in the previous chapter (e.g., educational legislation, systems change, MTSS, distributed leadership) is both independently complex as well as potentially interconnected with each other. Therefore, this chapter reviews the topics of current educational legislation, system change, MTSS, and distributed leadership separately. Next, I focus on the intersection of MTSS implementation and distributed leadership. Finally, I identify gaps in the current literature and questions that need to be addressed through future research.

Educational Legislation for Accountability and MTSS

This section will begin with educational legislation and law that has guided the conversation on inclusive practice for all students (e.g., Public Law 94-142, Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act), which helped to establish the mainstream implementation of MTSS for student’s academic, behavioral, and social emotional needs. Other educational acts of congress (e.g., No Child Left Behind, Every Student Succeeds Act) that have created the current age of accountability and provided additional support for the implementation of MTSS also will be reviewed. This section will conclude with a summary of how educational law and legislation supports MTSS implementation.
In 1977, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142, 1977) was passed. Public Law 94-142 (1977) had multiple main purposes; “to assure that all children with disabilities have available to them … a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs”, “to assure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected”, “to assist States and localities to provide for the education of all children and disabilities” and “to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities.” In addition to the multiple purposes of Public Law 94-142 (1977), The U.S. Department of Education was tasked with determining special education eligibility criteria for such labels as Specific Learning Disability (SLD). The U.S. Department of Education dictated within Public Law 94-142, that an SLD classification would require a discrepancy between a student’s Intelligence Quotient (I.Q.) score and their score on an achievement-based measures. However, states were individually tasked to define how much of a discrepancy would be required for a student to receive special education services under the classification of SLD.

Although Public Law 94-142 (1977) was intended to provide supportive services to students with disabilities including students with SLDs, implementation of the law proved problematic. Concerns regarding the rise in special education referrals and poor outcomes for students receiving special education services under this identification model for SLD caused practitioners and researchers to push for changes to the law (Batsche et al., 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Researchers suggested that the model delayed services to students that needed supplementary support for academic progress. For example, before students could be identified with an SLD and ultimately receive supportive services, learning deficits had to meet state criteria for a significant discrepancy between their intelligence and achievement scores. This is
meaning that students had to fall far enough behind before they could receive special education services (e.g., 15 points; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). This fact was concerning and problematic for those students who were not succeeding at the expected level of academic performance but were not discrepant enough to meet eligibility criteria to gain necessary supports. In addition, many researchers also outlined that there was a disproportionate identification of racial/ethnic minorities with learning disabilities (Patton 1998; Skiba et al., 2008). Some attributed the disproportionality to blatant educator racism (Anderson 1997; Skiba et al., 2008) and others outline that it was a rejection of minority cultures by the dominant culture (Patton 1998). Others also argue that the use of the disability label was an instrument of disadvantage (Reid and Knight 2006). Moreover, the assessment process for determining a significant discrepancy was intense and time-consuming, which left many students waiting for immediate and potentially necessary services. For these reasons, the traditional approach of special education eligibility through Public Law 94-142 (1977) often was called the “wait-to-fail” model (Batsche et al., 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006).

Given growing concerns about the traditional (e.g., “wait to fail model”; Batsche et al., 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006) approach of special education eligibility determination, The President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (PCESE) was established in 2002. The PCESE was created to analyze the current state of special education in the United States and to make recommendations about reforming and improving special education. The PCESE (2002) recommended (1) more of a focus on student outcomes rather than on the process for determining eligibility, litigation, and confrontation, (2) the creation of a system that identifies students at-risk for disabilities early and that facilitates quick intervention through evidenced-based instruction and teaching methods, and (3) general education and special
education systems that work together with flexible use of educational funds. One additional critical idea espoused by the PCESE was the notion that the system should be based on a comprehensive system that focuses on improving instruction for all students at their instructional level through a continuum of services, regardless of whether students have a disability (U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2002).

Following the PCESE (2002) recommendations, the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) was reauthorized in 2004. This reauthorization outlined that a student’s response to scientifically based instruction and intervention could be used to determine eligibility for SLD. This new method for identifying students eligible for special education services under the SLD category was a substantial change in philosophy and in the eligibility process. From that point moving forward, students no longer had to qualify for special education services under SLD using the discrepancy model in order to receive academic supports. Rather the reauthorization allowed LEAs to use response to intervention (RTI) as part of a comprehensive evaluation for student suspected of needing additional academic supports. In addition, IDEIA included provisions that allowed LEAs to use up to 15% of their funding to provide early intervening services to students at-risk for being identified with a disability.

These changes in IDEIA (2004) not only influenced how LEAs evaluated students suspected of having an SLD, but also how they conceptualized RTI. Scholars who had been writing about special education services and alternate models of service delivery began connecting research utilizing public health notions of service delivery to the requirements of IDEIA. What emerged was a concept of RTI that went beyond identification procedures for determining special education eligibility to a multi-tiered, comprehensive model of services designed to serve all students regardless of need in a continuum based model of service.
Numerous publications describing RTI as multiple tiers of assessment, instruction, and intervention designed to meet the needs of all students and how the model related to special education eligibility determination emerged in the literature (Batsche et al., 2006; Bradley, Danielson & Doolittle, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Mellard & Johnson 2007; Tilly, 2008; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006)

Despite the major shift in ideology and practices reflected in general and special educational policies, there are some criticisms of MTSS in the literature. For example, Kavale (as cited in Batsche, et al. 2006) voiced that utilizing MTSS for identifying students at-risk and for intervening to address knowledge and skill gaps weakens the diagnosis of SLD which can lead to confusion between students who are “low achieving” versus “under achieving” (Batsche et al., 2006). Aligning with Kavale (as cited in Batsche, et al. 2006), if MTSS is intended to serve all students based on their response to intervention and instruction, it must clearly differentiate between students who have SLD and require special education compared to students who are under achieving and just need additional support. Lacking that preciseness needed for students, Kavale (as cited in Batsche, et al. 2006) and other authors outlined that MTSS does not clarify “responsiveness”, which contradicts the PCESE’s recommendations (Batsche et al., 2006; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006). Those same authors worry that this leads to the MTSS framework creating false positives (e.g., student is determined to be positively responding to supplemental or intensive intervention, yet still has a disability), false negatives (e.g., student determined to be not positively responding based on normative sample and determine to be underachieving, as opposed to low achieving) or a never ending cycle of unsuccessful intervention until resources have been exhausted (Batsche et al., 2006; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006). Overall, Kavale (as cited in Batsche, et al. 2006) questions the MTSS framework due to its potential to erase the notion of
students with SLD, require an unrealistic expectation of schools not having students who are slow learners and create a shift from “all students with SLD have low achievement to all students with low achievement have SLD” (p. 13).

Despite the criticisms, MTSS was still embedded in the push for more accountability in LEAs which was evident in the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004. Among growing concerns from stakeholders and educational officials that student achievement in the United States was not globally competitive, political push to hold schools accountable for student achievement occurred. Theoretically, more accountability for student achievement within LEAs would increase student outcomes and ultimately result in more globally competitive graduates. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. NCLB increased federal oversight in holding schools accountable for the academic progress of all students (NCLB, 2002). The act also had a specific focus on increasing the performance for certain groups of students (e.g., English-language learners, SWDs, students from improvised backgrounds and students who identified as racial minorities) whose achievement was lower than the general student population. Under NCLB, state departments of education had to conduct yearly testing in math and reading to determine progress for all students. States also had to set targets for improvement (e.g., adequate yearly progress; AYP) to showcase their attempts to increase overall student achievement. Although MTSS was not specifically mentioned in NCLB, proponents of the model argued that MTSS not only was an effective model for identifying and improving the outcomes of SWDs, but also for helping schools to improve the performance of all students consistent with NCLB requirements (Bianco, 2010; Burns et al., 2005; Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Mellard, Frey, & Woods, 2012; Reedy & Lacireno-Paquet, 2015).
MTSS, however, was explicitly mentioned in the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015; ESSA) that replaced NCLB (2002). ESSA created an accountability system that considered other factors other than solely student achievement test scores in math and reading. There were multiple academic factors added such as reading and math scores, English Language proficiency test scores, high school graduation rates, and state chosen academic measures. Additionally, state departments of education were given more flexibility in decision making such as determining the components of plans that were evidence-based to help struggling schools and students. Moreover, ESSA provides access to federal funds to help school districts address the comprehensive needs of their students and staff. One important aspect of these allowances is the fact that MTSS is specifically mentioned in ESSA as an example of ways in which school districts can access money to build educator capacity to meet the various needs of students.

Regardless of the spotlight on MTSS, some do not necessarily agree with how MTSS is viewed as a systematic process for helping students. For instance, MTSS cannot be consistently quantified and using local normative samples is less precise than the traditional approach of identifying students with SLD (Kavale as cited in Batsche, et al. 2006; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006). Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) outlined that a major criticism of the traditional model was the unreliability of the diagnosis, yet educators have to rely on multiple, unstandardized assessment methods in hopes of a more reliable diagnoses. Aligning with the age of accountability, the potential departure of a reliable system (i.e., traditional model) does not necessarily promote the clarity around accountability for student achievement., Kauffman, Bachmeier, LeFever (2008) also question MTSS as a systematic process to reduce the number of unnecessary referrals, however, they question educator actions after a student is deemed a “treatment resister.” Kavale et al. (2008) discussed that after a student is unresponsive to all tiers of support implemented, the
only assumption and conclusion is that teaching has been "scientifically validated" and the
deficits lay within the child. This in turn can create an environment where instruction is
blameless and the student’s failure to respond their own fault, which is similar to the same issues
with the traditional model. In addition, MTSS can potentially be more harmful than helpful for
students and educators. For example, Kavale (as cited in Batsche, et al. 2006) outlined that the
MTSS framework provides and arbitrary five percent rate of student who will not be responsive
to instruction. This five percent target can pressure educators to either over identify or under
identify students to be compliant with the arbitrary MTSS framework (Kavale as cited in
for teachers to provide an intensive spectrum of services to please a normative profile of MTSS.
Logically, teachers would rely on a normative framework that aligns with low achieving students
to hit the artificial benchmark created by the MTSS framework (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). In
addition, MTSS was established as a universal process that was premised on a distributive view
of justice for helping all students (Artiles et al., 2010). For example, MTSS is intended to
distribute valued resources (e.g., evidence-based instruction, academic supports) to all students
as well as limit inaccurate identification through data driven decisions (Artiles et al., 2010). Yet,
Artiles et al (2010) argues that MTSS provides less clarity and actually blurs the lines between
special education and general education to simply showcase the notion of the potential difficult
task of meeting the needs of all students. For instance, MTSS is stuck within a “equity–
difference dilemma” in which those within the system are expected to both deliver social justice
through a universal process yet recognize differences to tailored learning supports (Artiles,
2005). This may contribute to the concerns of researchers that the adoption and enactment of
MTSS does not promote social justice for students but simply reframes the status quo of
fragmented services through a continued focus on deficit-based assessment and intervention services (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, 2006; Sabnis, et al., 2020). For instance, Sabnis et al. (2020) questions if MTSS is enough to disrupt the historical, economic and institutionalized oppression of minoritized students. In the same sense, Sabnis et al. (2020) summarized the work of Park & Datnow (2009) and discussed that blame for undesirable policy outcomes (e.g., oppression associated with implementation of MTSS) often falls on educators and not systemic factors or policies in place. In addition, Thorius and Maxcy (2015) noted that MTSS does not enter a neutral school system and is often molded by the current system structures, resources and environment.

Another criticism involves intervention fidelity. Intervention fidelity is a key piece in ensuring interventions are effective for student progress within an MTSS. However, intervention fidelity measures often do not document the learning environment or other factors that are beyond the established intervention protocols (Artiles et al., 2010). This can be particularly problematic for students (e.g., SWDs, students from minority backgrounds) who do not fit the monolithic measurement of specific tools within MTSS. For example, a student who is receiving a specific intervention might not be progressing at an effective rate of improvement, yet it is noted that the intervention was implemented with high fidelity. Even though the fidelity measure might be inaccurate, that student might be inaccurately referred to additional or special education services.

Sabnis et al. (2020) also noted that in the large scale research studies that claim MTSS reduces the number of students of color in special education (e.g., Bollman, Silbergliitt, & Gibbons, 2007; VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007), only focus on the number of students of color who were not identified for special education. Those same studies did not clarify the
impact of MTSS on the proportional rate of students of color in special education as compared to white students. Overall, Sabnis et al. (2020) argued that outlining the reduced the number of students of color who were not identified for special education should be examined more closely to determine how MTSS is supporting student of color compared to their white classmates. Overall, even though MTSS is intended to be a universal and social justice promoting framework within education, there are still systematic and social inequalities that plague the framework.

Although criticisms of MTSS continue to exist, school districts not only are permitted by IDEA to provide identification proactive and intervention services consistent with MTSS, but ESSA, the law that sets much of education legislation in the United States also reinforces MTSS as a service delivery framework. It is outlined in multiple pieces of education legislation that MTSS is a comprehensive framework that schools, and districts can utilize to improve the outcomes of students, overall school improvement and ensure accountability. What follows is a review of MTSS and its impact on student outcomes.

**Multi-Tiered Systems of Support**

IDEIA (2004) outlined that a student’s response to scientifically based instruction and intervention could be used to determine eligibility for SLD. RTI was the first version of a MTSS that focused on providing all students with academic supports based on their response to scientifically based instruction and intervention. Tilly (2008) described this version of MTSS as a framework that encompasses three tiers of services for academic success. Tier I represent students who will become successful based on core academic curriculum and instruction. Tier I also includes preventative and proactive strategies (e.g., academic screeners, school wide behavioral expectations, various summative and formative assessments) to identify students in need of academic supports. In Tier II, students are provided with core academic curriculum and
supplemental instruction (e.g., supplemental instruction, additional time, modified instruction). Last, Tilly (2008) describes Tier III as intensive academic intervention in addition to Tier I and II services.

Although schools were widely using RTI to provide academic services, at the same time schools needed systems in place that could provide necessary behavioral services to student who were not responding to universal behavioral expectations. In 1998, the Office of Special Education Programs funded a project for the development of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS is defined as a framework for enhancing the adoption and implementation of a continuum of evidence-based interventions to achieve academically and behaviorally important outcomes for all students (Sugai et al., 2000). PBIS was intended to be a framework with an emphasis on processes or approaches, rather than a curriculum or intervention. This PBIS framework was intended to be aligned with the established RTI framework such as having multiple tiers (e.g., Tier I, Tier II, Tier III) that differed in level of intensity (e.g., class wide rules, small group skill development, behavior improvement plans).

Although each model (RTI and PBIS) emphasized the need for a continuum of services (e.g., academic, behavioral) with multiple tiers of support that involved all students, researchers only recently have discussed that MTSS involves the integration of academic (e.g., RTI) and behavioral (e.g., PBIS) systems. For example, MTSS is defined as "the practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals and applying child response data to important educational decisions" (Batsche et al., 2005). Whether a student has issues with their academic, behavioral, or social-emotional progress within the school setting, MTSS is intended to be a comprehensive framework that encompasses all multi-tiered approaches that
help children in all domains. Regardless of the content area, the critical components of MTSS involve multiple tiers of instruction, problem solving process, leadership, capacity building infrastructure, communication and collaboration, and data evaluation (“Critical components of multi-tiered system supports,” 2019). For the remainder of this paper, I will refer to MTSS as any multi-tiered, comprehensive model of services designed to serve all students regardless of need in a continuum based model of service.

**Multi-tiered systems of support and student outcomes.** Evidence exists for the efficacy and effectiveness of MTSS models for improving the academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and/or systemic outcomes of students (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2015, Bradshaw et al., 2015; Burns et al., 2005; Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Jimerson, Burns & VanDerHeyden, 2016). Research clearly supports that MTSS models significantly relate to or result in improvements in students’ reading and math performance, reduced exclusionary discipline practices such as use of office discipline referrals and out-of-school suspension and reduced special education referral and placement rates (Burns et al., 2005; Horner & Sugai, 2015; Hattie, 2015; Hughes & Dexter, 2011). In fact, randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental studies, and field studies or various versions of MTSS have produced moderate to large effects for positive student outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Burns et al., 2005; Hattie, 2015). Although a comprehensive review of all relevant studies of MTSS and student outcomes is beyond the scope of this literature review, I review a few examples below to illustrate findings from the literature.

Marston, Muyskens, Lau, and Canter (2003) examined student outcomes within Minneapolis Public Schools and the influence of their MTSS model. The study analyzed data from the school years of 1990-1994 (prior to the implementation of MTSS) and data through 2001 (following the implementation of MTSS). For this study, the MTSS model referred to as
the Minneapolis problem-solving model (MPSM), which is a collaborative consultation designed as a three-tier process and is used in the district’s special education eligibility process. Within this model, the main catalyst for implementation was the intervention assistance teams (IATs) which consisted of general and special education teachers, a school psychologist, and any other necessary specialists (e.g., nurse) and administrators. The IATs were responsible for problem solving for student success and using a four-step system for identifying analyzing and supporting students with academic difficulties (e.g., (1) describing with specificity the student’s problem, (2) generating and implementing strategies for instructional intervention, (3) monitoring student progress and evaluating effectiveness of instruction, and (4) continuing this cycle as necessary).

Throughout the implementation of the Minneapolis Public Schools’ MTSS model, the number of students receiving services under special education remained consistent throughout the years, the rate of special education eligibility decreased slightly for students who had learning disabilities (approximately 6% to just under 3%) and students who had intellectual disabilities. According to the authors, the implementation of MTSS also lowered disproportionality in terms of the rate of African-American students being found eligible for special education. Even though this study showed promise in the link between MTSS implementation and identification of students who need special education services, one must note that the researchers did not demonstrate experimental control, so the effects of MTSS should be interpreted with caution.

Torgeson (2009) examined the effect of the implementation of an MTSS through the implementation of an early reading prevention program known as Reading First in the state of Florida. The sample included over three hundred schools (318) starting in the 2003-2004 school year. After following these schools for three years, the researcher found an 81% decrease (from
approximately 2% to 0.4%) in the amount of kindergarten students identified as having a learning disability. Similar decreases in students identified as having a learning disability were noted in other grades such as 67% decrease in first grade, 53% decrease in second grade and 42% decrease in third grade. Another finding from the research was that the percentage of students within the sample who were scoring at or below the 20th percentile in reading comprehension ranged from a 30 to 40% decrease for students in kindergarten through third grade. These findings indicated the potential for MTSS to help improve student achievement and reduce the numbers of individuals identified with SLD. However it is also important to note that there were no experimental methods utilized in this study and results should be interrupted with caution.

Mellard et al. (2012) conducted research to examine the influence of the implementation of MTSS on school wide reading achievement. The researchers used a total of five schools filtered through a review process of 40 schools. This review process was intended to examine each schools’ implementation of components related to MTSS (e.g., tiered format, data based decision making, progress monitoring systems). Each school in the sample was at the elementary-level and ranged from 366 to 977 students. To measure the school wide reading achievement, Mellard et al. (2012) used reading probes from the DIBELS, however, some schools within the sample had already utilized standardized reading exams that were used. The researchers found that one school who was implementing MTSS at sufficient level (based on the filtering system) in the sample started with school wide performance below the reading assessment (e.g., DIBELS, standardized reading exams) norms, but increased significantly throughout the school year. The other schools who were implementing MTSS at sufficient level (based on the filtering system) within the sample started the year off with reading levels above...
the established norms and three of these four schools increased above the expected rate throughout the year. Although some of the schools within this study did not achieve at the expected rate, this study showed promise that MTSS can improve student achievement in reading in various elementary schools. However, without a randomized controlled trial, the researchers could not provide a causal link between MTSS and academic achievement.

In addition, both Burns et al. (2005) and Hughes and Dexter (2011) provided a review of studies that examined the effectiveness of MTSS (specifically RTI) on student achievement. Burns et al. (2005) examined four MTSS models (i.e., Heartland Agency Model, Ohio’s Intervention Based Assessment Model, Pennsylvania’s Instruction Support Teams Model, and The Minneapolis Public School’s Problem-Solving Model) and other sources of research that examined the effect of MTSS models. The researchers examined the impact of MTSS on systemic and student outcomes and determined the models influenced the number of students identified as having a disability. Burns et al. (2005) used a specific set of criteria in order to filter all necessary studies. For a study to be involved in their review, the study must (1) have implemented an intervention (e.g., intensive instruction) or a systemic intervention (e.g., a problem solving model) with children experiencing academic difficulties or identified a learning disability, (2) have provided measures of either individual student learning (e.g., progress monitoring) or systemic outcomes (e.g., number of children identified as having a specific learning disability), (3) have used a unit of analysis that was either the individual students or school buildings, (4) have included at least one between-group comparison and/or at least one within-group comparison for the outcomes measures, (5) have presented quantitative data that could be used to compute effect sizes and (6) have been written in English. Through the research search, the researcher found 21 articles that met the inclusion criteria.
Burns et al. (2005) examined two main outcome variables which were student outcomes (e.g., academic skill assessments, estimates of growth, time on task and task completion in relation to academic interventions) and systemic outcomes (e.g., referrals or placements in special education, student time spent in special education services, and number of students retained). With these measures and variables, a total of 25 effect sizes ranged from 0.18 to 6.71, with a median effect size of 1.49 ($M = 1.09, SD = 1.43$). Specifically, student ($M = .96, SD = .77$) and systemic outcomes ($M = 1.53, SD = 1.02$) median effect sizes ranged from 0.72 to 1.28. The researcher also compared university-based and field-based MTSS models. They found that MTSS models implemented in the field had a mean effect size of 1.73 ($SD = 0.99$) for systemic variables and a mean effect size of 0.62 ($SD = 0.33$) for student outcomes. However, MTSS models implemented by university faculty for research differed. Those models had a mean effect size of .47 ($SD = .07$) for systemic outcomes and 1.23 ($SD = .95$) for student outcomes. Finally, the study examined the percentages of nonresponders (e.g., children who did not improve at the rate of the study’s operational definition of adequate responsiveness to an intervention). Of the 21 studies, only 11 studies reported a percentage of children who were classified as nonresponders, which ranged from as low as 2.7% to as high as 44.0% ($M = 19.8, SD = 12.5$). Also, those studies reported an average of 1.26% ($SD = 0.65$) of the student population was referred for a special education eligibility assessment and 5.98% ($SD = 2.97$) were referred to the problem-solving team within the MTSS model.

Overall, Burns et al. (2005) found “consistently strong effects of MTSS implementation in practice” (p. 388), as well as all sites that were implementing MTSS had improved in both systemic and student outcomes. Burns et al. (2005) also found that less than 2% of the students within the studies were identified as having a SLD. Another key notion to consider is that the
review found approximately 6% of the student population participated in the MTSS model across all school sites. Yet, the results showed that of that student population (e.g., 6%) 66% of the students who received additional supports within the MTSS model benefited from the tiered levels of support and did not require special education identification.

Hughes and Dexter (2011) also completed a review that examined 13 studies that focused on the effectiveness of MTSS on student outcomes, either academically or behaviorally, as well as outcomes for students receiving special education services. Studies that were included had at least two defined tiers within their model, quantitative progress monitoring data for each tier and within the elementary setting. It is important to note that the majority of the students in the included studies were considered at-risk for academic failure. For measuring outcomes, the researchers used academic achievement data (e.g., reading, math), behaviors related to academics (e.g., time on task), data on problematic behaviors, standardized performance data (e.g., statewide exams) and data on special education referrals or placement. The authors also noted the chosen methodology of the collected studies which included single case, historical control, quasi-experimental and descriptive designs. The authors reported that “all of the studies examining the impact of an RTI [MTSS] program on academic achievement or performance resulted in some level of improvement” (Hughes and Dexter, 2011 p. 9). However, none of these studies had a random control trial or could provide evidence for direct effects of the implementation of MTSS. Another key finding from the researchers was that special education referral and placement rates remained fairly constant, with few studies showing slight decreases. Finally, it should be noted that the authors outlined that there were several supporting factors in place for the implementation and sustainability of RTI (e.g., extensive, and ongoing professional
development, administrative support, teacher buy-in, and adequate meeting time, intervention attention).

Last, Hattie (2015) completed a synthesis of multiple meta-analyses of research on variables that influences student achievement. The synthesis consisted of roughly 1,200 meta-analyses of different variables, 65,000 research studies, 150,000 effect sizes, and about 250 million students. The research studies all were related to the influence of some program, policy, or intervention on academic achievement for students in kindergarten through the end of high school. In one of the many meta-analyses, Hattie (2015) examined the influence of MTSS on student achievement. Hattie (2015) conceptualized MTSS as a structured framework intended to provide supporting interventions to students at-risk for academic failure to achieve at the expected rate of their peers. Hattie (2015) also outlined that MTSS is intended for students at-risk for academic failure, but the concepts behind MTSS are applicable for all students. In order to synthesize and compare all the data, Hattie (2015) used the effect-size statistic. Typically, an effect size of 0.2 or less is considered small, between 0.2 and 0.6 is considered average, and any effect size greater than .6 is considered large (Hattie, 2015). Through the synthesis of meta-analyses regarding MTSS, Hattie (2015) calculated an overall effect size of 1.07. MTSS had the sixth highest influence on student achievement in Hattie’s review behind teacher estimates of achievement ($d = 1.62$), collective teacher efficacy ($d = 1.57$), self-reported grades ($d = 1.33$), Piagetian programs ($d = 1.28$) and conceptual change programs ($d = 1.16$; Hattie, 2015). The average effective size for all variables examined (e.g., roughly 1,200) was 0.4 (Hattie, 2015).

In regard to the critiques to MTSS outlined in the literature, Marson et al. (2003) stated that the implementation of MTSS can be difficult to generalize across schools and districts. Due to the lack random control trial studies as well as comparison studies with student demographics,
school districts across the nation are still not provided answers regarding the impact of MTSS on various groups of students (Marson et al., 2003). Sugai and Horner (2009) also agree that the experimental support for using MTSS for making high-stakes decisions is limited. They also outline that professionals should be cautious because of the “questionable psychometric measures utilized, standardizing assessment procedures, utilization of cut-scores and benchmarks for the determination of response to intervention, questionable intervention effectiveness, relevance, and efficiency, lack of consideration of culture and lack of applicability across disability, age, and grade” (p. 226).

In addition, Marson et al. (2003) stated that special education referrals depend on local standards and varies between educational professionals, schools, and districts. For example, two districts might use the same MTSS or problem solving process, but varying student results (e.g., a student might receive supplemental services in one district and the other receive intensive services in another). The MTSS framework attempts to operationalize and standardize those procedures, however, due to the complex nature schools will vary in the time dedicated to the process, established local norms, chosen evidence-based interventions, and sources of data. Last, Torgeson (2009) outlined in some cases, schools could spend a significant amount of time selecting and implementing interventions that are not sufficiently powerful. In these circumstances, an MTSS model could actually delay identification of students in needed for intensive instructional services, which relates to the previously replaced model of special education identification (e.g., discrepancy model).

There are also concerns with the research to-date on MTSS implementation and the capacity of educators to implement the model with fidelity. For instance, Hughes and Dexter (2011) reviewed several researcher-led and field studies that provided positive results for student
outcomes associated with MTSS implementation. However, Hughes and Dexter (2011) were critical about the studies overall rigor and they questioned the ability to draw causal links between the implementation of MTSS and student outcomes. Furthermore, another research group conducted a randomized controlled trial and found no significant evidence for the implementation of MTSS and academic outcomes for students who were at-risk for academic failure (Balu et al., 2015). However, proponents of MTSS criticized Balu et al.’s (2015) study for its conceptualization and lack of attention to fidelity of implementation (Balu et al., 2015; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Similarly, other researchers have expressed the need for school leadership and staff to engage educators in effective and continuous professional learning to maintain MTSS implementation (Castillo, Dorman et al., 2016; Kratchwill et al., 2007; Sugai & Horner, 2009). This is another factor that might vary across schools and district that directly influence the consistent implementation of MTSS. In sum, it is important to attend to implementing MTSS with fidelity when considering adoption of the model. There also have been tools developed to evaluate MTSS and the implementation of their critical components (Crone et al., 2015; Lewis, McIntosh, Simonsen, Mitchell, & Hatton, 2017; Noltemeyer, Boone, & Sansosti, 2014; Martin, Nantais, Harms, & Huth, 2015). With the concerns of the implementation fidelity of MTSS, those who provide support for implementing the model should attend to systematically supporting educators’ tasked with implementation of the critical components.

**Systems Change Approaches**

Within the current literature, there are multiple models for systems change (e.g., Castillo & Curtis 2014; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan 2010; Hall & Hord 2011). Models of systems change are frameworks that outline either natural or human-made systems, the system’s sub-systems, the cohesiveness throughout the system and daily functioning of those within the system. Models of
system change are also a guideline for professionals looking to lead system change efforts (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan 2010; Hall & Hord 2011). For example, Fullan (2010) outlined seven big ideas for whole system reform that drive systems change in education (e.g., fostering a belief that all children can learn, identifying and remaining focused on a small number of key priorities, etc.). Hall and Hord (2016) provided 12 principles for organizational change (e.g., change is a process, facilitating change is a team effort, interventions are the actions and events that are the key to successful change, etc.). Although these models and other versions have some unique variations, it is beyond the scope of this paper to outline all models. Given that scholars and practitioners focused on the implementation of MTSS have focused on Fixsen, Blase, Duda, Naoom and Van Dyke’s (2010) model of implementation science, I will focus my review of systems change approaches on their model. However, during the data analysis phase of this study if my results lead me to another conclusion, I will be open to consider other models of system change. Fixsen et al. (2010) developed their model based on a review of systems change research (see Fixsen et al., 2005). The model has been refined based on the efforts of those leading system change and is meant to be utilized to facilitate implementation of new practices. Specifically, current versions of the model include four stages of implementation, Exploration and Adoption, Installation, Initial Implementation, and Full Implementation. Within the next sections, I will review each stage of the Fixsen et al. (2010) model.

**Exploration and adoption.** Whenever there is an adoption of a new innovation or practices, the new practices should be aimed at a particular need related to the system. The specific need might involve all students or a particular population of students (e.g., individual student, subgroup of students, whole grade). The Exploration and Adoption stage is defined by inquiry and planning around the identified need, exploring different innovations or new practices
and their components, making connections to the local context, and ultimately making a decision to adopt a certain innovation (Fixsen et al., 2010). After completing this stage, teams or individuals within the system often have a common understanding of the need for change as well as the proposed change. Also, teams and individuals within the system will be identifying the resources necessary to move forward (Fixsen et al., 2010). Leaders must consider the practicality and feasibility (e.g., time, resources, alignment with vision, distribution of responsibility) of a newly selected intervention. Another key aspect of this stage is considering the current interventions in place and how the new innovation or practice will work in conjunction. Finally, those leading the change should gather information from not only individuals within the school, but also should include the community and local organizations during this stage. The potential information should result in a plan with timelines to allow the system to proceed with the adoption of the innovation.

Program installation. After leaders of the system change decide to adopt an innovation, the second stage of the implementation framework begins, Program Installation. This stage’s main focus is allocating and organizing resources in ways that will support future implementation, capacity building, and alignment of policies, procedures, and communication streams (Fixsen et al., 2010). During this stage those who are tasked with implementing the innovation start to take action on putting components in place outlined during Exploration and Adoption. For this stage to be successful, there needs to be activation of implementation drivers (described below; Fixsen et al., 2010). Typically, leaders of the system change focus on establishing material (e.g., funding sources) and humanistic (e.g., existing human resources and hiring of new staff) support to streamline communication, and develop polices, processes and procedures during this stage.
**Initial implementation.** Initial Implementation is the first attempt for the school or system to implement the newly chosen innovation for which they have been preparing in the previous stages (Fixsen et al., 2010). During this stage, there are potentially compelling forces of fear of change, difficulty with implementation and investment in the status quo within all who are involved with the initial change. Attempts to implement new practices may end at this point because of the overwhelming influence on practice and system management (Fixsen et al., 2010). Within this stage, there are multiple factors that can greatly contribute to success of the initial implementation. For example, non-school based support (e.g., district-level administration, educational consultants) can provide support in building capacity through performance feedback and job-embedded coaching (Fixsen et al., 2013). Another factor that might have influence during this stage is the reaction of the staff during implementation. Teachers, staff as well as various stakeholders might question the proposed change, verbally express their conflicts with the proposed change and possibly go back to practices they used before (Fixsen et al., 2013). Leaders of system change must appoint the necessary individuals to prepare for conflicts and utilize implementation drivers to address areas of need.

**Full implementation.** This last stage of the implementation science framework is Full Implementation. This stage is the point where the learning from the implemented innovation becomes standard practice and there are overall high levels of fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2010). It is important to note that many organizations struggle to get to this stage because of the amount of time and commitment system change entails. Often it takes anywhere from two to five years to arrive at this stage (Fixsen et al., 2005). Ideally at this stage, desired outcomes will be present, yet typically there are still ongoing challenges. Leaders of the system change need to plan for
appropriately withdrawing previously accessed external supports and for supporting new staff who need to be trained on the innovation.

Finally, high fidelity of the system change must be in place prior to completing the implementation framework (Fixsen et al., 2005). Fixsen et al. (2005) also discuss separate phases of implementation which are innovation and sustainability. Each time a system attempts to innovate, it provides an opportunity to learn more about the program as a whole as well as the conditions under which the innovation can be used with fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2005). Also, new innovations can be seen as opportunities to expand both treatment practice and programs as well as implementation practices and programs (Fixsen et al., 2005). However, each innovation proposed to the system might happen to early or create difficulty for individuals within the system. Often an organization such as a school might innovate for additional needs before reaching full implementation as an attempt to address specific needs or eliminate barriers to the intended innovation. In this scenario, providing additional innovation to a system can reduce the overall fidelity of the intended innovation. Specifically, within a school setting, practitioners that are overwhelmed with the new innovation, might not be able to implement all the components of an evidence-based intervention that is within the intended innovation. Fixsen et al. (2005) recommend that schools aim to implement new practices with fidelity first, and then innovate to support those additional needs.

Similarly, during any system wide change, sustainability should be considered from the earliest stages. Sustainability is a key concept and it relies on high levels of implementation within a system in order to maintain positive effects (McIntosh, Filter, Bennett, Ryan, & Sugai, 2010). The goal of sustainability is to allow changes to survive in an ever changing system or world (Fixsen et al., 2005). Within a school setting, factors such as environmental fit, perceived
value of the intended change, the effectiveness and efficiency of practices, using data to make decisions and adaptations to processes over time are all factors that can contribute to sustainability (McIntosh et al., 2010). Other actions that could improve sustainability include planning for the replacement of school staff and leadership and continuously obtaining necessary funding or external support.

In addition to considering the multiple stages of the Fixsen et al. (2005) model, it is critical to recognize and support implementation through the strategic use of implementation drivers. Within the Fixsen et al. (2005) model there are three types of drivers, competency drivers, organization drivers and leadership drivers. Competency drivers involve professional development processes that are aligned and purposefully advance the beliefs, knowledge, and skills of educators necessary to implement key practices. Specific tasks associated with competency drivers include selection of stakeholders, initial and ongoing training, and ongoing job-embedded coaching supports (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Second, organization drivers include necessary school- or district-level structures to allow practitioners to implement the intended evidence-based practices (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fixsen et al., 2009). These drivers involve facilitative administrators (e.g., superintendent, principals) who create an environment that allows for implementation of new practices as well as develop data systems to identify, implement, and evaluate systems interventions to facilitate the use of key practices (Fixsen et al., 2009). For example, changes to policy, funding allocations and allotting time for organization drivers and facilitative administrators to engage in new practices.

Finally, leadership drivers involve primary facilitators of the intended systems change. Implementation science models outline that leadership is both a technical and an adaptive
process (Eagle et al., 2015). Technical leadership includes management of schools such as setting performance goals, managing staff time, budgeting, scheduling, and solving day to day problems (Stacey, Griffm, & Shaw, 2000). On the other hand, adaptive leadership refers to skills in supporting individuals within the system through the complexities of change when next steps, strategies, and solutions are not clear (Stacey et al., 2000). This approach may include practices such as empowering teachers, staff, and families to identify and define problems, facilitating consensus regarding strategies, and monitoring progress toward reducing or eliminating problems (Fixsen et al., 2013; Hall & Hord, 2016; Heifetz, 1994). Overall, it is required that effective administrators or leaders balance both types of leadership during times of system change as well as utilizing systems change principles and models to facilitate necessary systems change efforts.

Specifically with the school realm, Fixsen et al. (2005) outlined that often school staffs have difficulty with identifying students at risk for academic failure as well as having the proper training to implement evidence based interventions (e.g., interventions within an MTSS framework). In the same sense, one of the major contributors to effective and high fidelity implementation of MTSS is the role of leadership within a school. Educational leadership (e.g., principal) establishes the vision and expectations for change, leads efforts for building staff competencies, implements models for monitoring progress, and supports problem-solving techniques for necessary system change effort of MTSS (Louis et al., 2010; Sharatt & Fullan, 2009). However, many questions remain about the commitment and capacity of those in leadership positions facilitating system change (e.g., being committed and actively engaged in implementation efforts and capacity building for themselves and their staff; Fixsen et al., 2005). Considering that any implementation of MTSS involves many different moving parts and
domains (e.g., screening, assessment, instruction, problem solving, progress monitoring), educational leadership is in a critical position to implement effective system change within a MTSS. In the next section, I expand on the role of leadership in facilitating change by discussing distributed leadership approaches to implementing new practices.

**Distributed Leadership**

Although distributed leadership is a somewhat of a self-explanatory term, there is not a universally accepted definition or implementation technique (Tian et al., 2016). Various scholars have provided different definitions of the term; however, distributed leadership is informally understood as decision-making and influential practices performed by school based staff at multiple levels rather than one predominant leader (Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2009; Hartley, 2007; Lashway, 2006). Within the literature, distributed leadership has been conceptualized with two main approaches: modeling or practicing distributed leadership and comparing distributed leadership with similar concepts (e.g., teacher leadership; Tian et al., 2016). Also, within the literature, three major models have emerged from implementation and practice of distributed leadership, models offered by Spillane (2006), Gronn (2008) and Leithwood et al. (2007) (See Table 1).

Of the three major models, Spillane (2006) and Gronn (2008) are the most widely cited models for distributed leadership. The Spillane (2006) model of distributed leadership focuses on the practice centered model, that has three main components (e.g., practices of the leaders, followers, and the situation). The leaders component involves the individuals who are leaders (e.g., sole or multiple) and how they interact with each other. The follower component focuses on what type of assistance (e.g., support, resources, time) followers (e.g., classroom teachers, administrators, support staff) can contribute to the practices of leaders in different situations.
Finally, the situation component is the atmosphere or environment (e.g., school, district) in which the leaders are contributing their efforts on a daily basis. The effectiveness of the Spillane (2006) model in schools depends on the routine and tools that are already a part of a specific system. Spillane (2006), noted the importance of shared leadership (e.g., distributed leadership) not only in the leader-plus aspect (e.g., multiple individuals act as leaders), but also the practice aspect (e.g., leadership is embedded within interactions). Additionally, Spillane (2006) outlines the four main distributed leadership patterns: collaborative distribution (e.g., multiple leaders perform the same leadership practice in the same situations), collective distribution (e.g., multiple leaders perform separate but unified tasks to achieve the same goal), coordinated distribution (e.g., unique actions of multiple leaders that are performed in a specific sequence), and parallel distribution (e.g., multiple leaders perform a universal action but in different contexts). The distributed leadership model from Spillane (2006) provides a framework that leadership can use to categorize the different actions and patterns of tasks, which in turn can provide a better understanding of current methods to differentiate and administer leadership tasks.

Gronn (2008) created another influential model that conceptualizes distributed leadership as a more holistic approach. Gronn initially created a model that was similar to Spillane’s model (2006) with aspects of leader-plus and practice-centered tendencies. However, he advanced Spillane’s (2006) model with a more practical or normative example of distributed leadership. Gronn’s (2008) model expanded on Spillane (2006) by eliminating the notions of individualism and the formal-informal leadership structure. The main focus of this model is the idea that individual, formal leaders remain significant while simultaneously co-existing with collective forms of leadership. Gronn (2008) also outlined that distributed leadership continuously evolves.
over time and is dependent on the context and situation. These notions lead to the overall conclusion that the Gronn (2008) model has no set pattern. The Gronn (2008) model also identifies three types of action in distributed leadership: spontaneous collaboration (e.g., interactions among staff in productive task accomplishment), intuitive working relations (e.g., common understandings and shared approaches in problem solving that can result from close interconnectedness in the team) and institutionalized practices (e.g., organizational structures such as school problem solving teams).

The last major model of distributed leadership that is present within the literature is the Leithwood et al. (2007) model of distributed leadership alignment. This model differs from Spillane (2006) and Gronn (2008) due to its focus on showcasing practical example, rather than outlining the structure of leadership. Leithwood et al. (2007) outlines the four major types of alignment that could potentially form within a leadership dynamic within a school. First is planful alignment, which is when the tasks or functions of those providing leadership have been given prior thoughtful consideration by all organizational members. These agreements between the leadership and organization members have been worked out among various sources of leadership (e.g., principals, heads of departments, teachers, educational specialists) and the delegation of tasks are assigned by position and capacity. The second type of alignment involves spontaneous alignment in which leadership tasks and functions are distributed with little or no planning. Often there are assumptions that certain individuals (e.g., principals, teacher leaders) are solely responsible for certain tasks to be carried out. These assumptions can lead to instability and miscommunication across leadership sources on the delegation of school governance tasks. Ultimately, this can result in leaders continuously deriving responsibilities from situations that arise, without prior consideration. The third type of alignment is spontaneous misalignment,
which is similar to spontaneous alignment; however, the outcome of the specific tasks is less consistent in terms of alignment with the innovation. For example, leadership within a school might provide direction to complete a task that does not relate to the current practices of staff or the overall vision or mission of the school. The amount of misalignment may vary from small to extensive, which can affect both short- and long-term organizational productivity. Often, those within the system that are involved in this type of alignment remain open to the idea of adopting either planful or spontaneous alignment strategies. This can ultimately increase the amount of flexibility within system members to return to some sort of planned alignment. The last alignment type is anarchic misalignment, which is characterized by active rejection by the leaders within the organization that often have influence others on how leadership should be conducted. Typically, as a result, leadership teams behave highly independently without coherence and compete with other school based teams on organizational goals and access to resources. This misalignment is influenced by individuals outside (e.g., community, political influence) and within a certain school (e.g., leadership style, school culture). This alignment can also lead to individuals being more concerned with the position they hold in the organization compared to the overall functioning of the organization. Research from Leithwood et al. (2006; 2007) determined that planful alignment has the greatest potential for short and long term changes within an organization. Leithwood et al. (2006; 2007) also suggested that spontaneous misalignment and anarchic alignment were likely to have negative effects on organizational change as well as short- and long term leadership goals.
Table 1. Major Theories of Distributed Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Model of Distributed leadership</th>
<th>Components of Model</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Spillane (2006)</em></td>
<td>• Practice centered model</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Focuses on practices of the leaders, followers, and situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Importance is put on shared leadership (i.e., leader-plus aspect, practice aspect)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Four main patterns: collaborated distribution, collective distribution, coordinated distribution, parallel distribution</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Gronn (2008)</em></td>
<td>• Model is similar to the Spillane model (2006) with aspects of leader-plus and practice-centered tendencies.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Expanded from Spillane by taking out the individualism and formal-informal leadership structure.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Focuses on the idea that individual leaders are equally significant as well as able to simultaneously co-exist in addition to collective forms of leadership.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Outlines that distributed leadership continuously evolves and depends on the context and situation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• No set pattern for leadership</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Identifies three types of action: spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practices</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Leithwood et al. (2007)</em></td>
<td>• Model outlines four types of alignment of distributed leadership; planful alignment, spontaneous alignment, spontaneous misalignment, and anarchic misalignment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Planful alignment has the greatest potential for short and long term changes within an organization.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Spontaneous misalignment and anarchic alignment were likely to have negative effects on organizational change as well as short- and long term leadership goals.</td>
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In sum, all major models have different sets of patterns or actions regarding the formation or dynamics of distributed leadership. For example, Spillane (2006) outlined how leadership should be created within the model, which differs from Gronn (2008) that expressed the fluidity and the importance of interactions between formal and informal leaders. On the other hand,
Leithwood et al. (2007) solely provided an outline of the interactions between individuals within the distributed leadership. A similarity across models was the examination of the interactions between the formal leaders (e.g., principal), informal leaders (or followers) and the environment in which they interact to facilitate effective practice. In alignment with that point, Leithwood et al. (2007) also found that educators believed that distributed leadership models are created in many different ways. However, all distributed leadership models required active forms of engagement between teachers and school administrators for school wide decision making. To conclude, one major difference between all three models is the flexibility of distributed leadership. For example, Spillane (2006) focused more on the interactions between leaders, followers, and the situation and less about the growth of distributed leadership. However, both Gronn (2008) and Leithwood et al. (2007) discussed how an organization’s distributed leadership can evolve over time and change purpose and effectiveness.

Even with the multiple theoretical representations of distributed leadership, there is not a unified understanding of the theoretical frameworks in the literature or within natural settings. For example, some believe that distributed leadership is more of a universal term that is conceptual in practice and can be adapted within any situation (Harris 2007; Spillane 2006). Along the same lines, commonly distributed leadership is known as other terms such as team leadership or teacher leadership (Tian et al., 2016). Tian et al. (2016) discussed that studies that involved teacher and team leadership models focused more on perspective of members, yet there is no investigation of interactions between various levels of professionals or leaders within a school. Also, Tian et al. (2016) claimed there are no systematic approaches or literature that directly focuses on the overlap between distributed leadership and other related concepts (e.g., shared leadership, teacher leadership).
In conclusion, there are multiple models of distributed leadership that can be adapted to the school setting and possibly support leadership in facilitating and maintaining systems implementation and change. However, there is not a universal definition or conceptualization of distributed leadership, which might contribute to the various functions and effects it plays within the school setting. It is my belief that examining the conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership as well as connecting it to established outlined theories could benefit leadership within school to potentially improve educational practices and student outcomes.

Influences of Distributed Leadership

All previously discussed models of distributed leadership indicate that the collective capacity of a group of school based professionals can be more beneficial than the skills from a sole leader. Similar to the work of a group of school based professionals (e.g., school leadership team), distributed leadership models are theorized to impact a number of important educational outcomes. This section outlines the different influences that distributed leadership has on student outcomes, organization and membership perceptions and school based implementation of innovations. It is important to note that all of the studies reviewed used research methodologies that do not allow for inferences of a direct link between distributed leadership and the established outcomes variables.

Student outcomes. To begin, Harris (2009) reviewed research that examined the link between distributed leadership and student outcomes. From the literature search, Harris (2009) found two major initial studies that looked into this linkage, Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) and Silins and Mulford (2002). However, it is important to note that both studies occurred before the major distributed leadership models (e.g., Spillane, 2006; Gronn 2008; Leithwood et al, 2007) were widely articulated in the literature. These studies examined transformational leadership
which was a leadership style that spread power to organizational members who were willing to build collective aspirations for mastery of a new change within their community (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). For example, a teacher who was willing to lead a specific innovation and ultimately guide other staff members within the school on the new practices. Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2000) findings suggested that distributing a larger proportion of leadership activities to teachers can have a positive influence on teacher effectiveness and student engagement. They then theorized that this could potentially create an atmosphere for increased student achievement. In the same sense, Silins and Mulford (2002) suggested that student outcomes can improve when leadership sources are distributed throughout the school staff and when teachers are empowered in areas of importance to them. Since both studies did not examine the previously discussed models of distributed leadership, I will not provide in-depth analysis here. However, the following studies will be described in detail, in efforts to outline the effectiveness studies of distributed leadership on student outcomes.

Starting in 1999, Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy as well as Institute for Policy Research were funded by the National Science Foundation and the Spencer Foundation to work on the “Distributed Leadership Project” (DLS; Sherer, 2004). A research team within the Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy collaborated with the Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research to perform a four year long longitudinal case study of leadership practices in eight urban elementary schools from 1999-2003. The researchers utilized the Spillane (2006) model of distributed leadership and examined it was related to instructional improvement in math and literacy. The DLS’s main purpose was to capture leadership practices through the Spillane (2006) model in two ways: examine what leaders and followers do, and by investigating their perspectives of their assigned
tasks. Over the course of the study, the research team collected qualitative data through interviews of various leaders and teachers, observations of teaching and leading (e.g., meetings), and relevant artifacts (e.g., meeting notes, documents related to student achievement in math and literacy). The research team found that leadership was distributed differently across the math and literacy (Sherer, 2004). The qualitative data showed that a major theme was the school put more priority on literacy compared to math. Relating directly to various models of distributed leadership, Sherer (2004) also found that the studied schools that were attempting to increase student outcomes in literacy expanded leadership from a single formal leader to multiple leaders. However, schools did not follow that same pattern to increase student outcomes in math. As a key limitation, Sherer (2004) noted that there needs to be continued research understanding school leadership around subject matter differences to influence instruction.

Another key study examining the relationship between distributed leadership and student outcomes was the mixed methods study performed by Hallinger and Heck (2009). This study was aimed to advance the understanding of the strategies that schools use in order to provide student improvement. They performed a post-hoc analysis of improvement in leadership, school processes and student learning outcomes. More specifically, a multilevel growth model technique was used to examine the changing relationships between school context, school processes and learning outcomes over a three year period. The authors also conducted 21 qualitative case studies of high-change elementary schools (e.g., making 20% or more growth in third grade reading proficiency levels for NCLB standards during the three-year period). The data collected were from third grade teachers and students from 200 elementary schools ($n = 13,391$). The participants provided their perceptions of key aspects of their school’s organization and operations that contributed to school improvement (e.g., distributed leadership, school
communication, staff professional capacity, stakeholder involvement). Regarding distributed leadership, Hallinger and Heck (2009) focused on the development of distributed, shared, or collaborative leadership in times of new school reform policies (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Each teacher was asked to provide three types of data for the study; (1) demographic data on their student population (e.g., socioeconomic status, race), (1) data on school processes that effect school improvement (e.g., Distributed Leadership, staff professional capacity) and (3) their student’s outcome data from the results of annual reading and math tests.

Both the quantitative and qualitative portions of Hallinger and Heck (2009) provided favorable results for distributed leadership. The results from the quantitative analysis suggested a linkage between distributed leadership and school capacity for improvement. Specifically, distributed leadership correlated with long term school improvement. For example, on average, as the capacity for distributed leadership increased in schools so did the capacity to improve, over a three year span. From the qualitative perspective, Hallinger and Heck (2009) found that the majority of high change schools within the study (71%) indicated that distributed leadership was a key factor in their school improvement effort. Those same schools specifically noted that distributed leadership was a key factor for increasing student outcomes in reading. In sum, both quantitative and qualitative methods suggested favorable results for the influence of distributed leadership on promoting student outcomes.

Last, Seashore et al. (2010) completed research on the distribution of leadership, specifically sources of leadership influence and its relationship with student performance. Seashore et al. (2010) used the term collective leadership, which was defined as, “the extent of influence that organizational members and stakeholders exert on decisions in their schools” (p.
19). Although collective leadership does not directly align with the most widely cited models of distributed leadership, it is comparable to other definitions of distributed leadership (Smylie et al., 2007).

Seashore et al. (2010) used qualitative data from interviews with school staff in five different schools. The schools that participated (i.e., four elementary school and one high school) either had a high or low rating of collective leadership. To measure the level of collective leadership within each school, Seashore et al. (2010) surveyed each school’s teachers with a nine item measure that allowed for ratings of multiple source of influence (e.g., district administrators, principals, individual teachers, teacher leaders, staff teams, parent advisory groups). With each source of influence, the teachers were instructed to rate the extent of direct influence on school decisions and the researchers derived a measure of collective leadership to make comparisons. Based on the results from the collective leadership measure, Seashore et al. (2010) then used purposive sampling to collected qualitative data through multiple interviews with school administrators and teachers at each school. Seashore et al. (2010) collected qualitative data mostly at schools that rated high on collective leadership and also had high student achievement (e.g., achievement data from state websites). Even though this is not a direct result of the study, it is important to note that the schools within the study that had low rated collective leadership had either middle or low student achievement.

Seashore et al. (2010) found multiple links between organizational performance and distributed leadership. For example, the researchers found that distributed leadership has a larger impact on student achievement than individual leadership. Also, staff members of higher preforming schools more often had influence on school decisions compared to those in lower preforming schools. Along the same lines, Seashore et al. (2010) found positive results in the
relationship between collective leadership and teachers’ perceived instructional ability and schools’ professional learning community. Both of these variables allow for an environment in which teachers can work together to improve their instructional strategies and potentially improve student learning. Last, another notable finding was that regardless of the level of collective leadership, teachers believed that even if leadership was distributed, it often had a hierarchical manner.

It is evident within the literature that distributed leadership is not universally operationalized, yet there are multiple studies that provide potential evidence for the linkage of distributed leadership and student outcomes. Even though distributed leadership is intended for positive student outcomes, adults are a key factor in its facilitation and effectiveness. Educational professionals (e.g., principals, teachers, support staff) the ones who are able to impact the implementation and success of distributed leadership models for student success. In the next section, I outline research that investigated distributed leadership models’ influences on a school organization, including distributed leadership’s influence on school members (e.g., teachers, support staff).

**Organization/membership effects.** Aligning with the Spillane (2006) and Gronn (2008) models of distributed leadership, it is important to examine those within a distributed leadership model to examine its effectiveness. It is important to outline research that has examined the relation between organizational outcomes and membership satisfaction within distributed leadership, due to the reliance on school based professionals’ ability to maintain the model for school improvement. Specifically, research in this area has focused on the influence of distributed leadership techniques on organizational functions within a school, and the perceptions
of educators involved in distributed leadership. This section will provide multiple examples of how a distributed leadership model influences humanistic factors within an organization.

To begin, Hulpia et al. (2009a) preformed a quantitative study that examined the perceptions of teachers and teacher leaders on distributed leadership, participative decision-making, and the collaboration of leadership teams. The research specifically examined the perceptions of each school staff’s organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The researchers examined large Flemish secondary schools ($N = 46$), where teacher leaders performed their ‘leadership’ assignments (e.g., redesigning school concepts, mentoring, problem solving) on a full-time or part-time basis. The teachers had leadership responsibility, but no formal authority over other teachers. The researchers used a theoretical framework of distributed leadership that modeled instructional and transformational leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Within the study, Hulpia et al. (2009a) examined two practices successful leaders should exercise (i.e., support and supervision) and demographic information (e.g., years of job experience, age, race). Support focused on the leader’s role in promoting a collective school mission as well as energizing the members of an organization (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) and supervision focused on the instructional leadership in daily monitoring, overseeing and influencing of a school organization (Bamburg & Andrews, 1990; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Hulpia et al. (2009a) provided surveys to all principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders ($n = 248$), and the teachers ($n = 1522$) of the 46 secondary schools. For the purpose of this study, Hulpia et al. (2009a) developed and used a self-created and psychometrically validated tool named the Distributed Leadership Inventory (DLI; Hulpia Devos, & Rosseel, 2009b). The DLI consisted multiple domains that was intended to operationalize distributed
leadership. For example, the DLI examined: (a) the formal distribution of leadership functions (e.g., distribution of leadership functions among the leadership team, consisting of individuals in formal leadership positions) (b) the cohesive leadership team (e.g., collaborative and coherent team characterized by clear roles and a consensus among its members regarding the goals of the team) and (c) the participation of teachers (Hulpia et al., 2009a). Participants were instructed to provide a rating on a five-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always) on the individual leadership functions of the principal, the assistant principals, and the teacher leaders. In addition, participants were asked how they perceive the connectiveness of the leadership teams on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The final section of the questionnaire examined job satisfaction of teachers and teacher leaders and organizational commitment.

For data analysis, descriptive statistics of the study variables were analyzed as well as multiple regression was used to examine the relationship between the independent (e.g., maximum leadership functions, formal distribution of leadership functions) and the dependent variables (e.g., organizational commitment and job satisfaction of teachers and teacher leaders). Based on the responses from all participants, the school principal is the most influential contributor to distributed leadership. The results suggested that the highest centralized leadership function was supervision, while supportive leadership is more equally distributed among the leaders within the school (e.g., principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders). For example, often principals are solely responsible for the supervision aspect of leadership, yet multiple staff members often take lead in the supportive leadership aspect.

In the examination of the perceptions of teachers and teacher leaders on their abilities within the leadership models, the results suggested that teachers and teacher leaders believed that
they can moderately participate in school decision making. However, the results indicated that the within a model of distributed leadership, teachers and teacher leaders feel highly committed to the school and are highly satisfied with their job. In sum, the findings provided by Hulpia et al. (2009a) showcased that schools with leadership that has a high amount of coherence and support, and evenly distributed can result in more organizational commitment of staff as well as higher job satisfaction.

With a qualitative approach, Leithwood et al. (2007), examined the organizational effects of distributed leadership models within a large urban and suburban district in southern Ontario. This district served more than 100,000 students in over 20 secondary schools (e.g., Middle and High school) and over 130 elementary schools. To begin the study, eight schools were selected (four elementary and four secondary) on the basis of multiple factors such as: the tenure of the school principal (at least two years), a demonstrable commitment to a shared or distributed approach to school leadership, and evidence of improvement in student achievement. All teachers within each selected school were sent a survey requesting them to nominate one administrative coworker in their schools whom they believed were providing leadership. There was roughly 44% response rate to the survey, however, there was a total of 296 non-administrative leaders nominated. Of those 296 nominated leaders, the researchers decided to interview 19 leaders and 31 nominators. The sample of interviewees included the principal in each school and an average of seven educators. In addition, Leithwood et al. (2007) performed one focus group interview with six students. All the interviews contained questions about various concepts and practices related to the school’s leadership model (e.g., district initiatives, leaders’ practices with respect to the initiatives, influences on the distribution of leadership, the impact of distributed leadership). Leithwood et al. (2007) utilized five main themes to organize the
qualitative data which were: patterns of leadership distribution, sources of leadership functions, characteristics of non-administrative leaders, influences on the development of distributed leadership and outcomes associated with distributed leadership.

The key finding from this study was that distributed leadership models were created in many different ways. However, the main theme was that distributed leadership models required active forms of engagement between teachers and school administrators in school wide decision making (Leithwood et al., 2007). Leithwood et al. (2007) focused heavily on the influence of the principal, however, one of the key findings suggested that distributed leadership formation differs, but communication and engagement between teacher and administration of the model is necessary for school decision making. This directly relates to the study design and methods, which involves examining the communication and engagement of leadership team members to enact a distributed leadership model. I am investigating school decision making via communication and engagement to ultimately describe distributed leadership for MTSS implementation with an inductive approach.

To further examine distributed leadership models and implications of those models, Tian et al. (2016) conducted a meta-synthesis of the elements that influence distributed leadership in schools. Tian et al. (2016) outlined that there are four main concepts of distributed leadership: formal leaders’ support, climate of trust, strategic staff policy and utilization of artifacts in leadership. In terms of formal leaders’ support, research seemed to indicate that informal leadership is shaped and influenced by formal leadership (Angelle, 2010; Dinham, Ingvarson, & Kleinhenz, 2008; Hulpia, et al., 2009a; Jing-zhou et al., 2010; Law, Galton, & Wan, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane & Healey, 2010; Wright, 2008). For example, formal leaders (e.g., principals) still have a key role in creating an atmosphere of informal leadership, which
aligns with the results of Leithwood et al. (2007). On the other hand, often schools that have a sole leader who takes sole responsibility for the entire school can lead to poor performance and low morale for those within the school (Oswald & Engelbrecht, 2013; Williams, 2011). Tian et al. (2016) explained that within distributed leadership models, those who are formal leaders (e.g., principals) should be considered as the facilitators that contribute to the ability of coworkers to lead change efforts. For example, principals are a key individual for providing influence and guidance on the delegation of leadership opportunities, yet teachers used these opportunities to act as informal leaders.

Similar to Spillane (2006) and Gronn (2008), Tian et al. (2016) expressed that in any distributed leadership model, the interactions between individuals are important for leadership or school wide functions to be carried out. A key component of those interactions between those within the model is the climate of trust. For example, Oduro (2004) suggested that trust is the most frequently and commonly mentioned factor for promoting distributed leadership. In addition, Oduro (2004) outlined that trust positively impacts a principal’s ability to delegate tasks and leadership opportunities to informal leaders. The result of having a trusting climate can potentially provide an environment that allows for cohesiveness of strategic staff procedures. For example, having a climate of trust across all staff and administration can provide flexibility in the organizational structures and allow practitioners to utilize human resources without jeopardizing the hierarchical structure of a school. For example, Law, Galton and Wan (2010) conducted a case study in Hong Kong, that involved an intentional rotation of leaders’ roles from those in formal leadership positions (e.g., principals) to committed teachers. The leadership role rotation seemed to boost teachers’ confidence in using their professional knowledge in curriculum work, and increased engagement in decision making process. In a similar study, Lee, Hallinger, and
Walker (2012) suggested that purposeful recruitment, distribution of responsibilities and increasing the fluidity of positions (e.g., having multiple professionals switch roles) allowed for equally distributed resources and professional support within a school.

The last key item that fosters distributed leadership models within schools that was outlined by Tian et al. (2016) is the utilization of artifacts. These artifacts can take many forms, such as student outcome data, school wide data, sample curriculum or staff surveys, district whitepapers or anything that can showcase effects of system change. The presence of artifacts provided a two way interaction between those who are in formal leadership and informal leadership positions. For example, with the presence of artifacts (e.g., behavioral intervention data) those in informal leadership positions can guide conversation and display their expertise in collaboration with individuals within formal leadership positions. Fostering the use of artifacts can eliminate the one way interactions between administration and staff (e.g., principal frequently presenting information) and empowers those with specific expertise. Tian et al. (2016) outlined that with the use of artifacts, the leadership dynamic changes to a bidirectional relationship. To conclude, Tian et al. (2016) expressed that distributed leadership models allow for not just a formal leader (e.g., principal) guiding others, but interactions and capacity building with all individuals within a school. Overall, a distributed leadership model can benefit from the use of artifacts to empower those in informal leadership roles as well as proving a better atmosphere for communication and interaction.

**Limitations of distributed leadership.** With the continued age of accountability, teachers are receiving increased responsibility around various aspects of data collection and monitoring, which may influence the practices of distributed leadership (Lumby, 2013; Youngs, 2014). Many have questioned if the adoption of distributed leadership within schools is organic
or manufactured (Holloway, et al., 2018; Lumby, 2013; Youngs, 2009). For example, school leaders might be mandating a prescribed distributed leadership model to delegate the growing number of administrative tasks associated with the age of accountability across all those within the school. On the other hand, schools might be organically working within a distributed leadership model based on the collective values of the staff. Either way, authors note that there is no systematic way in determining the purpose or adoption of distributed leadership (Holloway, et al., 2018; Lumby, 2013; Youngs, 2009). Seashore et al. (2009) also noted that the idea of distributed leadership is encouraged by multiple official agencies (e.g., National Conference of State Legislatures, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), which might compromise organic adoption. In addition, many argue that there needs to be various pieces in place for the organic adoption of distributed leadership such as dynamic relationships between staff and administration, specific problems or issues in focus, support from administration and collective attitude towards collaboration and staff development (Liljenberg, 2014). Harris (2003a) also noted that distributed leadership requires that those in formal leadership positions (e.g., principal) abandon power and gift that control to others within the system. It is perceived that it might be difficult for those in informal positions to accept that inherent change with the distributed leadership model (Vail and Redick 1993). Other literature points out that the typical “top down”, bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of a school system acts as a main barrier to the distributed leadership approach. The maintenance of that structure can impede teachers gaining leadership roles (Wasley, 1991).

Adding to the social influences of distributed leadership, there are also many potential issues with the implementation and maintenance of distributed leadership with the school setting. First, Lumby (2013) noted that distributed leadership can possibly legitimize growing workloads
and accountability requirements as well as ignore potential issues of the disempowerment or exclusion of staff. For example, distributed leadership might reinforce the delegation of tasks to individuals who are not directly involved to be more efficient. This in turn can create an environment where staff members are only theoretical included within the distributed leadership model yet are not called into action. In a different sense, formal leaders within a distributed leadership may be silenced and deterred with specific tasks due to a collective effort in task completion. In other cases, leaders might have to insert individuals into a leadership role for a specific task and use distributed leadership as a justification (Murphy et al., 2009; Storey, 2004).

Second, Sturdy et al. (2006) also argued that distributed leadership is branded as a new and innovative way to complete new tasks that otherwise seem impossible. However, Sturdy et al. (2006) noted in actuality in many cases the work completed within schools has always constituted the work of multiple educators and the rebranding of distributed leadership is facilitated by formal leadership to spread tasks more evenly.

Besides the structural dynamic and the growing pressures of a school, the social dynamic between individuals is another ignored factor of distributed leadership. Distributed leadership models and literature often do not recognize the multiple social and demographic variables (e.g., race, gender, education) that create difficult power dynamics (Holloway et al., 2018). For example, Martin and Collinson (2002) noted that a distributed leadership model is under the assumption that schools are staffed by ‘the gender-free, race-free, ageless, sexless, and un-embodied mythical ‘empty slot’ worker” (p. 246). Those authors would argue that distributed leadership might not be organically produced, unless those who are within the model address the multiple social aspects that will be challenged by the established social power structures. Lumby (2013) also argues that distributed leadership theory does not address that discriminatory
practices are present in any organization and it is not always a remedy for discriminatory practices. Aligning with the notions of Martin and Collinson (2002), if formal leadership is willing to open up their leadership power to all those within an organization, they cannot ignore gender, race and other characteristics because it may actually increase system inequality. Wasley (1991) also outlined that enactment of distributed leadership can be influenced by the relationships with teachers and school management. For example, teachers have flexibility in choosing their role, however, they often need support from school administration or fellow teachers in being successful in the chosen role. If teachers are not supported within a distributed leadership framework, it may be difficult to maintain autonomy and leadership. Along the same lines of interpersonal relationships, other research has shown that teacher interpersonal factors (i.e., insecurity and overcautiousness) can discourage leadership from teachers (Barth et al., 1999). Finally, there are some possible financial barriers to enacting distributed leadership. Those within formal leadership positions (e.g., principals) might not be able to distribute extra funds for those within informal leadership positions. In order to create and maintain informal leadership in schools, formal leaders must offer alternative incentives to motivate staff who take on leadership responsibilities (Harris, 2003b).

The previous two sections provided the literature on the influences of distributed leadership on a school organization and student outcomes as well as the limitations of distributed leadership. However, there is no specific literature involving distributed leadership models’ influence on the implementation of MTSS specifically. In the following section, I will provide more specific research looking at the intersection of MTSS and distributed leadership.
Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Distributed Leadership

Implementation of MTSS involves many different, dynamic components (e.g., screening, assessment, instruction, problem solving, progress monitoring) that requires active and consistent leadership (e.g., vision setting, planning, professional development, resource allocation). Typically, the complexity and diversity of the school setting can be too cumbersome for a sole leader (e.g., principal) to facilitate and maintain MTSS implementation. This notion likely contributes to the widespread use of school leadership teams throughout the literature and practice on implementing MTSS (Freeman et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2011; March et al., 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003).

Related to implementing MTSS, school leadership teams are often tasked to collect multiple data sources, monitor student progress, and problem solve at the student, classroom, and school wide levels (Freeman et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2011; March et al., 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). Beyond the daily implementation of MTSS, school leadership teams are often tasked with establishing funding or external support, promoting visibility and dissemination of key concepts, aligning policies and systems, and developing staff capacity (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2015). Sugai and Horner (2006) agree in that school based leadership teams are often conceptualized to enact MTSS through policy alignment, gaining community support and provide ongoing evaluation at the student, classroom, and school level. Other authors conceptualized that school leadership teams are responsible for establishing a shared commitment for collective performance, creating a vision or mission, determining specific goals, creating conversation for professional dialogue and exercising school wide responsibility (Court, 2003; Katzenbach and Smith, 1993). It is important to note that the various conceptualized tasks of school leaderships teams align with the many
critical components of MTSS (“Critical components of multi-tiered system supports,” 2019). Supporting the theoretical literature behind school leadership teams, there are also studies that have determined what supports and factors need to be in place for school based leadership teams to implement MTSS with fidelity (Albritton & Truscott, 2014; Castillo, Dedrick, et al., 2015; Castillo, March, Stockslager, & Hines, 2016; Castillo, Wang, Daye, & March, 2018; Erchul, 2015; Forman & Crystal, 2015; George & Kincaid, 2008; March et al., 2016; O’Conner & Freeman, 2012; Schultz et al., 2015; Sims et al., 2015). However, those same studies have not looked at how school leadership teams facilitate and delegate the act of distributing leadership to facilitate MTSS implementation.

In addition, there are many university organizations (e.g., The Florida Problem Solving/RtI Project, University of Connecticut Center for Behavioral Education and Research, The Midwest PBIS Network) that are partnering with school districts to provide technical assistance to support and increase the implementation of MTSS. However, those organizations have not examined how the intersection of distributed leadership, school leadership teams, and facilitation of MTSS. It is beyond the scope of the literature review to synthesize all related research involving MTSS related professional development and leadership teams.

In sum, the current literature base provides multiple examples regarding leadership teams for MTSS implementation and what is being completed for facilitating MTSS implementation. However, there is a lack of articles examining how leadership teams function on a daily basis for implementation of MTSS. In addition, there is not a large amount of literature that examines how school leadership teaming for MTSS implementation relates to research on distributed leadership models. It is my belief that there needs to be literature that provides information on leadership team’s efforts of the implementation of MTSS and their perceptions of distributed leadership.
Providing a school level narrative on the functioning of a school based leadership team’s ability to implement MTSS through a distributed leadership approach can advance what we know about how leadership teams facilitate MTSS implementation.

**Gaps in the Literature**

After examining the topics of current educational legislation, MTSS, system change models, distributed leadership, and leadership teams there are some significant gaps within the research that have been identified. First, Harris (2008) outlined that there are multiple terms that are used interchangeably to refer to distributed leadership (e.g., shared leadership, teacher leadership) that brings confusion and inconsistency. This could potentially result in low or lack of fidelity in implementation of any distributed leadership model. Finally, there is not research that examines the intersection between distributed leadership models, the implementation of MTSS and leadership teams. Current research involves descriptions of and studies that looked at training school leadership teams to facilitate MTSS implementation, but the literature pays little attention to how school leadership teaming for MTSS implementation relates to research on distributed leadership models. Therefore, it is my belief that research is needed to understand how leadership teams conceptualize their role in MTSS implementation and how they enact their distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities.
CHAPTER THREE:

METHODS

Design

I used a single embedded case study design. Specifically, I used an exploratory approach, which focused on situations in which the intervention being evaluated (e.g., distributed leadership) has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2003). Yin (2003) defined a case as “a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (p. 13). To expand, Yin outlined that the use a case study methodology is appropriate in three circumstances: (1) The research is intended to answer questions like “how” or “why”, (2) the researcher’s ability to manipulate the events has a little/no possibility, and (3) when the contemporary phenomenon is in a real-life context. Given the context of the study, all major circumstances were addressed. For example, all research questions were intended to answer questions like “how “ or “why” (e.g., How does a school leadership team facilitating implementation of MTSS conceptualize distributed leadership?, How does a school leadership team facilitating implementation of MTSS enact their distributed leadership?), I had no ability to manipulate the school setting where the research was performed and the study was situated within a real life context (e.g., elementary school). A single embedded case study format was
used because it is intended for the researcher to gather various forms of data within one organization (e.g., interviews, observations, document analysis; Yin, 2003). Yin (2003) listed six data gathering tools: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations and physical artifacts. The study accessed the majority of those data gathering tools to answer the established research questions (see Table 4). In the next sections, I discuss the study’s epistemological orientation, and reflect on my beliefs and experiences that influence the decisions I have made about my design and that impacted how I collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data.

**Paradigm and Reflexivity**

**Epistemological orientation.** A qualitative researcher cannot be objective and has to embrace the subjectivity that comes with the human nature of research. In that same sense, when studying humans, reality is socially constructed, subjective and varies by person. Moreover, there are factors within both the researcher and participants that cannot be controlled, which contribute to the subjectivity of research. Overall, through specific procedures that focus on multiple sources of information within a situation, one can strive to provide a detailed description of the reality behind a phenomenon; however, a researcher can never fully or objectively depict the reality behind a phenomenon due to the human nature of research. Reality is constructed by social interactions and perceptions of multiple individuals regardless of the setting. Individuals have their own varied backgrounds, convictions and experiences that contribute to the constant construction of the reality. Qualitative researchers should strive for a detailed narrative that can be used to describe, but not completely outline the accounts of a particular studied social reality.

Given my beliefs regarding constructing knowledge, for this study, the epistemological orientation I used was Interpretivism. Interpretivists believe an understanding of the context in
which any form of research is conducted is critical to the interpretation of data gathered (Willis, Jost, & Nilakanta, 2007). As outlined in the following section, I have experience with the studied topic of distributed leadership and MTSS as well as professional interest in the topic. As Willis et al. (2007) also outlined, researchers that have an interpretivism paradigm usually seek to understand a particular context and believe that reality is socially constructed. Throughout the study, I relied upon my background and experiences as well as all the leadership team member’s views of the situation being studied and embraced the variability that their own background and experiences had on the research. Creswell et al. (2003) also agreed that interpretivist researchers often rely upon the participants' beliefs and perceptions of the situation being studied. The study examined a school leadership team that was comprised of many different and variable realities, which continuously constructed the reality of the daily functioning of the leadership team. I examined each leadership team members’ reality and other forms of data within the environment (e.g., observations, document analysis), and engaged in reflective journaling. These data sources allowed me to showcase a holistic explanation of distributed leadership for MTSS that directly aligns with Interpretivism. However, based on my belief of constant changing realities, the results of the study did not provide the ultimate truth of distributed leadership for MTSS, but the subjectivity reality of the studied context.

**The researcher.** I primarily identify as a fourth year doctoral student within the School Psychology Program at a Southeastern University; however, there are many other aspects of who I am that influence my research lens. First, I was born in the Midwestern region of the United States to a family led by two educators. Those parents were the same people who pushed me since I was ten-years-old to have responsibilities (e.g., weekly chores, support younger siblings) and to monetarily support myself. Those same responsibilities made me understand the purpose
and satisfaction of hard work. In addition, education was a priority since I entered kindergarten. Both of those mindsets guided me to strive for higher education, pursue a Ph.D. and take on challenges within qualitative research. Coming from the quantitative research dominated realm of school psychology, I have been trained in more quantitative research methods and this might lead me to be rigid when it comes to data collection, data quality, and data analyzation. Performing qualitative research might provide me with situations of uncertainty. For those instances, I utilized my reflective journal when making decisions throughout the collecting, analysis, and interpretation of the data.

Second, I entered the world of education, knowing that there are many obstacles, challenges, and often, not much recognition of success. I wanted to work within an atmosphere where people are dedicated to helping others and are willing to commit to difficult but rewarding challenges. With this mindset, I have a bias towards those who work within education. I believe that all those who work within education are like minded and completely committed to their work. This might lead me to giving individuals the benefit of the doubt when providing the maximum effort toward service delivery for students. For example, I might interpret a potential lack of MTSS implementation fidelity as due to external and political factors (e.g., age of accountability, low wages for educational staff) and not internal (e.g., lack of staff buy-in, poor communication, lack of motivation) factors.

Finally, during my years as an adolescent, my parents instilled in me the idea that one should never judge a book by its cover. During my adolescence, my parents pushed me to embrace and challenge my initial thoughts about individuals and understand the perceptions of others. Specifically, my parents promoted problem solving skills in unfamiliar situations (e.g., understanding that my ideas and solutions might not align with others in times of uncertainty). I
believe that mindset has translated into my paradigm because of my willingness to expect humanistic differences, yet to continuously strive to understand the continuously changing reality. Along the same lines, I continuously attempt to dive deeper into educational topics that might be misunderstood by the general public, with the aim to further understand and showcase the subjective reality of a situation. I recognize the need to take an exploratory approach to provide research that allows for a deeper understanding of topics that cannot be investigated through quantitative designs. As a result, my epistemological orientation continuously strives to collect a rich and thick data set to understand and showcase the social context from the experience and subjective meaning from those within the context.

During the study, I considered my epistemological orientation, and the perspectives and experiences that shaped my research identity. Prior to conducting this study, I had multiple years of experience learning educational legislation and systems, being a school psychology practicum student, and occupying a graduate assistantship that directly works with school and district leadership teams, teachers, and school psychologists through practicum and consultation experiences. I also recognized my lack of experience as a school leadership team member, novice qualitative researcher status, and my professional interest in this topic. Considering the influencing factors as well as my epistemological orientation, I believe that it did influence the data collection, analyzation, and interpretation during the study. However, recognizing these factors and outlining my epistemological orientation provided transparency for all consumers of the research. Overall, my interpretivist orientation lends me to believe that the procedures outlined in the following section provided a rich and descriptive narrative of the subjective reality of distributed leadership for MTSS for the studied context.
Participants and Sampling

Given that school leadership team composition can vary, rather than look for a specific constellation of positions and titles, I used purposive sampling to find a school leadership team that included representation across key personnel (e.g., any combination of the professional titles described in the previous Chapter), and that allowed me to study the phenomenon of distributed leadership for MTSS implementation (Castillo, et al., 2018; Learning Forward, 2011; “School Leadership Teams: Identifying Team Members,” n.d). I included criteria that the school leadership team (1) allowed me to develop knowledge in distributed leadership and MTSS implementation (2) had kept the majority of team members consistent for 3-5 years and has been implementing MTSS for 3-5 years and (3) contained individuals that have expertise in MTSS implementation. Along with the criteria, I also recruited a team that focuses more on informal leadership in their daily functioning and system implementation. A leadership team should consist of individuals who have respect for and influence others, have knowledge and leadership capacity and have the ability to balance the team make-up (McKeever, 2003). Central to those characteristics is focusing more on an established set of informal leaders (e.g., teacher leaders, initiative leaders) within the team and school that are not necessarily tied to a certain role.

To facilitate finding a school that meets the above criteria, I worked with my Thesis Committee members to identify schools within local school districts in which MTSS is a required component of service delivery to gain access to a school site. Relying on professional networks to identify sites that meet the sampling criteria is a common method of recruiting participants in qualitative inquiries (Given, 2008; Lichtman, 2013; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Aligning with my outlined transparency of my researcher identity and paradigm, I wanted to provide the clearest image of the environment I conducted the research within as well as the individuals...
within that environment. To protect the identity of the participants, I used pseudo names for both the school district (i.e., Middlebrook School District) and the school (i.e., Willow Elementary) for the entirety of the paper.

**State level MTSS.** The Southeastern state in which the study was conducted first began implementing MTSS in the 2000s. Within the participating state, a statewide PBIS project was established in the early 2000s to promote school-wide behavior supports in schools (“Foundations for Implementation,” n.d.). Following the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 and the regulations that followed in 2006, the state established a statewide project focused on implementing problem-solving and RTI (“History and Future of MTSS,” n.d.). Both of these projects primarily were funded through special education dollars. In fact, the state adopted special education rules requiring the use of problem-solving and RTI procedures for special education eligibility determination in 2007, which went fully into effect in 2010 (Zirkel, n.d.).

Although special education legislation and rules created a focus on MTSS in the state, the state also embeds MTSS in general education. For instance, around 2008, the state department of education created and disseminated an MTSS Implementation Plan (“History and Future of MTSS,” n.d.). The Implementation Plan was intended to kickstart the state level framework to support districts in implementing MTSS at the school level. Since the development of this initial implementation plan, MTSS has been embedded into state-level requirements for school districts. For example, all school districts must submit annually a K-12 Reading Plan that indicates how schools assess student performance, deliver instruction and intervention, and monitor student progress (FLA. STAT. § 1001.215). One required aspect of this plan is to submit a decision-making template that indicates how reading services are provided at Tiers 1, 2, and 3 of the district’s MTSS.
**Middlebrook school district.** The Middlebrook School District (MBSD) is a school district in the south eastern region of the United States. At the time of the study, MBSD had roughly 75,000 students and over 10,000 staff members (USDOE, 2017). Overall, MBSD served mostly white students and had less than 20% of students with an Individualized Education Plan, roughly 5% of students identified as English Language Learners and over half of the student population eligible for free or reduced price meals (USDOE, 2017). Since the initial state department of education publication of the MTSS Implementation Plan, MBSD have been involved in implementing MTSS. MSBD initially partnered with the statewide project related to support MTSS implementation, specifically implementing problem-solving and RTI. After piloting implementation of MTSS in identified elementary schools for three years, MSBD looked to increase their implementation of problem solving, and leverage coaching and professional learning communities within their schools to promote MTSS. This information was gathered from my conversations with my thesis committee as well as professional networks that I came in contact with during my purposeful sampling. In addition, the most recent MBSD district success plan (that was accessible to the public) includes various connections to MTSS in their goals of matching learning experiences to standards and improving PBIS fidelity.

**Willow elementary.** During the time of the study, Willow Elementary was in its third year of operations. Willow was based in a suburban community that was recently developed. During the course of the study, the neighborhood continued to be developed, which contributed to a large influx of students. In fact, Willow was undergoing construction to add another section to the school to have enough capacity to house the influx of new students who were enrolled based on their move to the suburban residential location. Based on the document review, Willow had just under 900 students who were mostly identified as white (61%). In addition, the Willow
student population consisted of roughly 20% students with disabilities, less than 4% students identified as English Language Learners, and roughly one third of students who were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The participating school’s state department of education utilized school grades as a representation of school performance at the time of the study. Within this system, schools are graded on a scale of “A” (e.g., highest rating) through “F” (e.g., lowest rating) based on various factors (e.g., student achievement, learning gains, acceleration, graduation rate; 2019 school grades overview, 2020). Willow was rated with high grades (e.g., ranging from “A” to “B” rankings) by the state department of education each year. In addition, Willow was above the district average in percentage of third, fourth and fifth grade students who passed the required State Academic Assessment the two year prior to the study.

Regarding Willow’s history with MTSS, it was evident that MTSS has been a priority in their daily functioning since its’s first year. Willow has only been open for three years, meaning that they have been required to implement MTSS since the school opened. Evidence existed that Willow embraced MTSS in its planning. For example, Willow’s school success plan outlined specific goals that directly align with MTSS implementation (e.g., Teaching rules and expectations of PBIS, Professional Learning Communities [PLCs], developing progress monitoring system for Tier 3 implementation). Also, the document review provided examples of a PBIS training for all staff at Willow that outlined PBIS and its connection to Willow’s mission and vision for school success. Additionally, the school partnered with a local university attempting to conduct a school wide screening using the Social, Academic and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS; Kilgus, Chafouleas, Riley-Tillman, & von der Embse 2014). Per the document review, the screening was completed the year prior to the study and was utilized to facilitate social, emotional or behavioral intervention.
Study participants. The primary participants were the members of the school leadership team at Willow. Table 2 provides an overview of all those who were members of Willow’s school leadership team, their age, years of experience in their current role and the years of experience on Willow’s leadership team. The leadership team was comprised of 14 administrators, teachers, and instructional and student support personnel. Of the members of the leadership team, 11 agreed to participate, two members of the leadership team declined to participate, and one changed professional positions during the study.

Table 2. Members of the Participating School Leadership Team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of Experience in Current Role</th>
<th>Years of Experience on Willow Leadership Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Design Coach</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten Teacher</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Grade Teacher</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Grade Teacher</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Grade Teacher</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Grade Teacher</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Grade Teacher/Gifted Endorsement</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>&lt; 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th Grade Teacher</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech and Language Pathologist</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Study Protocols and Procedures

I used Yin’s (2003) principles for case study designs to guide my data collection protocols and procedures. Yin (2003) outlined three principles of data collection which are: (1) using multiple sources of evidence, (2) creating a case study database for notes and documents, and (3) maintaining a chain of evidence (e.g., initial study questions and case study procedure should be pointed out in the case study protocol, noted circumstances of the evidence to be collected, evidence storage in the database, sufficient citing of the case study database and evidence). In the following sections I describe the process for getting approval to conduct the study as well as the three data sources that were used: interviews, observations, and document analysis. Within each of the data sources sections, I describe the data source(s), how the data were collected, and how the data were managed. The data protocols and procedures took approximately 15 weeks within the school year to complete.

Permission to conduct the study. I gained permission from the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB; See Appendix E) and the MBSD’s Office of Research and Accountability to conduct the study. Following the gained permission from the district, I gained permission from the principal of Willow to verbally present the information in a leadership team meeting regarding the study and obtain consent from all those who were a part of the leadership team. During the initial meeting where I verbally presented the study, I outlined the study as well as each section of the consent form with the leadership team for roughly 10-15 minutes. I provided each individual with a consent form and scheduled individual meetings with each leadership team member to allow for any questions, further explain the consent form and collect their signed or unsigned consent form. I allowed for at least 24 hours between the initial presentation and individual meetings with me. Allowing for this procedure gave ample time for participants to
review the information, to consider whether or not they wish to participate and to make a decision without any undue influence from others. Once I was able to obtain consent from all leadership team members, I started collecting all data sources (e.g., interviews, observations, document review) that are outlined in the following section.

**Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews with each member of the leadership team were conducted. To begin each interview, I asked the participant to fill out a demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire documented simple demographic information (e.g., position held in school, time spent on the leadership team, time spent as an educational professional) and did not request the name of any team member (Appendix A). Following the questionnaire, I started the interview with neutral topic questions about the interviewee’s background and career (e.g., *What are your roles and responsibilities at the school?*, *How long have you been at this school?*, *What do you think about the school?). I believe that doing this helped me to organize each interview transcript and to ease the interviewee into discussions of the leadership team and distributed leadership. Next, I asked questions focused on to the participants’ experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions about distributed leadership and MTSS at their school. For the purpose of this study, I asked questions regarding their conceptualization of distributed leadership within their school (e.g., *How do you conceptualize the leadership dynamic at your school?*, *What does leadership mean to you?*, *How do you describe it?) as well as how they enact distributed leadership (e.g., *What is your current role within the leadership team?*, *What responsibilities do other team members have?*, *What are some tasks that are paired with your current role in the leadership team that directly aligns with the implementation of MTSS?). I also asked each leadership team member questions regarding barriers and facilitating factors of MTSS implementation faced by their leadership team (e.g., *What facilitating factors have helped
the leadership team implement MTSS?) and the influence of the principal on the leadership
team’s functioning (e.g., How does the principal influence the distributed leadership approach?,
What does the principal do that contributes to the leadership team’s ability to implement
MTSS?); however, these data were not directly the focus of the study (e.g., the data will be
collected for later analysis as part of my proposed dissertation project). See the scripted
questions and prompts from the interview protocol in Appendix B.

Before I started the interviews with each leadership team member, I introduced myself to
the leadership team, provided clear guidelines for the research study and obtain consent for the
study. I did not interject or co-construct the data from the interviewee during the neutral topics or
the questions that align with the aims of the study. I did ask follow up questions that expanded,
clarified, or summarized the perspectives of the leadership team member and allowed the
participant to explain their perspectives. For example I might have asked, “In your opinion, how
is implementation of MTSS going?” and if the response of the leadership team member was
“good,” I asked further questions for clarity and to obtain a thicker description of their
perspectives of and experiences with MTSS implementation at the school.

Overall, I conducted 11 separate interviews with each leadership team member at
Willow. Each interview session was conducted within the normal school hours (e.g., 7:00 A.M.
to 4:00 P.M) in a private setting within Willow (e.g., conference room, personal office, empty
classroom) at a convenient time for the participant. Each interview was conducted individually
and lasted 45 to 80 minutes. I offered to use precautionary techniques to limit distractions (e.g.,
putting up signs that signal a meeting being held, schedule breaks during the interview sessions);
however, no participant believed it to be necessary. During the interviews, I used a recording
device to capture the leadership team members’ responses. Interviews were transcribed verbatim
using the Rev service (https://www.rev.com/). Along with recording each interview session, I also took notes to capture salient ideas, issues, or concepts discussed by participants.

Observations. I conducted naturalistic observations of three leadership team meetings during the study period. The leadership team meetings consisted of monthly meetings during which all leadership team members discuss systemic implementation, school wide functioning and mission or vision creation. The observations took place in a private setting within Willow (e.g., conference room). The meetings typically lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. The main purpose of the observations was to provide context for and additional information to use to triangulate the data collected within the interviews. During the observations of the school leadership team meetings, I observed with an observer as participant role (Gold, 1958). I participated within the social setting during the study by sitting in on all leadership team meetings and taking field notes, but I was not an active member. In addition, I did not interject during the meetings. All leadership team members were aware of the purpose of the research and understood my purpose of attending the meeting. Regarding the field notes I took, I described multiple topics including, but not limited to: (1) the context, (2) the participants, (3) the observer, (4) the actions of the participants, (5) the situation, and (6) my feelings as the observer (Banister, Burman, Praker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994). I primarily focused my fieldnotes on topics that related to the established research aims which mainly were the facilitation of a distributed leadership approach with all members of the leadership team, the interactions between the informal and formal leaders and the facilitation of MTSS. To organize the information from the observations, I read through the observations field notes and generated analytic memos to record my thoughts regarding insights from the data. These analytic memos were used to document insights relative to the research questions as well as observations that relate to findings from the interviews.
**Document analysis.** In addition to the interview and observation data, I also reviewed various documents to further contextualize the functioning of the leadership team and to provide an additional data source to triangulate with interview findings. First, I collected de-identified data regarding the school’s demographic information (e.g., percent of students who were identified as English language learners, percent of students with disabilities, percent of students who received free or reduced-price lunch), academic achievement data (e.g., student statewide benchmark test schools, school grade) and behavioral or social emotional data (e.g., behavioral screening results) to illustrate the context in which the school leadership team operates. I gained permission from the leadership team to access these data through their schoolwide data systems. I identified the documents to review using the leadership team’s online portal that housed all relevant documents. I completed the review with the assistant principal and she printed and de-identified all documents. To organize the information from the document review, I read through each document and generated analytic memos to record my thoughts regarding insights from the data. These analytic memos were used to document insights relative to the research questions as well as any documents relate to findings from the interviews or observations.

I also reviewed any documents created by the school leadership team or that were provided to the school from the district regarding the implementation of MTSS. These documents included documents that were informational or focused on policies, processes, and procedures (e.g., white papers, infographics, guidelines, resources, policies, procedures). Documents also included protocols or assessment results that addressed the school’s MTSS implementation fidelity (e.g., progress monitoring tools, assessments of MTSS), professional learning approach, communication of MTSS, or other attempts to facilitate MTSS implementation. I also conducted a document review of the leadership notes and time stamps
from the previous three leadership team meetings (e.g., meetings that occurred prior to the onset of the study) and those that were generated during the meetings I observed. For those data sources, I also utilized analytic memos to record my thoughts regarding insights from the data. I continuously met with the assistant principal throughout the study to determine other documents that might help contextualize the functioning of the leadership team as well as to provide any additional data source to triangulation. See Table 3 for a summary of the data collection processes and the timeline of data collection.

**Table 3. Timeline of Data Collection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Research Activity</th>
<th>Related Research Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| November, 2019   | • Gained Consent To Complete Study  
                  | • Initially Met With Leadership Team  
                  | • Obtained Consent From All Leadership Team Members  
                  | • Scheduled All Interviews With Consented Participants  
                  | • Attended Monthly Leadership Team Meeting  
                  | • Interviewed All Scheduled Leadership Team Members  
                  | • Reviewed All Necessary Documents With Appointed Leadership Team Member  
                  | • Attended Monthly Leadership Team Meeting  
                  | • Analyzed Any Collected Data  
                  | • Interviewed All Scheduled Leadership Team Members  
                  | • Attended Monthly Leadership Team Meeting  
                  | • Analyzed Any Collected Data  
| December, 2019   | • Gaining Consent  
                  | • Data Collection  
                  | • Data Collection  
                  | • Data Analyization  
| January, 2020    | • Completed All Interviews Scheduled Leadership Team Members  
                  | • Attended Monthly Leadership Team Meeting  
                  | • Analyzed Any Collected Data  
| February, 2020   | • Completed All Interviews Scheduled Leadership Team Members  
                  | • Attended Monthly Leadership Team Meeting  
                  | • Analyzed Any Collected Data  

| March, 2020-May, 2020 | • Attended Monthly Leadership Team Meeting  
• Analyzed Any Collected Data  
• Wrote Up Results Of Study | • Data Collection  
• Data Analyzation  
• Data Interpretation  
• Documentation Finalization |

**Data Analysis**

The overarching technique I utilized was inductive coding with each separate interview and a constant comparison technique (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) across data sources. With the constant comparison technique, I compared each source of data (e.g., interviews, observation, documents) against each other to examine similarities and differences (See Figure 1).

Throughout the study, I generated a codebook that outlined the similarities and differences between sources. With each new source of data that I considered to be similar to a previously coded data source, I assigned it the same code. However, any new codes that were conceptually different were assigned a completely different code. On a bi-weekly basis, I coded three interviews and incorporated any analytic memos from the sources of data that was available (e.g., observations collected, reviewed documents). Once I completed coding all interview transcripts and incorporated all memos from observations and documents, I reviewed all the interview transcripts one final time to finalize and synthesize all collected codes.

Once all data sources were coded, I aggregated all related codes into axial codes to make connections within the data and to guide my interpretation through theming. I followed the guidelines by Rowley (2002) to generate themes. Rowley recommended the following
components to generating themes from multiple data sources in a case study: (1) incorporate all of the relevant evidence during analysis, (2) consider all of the major rival interpretations, and explore each of them in turn, (3) address the most significant aspect of the case study, and (4) draw on prior expert knowledge in the area of the case study.

In addition to following Rowley’s guidelines, I also participated in weekly reflective journaling. During the duration of the study, I spent roughly 30 minutes per week updating a self-reflective journal that helped facilitate my reflexivity, document my challenges as a researcher, and examined my personal assumptions. Since I was the sole data collector for this study, I consciously acknowledged my biases, assumptions, and reflections through reflective journaling. Keeping a reflective journal is a common practice in qualitative research (Etherington, 2004). Reflective journaling made my experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings visible to me and my consumers.

**Figure 1.** Constant Comparison Technique
Triangulation of data. I used the three outlined data sources to not only determine similarities and differences in findings relative to the research questions, but also to capture different dimensions of the studied environment. Some researchers advocate for the use of triangulation with multiple data sources to strengthen a qualitative study (Patton, 2002; Tracy, 2010). During the data analysis phase of the study, I noted each major findings’ origin (e.g., interviews, observations, documents) and actively used the analytic memos that I outlined in the previous section. I also noted the extent to which the findings from the different data sources converged to support key themes and findings, as well as the extent to which the data sources indicated divergent findings.Aligning with my Interpretivist paradigm, I used triangulation methods not to validate or verify, but to create a comprehensive interpretation for the consumers of the research.

Sources of information summary. Table 4 outlines the sources of the information, sources of evidence and research questions addressed. After analyzing each of the sources of evidence (e.g., interviews, observations, document analysis), I saved each file, noting the date, content, and other necessary information (e.g., role of interviewee, purpose of meeting). I housed all saved files on a secure online platform (e.g., BOX™ ) that was accessible to only me and my Ed.S thesis committee chair. To maintain a chain of evidence, I utilized the online platform to also house my initial study questions and case study procedure. I also utilized the saved file notes to organize the information and timeline of the data collection.
Table 4. Sources of Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Information</th>
<th>Source of Evidence</th>
<th>Research Question Addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Interviews</td>
<td>• Each member of the Leadership Team</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>• Leadership Team Meetings</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record Review</td>
<td>• Leadership Team Notes</td>
<td>*Supporting Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School Demographic Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School Wide Achievement Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• District MTSS Documents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• MTSS Fidelity Documents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Information</td>
<td>• Demographics of each member of the Leadership Team</td>
<td>*Supporting Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Journaling</td>
<td>• Weekly Reflective Journaling on Research Process</td>
<td>*Supporting Information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Documents and reflective journaling were mainly used for descriptive information. However, they also were used to support evidence for Research Questions 1 and 2.*

**Quality Criteria**

In addition to following the guides of Yin (2003), the study met multiple quality criteria for qualitative research as outlined by Tracy (2010). First, the study focused on a worthy topic that is relevant, timely and significant. As stated previously, current educational legislation has created the age of accountability in which positive student academic outcomes and yearly student progress are the main goals of the school system. This same legislation has mandated schools to implement MTSS to provide a continuum of services for all students. This study provided a narrative for practitioners to help empower those within a leadership team to implement MTSS. Second, the study is characterized by self-reflexivity, transparency of the methods and challenges
to showcase sincerity. Within chapter three, I provided all consumers of this research a transparent image of who I am as a researcher, my paradigm, and my research procedures. Third, I established credibility through a thick description and triangulation of multiple interviews, observations, and documentation analyzation. Finally, I had coherence with methods and procedures that matched my research aims as well as connected with the literature base. As I stated previously, the literature on distributed leadership is lacking research on the functions of distributed leadership in a naturalistic setting (Angelle, 2010; Harris, 2003; Hulpia et al., 2009a; Ritchie & Woods, 2007; Tian et al., 2016; Seashore et al., 2010). Also, Yin (2003) defined a case as “a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (p. 13). The noted limitations, concepts from Yin (2003) and the study’s research questions aligned with the theories already established in the literature (See Appendix B).

**Institutional Review Board Approval and Ethical Considerations**

**Ethical considerations.** I gained permission from the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and MBSD’s Office of Research and Accountability to conduct the current qualitative study. I also gained permission from building leaders of Willow involved in the study. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants were given a copy of a consent form (Appendix C) that outlined information on participating in research, the purpose of the research (without stating the central research questions), the procedures of the research, the risk and benefits of the research, the voluntary nature of research participation and the procedures used to protect confidentiality. All signed consent forms were stored in the researcher’s faculty advisor’s
office. All signed consent forms were stored in a locked filing cabinet, which was only accessible to the faculty advisor.

All data collected (e.g., audio, field notes, related documents) was stored on my BOX™ account which is a password protected online storage application. Only my faculty advisor and I had access to the BOX™ account. During each interview, I used a digital recorder to capture the audio. Directly after each interview, I uploaded the audio and transcription to my password protected BOX™ account. During the observations, I focused on the functioning of the leadership team and did not narrow in on a specific individual. If a participant chose to not participate in this research study, I did not take any observation notes that contained any specific information on those individuals to comply with confidentiality requirements. I stored all electronic notes from the observations on my BOX™ account. In addition to the interview and observation data, all data I collected in the document review, was scanned, de-identified and stored in my BOX™ account. All physical copies of the data forms were stored within the researcher’s faculty advisor’s office. Also, all physical copies of the data were stored in a locked filing cabinet, which was only accessible to the faculty advisor.
CHAPTER FOUR: 

RESULTS

This chapter looks to provide the overall themes related to the established research questions. In addition to the major source of information (interviews), I also incorporated common themes across the other sources of information (e.g., observations, document review) and my thoughts from my reflective journal. I wanted to clearly articulate the conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership from a leadership team that is facilitating MTSS. I began with the conceptualization of distributed leadership to outline the common themes of the leadership team’s perspectives before I discuss the common themes of enactment. However, the two examined constructs (i.e., conceptualization and enactment) corresponded greatly with each other. For instance, some of the participant’s comments and other collected data (e.g., observations, reflective journals) regarding the conceptualization of distributed leadership also connected to examples of enactment of distributed leadership (i.e., Research Question 2). Because the two constructs were closely aligned, consumers of the research can expect some overlap between the findings of each research question.

Research Question 1

The first research question focused on how Willow’s school leadership team conceptualized their distributed leadership model for MTSS implementation. During the
interviews, participants were asked questions about their definition of leadership in their school, the school’s vision for MTSS, their beliefs around the influence of their distributed leadership model and how they perceive distributed leadership is incorporated in their daily functioning. Based on these interviews and other data sources (observations, documents, and reflective journal entries), there were four main themes and various sub-themes that evidenced the conceptualization of distributed leadership for MTSS (See Table 5). Appendix D provides all codes utilized in the interviews that were used in conjunction with analytic memos to generate the overall themes for first research question.

Table 5. Research Question 1 Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does a school leadership team facilitating implementation of MTSS conceptualize distributed leadership?</td>
<td>Collective Responsibility</td>
<td>Our Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Daily Functioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Balanced Leading Qualities</td>
<td>Personal Leading Qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variety of Communication</td>
<td>Logistical Leading Qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication Between</td>
<td>Administration And Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Communication Between</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Informal Leaders And Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Level Teams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Theme 1: collective responsibility.** One of key notions that was evident through interviews with multiple leadership team members and other sources of information was the importance of Collective Responsibility in the conceptualization of distributed leadership. Specifically, leadership team members spoke about the importance of every student being the responsibility of all staff members and the role of the leadership team in facilitating that shared responsibility. Creating a sense of Collective Responsibility across multiple individuals aligns with the theoretical frameworks of distributed leadership noted previously (Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006).

Multiple members of the leadership team at Willow spoke extensively about how all those within the building are responsibility for all students’ achievement. The following four quotes were from the teacher leaders in the third, first, and kindergarten grade levels as well as Willow’s principal, respectively. They all highlight Willow’s ability to move beyond “my students” to “our students” regarding supporting students within an MTSS.
“... I think, because we have that Collective Responsibility here at Willow and it's not just ‘My student,’ or ‘Your student,’ it's ‘Our student,’ I think that, as a whole, everyone truly cares about the whole child and not just the academics of that child, but maybe you need RTI for behavior, or some kind of behavior system, so that's when not just the behavior specialist, but you might have a check-in/check-out buddy …. That's when you pull in maybe those people in your school who aren't academic-focused: custodian, the security officer, the cafeteria staff. They also help in those areas, as well.”

“… I would say I'm lucky to be working here because we're doing whatever we can for all the students. And it's not just my students, they're our students. So, on our team, I have students from all the different classrooms for interventions. It's not just my students …”

“…to understand that kindergarten, they're all ours. It's not just your classroom, the grade level’s ours. That sometimes you have to understand that you may be very good at something that you can give to a student that's struggling in another classroom.”

“It can't be your class, my class, those kids, these kids. It has to be our grade level, our school … When my new secretary came in, she wanted to know what people's job descriptions were and but the assistant principal and I our answers were so gray because we truly believe that it just depends on the situation.”

The “our student” mindset was also evident in observations and reflections of the leadership team. For instance, in an observation of a leadership team meeting, the principal had a conversation with the leadership team about a recent issue with staff members “playing the blame game” in regard to student issues. The principal spoke about staff expressing that often when grade level teams do not see students progressing at the expected rate, they attempt to find
a specific thing to blame (e.g., previous teachers, students’ homelife, current teacher’s efforts). Instead of exuding her administrative power and demanding this issue to be solved, the principal took time to lead conversation around ways to incorporate the strength-based approach (See Theme 2: Strength Based Culture) to problem solve. She explained that the mission and leadership approach of this school is to focus on strengths for communication and problem solving. In addition, the success of students is all staff’s responsibility, not solely on one specific staff member. She concluded the conversation around the leadership team’s duty to model that behavior and foster a Collective Responsibility mindset within their teams to improve success for all students. Even though the strength-based approach will be discussed more extensively later in the paper, I reflected on Willow’s ability to foster Collective Responsibility for student success through the strength-based approach. Through my reflective journals and observations of leadership team meetings, I noted the idea that all staff members have strengths that can be leveraged to make sure students are successful.

This Collective Responsibility mindset was also observed in Willow’s leadership team members’ discussion of their distributed leadership model and daily functioning. Multiple leadership team members spoke about their idea of how they conceptually connect their distributed leadership model, daily functioning, and Collective Responsibility. The following quotes are from the assistant principal and one of the third grade teacher leaders, respectively. They demonstrate their perspectives regarding the importance of having Collective Responsibility across all staff to promote daily functioning at Willow:

“I think leadership means working side by side together. I'm a huge proponent of servant leadership … being there as one of the team members that shared leadership, servant leadership of I'm here to do whatever is needed at the time. To me, leadership is anything
from helping empty the trash, to helping dig deeper into the core actions and into the standards that help or help desegregate data to make decisions. It's really being whatever is needed and not only my own leadership, but having all of us have that Collective Responsibility across not just the leadership team but the entire staff because we're all leaders in a different area and finding the strengths of individuals and using that for leadership to grow and guide to move forward….One example that I could give is everybody has the Collective Responsibility piece. So, for example, our front office secretary teaches a tier group for foundational skills in third grade. Our support facilitators help with the tiers of support. Anybody in the school could carry out the role based on whatever the need is. And based on their individual strengths and understanding. And it's the responsibility of all of us.”

“That's where the Collective Responsibility across the entire school where we have our front end secretary and our guidance secretary and various roles that will support. Tiers of support both for standards based MTSS and PBIS. There are many check-in checkout people that varied roles that will support and someone who helps with behavior as well as academics and that Collective Responsibility that it doesn't matter what your role is, we're here for the kids and we'll do whatever it takes to meet needs.”

My observations of the leadership team meetings illustrated this mindset, but also extended it to allocation of resources. For instance, I reflected on a situation where I observed the principal fostering Collective Responsibility around the resources utilized within the school building. Within a leadership team meeting, the principal developed and presented a system where each of the leadership team members would observe a random teacher over the course of the month to determine what resources are used at the different tiers of support within their
MTSS. She was planning on using the data to inform her decisions regarding allocating funding. I believe this demonstrated the leadership team taking shared ownership in gathering information from all those across the building to inform decisions regarding the funding behind the tools and resources utilized to improve the outcomes of all students. I also reflected on the principal’s ability to transform a critical yet logistical task into something that provided a shared responsibility in which all those within the distributed leadership model where collectively guiding the school in a specific direction for MTSS implementation and how it is used to impact student outcomes collectively.

Overall, it was evident through multiple sources of information that Willow’s leadership team conceptualizes the notion of Collective Responsibility as major piece in their distributed leadership model for MTSS. The conceptualization of Collective Responsibility appears to influence both the mindsets for student achievement and daily functioning for all those within the distributed leadership model at Willow. However, even with the Collective Responsibility established at Willow, leadership styles within a distributed leadership model vary between situations (Gronn, 2008). The next theme will examine the varying leadership qualities that were present through interviews and observations at Willow.

Theme 2: balanced leading qualities. One of one central ideas behind distributed leadership is moving away from a sole leader within an organization (Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2009; Hartley, 2007; Lashway, 2006). However, formal leaders (e.g., principals) and informal leaders (e.g., teacher leaders) within distributed leadership models remain critical catalysts for improving and sustaining practices (Hulpia et al., 2009a). Throughout data collection, it was evident that the leading qualities differed by staff member and was a major factor in sustaining MTSS utilizing a distributed leadership model. There were two distinct leadership qualities (i.e.,
Personal, Logistical) that were evident from the leadership team (see Table 6). This section will provide insight on each leadership quality discussed, instances of these qualities and how they related to the distributed leadership model at Willow.

**Table 6. Leadership Qualities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Technique</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Leadership</td>
<td>Any mention of having specific qualities that relate to managing the interpersonal relationships between staff members such as promoting positivity, showcasing empathy, establishing a core set of values, modeling correct behavior or allowing for open and honest conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistical Leadership</td>
<td>Any mention of having specific qualities that relate to maintaining the daily functions of the school such as following through with tasks and commitments for staff, gaining consensus on a decision, utilizing administrative powers to come to a decision, and establishing standards for practice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Personal leading qualities.** The first subtheme of balancing leading qualities is focusing on the personal and relational aspects of leading others in an organization. Similar to the adaptive leadership techniques outlined in the implementation and systems change literature (Eagle et al., 2015; Fixsen et al., 2013; Hall & Hord, 2016; Heifetz, 1994; Stacey et al., 2000), Willow’s leadership team discussed the importance of attending to the interpersonal relationships between staff members (e.g., promoting positivity, showcasing empathy, establishing a core set of values) and how it is integral to their conceptualization of distributed leadership. Many team members conceptualized their idea of leadership and relationships, and then referred to the principal as an example. For example, the second grade teacher leader provided a simple yet honest evaluation of the personal leading qualities of Willow’s principal that contributes to her conceptualization of distributed leadership:
“She's very humorous so it's not always serious. She does a great job of making sure that we are celebrated for our strengths. She shows and lets us know often that we are valued to her and important. She allows the individualization of each team. So, she comes to me often, touches base with my team. Is there anything that we need to move forward and how's it going?”

The third grade teacher leader discussed the principal’s interpersonal style as well, but also talked about how the principal handles disagreement:

“She hasn't been fired yet, so it looks like she's doing a great job. I think it's going well. I've never had an issue, even with things that I strongly disagree with … She's got a good personality, it's open, it's funny, sarcasm, but it's approachable. And I've never had, personally, I've never had an issue of going to her and sharing something that I disagreed with. Or to share what others have disagreed with. And she's always been opened to accepting that. I think of it almost as that Google … I don't know if that's dated now, but that work environment … And I've seen a lot, especially in my prior role, because I was involved with a lot of principals and their leadership teams. And nothing against any of the schools, everyone's doing the best they can. But I think our principal, treats us as a member of the team. It's not just mandates that are sent out, or we have to do this, or we have to do it that way. So, it's like everything is on the table and it's discussed and inspected, respected, and we move it forward.”

Finally, the fourth grade teacher leader expanded on the issue of disagreement by describing how the principal approaches staff who fundamentally disagree with her vision and core values for the school:
“And I know like for example, she fully respects that we've hired you here, we love having you here, but if you are not in line or you don't believe in these core values, then you're more than welcome to go out. Not trying to be mean or anything, but you're more than welcome to go somewhere else because this is what we believe in. And so, I think she has strong core values. She stands by those core values and she makes that clear in everything she does.”

Examples of personal leadership qualities occurred beyond the principal. Members of the leadership team discussed their personal leadership qualities and how they were applied as part of their role on the leadership team. Moreover, leadership team members learned from each other and the principal to create their own way of navigating interpersonal aspects of leadership. For example, the second grade teacher leader explained what leadership meant to her as well as what specific personal skills leaders need to be effective such as communication skills, developing others, and being willing to voice an opinion that is unpopular.

“So, leadership I do believe that there needs to be some strengths and skillsets involved that would probably be [pause]you stick to your core beliefs. You're not wavering. You have a solid understanding of the school systems and beliefs. Your autonomy as a teacher and the different practices that you have are in line with the County’s district plan and vision. I also believe that you need to have strengths as far as communication and social skills to be able to empathize with others to be able to help them walk beside them, teach them along the way and I think a lot of leadership gets misunderstood as far as I'm just going to give you the information. But really going to each person on their level and developing them as a leader as well and finding their strengths and helping them to grow and move forward … I think it also means being comfortable with sharing opinions and
even if it goes against the status quo but having the students and the school's best interest in mind and being able to communicate that. Then, I think following through and being reliable is a very important piece too for leadership.”

The fifth grade teacher leader described her relationships with her colleagues being equal, and that she serves as a liaison between her colleagues and the leadership team. She stated that:

“Leadership to me is taking what your team needs, wants, or questions and figuring out how to communicate that and how to make that happen. So, I'm not in charge of anybody, I don't tell anybody what to do, that's not my job as a leader. My job is to listen to my teammates and to communicate with them to share any concerns they might have, share any celebrations they might have, and make sure that that information is being communicated back to the administration and the other people on the leadership team.”

In addition, the fourth grade gifted certified teacher moved beyond typical communication and relational dynamics of working with their grade-level teams and discussed how leadership involves directly addressing problems or concerns with colleagues. In fact, she provided a concrete example of how leadership in addressing issues or concerns with colleagues not only influences her interactions with other staff, but also how she expects students in her classroom to interact.

“So I normally tell kids you're only a leader if people are willing to follow. So if you have no one following you, are you really a leader? Like I could be miles ahead, but if I'm not setting an example in wanting people to rise up to that, then I don't believe you're really a leader. You're maybe a dictator like this is what we do. I don't know. A leader is invested in who they're leading. So what I would maybe expect to see, so from principals,
from assistant principals, from teachers is our students is who we're invested in, and so spending time with that investment, not only on the educational level, but on that personal level as well … one of the things that I was really glad about being at this school is that they model a lot of that. One of the things that I learned by coming here from their leadership is if you have an issue with someone, and this happens everywhere, in any job with any group of people, you have an issue, you go to them first before you ... The first question is if a parent calls, oh, this teacher or teacher to teacher or, and I'm just making that up, or what have you, did you speak to them? Did you talk to them? And so you're showing that person respect enough, like I respect you enough that I'm going to tell you that this is bothering me, let's deal with it as opposed to now I'm going to someone else and I never directly even gave them an opportunity to say anything … And so that leadership has carried over into my classroom. So if a kid comes up to me, so-and-so did this, did you talk to them first before you came to me? Who is above like before going to whoever is above in that ladder or chain or whatever you want to call it. Did you speak to that person? Did they respond to you? And then when you call them over like, look, this person respected you enough to bring the problem to you and now you have to respect them in return. Like how are we going to handle this …”

*Logistical leading qualities.* The second subtheme of Balancing Leading Qualities is focusing on the logistical aspect of leadership within an organization. Directly aligning with the notion of technical leadership found in the leadership and systems change literature (Eagle et al., 2015; Stacey et al., 2000), Willow’s leadership team discussed having specific qualities that relate to the technical skills and knowledge of leaders (e.g., meeting structures and procedures, consistently hiring qualified staff, problem solving staff related issues of time and resources,
understanding the state and federal regulations). Within this subtheme, meeting structure was consistently mentioned as one of the key pieces of the logical leadership qualities important to their distributed leadership model. Specifically, some team members discussed how the principal is able to construct meetings efficiently to both cover all necessary topics as well as gather input from those within the organization. The principal also briefly outlined her role in with the leadership team meetings.

“I develop the agenda and most of the time I facilitate the conversations. So I make sure that the suggestions that have been made or that I've identified are on the agenda and that we're able to move through the agenda at a pace that's conducive to the 50 minutes we have.”

After that brief explanation of her role in structuring the leadership team meetings, the principal also expanded on what “moving through the agenda” looks like as well as determining the logistics around a substitute teacher shortage. This also was an example where the principal was able to balance between logistical leadership qualities (e.g., sticking to the determined agenda in a leadership team meeting) and personal leadership qualities (e.g., having an open conversation around an issue that directly effects the instructional staff)

“The next thing on the agenda is they're addressing the sub shortage. So in some situations the principal might say at some schools, "Well there's a sub shortage, so we're using the Instructional Assistants [IAS] and we're not going to have groups today." Or they'll say, "We're never using the IAS, you're splitting your classes and this is how it's going to be." But where we are, the leadership team will discuss what the problem is and go through the problem solving cycle and they may come up with what they want to do to solve that sub piece. So there's a data piece and a school success plan and there's a
managerial piece that's there too. And then they'll also be the opportunity where they've identified writing as an area that they want more vertical communication with K-5. And so the learning design coach will lead part of the conversation with regard to that.

In addition, the document review was able to showcase an example of multiple leadership team meeting agendas that were developed and facilitated by the principal. Each agenda showcased multiple structures that are already in place before the meeting is even held. For example on the agenda, there are various categories (e.g., A focus on Continued Growth and Improvement) that directly align with the school success plan and the functions of the distributed leadership model at Willow. Second, the norms and mission statement are visible on the agenda. I reflected that the simple act of creating a structured agenda was a good representation of the principal’s ability to effectively and efficiently structure meetings within their distributed leadership approach.

Other leadership team members agreed with the notions of the principal and outlined specifically what she does during leadership meetings. One of the third grade teacher leaders provided an example on how the principal was able to structure the processes around meeting times and manage the flexibility of the third grade team needs.

“And our want was a day. She was like, ‘You tell me what you want, and I'll try to make it happen if possible, and then we'll work from there.’… And our team struggled at the beginning, as I imagine all schools will, because everyone comes with past experience. "Well, at my last school we did," "Well, we did this." And then trying to build that culture as a team and as a school. And our team decided we want a whole day. Once a month as a team, we meet together, we plan our interventions, we look at data, we look at resources, and we get so much more done for our team, as opposed to having one hour or
an extra 45 minutes. And our struggling team turned around at that moment. Because it worked for us. And she made that happen. ‘Okay, well, I'll get the subs and I'll try to figure out everything to cover it.’”

The Speech Language Pathologist also provided comments related to the efficiency of the meetings and how it contributes to the implementation of MTSS and them being empowered to be leaders.

“Well she [the principal] facilitates the meeting, she turns the meeting over to others if that's what needs to happen. She's open to us sharing concerns. She's very cognizant of our time. Thursday, …there was still a couple things that needed to be discussed, but she had promised to get everyone out by 9:25. The rest of the information was emailed to us … I think her facilitative nature helps us feel more confident in implementing MTSS. That her letting us be leaders on her campus or allowing us to implement MTSS and show student achievement and show growth. She doesn't feel like she needs to have her hand in every single thing, but yet she does, because she has leaders out there that are able to do what need to be done.”

The assistant principal also added comments that articulated her assigned role as a facilitator and contributor to leadership team meetings and how it contributes to the implementation of MTSS.

“One of my roles on the leadership team is to collect the minutes. So really listen to what everybody has to say and capture that in notes and minutes to share out with everyone to make sure everyone remembers responsibilities that were communicated or information pieces that were discussed, strategies that were discussed to be able to communicate...
across teams. I also am a shared facilitator with the principal, both of us depending on who's available, we'll facilitate as well. And then a member of the team just like the rest of the leadership team to help problem solve and really look at the data and make decisions based on data for our school.”

I also noted how the systemic structures in place facilitated their distributed leadership approach during my observations of the leadership team. During an observation of a leadership team meeting, there was an instance in which the principal and learning design coach presented data from “instructional walkthroughs” focused on leadership team members observations of evidence based practices and teacher’s instructional practices. Due to large amount of data (e.g., multiple observations from multiple classrooms) the principal wanted to theme and simplify the data to construct an action plan and disseminate the information to the staff. In order to collect each leadership team members’ perspectives on the data and to summarize the data, the principal implemented a “World Café.”

A “World Café” was an activity in which there were multiple poster boards around the room with various labels (e.g., “Areas to focus”, “Barriers”, “Potential Solutions”). First the principal explained the data through a presentation and displayed the aggregated data, then each leadership team member was able to silently walk around the room and write their perspectives on the poster board. After about 15 minutes, the meeting moved on to another topic. Once the meeting was over, the assistant principal gathered the poster board and themed each of the categories in order to analyze the feedback and disseminate the results to the entire staff. I believe that this was an effective and efficient way to gather feedback of all leadership team members as well as develop an action plan for specific data. Reflecting on that meeting, in many schools there would be a simple open discussion about the data, which might not end in any
actionable tasks. At Willow, the leadership team was able to put a creative spin on looking at data to empower those within the leadership team to share their opinion in an efficient manner.

The same logistical leadership qualities that were displayed by the principal were also evident in the leadership qualities shared by various grade level team leaders on the leadership team. For example, the first grade teacher provided an example on how her grade level team meets in terms of responsibilities and norms.

“So in all of our team meetings, I have people that are the timekeeper, the recorder. People that help write down the data. People that also write down questions that we have for upcoming meetings. So everybody has responsibilities on the team and everybody has the responsibility of putting their data in SharePoint, doing the interventions that we planned. It's a collective. Everybody expects each other to do their best every day and implement everything that we've agreed upon. At our school one of the things that the principal talked about is you agree upon things, you may disagree with some things, but you agree to disagree that you're going to implement it. So it's the decision of the team, everyone together, it's not just one person making the decisions. It's everyone together …

We unite the team with a common goal and collaboration and having norms is very critical. So not only do we have on our team leader but we have norms, we also have them for our teams and we collectively come up with them … we revisit those norms every single year to see, do we need to change, revise or start from scratch.”

In conjunction with having the logistical skills to develop meeting structures and scheduling processes, leadership must also be knowledgeable about the guiding principles for student success. Teacher leaders across the leadership team discussed their responsibility to know and plan for their grade level team’s process of implementing and monitoring grade level
student standards. For example, one of the third grade teacher leaders discussed that leadership is conceptualized as “taking your knowledge and being able to lead others in the right direction. Molding, guiding, helping, facilitating, reflecting ... understanding or meeting the standard.” Consistent with this brief explanation, the fifth grade and the other third grade teacher leader described what their responsibilities are in leading those within their grade.

“I'm responsible for teaching the fifth grade standards. I do math and science and I have a partner teacher that does reading, writing, and social studies. So I'm in charge of the math and science standards for those two classes. …I'm also obviously part of the leadership team, so I'm the PLC facilitator for our grade level which is about sharing information from the leadership team back to the grade and vice versa, sharing information that my teammates have that they want the leadership team to know, and making sure there's that open communication. And then leading our PLC meetings to make sure that they're run well and we get everything done that we're supposed to get done.”

“So my structure started out very standard, following the math curriculum, because I helped implement it, but I still hadn't used it. So I had a lot of learning for how the curriculum grew. And as I became more comfortable with the components and the standards within them, started switching things up …. we're looking at providing those tiers of support for our students. Making sure that we identify the area that we're targeting. If it's curriculum, we'll look at what data we have available, examining trends, we'll look at our main content standards, the major work for our grade level, looking at both our formative and even summative data to determine which students need support. Prioritizing them, then developing the intervention groups to go along with them. So that's really the process of how we're working to meet the needs of our students.”
In summary, multiple leadership team members at Willow conceptualize logistical leadership qualities as a major factor in their distributed leadership approach to implementing MTSS. In addition to interpersonal skills, having skills related to logistics, strategic planning as well as knowledge of standards of student learning is key in conceptualizing a distributed leadership model for MTSS implementation. Consistent with notions of Eagle et al. (2015) that effective leadership is multifaceted and combines both technical and adaptive leadership styles, the leadership team members at Willow demonstrated how they thought about interpersonal and logistical leadership at various levels of their school.

**Theme 3: variety of communication strategies.** A Variety of Communication Strategies was the third theme related to conceptualizing distributed leadership. Multiple researchers agree that communication streams within an organization help sustain a distributed leadership approach and MTSS implementation (“Critical components of multi-tiered system of supports”, 2019; Fixsen et al., 2005; Leithwood et al., 2007; Oduro, 2004; Seashore et al., 2010). In fact, Fixsen et al. (2010) discussed the importance of focusing on establishing and maintaining communication to foster collaboration and decision-making for any innovation. It is important to note that all outlined themes within this paper are somewhat connected to the various conceptualized communication streams at Willow, meaning that even though communication was evident enough to has its own theme, communication was embedded in both the conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS implementation themes described throughout this document. In addition, multiple sources of information outlined in this section provide examples of both conceptualization and enactment of communication for distributed leadership.
Communication at Willow was a cornerstone in conceptualizing an effective distributed leadership model for MTSS. There are three main subthemes within the conceptualization of the Variety of Communication Strategies at Willow; communication between administration and staff (e.g., feedback loops, disseminating information to leadership team, proactive communication), communication between informal leaders and grade level teams (e.g., sharing information with grade level teams, seeking input from team members), and communication across grade levels (e.g., support staff involvement, communication of student needs). To begin, I wanted to start with the perspectives the formal leadership (e.g., principal, assistant principal) at Willow. Regarding the conceptualized communication between administration and staff, the assistant principal outlined what communication around soliciting feedback and having an “open door policy” looks like at the school wide level.

“…that open communication piece and the principal is excellent about gathering feedback from everybody and using the feedback in decision making. And not just fly at the seat of your pants, like here's a decision, but really taking in all the information and all of the feedback, focusing it and filtering it through our school success plan before making a decision to move forward and then communicating the why of that decision after as well. So this is a decision we made and why, but always making sure and then putting it out to our leadership team and the rest of our staff of if ever we are not in line with the school success plan and the commitments that we promise, then we want to hear that from you. So come and tell us that and that open door policy of accepting feedback. In built in time to ensure we're gathering feedback as well, such as through our admin chats.”
To gain more clarity about what the assistant principal called “admin chats”, I asked her to describe what that would look like at Willow.

“The admin chats…just an open feedback time of this is your time with us. It came from that feeling that sometimes you have an interview with people when you hire them, but then you don't have that one on one time with them much after that. Well, we received such good feedback from staff that we decided to do it once per quarter. So once per quarter we come together, and we ask about four questions. They're strengths based and supportive to help everybody grow. And then the last one is always, what do you need from us? Do you have any feedback questions or needs from us? And it just allows them time to say whatever it is that they were hoping to say to us. And building that trust with our staff that they are willing to share with us any feedback that they feel needs to be addressed or considered in decision making…And then at the end of the year for example, last year the Principal created a sheet that says this is the feedback we were given. This is the decisions we made based on that to show them that look your decisions really did or your feedback really did help to influence decision making.”

To more closely examine the specific things the principal does to foster communication, the principal described below how she incorporated communication from staff feedback regarding specific decisions around funding to determine actions most beneficial for staff when developing a leadership team agenda. Following that, the assistant principal also spoke about the influence of the principal in making sure communication with all leadership team members is clear and consistent in establishing a “feedback loop.”

“…Most recently it's been school recognition funds, which two people from the leadership team are leading that. That's very divisive. I was leading the group, feedback
came through the leadership team that people were intimidated that I was leading the group, so I stepped out. I don't think in the past in a leadership model that the leader would say, ‘Okay, I get it. I'm your boss and you don't want to say how you're feeling. I'll step out. You run it.’.”

“…an open feedback loop of gathering what information or what needs we have for creating an agenda. So the Principal always creates the agenda and made a commitment when we opened this school to have that at least two days in advance. So communicating that out ahead of time for everyone to be able to think about and reflect on what the topic would be. And then staying focused on the agenda when we come together and making it really meaningful and purposeful based on our school success plan and our core values, our core commitments that we've developed together…”

Beyond the comments from the formal leadership, it was also noted in multiple observations that the leadership team enacted the specific notions of communication they were conceptualizing. Specifically, the formal leadership consistently disseminated the school leadership team meeting agenda multiple days prior to solicit feedback. Also, after each meeting all leadership team members were provided with the notes gathered from the meeting within hours of the meeting in order to share the information with the grade level teams. If there were specific topics that were not able to be covered within the allotted time, all leadership team members were provided with a link to an online application that was an online bulletin board used to display comments from various individuals. This allowed all leadership team members to ask questions and provide input on various topics outside of the allotted meeting time. The formal leadership also utilized that online application for all staff to contact them for any quick questions or comments at their convivence.
Other leadership team members commented on the communication with administration. For example, the Speech Language Pathologist provided her perspectives of how the formal leadership communicates with staff across the building to ensure effective planning and implementation. This is an example where there were specific examples of enactment of their conceptualization of distributed leadership.

“… They [the principal and assistant principal] like to have a pulse on what's their hand on the pulse of what's going on out there. They are in our classrooms and out and about on campus a lot, but there's only the two of them. They trust us to share information back to them of things that might be successes, celebrations as well as struggles … They trust me as a professional and they know that I'm going to get my job done to the best that I can. That if they do need to speak with me, and give me feedback, that it's in a nonthreatening manner. I love how they just pop in and they will sit and watch us and it's not evaluative. They leave us the notes. Then they always leave with a question, ‘This is what I saw … What strategies have you implemented to help strengthen your communication style or something? How are you collecting data on your student? I saw that you established great rapport with your students. What is it that you're doing to establish rapport?’ They always leave us with a question and so I feel like she's very open to hearing feedback.”

In theory, distributed leadership models are intended to empower and promote informal leaders to increase autonomy and communication across organizations. Within the first section of this theme, Willow displayed their conceptualization of communication between administration and staff. Willow was also able to showcase their perceived importance of communication across Willow’s school leadership team. Below are the comments from multiple leadership team
members) regarding their conceptualization of communication across the leadership team. First, the fifth grade teacher leader speaks on the notion of transparency in communication across the leadership team.

“… we try really hard to be very transparent here. Whenever we have a meeting I come back immediately and talk to my team about it. If they have a question, I immediately go to the leadership team and talk to them about it. So I think there's a lot more transparency. In my previous site where I was part of the leadership teams there, I don't know, I think it... again, it was a school that I loved because I think there was that open communication. So I think that's the big key that really makes it work is if you have good communication …”

In addition to that comment, the Speech Language Pathologist expands the notion of transparency, and discussed her conceptualization of trust and openness for communication within Willow’s leadership team.

“I like how we've built trust among our leadership team, and I feel like we're in a safe environment when we have our meetings to be able to express any concerns. Then we also enjoy celebrating successes with each other and they're very willing to share resources too. If we have a concern about a certain topic or anything, somebody, ‘Oh I have that resource and I can help you with that,’ so very willing to collaborate.”

Last, the fourth grade gifted certified teacher added to the comments made previously by echoing the notions of open communication across the leadership team.
“I think it is just having that open communication and making sure that everyone is heard. That where being all ... well I guess that's it. Just everyone is being heard and having an opportunity to speak about their students…”

The majority of the leadership team members were also the teacher leaders of their grade level. This meant that they were responsible for communicating with their grade level team on anything necessary for the implementation of MTSS. I believe that this was one of the strengths of Willow’s MTSS because they had multiple individuals who realized that communication is a key focus of making MTSS work at their school. This directly aligns with Fixsen et al. (2010)’s theory of how organizations that are adopting an innovation should focus on the alignment of communication streams and establish supports to streamline communication. For example, the fifth and fourth grade teacher leaders provided an example of how communication at their grade level is conceptualized and (e.g., PLCs) is a key component in sustaining the distributed leadership model for student success.

“So coming back and talking to each other and problem solving, coming back and talking to my team and problem solving and sharing information. A lot of the times the team people here will have resources that I can then take back to the leadership team and say, ‘Hey, somebody's tried this before and this has worked with their success.’ So we can look at that as a possible resource.”

“I think in our PLCs, in our planning, in our communication with each other and being open and honest like here's what I'm doing. I think like when you have those PLCs and you're planning out, like here's the standards we're trying to meet, and having that discussion in the PLCs of, for example, the last PLC that we had, we gave a test and we analyzed okay, we had some kids that did not ... a lot of them did not do well on it. Well
why? Why are they not doing well on it? And so we looked at well is it the standards? Did we teach the standards well? Well yeah, we taught the standards well. These are the standards. Okay. Was it the way the questions were asked? And so we looked at that part and it's like, no, these are questions that they should be able to understand. And so what we found is that there's a lot of kiddos that are not like going back into the text. Okay, so how are we going to pull that into our tier one? And so it's that conversation that we're having that helps.”

Finally, I wanted to highlight the communication present across grade levels at Willow. Communication at Willow seemed to be the glue between formal and informal leadership, yet it was also noted that there was ample communication between all professionals within the building. Specifically, in order to enact distributed leadership model for MTSS implementation, grade levels must prioritize communication for all those within the model to feel empowered to lead and foster Collective Responsibility for student success. This aligns with the previously cited theories of MTSS and distributed leadership (Leithwood et al., 2007; Oduro, 2004; Seashore et al., 2010). For example, the fourth grade gifted certified teacher expressed the communicative environment across grade levels, specifically for students who have been identified as gifted.

“I mean that's something that as right now we have some teachers that have gifted students in their class that are not in my class because they were identified later on. And so that's communication between that teacher to make sure that they have the resources that they need.”.
Beyond communicating with other grade levels, the second grade teacher provided an example of the importance of having conversations with student support staff in determining specific services for students.

“… at that point the school psychologist usually gets involved or a social worker or a nurse and have those conversations of what route we need to take with that student based on the data and input from the teacher so that we can move forward and either strengthen the tiers or add a tier or most of the time look at identifying something further.”

In summary, the notion of communication stems from the formal leadership, trickles down to the mindsets of informal leaders, is utilized in grade level teams and is necessary for the conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership at Willow. Willow’s various communication strategies not only seem to be effective for their distributed leadership team’s approach to implementation of MTSS, but it also aligns with the current literature (“Critical components of multi-tiered systems of support”, 2019; Fixsen et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2007; Oduro, 2004; Seashore et al., 2010). In addition, there were ample instances were comments of conceptualization where embedded in examples of enactment. I believe that this shows the direct alignment between Willow’s notion of communication and their ability to enact communication for distributed leadership. Even though communication was noted as a critical piece in all outlined themes, the majority of conversations within those communication streams focused on practice and decisions for student success. Specifically, communication was continuously conceptualized and enacted to be a catalyst for improvements and modifications of practices around instruction, assessment, and intervention.

**Theme 4: student guided practice.** At Willow, it was evident that the conceptualization of distributed leadership for MTSS was directly aligned with how students were improving.
Overall, it seemed that the focus of those within the distributed leadership model were guided by how students were responding to the systems they had in place. Specifically, Student Guided Practice was a central theme that comprised the conceptualization of distributed leadership at Willow. Student Guided Practice involved (a) having a student focused culture (e.g., aligning student progress with professional roles, focusing on progress of all students, changing the environment to be conducive to students), (b) the challenges with a student focused mindset (e.g., staff conflicts, student who are not responding to interventions), and (c) making connections to the MTSS framework for student progress (e.g., providing a spectrum of services, problem solving within multiple tiers).

I began by focusing on the conversations with Willow’s formal leadership regarding their conceptualization of Student Guided Practice within their professional roles. The formal leadership (e.g., the principal and assistant principal) provided an explanation of their role within the distributed leadership model and how they have focused on facilitating a student focused culture.

“I'm the principal, so I'm responsible for the overall achievement and proficiency of all the adults and children on campus…I'm very proud of Willow. I think we've [The assistant principal and her] established a culture that's really conducive to children as well as adults, which is a tough balance sometimes.”

“I am the assistant principal, so my role is working to help guide the staff and the students toward our vision of every tiger every day. We [Principal and I] guide through our school success plan as well as through reviewing data and specific problem solving through MTSS with our students and through communications such as PBIS to make sure we have a safe welcoming environment “
In addition, the principal spoke extensively regarding her conceptualization of how those within Willow should embody their professional roles to create an environment that can be effective for student growth. Specifically, she commented on how professionals at Willow should embody a more forward-thinking mindset to teaching and embrace the MTSS framework to avoid situations of “teaching to the middle.”

“…So I have a heterogeneous group of children. I present my goal, my standard, whatever my lesson is. I kind of aim at the middle proficiency where most of the students will get it, but then the students who are high achieving don't get anything in addition. And the children who are lower achieving are just drag along and not really strategically planning for the focus I think...But back from its very beginnings. Education has been based on an agrarian calendar based on a mechanized society. We have 50 of you, we'll put you in 50 rows. We will give you this information and you will be able to at the end of it do X, Y, Z, and with today's world, you have to ensure that you are teaching children how to problem solve and how to think at a rigorous level ...But our educational system still stays the same. One of my professors once said that if you had someone like Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep for 50 years and you put them in the middle of Google or in the middle of Times Square, they would be overwhelmed. But if you put them in an elementary classroom, 50 years later they'd go, ‘Oh, I recognize this. Chalkboard, desk. Yeah, I'm in a school.’ And so we've lagged behind when we're supposed to be leading the way….So the way MTSS is different than that is that it changes that model of education,”

At Willow, it was evident that many leadership team members conceptualized their practices within the distributed leadership model as being guided by a student focused culture as
well. For example, the third grade teacher leader noted how actions with Willow’s distributed leadership model was dictated by the services necessary for student achievement.

“I think one of the best things about it, too, is the focus is so much more on student learning, as opposed to just management. And those are very important of those pieces, but it's what we discuss and then what we bring back to the teams to discuss, to share, is focused mainly on student learning … So it's not like, ‘All right, we need to make sure that people are getting to the cafeteria on time, we've got to keep this gate locked because people are coming in.’ It is focused more on content, curriculum, student learning piece. And we do a really good job, I think, in my opinion, of more vertical discussions with grade levels. So it is focused more than just school functionality … It's making sure, how are we reaching every student that needs it the most efficient and effective way possible? Using the best strategies, using our screeners, ensuring that we're constantly revisiting those data to make sure that we're pushing our students forward. I think one of the biggest things here is, it's not ... Sometimes in prior schools there's been a push towards process as opposed to progress… Process is an important part of it, because we want to make sure we're meeting our students' needs and getting them the support that they're entitled to.’’

The first and second grade teacher leaders align with the comments from the third grade teacher leader with their insight on how Student Guided Practices fit into Willow’s distributed leadership model.

“It's very teacher-focused on doing what's best for your students. What's best for my students might not be what's best for the teacher across the hall's students even though we're teaching the same grade level.... Making sure that all of our students needs are being met, that they're all getting the support”
“I would say the overall vision is to make sure that its student centered instruction. That we have data driven decisions. Also having caring and capable collaborative staff members involved in that process and making sure that students aren't stuck in that system.”

Even though multiple leadership team members provided the ideal notion of Student Guided Practice, there are always challenges that come with that mindset. I wanted to shed light on the challenges that were present at Willow regarding having a student focused culture. In some cases, having a student focused culture can lead to conflicts among staff. For example, the Speech Language Pathologist explained one specific example that happened prior to the study.

“We had a situation last year among our team. We had a staff member who was involuntarily transferred here just for whatever circumstances and just really did not mesh well with our vision and our beliefs. I attempted as the leader of our team to facilitate and work through that. Went to administration and they helped facilitate my thinking of some different strategies that I could use to try to help this person try to become more of the fold. It got to the point where we could no longer facilitate, we needed to dictate and tell this person, ‘Yes, this is your role and this is what you will be doing.’ … It was very uncomfortable, but it was something that we needed to do because I tried to never lose sight of what is in the best interest of the students.”

Keeping focused on students also can be a challenge for leadership team members who embraced the approach. For example, the kindergarten teacher leader provided an example of getting emotionally fatigued at times.
“Well, there are kids that you know sometimes are, not the lost cause, but, in sense, that you know they're the ones that are going to challenge you. You know they're the ones that are always going to struggle. You know they're the ones that have all the cards stacked against them. So you have to keep thinking of ways to make that your goal. You got to keep figuring them out. Sometimes it's exhausting, and sometimes you just don't think you can do it and you can't get that last student to succeed, but you just got to keep doing it … digging deeper into your tiers. So, you can spread that across your grade levels. You can get input from the grade above you or the grade below you as far as what do you need for these kids going in, or what are we missing? What do we need to do to get them ready for this next grade?”

To conclude this theme I wanted to expand on the notion presented by the kindergarten teacher leader, when she explained that in some cases having a student focused mindset for distributed leadership, means you must “dig deeper into your tiers.” Within the age of accountability, MTSS is incorporated within multiple pieces of educational legislations for identifying, intervening and support student success (NCLB, 2002; IDEIA, 2004; ESSA, 2015; Bianco, 2010; Burns et al., 2005; Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Mellard, et al., 2012; Reedy & Lacireno-Paquet, 2015). As MTSS is being reinforced by educational legislation and the use of distributed leadership models seem to be increasingly common within the literature for implementing MTSS, (Freeman, et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2011; March et al., 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003) schools need to make that connection between the two concepts. Willow’s leadership team was able to showcase their conceptualization of making direct connections between their MTSS, distributed leadership and their Student Guided Practice.
For example, multiple teacher leaders provided a variety of examples on how they conceptualize student focused practices within an MTSS. First, the second grade teacher leader provided an overview of how she connects MTSS to student who are in need of additional supports.

“So the goal is give the students really targeted instruction, explicit what they need on their level at a tier three to help move them forward. At a tier two, still exposing them to grade level standard pieces so that we're not completely taking them away from the grade level piece and meeting them where they're at, but giving them sort of a balanced literacy approach or a balanced math approach. So tier one they are getting everything that everybody else gets, but differentiation and scaffolding being trickled throughout all of that to make sure that they're being exposed to the grade level piece, but still meeting their needs to help move them forward.”

The fifth grade teacher leader also noted her conceptualization of student guided practices within an MTSS. However, she focused more on tier I practices for reaching all students.

“So when it comes to MTSS, we talk about how do we make sure our students are meeting those essential standards? We focus a lot on our tier one because we know that tier one instruction is where all the kids get their most amount of learning, so we really focus heavily on making sure those are planned well, making sure that our lessons are well planned and organized in a way that most of our kids are just going to get it from that first round, and then we do a lot of the tier two for the kids that maybe just didn't get it, smaller group. And then we have some of our tier three kiddos that I said again are the ones that not only are missing this year standards but fourth grade, third grade, second grade, previous standards to work on things with them. Tier one doesn't work. Then we
also look at, like if there's a whole bunch of kids at tier two, then we'll go back to our tier one and say, ‘What did we do wrong?’ Because there should not be that many kids that are in tier two level. If there's too many kids at a tier two level, if it's more than 20% of our kids, 15 to 20% of our kids are at a tier two level, then we have to go back and look at our tier one and say, ‘What could we do better to reach more kids from the start?’ So we don't have such a huge group in the end.”

Finally, the third grade teacher leader provided a briefer explanation of her focus on students when implementing MTSS within Willow’s distributed leadership model. However, she expands the notion of service within an MTSS to students who are in need of enrichment.

“All the tiers: Tier 1 students, Tier 2 students, Tier 3 students … So, that even means enrichment. I mean, those students also need to be pushed. It's not just ‘Okay, you've got the Tier 1, I'm going to stop right there with you.’ I can push you higher without just giving you fourth grade work to do. I can still go deeper in the standards with you.”

In conclusion, the formal and informal leaders at Willow expressed the importance of having Student Guided Practices in conceptualizing their distributed leadership model, the challenges that come with Student Guided Practices as well as the connection between Student Guided Practices and MTSS. Although monitoring and reporting student success is mandated through multiple pieces of educational legislations, Willow’s leadership team displayed sincere comments regarding how their conceptualization of their distributed leadership is guided by how their students are progressing. There was little to no comments regarding the mandating of district or state level powers as the main catalyst for having a Student Guided Practice. Reflecting on this theme, I believe that the leadership team at Willow truly embraces a Student Guided Practice approach within their distributed leadership model.

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Research Question 2

The second research question focused on how Willow’s school leadership team that was facilitating implementation of MTSS enacted their distributed leadership model. During the interviews, participants were asked questions around their current role in the distributed leadership model, responsibilities associated with the leadership team, task distribution and alignment of tasks with MTSS. Based on the multiple pieces of data, (e.g., codes from interviews, and analytic memos from observations, documents) there were four main themes and various subthemes that outlined the enactment of distributed leadership at Willow (See Table 7). The remainder of this chapter will provide an in-depth description of all themes and sub-themes on Table 7. Appendix D provides all codes utilized in the interviews in conjunction with the analytic memos to generate the overall themes for second research question.

Table 7. Research Question 2 Summary

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<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
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<td>How does a school leadership team facilitating</td>
<td>Data, Data, And More Data</td>
<td>Data Culture</td>
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<td>implementation of MTSS enact distributed leadership?</td>
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<td>Strength Based Culture</td>
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**Table 7 (Continued)**

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<td><strong>Empowerment Through</strong></td>
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**Theme 1: data, data and more data.** In order to provide a spectrum of services to support students within an MTSS, all those within distributed leadership models must continuously incorporate data-based decisions around intervention and instruction (Batsche et al., 2005; Batsche, 2014; “Critical components of multi-tiered systems of support”, 2019; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Tian et al., 2016). Theoretically the MTSS framework combats the complex nature of the school setting by having multiple sources of data to meet the needs of all students (Marson et al., 2003). Regarding any school wide system change, researchers have also noted that using data to make decisions and establishing data systems to identify, implement, and evaluate interventions are both key factors in any system change (Fixsen et al., 2009; McIntosh et al., 2010). At Willow, the utilization of data seemed to be a driving force of enactment with their distributed leadership model, specifically around (1) creating a culture of data, (2) devoting specific meetings for data reviewing, and (3) examining student growth.

To begin, at Willow, it seemed that the principal continuously fostered the data culture by data reviewing and strategic planning within their MTSS. The following quote from Willow’s
principal outlines her ability to utilize data within Willow’s distributed leadership model to facilitate the implementation of MTSS. I believe that this conversation showcased the individual yet collective effort for enacting the distributed leadership approach for MTSS at Willow.

“The leadership team as a group looks at data, disaggregates data, which is part of how you incorporate MTSS, but it's what they do individually within their own teams that tends to maintain that. So as a group, we're looking at schoolwide trends from data. We're looking at what specifics do we need for this cluster of students, those kinds of pieces, what interventions are working, not working. Those kinds of things. But the true power of the leadership team comes when they're leading their individual groups. So for example, our MTSS leader, if she goes back to her team and they have PLC planning and she lets them talk about a field trip for 45 minutes, then her leadership isn't moving them toward MTSS. She has to go back and say, ‘Okay, the last time we met, we did this common formative assessment. It showed us that this group of children did not achieve what we expected them to. So what intervention do we have for this particular group?’ So we do as a school leadership team, the broad work of disaggregation, the broad work of the curriculum, of identifying the resources, but then they're going back and individually working with their teams to build that strategic planning and instruction that leads to MTSS.”

The following quotes from multiple teacher leaders also display the involvement of the principal in establishing the data culture across the leadership team and other staff at Willow. Specifically, the second grade teacher leader outlined the principal’s willingness to meet with all staff and advance data collection and analyzation.
“Yeah she's [the principal] not let's wait until a SIT [Student Intervention Team] meeting or I can go any day and she would go above and beyond to make sure, well let's get an observation done for the student or I'll help you call a parent or I'll sit with you. So she's always there throughout the steps of the process. Making sure it does move forward. She has a very critical eye when it comes to the data to hone in on maybe a piece that we're missing as far as the standards and how to analyze those and the best tier system for each student. She developed the SIT template that put students in the different groupings. So that's helped everybody identify and move and progress that forward”

The fifth grade teacher leader expanded upon the comments of the second grade teacher leader by also outlining the principal’s involvement with the SIT team. In addition, she commented on the influence of the principal specifically during leadership team meetings that involve some sort of data review.

“She [the principal] attends all of our, what we call SIT (e.g., Student Intervention Team) meetings, which are grade level versions. They're student intervention meetings. So once a month she just comes down to our grade level and we look at specific data and pull out kids that might be struggling a little bit to determine what we need to do next with those kids, if what we're doing is working and showing improvement or if the kid's stagnant, where do we need to go next? And she attends most of those meetings to help with that process along with other, lots of other people, speech, and psychologists and all sorts of people …. The principal will often give us whatever data she wants us to look at that time [during leadership team meetings], whatever is the most current data available to us, and then we sit down in small groups usually to start with and we just look at that data and we just write down, what are some insights, what are some things we're noticing? And we
don't really try to infer or anything at that point, we just write down things we notice. She always has us look at both strengths and things that need to be worked on, things that need to be improved, and then after we've had that small group conversation and we've noticed those things, then we pull out and we look at a bigger group. So everybody shares the things that they noticed. And then once we have finished sharing what we've noticed, we will start talking about and honing in on specific things and maybe starting to problem solve.”

Last, the first grade teacher provided comments regarding the formal leadership’s willingness to communicate and support data conversations within monthly SIT meetings.

“One thing that she does, she [the principal] attends all of our monthly SIT meetings, the intervention team meetings and so does the assistant principal. So when we have that narrow focus of these are the students we need to discuss, the focus is right there for all of us to see together and what are we doing on these interventions. And she reviews the notes from the previous meeting and we also have the notes from the previous meeting. How are these interventions going? Do we need to adjust the interventions? What should be our next steps? Do we need to go to possible in-school staffing by looking at the data?”

In fact, during an observation of a leadership team meeting, there was a discussion around the school success plan for the following school year. The discussion started with the principal outlining the current success plan and outlining her feedback that she received from a district MTSS coordinator. She provided the feedback via a worksheet to each leadership team member. She instructed each leadership team member to take this feedback and have a structured discussion with their team to solicit more feedback before the following meeting. The principal
outlined she wanted as much feedback as possible before the leadership started to construct the following year’s school success plan. I felt like this was a great example showing the principal’s ability to discuss data, collect data and plan for further data to strategic plan an action for school improvement with the leadership team.

In conjunction with the previous comments, both the assistant principal and principal provided comments on their own ability to foster the data culture within Willow’s MTSS. First, the assistant principal discussed how the leadership team utilized data to improve the overall capacity of the staff.

“One of the tasks [of the leadership team] would be to look at the data of the school and talk about the needs of the school to differentiate that based on grade level needs. So what fifth grade needs is very different than what kindergarten needs. Monitoring data to ensure there is evidence of that collective responsibility that every student's need is being met.”

To expand on this notion, I asked the assistant principal to provide a more specific example of what data reviewing would like in a specific initiative that is being facilitated through a distributed leadership model. She provided an example around Willow’s PBIS (Positive Behavior and Intervention Supports) and their goal to become a model PBIS school.

“With PBIS [Positive Behavior and Intervention Supports], I work closely with our behavior specialists and also part of the leadership team. And we collect data regularly through the statewide PBIS [Positive Behavior and Intervention Supports] system and work with our PBIS committee to problem solve to. We really have developed a strong tier one across. So this year we are working to develop a more consistent tier two and tier
three. We felt like working with the team, we felt like tier one was strong and tier three is strong because it's a very guided process through FBA [functional behavior assessments] and BIP [Behavior Improvement Plans], but sometimes tier two maybe could be better with the data collection piece of it or offer opportunities for different strategies for students. We also use that to look at our data of discipline data and discuss situations such as like cafeteria, incentives and different school wide incentives, different lessons for our expectations. And currently we're also working on the goal of becoming a PBIS model school. So our most recent work has been looking at model school walkthrough applications and really thinking about what it is we do well. We broke up into teams and walked around the school, completing that ourselves to come back and discuss the data of these are the areas where we still need to move forward.”

Differing from the assistant principal, the principal spoke about how all those within Willow’s leadership team are open and honest about their data and that is a key component for the facilitation of distributed leadership for MTSS. To avoid the “blame game” scenario that was previous described, Willow’s principal discussed how all members of Willow need to take responsibility of their data and utilize it to better their practices for students.

“Transparency and trust amongst the teachers is key for MTSS to be successful because I have to be transparent enough to openly show you that my data is not as good as yours and I have to be strong enough to know that you should take the kids and teach them that piece. That takes a lot of trust and transparency because that's a vulnerable place to be when you're not good at something. So I think it's been key to look at that other commitment of a focus on continued growth and improvement. And that's that, well my data's not good on this yet, but I'm going to come watch you and I'm going to learn how
to get better at this. So collective responsibility, that truth and transparency and that desire for growth I think are key to being successful. And I think you have to understand how to use data to drive instruction. A lot of schools look at data and they look at it and they go, ‘Well, look at that.’ And then it goes on a shelf. … You have to understand, and teachers sometimes get frustrated. They'll say, "I had one class in measurement and you're expecting me to create assessments and do all this work that people get PhDs in." And that's tough, but you have to be able to know if it's the fish or the water, if it's the question, if it what you need to do about that question. So you have to really be able to use data to drive your decision making to be successful.”

Moving beyond the influence of the formal leadership, the data culture at Willow was evident though the extensive amount of dialogue from many leadership team members. Specifically, I wanted to mention how the leadership team members were able to be proactive in data collection, adamant with their data utilization and reflective with their data outcomes. To start, multiple informal leaders spoke on their ability to be proactive in data collection with the use of academic and behavioral screenings. Starting with academic screeners, one of the third grade teacher leaders spoke about his usage of a specific math screener to identify students who may be in need of additional supports.

“… at the third grade level, only our students that are identified in that category [needing additional support] are retained students from last year. Because they're the only ones with state data that determine if they're lowest 35%. So we have to be more mindful of identifying students that need critical levels of support as well. So we use IRLA [Independent Reading Level Assessment], making sure we're seeing if they're multiple years below in their reading level. We have different screeners, we use what's called the
Boulder Rally math screener, which is just another quick way to pinpoint specific student readiness in each grade level. So we're trying to use those data to inform and develop our intervention groups.”

On the other hand, the first grade teacher spoke about her usage of a behavioral and social emotional screening in partnership with a local university to identify students with specific behavioral needs.

“In first grade we had some severe behaviors this year. So our most severe behaviors...

We also had a graduate student last year and she did a survey that showed students that had social emotional problems, different types of things. So we took all that data.

Everybody in the school rated their students. Then what was nice, we got a whole printout of where our students were. So who had the academic concerns, who had social emotional, who had behavior, who had this. So we took all that data at the beginning of the year. We put all the students in first grade, wrote all their names down, we said, ‘Alright, who has similar needs?’ ‘So we put those who has the most severe needs?”’

Even though screening students is a proactive way to gather data to facilitate services for students, embedding data reviews and strategic planning within the daily functioning at a school can be potentially beneficial in sustaining the data culture. The informal leaders at Willow displayed their ability to enact their data culture within their distributed leadership model and noted the importance of data in student progress. For example, the first grade and kindergarten teacher leaders provided their explanations of the data culture at Willow, the importance of data and how they enact it for the implementation of MTSS.
“So everything's data driven. We're making this decision to teach it this way because the
data, we need this intervention because the data's showing it. So I don't think it's been that
much of a barrier at this school because I think we've had that shared understanding of
what we need to do with MTSS…..And then having our monthly SIT meetings, that's
another way of analyzing the data, sharing what we're doing, what are our next steps and
that we have progress monitoring system. That's the key piece that we're monitoring the
progress and what are we doing? Is it working? Is it not working? If the intervention isn't
working, we need to do something differently.”

“It sounds like, I mean, is repetitive in this, but that's just the nature of the beast right
now. Everything’s data-driven, and our school is data-driven. I've done, when I was in the
leadership role, back when I taught third grade and it was a very different structure than
what we do here. Ours was we would look at data quarterly, whereas we look at it, now,
weekly. That's our primary function, is looking at our data and readjusting our instruction
and what we do for our students here.”

Echoing the previous comments, the fifth grade teacher focuses specifically on the
extensive amount of data that shapes the data culture at Willow as well as its connection to
MTSS.

“Well, data. The data conversations, you can't have MTSS without data. You don't want
to go into it blind. So you really need to look at that data and see, we do pull out our
lowest 25% from the data that we have so that we can look at individual students and see
who might need that tiered service. Students that are not showing progress are the ones
that end up going to the SIT meetings and having more detailed conversations about
them. …. So data, lots and lots of data. We look at any type of data point that we have.
So there's never something that we're asked to do that we don't then look at whether it's the quarterly assessments that we have to do, the state assessments that we have to do, the Gallup® poll that talks about just how happy people are at work and how happy the kids are at school and things like that. So whenever there's data out there, we look at the data that comes from our walkthroughs. So whether it's the leadership team or the district people coming in and doing walkthroughs in our classroom, we look at that data to see if there's any trends, and that's actually what we base our professional development on is that walkthrough data and the things that we see. So a lot of the data pieces.”

Another key piece that was extensively noted at Willow was having specific meetings or teams devoted to reviewing student data. For instance, multiple individuals brought up the student intervention team (SIT) as a team that was devoted to making data based decisions around student and grade level data. Because data based decisions are deeply embedded at the student, class, grade and school level within any MTSS, having specific teams devoted to examining data is key in fostering distributed leadership for MTSS (Batsche et al., 2005; Batsche, 2014; “Critical components of multi-tiered systems of support”, 2019; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). The comments below, made by the principal provided some insight on how the SIT is able to expand the distributed leadership approach and support the facilitation of MTSS through data based decision making.

“…The school intervention team that meets with the PLCs also helps to monitor that MTSS piece. So for example, when the school intervention team meets, we are going to look at the children who have been in tier three, how they're responding and what needs to be done to either change or continue the intervention. And so the school intervention
team acts as a resource for the grade level team, which then goes back up to the school leadership team.”

The second grade teacher leader also outlined the importance the SIT meetings have on data reviewing. However, she also provided more context in terms of the formal leadership’s relationship with district specialists and how they connect that to the SIT meetings functioning.

“So the SIT team and having that be a monthly piece. Also we have data meetings with admin that we can look at some of those pieces more specifically if we choose to reach out based on quarterlies …. I know the principle has a very close relationship with our district level MTSS person. So he's visiting our school often. He looks at each team's data and our structures and looks for those main core pieces to make sure they're in place and that they're consistent … What we do is formulate a plan with the SIT team. We have an intervention teacher on our team which is a little different than the others. So a lot of times she's pulling those tier two and tier three groups and so I have a lot of communication pieces with her. Just making sure no students fall through the cracks … Problem solving what we need to do to move forward and if we need more time with that student they give us that feedback as well.”

Other leadership team members noted the importance of having the SIT to review and utilize data for student intervention plans for their specific grade levels. For example, the fifth and fourth grade teacher leaders discussed how their grade level teams collaborate with the SIT using data to support students.

“So we as a leadership, I think that we just need to make sure that we're coming back and we're having those discussions with our teams and we're setting up our intervention plans
and we're using our data checkpoints to show if students are improving or if they still need help with those things …. And then having our monthly SIT meetings, that's another way of analyzing the data, sharing what we're doing, what are our next steps and that we have progress monitoring system. That's the key piece that we're monitoring the progress and what are we doing? Is it working? Is it not working? If the intervention isn't working, we need to do something differently.”

“We have SIT meetings where, okay, we look at like our PLCs, which is where we meet as a fourth grade team. We have that conversation of our own students. Like how is our tier one, oh, all of our kids failed this test. Well why was it the test? Was it this? So I mean we have data chats, all of those things that fit that tier one, tier two, tier three and that's where like sit comes in. So those are definitely a part of what we do here in order to make sure that kids aren't falling through the gaps or okay this kid hasn't made any progress. What are we doing to move them forward? So those conversations are happening too.”

In addition to creating a data culture, and having specific meeting structures for data, focusing on the bigger picture of student and system outcomes was another noted key piece in the enactment of the distributed leadership model at Willow. For example, the fifth and fourth grade teacher leaders provided comments about how student outcomes must be paired with the enactment of a data culture at Willow.

“We focus on growth. As long as we see the kids growing and we know that we're doing, we're heading in the right direction and ultimately we would love to see them get that passing score on that final assessment, but in the long run, if they went from a one to a two or they even were in a two and they went up in their scaled scores and we see that
they have that growth on their unit assessments, on their quizzes and things like that, we're seeing growth and at least we know we're heading in the right direction.”

“I think with the successes of meeting in our SIT and seeing okay, seeing what we have been doing and seeing the outcome of what we have done. Seeing that kids that have started off in that lowest 35% and watching them grow.”

In addition, I wanted to highlight some of documents that are different assessments of MTSS fidelity at Willow. I believe the reviewed documents paired with the comments above showcase the strive to mobilize the data collected to guide actions for student and system outcomes. From my reflection, Willow was not only data rich, but they were information rich as well. This meaning that Willow’s distributed leadership model not only had multiple pieces of data, but multiple pieces of informative data that they used for school and student improvement. For example, Willow’s leadership team completed a self-reported assessment that examined their Positive Behaviors and Intervention Systems (e.g., PBIS). At the time of the study, the leadership partnered with a state level project in applying to become a “Model PBIS School”, and this is one of the data pieces that are collected to ensure fidelity and that structures are in place. I believe that the assessment not only showcased their success in PBIS fidelity and structures, but also that Willow’s leadership team strived for more recognition of their MTSS and focus on systemic outcomes for school improvement. Also, the leadership conducted a School-Level Assessment the school year prior to the study to examine multiple domains (e.g., Leadership and Decision Making, Instruction, Collaboration) within their school functioning. I believe that it provided another example of Willow’s leadership team’s ability to access data for potential school improvement and examining system outcomes.
To conclude, it was evident that data at Willow was a major factor in the enactment of their distributed leadership model for MTSS implementation. Those within the distributed leadership model at Willow showcased the rich data culture, examples of teaming for student success through data utilization and the importance of focusing on outcomes for student and system success. Although data was entrenched in many other notions of Willow’s conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership for facilitating MTSS, the following section will focus on one specific data piece (i.e., strength based approach) that was widely noted. I spoke on the Gallup® strengths based model within Willow’s distributed leadership model earlier within this paper, however the following section will provide a more detailed outline of the strength-based approach at Willow.

**Theme 2: strength based culture.** Distributed leadership models encourage staff to bring their own expertise through necessary modifications for a large scale system implementation such as an MTSS. A school’s atmosphere is a key piece in ways leadership is able to contribute on a daily basis (Spillane, 2006). At Willow, the leadership team utilized a strength-based approach (i.e., Gallup® Strengths Program) to maximize the potential of all staff, foster ownership of tasks as well as create a communicative environment for problem solving. The principal provided a clear example of what the program looks like within their school.

“Middle Brook School District has been using the Gallup® organization's engagement survey probably for 10 years or more. When we opened Willow, we wanted to take a piece of the Gallup®'s organization work, which is a strengths-based organization and it's a positive psychology approach with the theory that a survey that you take, which is about 148 question, identifies natural talents that occur that according to them usually start around age three and continue to work within you until you're in your mid-20s and if
you focus time, attention and effort into those talents, they can become strengths. The theory being that if you go from the perspective of your strengths, you will increase your achievement and your efficacy. That's different from how an organization typically works in education, which would be I call you in, I tell you what you're bad at. I tell you how you're not going to be bad at it anymore, and then you go on your way and you work at not being bad at that anymore….At Willow, we decided you still have to get good at things, but you're going to use strengths you already have to improve what you do and so that's different than if I want to teach you about MTSS and you are an achiever, then I'm going to give you a breakdown of lessons that I want you to do and you're going to really appreciate being able to checklist that as you accomplish it. If you have a learner strength, you may want me to just give you everything I have about MTSS and you're going to find your own way based on what you enjoy reading about. So it's about differentiating an approach to end up at the same place. You're not letting people off the hook. You're not saying, well I don't have to do that because I'm not good at it. What you're saying is we're going to use your existing talents to make you more efficient and effective at what you do.”

Beyond the formal strength-based approach (i.e., Gallup® Strengths Program) Willow was also able to enact a more informal strength-based approach. Within this approach, the leadership team utilized the professional expertise, knowledge, and previous experiences of all those within the distributed leadership model to support daily functioning and MTSS implementation. I will go into more detail later in this section; however I want to continue to showcase the ample comments regarding the Gallup® Strengths Program. Aligning with the last quote, from my reflection, the principal was known at Willow as the driving force for the
strength-based approach. For example, the Speech Language Pathologist provided her perspective on the influence of the principal on the strength-based approach.

“She [the principal] is a pro at the Gallup® strengths and understanding how that can be embedded in us as we do our day to day work. Always bringing that to the forefront, and she's definitely a big picture person. She sees it all. She truly understands the characteristics that someone might have with each of those 34 strengths. She's always bringing that, like she has that at her fingertips and she'll say, ‘Someone came to see me today and their strength is communication. I understand now why they need to talk things out constantly and drive their point home.’ That does not mean that that may not upset her at some point, but she's very individualization is her number one strength. She's able to understand why people around here tick the way that they do. Really tries to help us as leaders capitalize on the strengths of our teammates that we are leading and really trying to work through that. Keeping that in mind that we work better as an organization if we build relationships, if we have strategic thinking. Understanding the different strengths of our teammates so that if a big event needs to be planned, then this is the person that needs to do that because they have, strategic thinking is one of their top five strengths. Really working on that and helping us grow to understand so that we work better together and more cohesive.”

Adding to the comments of the Speech Language Pathologist, the fifth grade teacher leaders provided more context around how the principal and leadership enact the strength-based approach for the distributed leadership model at Willow.

“And then sometimes she gives us homework to go back to our teams and do those activities within our actual grade level teams so that we can get to know each other a little
bit better and try to learn what are different tasks that might be better for one person to do than another based on their strengths, or if there's ever any problems between two or three people on a team, we can look at our strengths to see like, why might those problems be existing? Is it a conflict with our strengths and how could we better understand each other to resolve those conflicts?”

Last, third grade teacher leader noted how the strength-based approach promotes belonging among staff members and more specifically how it is enacted among all staff members.

“We all are a part of something so that we all feel like we belong, in a sense, to the leadership team. If there's something specific that she [the principal] knows that someone on the leadership team might have a higher strength in that area as far as maybe they're an analytical person or they're really good at strategizing things, then of course, she would give them something that was data-driven, if they're really good and they have communication as one of their top strengths, then she might give them a more collaborative piece, but she definitely looks at our strengths and divvies up things based on that..... so, it's not ‘Well, you don't know how to do this, so I'm not going to give that to you,’ it's more of ‘You're really good at this, can you do this for me,’ or ‘Can you help me with this,’ or ‘Can you show me how you did that because you're really good at that?’”

Similarly, to the comments above, a related piece of information was the previously discussed observation of a leadership team meeting where there was a raised issue with staff members “playing the blame game” in regard to student issues. As noted previously, the principal lead conversation around ways to incorporate the strength-based approach to problem
solve. This was another example where the principal was able to practice the strength-based approach in a time of conflict. In addition, after each interview and observation I felt that the strength-based approach was referenced in some capacity, which exhibits the extent to which the leadership team was enacting this approach. The vast commitment to this approach was even noted in my first reflective journal entry, where I reflected on my first two interviews with the principal and assistant principal. I reflected that the principal and assistant principal were completely invested in a strength based approach, the principal was the primary leader for the approach and the program was vastly embraced by the staff. Even though the principal was seen as the driving force, the leadership team was primarily responsible for facilitating the assessment, discussion and maintenance around the strength-based approach for all those within the building.

For instance, through the document review, it was noted in one of the leadership team meetings at the beginning of the school year (prior to the start of the study) that leadership team members were allocated the majority of the meeting to map out their grade level teams. The principal facilitated an activity where each leadership team member received a poster board where they organized all the Gallup® Program data and labeled the strengths of each of their grade level team members. The poster board was intended to be at grade level meetings to facilitate conversations around overall strengths for each grade level and some areas of improvement. Reflecting on that meeting structure, I felt like this was a showcase of the importance of the strength-based approach. Typically, in schools the beginning of the school year is a lot of planning and aligning systems for school maintenance. However, the leadership team decided that mapping out the strengths of everyone in the building was a worthwhile activity. Also, various leadership team members provided comments regarding how they work
together within the leadership team to facilitate the strength-based approach. For example, the
assistant principal expressed the importance of the approach and how it was essential for
enacting distributed leadership.

“We first look at strength, based approach. We offer volunteer situations based on just
someone who maybe feels what I have, for example, the mentor liaison, I have a strength
in developer and I would like to do this. So we have offered that opportunity and then we
go to certain people and say, we know you have this strength. Do you think you'd be able
to use the strength to carry out such task? For example we knew that the second grade
teacher leader really worked hard and with her achiever strength, she had become very
proficient with the use of some of our technology in our STEM lab. So we went directly
to her and said, would you be able to present what you've learned to our new teachers and
new to Willow so that they would have an understanding of STEM labs. So there are
situations where we would go directly to them. There are situations where they come to
us and we have that open communication policy where they say, we see a need and we
would like to help with that need. And then there's situations where whether it be through
our admin chats or just through our data chats or where we see a problem that will arise
and we work together, shared leadership across the board to say, this is what we need.
How do we accomplish it? And they contribute to what we need to do to accomplish the
goal. I think everything back to what our core commitments are and keeping it strengths-
based as well. So really focusing on maintaining a strengths based organization and
language through that of using our strengths to move forward as well as keeping us
focused on our school improvement plan….”
In addition, the first grade teacher leader provided an extensive example regarding how the strength-based approach starts with formal leadership, spreads throughout the leadership team, and moves in the daily functioning of the distributed leadership model.

“So it's not really revising all the time, you're reflecting a lot and especially our school is a strength school, so we reflect on our strengths a lot. So the principal will send emails with different questions and you have to reflect with your strength. But everything that we do at Willow from our school improvement plan all the way down into the teams, into the classrooms, the leadership team, it's all based on our strengths. So we all know our strengths. When we started out Willow everyone on the leadership team wrote down their strengths, we talked about them, who had something similar, we did a chart and that helped us get to know each other. It's a leadership team because then we can build off of each other's strengths and share ideas because my strength may be one thing and someone else may have something else and that can really help me with working with teams and different teachers…..But I think we're lucky with our leadership team because our leadership team has pretty much stayed the same. And that's really helped with having the new teachers that we're all working together. And that's definitely shown by our Gallup® survey because we've been the top three in the district or top one in the district for three years. And that's pretty much unheard of. So we've really built that collaborative, caring structure and everybody knows the Willow expectations.”

Willow’s informal leadership also showcased how the Strength Based Culture is essential in establishing and maintaining specific initiatives and grade level teams. For example, the kindergarten teacher leader commented on the enactment of the strength-based approach for developing specific groups within the schools.
“Well, PBIS would be our big one, but we have committees set up across the school that handle most of the little things, like social things. We have a ABC group that takes care of our newbie kids that come in, and making sure they're in. So, most of those things are handled by smaller committees, but we do really, I mean, we do a lot of work with this PBIS, I'm trying to think what the word is. The management system.”

I then asked her if there needs to be a committee for an initiative, how would the leadership team determine who would want to contribute or be a “good fit?” She expanded further and discussed the enactment of the strength-based approach across the school and within her grade level team.

“Yeah. I mean, each teacher is asked, strongly requested that they find something that fits their strengths and their personality to work on… Yeah ... So far, it seems to work out because you generally get an achiever on a task to lead that group. There's somebody that's got those get-things-done kind of strengths on any kind of a committee, usually. You just got to find them … Sometimes we're asked to do some of the Gallup® things with our teams, so we want to understand each other's strengths and how they can contribute to our team. So there's been times where we've been given like within group assignments where we work together with other leaders to talk about our strengths and how our strengths can both help and hinder us in some ways, she [the principal] calls them the balconies and the basements, the good things about your strengths and the bad things about your strengths. For instance, I'm an achiever, which is awesome because I get a lot of things done, but sometimes it's not awesome because I'm so focused on getting things done that I can get overwhelmed with myself. So we focus on those.”
In addition to the formal strength-based assessment program (i.e., Gallup® Strengths) guiding the actions of the leadership team and the daily functioning of the school, informal strengths are also influential. Informal strengths would include strengths that are associated with the professional careers of those within the leadership (e.g., previous leadership experience, content knowledge, skills in technology). The leadership team at Willow emphasized the importance of focusing on the informal strengths that all those within the building already acquire. One of the third grade teacher leader speaks on the diversity within the leadership team.

“I think we all bring certain pieces to the table, but there's different strategies that come from different perspectives. A few of us on the leadership team have been to MTSS trainings … Because we all have different strengths, we all bring something different to the table, and now, you have a face at the table because we all have so many different things to bring.”

An example of different strengths that are brought to the table by the leadership team is the reported skills of the other third grade teacher leader in the realm of math, science, and technology. He speaks on his experience at the district level and his ability to support others utilizing his professional strengths.

“Mainly just math curriculum and support is the biggest thing. Also, science and technology is also a strength. As we look at best practices, which are focused on our tier 1 students, using an instructional practice guide is something that I've had a lot of training in, and I've trained across the state, country, principals with that on the instructional practice guide. So making sure tier 1's instruction is strong, even in content areas I'm not as comfortable. I led, during our last PD, science model lesson with the teacher so that
they participated in the lesson, but they also then used the instructional practice guide to identify areas within the lesson that could have been better.”

The identification of those informal strengths was another key piece in fostering the enactment of the strengths based approach. The principal spoke about her ability to detect those informal leadership qualities during hiring.

“And when you're looking for leadership, you might interview someone and see like our fifth grade teacher leaders, she voiced right out of the gate, ‘I'm a math coach. I want leadership opportunities in math.’ So you have those people that you track as they've identified their strengths, they know what they need to do, and that's easy.”

Finally, the second grade teacher leader provided an extensive example of the leadership team’s ability to work together to enact a strength-based approach focusing on the informal strengths of the staff.

“Because she [the principal] has really looked at the leadership team and seen what is your background, what expertise do you have and she has those people chair or lead some of the pieces. So for example year one we had one leader who used to be a district trainer in math. So naturally that would be a really great piece. So he actually led our professional development year one, called the mathees, that was tied to our school success plan. He touched base with her, but it was really he designed it, he structured it and then based on input from observations or peers, the team was put together …. I've seen this year we've switched goals as far as our school success plan with more of ELA which shifted hands to our learning design coach because that is her expertise … While the third grade teacher leader was a part of that initial planning piece to see our structure,
he stepped aside because that's not his expertise. So it allows other leaders to come into play which I really like because in previous locations it was the same people all the time doing everything. Whereas here the principal’s number one piece that she communicated year one was that we can’t be successful based on one person. We're going to be successful based on strengthening and leaders spread out amongst everybody. So I definitely see that here. We have some leaders on the team that they're really great with the PBS model and that behavior piece. So she targets those and they go to specific trainings. So really there's a nice spread of experts based on their background.”

Through the multiple sources of information, both of Willow’s formal and informal strength-based approach was deeply embedded in the enactment of their distributed leadership model. I found this theme to be interesting because I reflected on its absence in the literature of MTSS and distributed leadership. Even with subtle connections with embracing staff expertise to facilitate distributed leadership model and MTSS (Eagle et al., 2015, Spillane, 2006), there is little mention on focusing on staff specific formal and informal strengths. Reflecting on this theme, I see where this style of leadership can support any enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS. Establishing a system of communication that enables all those within an organization to focus on members strengths can potentially improve daily functioning and actions towards MTSS. Although, it is also important to highlight the striving efforts of other processes, procedures and frameworks besides the strength-based approach that created a sense of coherence at Willow. I believe that there were many other things already set in place (e.g., mission and vision, integrated framework, evaluation systems) that might have contributed to both the success of the strength-based approach and the enactment of Willow’s distributed leadership team for MTSS. Within the following section, I will outline the systematic coherence
and the various subthemes that helped facilitate the enactment of distributed leadership at Willow.

**Theme 3: systemic coherence.** Theoretically, distributed leadership models are intended for simultaneous work across multiple members of an organization (Spillane, 2006) and establishing intuitive working relations (e.g., common understandings and shared approaches in problem solving that can result from close interconnectedness in the team; Gronn, 2008). In order to have simultaneous work and intuitive working relations a school must have some sort of coherence between all members within the distributed leadership model. In addition, Hulpia et al. (2009a) suggested that schools with leadership that have a high amount of coherence and support and can evenly distributed can result in more organizational commitment of staff as well as higher job satisfaction. The importance of coherence in not only present in the literature of distributed leadership, it was also displayed at Willow with their continuous attempt at making sure all those within their distributed leadership model are aligned. Within this section, I want to highlight Willow’s establishment of a consistent mission and vision, their strive for integrated frameworks of support (e.g., RTI and PBIS coexisting) and their continuous monitoring of intervention and instruction fidelity within MTSS.

To begin this section, I wanted to provide context around the guiding vision and mission at Willow. Throughout multiple interviews, it was evident that all leadership team members are aware and strive to follow Willow’s overarching mission of “Every Tiger Every Day.” The purposefulness of that mission was established prior to the school even opening. The first grade teacher leader provided context around the leadership team setting the stage for Willow when they first opened three years ago.
“I think it's a wonderful school. I think it was nice opening up a brand new school. And it was nice because the principal had all the team leaders have a meeting before we opened. So we knew the expectations and we also had different trainings with district people. So we knew what we needed to work on. We needed to come up with a plan, a school improvement plan, which we had one our first year, which wasn't expected by the district, but at least we had a starting point because we knew we wanted to continue improving … I've been on a lot of leadership teams and I would say our leadership team is the best one I've ever been on. Everyone has the same mission and vision. They have the same focus on the strategic planning, the caring, capable, collaborative environment, continued improvement through assessments, student-centered behaviors and structures.”

In addition, the second grade teacher leader talked about the change in the level of coherence at the start of Willow’s existence compared to a school she worked at previously.

“We went to the foundational trainings of what we want Willow to be like, our motto, our core beliefs and we've been able to follow that through all three years and go deeper, whereas some other schools that were already well established … I came into Willow and it was already a going team. There was a lot of flow… Whereas other locations I did not see that. So it affected a lot of the school morale as far as the logistics of what different programs we have and how they run. It was falling through the cracks. Systems were not strong enough, whereas here I do feel like there's a coherence.”

Moving forward in Willow’s timeline, the assistant principal explained what that mission is currently being embodied by the staff at Willow.
“...we developed our mission of every tiger every day, we talked about really what that meant. That it really, not only does it mean the success of all of us, our students, our staff, but it also is that responsibility of all of us to meet the needs. So any one of us at any time will do whatever it takes to work toward our vision. And really there's those blurred lines of responsibility that it's not unnecessarily, this is your role. You're the teacher, you're doing this. But all of us are responsible for all of our students....everybody to really have a pulse on the needs of the school and help ensure that we're staying on track with our school success plan and moving towards those goals and pieces to ultimately reach our vision of every tiger every day. And some of those pieces would include MTSS, PBIS, student engagement, growth mindset moving forward, social emotional learning at this point.”

In addition, the fourth grade teacher leader spoke on the expectation of the mission and vision that has been set by the formal leadership.

“So a clear plan, a clear structure, but then that's where we come in and bring it to life. ... I think it's like she [the principal] provides that structure and that knowledge of what that should look like and, and what the expectations are for that. ... And I'm a visual so I'm looking at like ... Okay. Yeah. So basically providing that here's where we are, here's where we want to be and provides those in a sense monitoring pieces. Also communicating with the PLC facilitators and ensuring that they are carrying that out within the team as well. The expectation that we have that vision of every tiger every day. And I think that's it is she sets the expectations.”

Moreover, the first grade teacher leader spoke to the consistency of the leadership team and how that helps sustain the shared vision and mission at Willow.
“But I think we're lucky with our leadership team because our leadership team has pretty much stayed the same. And that's really helped with having the new teachers that we're all working together … So we've really built that collaborative, caring structure and everybody knows the Willow expectations. When we were hired, one of the things was every tiger, every day, all the students can learn at high levels.”

Last, the principal focused more on how the overall mission of “Every Tiger Every Day” aligns with MTSS.

“MTSS fits under our commitment to strategic planning and instruction. So of those four commitments, that tends to be the area where MTSS is housed because the idea of strategic planning that we shared with the team, when we were training them in MTSS was how do we plan what we're going to teach, how do we know what we're going to do if it's ineffective and how are we going to use the data instead of our gut or what we feel to strategically plan for these students to meet our goal?... My favorite line is how are your words and actions contributing to the successful implementation of our mission? If you talked badly to a child, if you insulted a coworker, you're off base … So that commitment, that mission of every tiger every day through strategic planning and instruction is truly MTSS in a nutshell.”

Beyond having the same collective mission and enacting that same mission, having collaboration across the building regarding the service delivery model (e.g., MTSS) is another key piece in coherence within a distributed leadership model. Working collaboratively under the same umbrella of frameworks and processes facilitates all students receiving a spectrum of academic, behavioral and social emotional supports. The assistant principal provided an example
of what working together across the staff and coaching looks like during the mission of “Every Tiger, Every Day” for MTSS facilitation on a daily basis.

“And truly it's their [the leadership team] job to be that shared leadership across the school and ensure that that is happening on their team and guide and support their team as they move towards the mission if they don't have a deep understanding. So it's kind of like coaching within their team and guiding their team to follow that process and collect the data. And it's also their role to reach out to the experts as well as we'll monitor their products and support when we see things, to be that open communication across the team, across the school to be able to say, this is what we need as a PLC.”

The second grade teacher leader also discussed the staff’s viewpoint regarding their ability to work together to implement research based interventions and their attempts in terms of “getting on the same page.”

“One piece that we do is we have conversations a lot about what our research based interventions that are appropriate. We have developed a document where any teacher in the school can access that and it has in each different area what we feel would be the best intervention piece to give so that people aren't recreating the wheel or using something that doesn't align with that structure and what we feel meets our standards to move us forward. We have conversations as far as what CFA's [common formative assessments] we feel as a school are important to have across the team and so the leadership team has a lot of conversations with each other as far as we utilize this piece so that the following year it's more collective and cohesive … Getting us on the same page and making sure that it's pervasive across all grade levels. So we're not separate entities, but really trying to function as one cohesive school across the board.”

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Connecting to the previous comments, earlier in this paper I spoke about a leadership team meeting where the principal presented a system where each of the leadership team members would observe a random teacher over the course of the month to determine what resources are used at the different tiers of support. She was planning on using the specific collected data to inform her decision in funding. This meeting was during the statewide assessment season, in which teachers are typically busier than usual. After observing this meeting, I thought about how the system could be explained over email to the leadership, in order to save time for teachers. That same meeting was also about 15 minutes shorter due to the lack of questions about the observation system. However, the principal did explain that she wanted to hold this meeting to make sure that “everyone was on the same page with such an important decision.” She also explained that since this is such a busy time of year, she wanted to make sure she had everyone’s attention for 15 minutes to explain a process that will inform their MTSS structure the following year. Reflecting on that observation, even with the shorter meeting and my thoughts of efficiency with email, I believe the principal increased coherence with the in person outlining of the system. This was a perfect example where the principal spent extra time to develop coherence to make sure she empowered all those within the distributed leadership model to implement MTSS.

In addition to working together, focusing on the diverse needs of students within the schools calls for even more coherence between staff members. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Willow was in the process of applying to be a model PBIS school. During the course of the study, there was a specific focus within the leadership to assimilate the improved PBIS system to the existing academic systems. I believe that this was a wonderful example of the enactment of coherence for the distributed leadership model at Willow. Multiple leadership team members spoke about the impact of looking at both the academic and behavioral needs of
students. For example, the second grade teacher leader provided her perspectives on how the principal and leadership team influence interventions for a variety of student needs as well as how structures within Willow are aligning for serving the “whole child.”

“So she's [the principal] very reflective of what are the interventions that we're putting into place and do they really fit the whole child? Whereas sometimes we can get really focused on the academic piece because we're so concerned about data. She has a well-rounded picture of the whole leadership team as a whole. Let's tap into the behavioral specialist for PBIS and look at some of the behavioral pieces or let's contact the school nurse, is there pieces there? ... a lot of the behavior pieces we support as well, which ties into the PBIS. But we have quite a few students who need to go through the tiered systems of support for that. So a lot of times we're working with our behavior specialist and she's on our leadership team. So refining our school structures as far as the PBIS and expectations for students and she has developed a lot of strategies or pieces that teachers have quick takeaways. So I’ll communicate that with my team. We can put that structure in place and then we can revisit with the leadership team and the behavioral specialist…”

The third grade teacher leader also commented on the importance of thinking about service delivery for both the academic and behavioral needs of students.

“… my mind automatically just goes with curriculum, but also just PBIS, with our MTSS, and we have district representatives coming in to support, dealing with walkthroughs. … We guide through our school success plan as well as through reviewing data and specific problem solving through MTSS with our students and through communications such as PBIS to make sure we have a safe welcoming environment”
Finally, paired with aligning frameworks of service delivery, Willow’s leadership team displayed the importance of the fidelity for MTSS as the desired outcome of coherence across staff. In the previous theme of Data, Data and More Data, I provided examples of school wide evaluation of systems that were conducted by the leadership to gauge the level of system implementation fidelity. Other leadership team members commented on the leadership team’s ability to gather information for fidelity. For example, the first grade teacher leader and Speech Language Pathologist spoke about the “tiger tag” process that is meant to help increase fidelity of MTSS.

“One thing that our leadership team does that not many leadership teams do, our administration comes into our classrooms usually once a week and they give us little write ups, they're called tiger tags … The tiger tags say what's positive they see in the classroom and something to grow on. But they also do that at some of our team leader meetings in our SIT meetings about interventions … So everybody, whether the principal walks through or the assistant principal walks through, they always have some type of comment to give you … I can see the interventions were being implemented with fidelity, I can see the team is working together, your contributions were valued, things like that.”

“They [administration] will pop in and just watch me conduct a session or with students. This is what was going on and it stands for teacher activity glow and grow. This is what they saw and then this is what they might grow, so for this one, how do you use your communication strength to support students? They give us what we were doing. Great job building a positive, you know how can we support you as we continue to grow? Just these are little notes that they come in and they leave as they walkthrough it.”
Last, the fifth grade teacher leader advanced the conversation around ensuring MTSS fidelity by explaining how she helps enact coherence as a formal leader through fidelity assessment within her grade level team.

“I think that our job is to make sure that what we do in our private PLC groups and our grade level PLC groups is really implementing what MTSS is looking for. A lot of our leadership team went to a MTSS seminar not too long ago, it was a few days long, and we really learned like what is that supposed to look like and how is that supposed to be? And then our job was to come back to our teams and make sure it was being implemented with fidelity the way that it's supposed to be … We know again what that end goal is and what that's supposed to look like. We have the training necessary to do it, we have the book RTI MTSS resources so that if we need to go through and see like what are some ways that we can do it, then we can figure it out.”

In addition, there was other sources of information gathered from the document review that add more context around the focus of MTSS fidelity across all staff. For example, Willow had multiple documents (e.g., behavioral flow charts, resource guides, outlined intervention for each tier) that were housed on an online platform accessible for all staff. All of these documents were examples of Willow’s leadership team attempting to create coherence will all staff services within their MTSS and increase fidelity of implementation. For example, one document that was noted as the “MTSS resource guide” and it outlined available screeners and interventions across all subjects (e.g., math, science, writing) as well as behavior. I believe that these documents were a prime example of how the distributed leadership model at Willow was enacted to create coherence across all staff for MTSS implementation.
Overall, Willow’s leadership team provided numerous instances of focusing on a set mission, integrating frameworks of service delivery, and ensuring MTSS fidelity to enact coherence within their distributed leadership model for MTSS. I believe that with the multiple sources of information, it was clear that having all individuals “on the same page” is a key element in enacting distributed leadership as well as facilitating MTSS. However, even with a high level of coherence, professionals must also continuously build their capacity to be an effective educator (“Critical components of multi-tiered systems of support”, 2019; Tian et al., 2016). Meeting the needs of “Every Tiger, Every Day”, each year means that those at Willow must acquire the appropriate knowledge and resources to increase their capacity. In the following section, I will outline Willow’s ability to enact distributed leadership by accessing humanistic and materialistic resources to empower all those within the model.

Theme 4: empowerment through humanistic and materialistic resources. Capacity building is necessary for both the sustainability of distributed leadership models as well as the sustainability of any system change (“Critical components of multi-tiered systems of support”, 2019; Tian et al., 2016). Empowering all those within a distributed leadership model can potentially maintain the model as well as increase fidelity of various aspects of MTSS (e.g., intervention, instruction, data based decision making; Castillo et al., 2016; Kratochwill et al., 2007; Sugai & Horner, 2009). In addition, multiple pieces of educational legislation (e.g., ESSA, 2015; IDEIA, 2004; NCLB, 2002) have included mandates or requirements of schools to complete and provide professional development opportunities. There have been previously highlighted themes have spoken briefly on the importance of increasing the overall capacity at Willow (e.g., Collective Responsibility, Strength Based Culture, Systematic Coherence). However, at the center of increasing the overall capacity is a school’s ability to utilize the
humanistic and materialistic resources available. This section will outline Willow’s leadership team’s ability to enact distributed leadership through the mentoring of incoming staff, establishing a system of professional development opportunities, facilitating district support for capacity building, and having necessary resources available. To begin, I wanted to showcase Willow’s ability to empower those who are entering the distributed leadership model. Similar to the systematic coherence theme that was previously outlined, Willow focuses on empowering new members of the staff by enacting mentoring through their distributed leadership model. The assistant principal’s comments on ensuring those who have the MTSS knowledge are mentoring newly hired individuals illustrates their commitment to professional learning for MTSS.

“I would say they're the people who will scaffold all new staff coming in. So that's one of their roles. So they are pretty much, they're the ones that will really have the deepest knowledge of MTSS to be able to facilitate that across their team. To ensure that they are following the PLC cycle, ensuring that there is collective responsibility happening in their team, that common formative assessments are being developed based on learning targets to ensure that they're not only meeting tier two and tier three supports. Also ensuring that they're meeting the needs of enrichment.”

The fifth grade teacher leader provided an example of what specific grade level teams target and help build when it comes to empowering newly hired teachers.

“…so like we have a couple of new teachers on our staff right now, so during the PLCs, like today specifically, we have a meeting and it's going to be looking at our next unit in math, but it's also an opportunity to do some coaching for our new teachers. So we actually go over strategies that we have to teach the kids, make sure that teachers really understand it, because if the teachers don't get it, then they're going to have a hard time
teaching the students and we'll have less kids that meet those standards. So we try to be proactive in that way.”

Finally, the first grade teacher leader provided her own perspectives what it is like being a teacher mentor at Willow.

“Each year I mentor new teachers and I also have interns. Last year, I had an intern and she's now in our first grade team. So I work with multiple colleges, whoever is sending me the interns. And then they get to know how we teach in MBSD, the expectations. And then when I mentor a teacher at our school, they're in my team meetings, but I also meet with them once a week individually. I do observations with them, things they have questions on or need help with…. I had a beginning teacher last year, that was in kindergarten. Officially, we do it for one year, but I still continue to check on her every week and she expects that. She's like, ‘You didn't come at eight o'clock in the morning to visit me.’ And I said, ‘I was a little late today but,’ so we still have that joke. She's like, ‘But I still need you to check on me every day.’ I said, ‘You're doing a good job.’ And she said, ‘No, I liked how you did that every week and that just gives me a little positive reinforcement. If I have a question, I know you're right there.’”

In addition, there are other current staff members that focus on specific domains within the school to help new staff members build capacity. For example, the third and first grade teacher leaders have various focuses on curriculum that are intended to empower new staff members to build their capacity to implement the curriculum. The third grade teacher leader provided their insight on their focus area of math curriculum and how they train incoming teachers.
“As we get our math curriculum, again, that's my focus area, is very involved, and it requires a deep level of understanding of mathematics in general. So it's making sure that as they're either brand new teachers, new to the curriculum, new to the county's expectations, and the school, we're trying to make sure that they're continuing the work and creating that onboard process so that we're supporting them with this curriculum without repeating that first year over and over again. …”

The first grade teacher leader provided a more diversified role as a mentor with helping support incoming teacher in both the “Matthys” and “Bookies” committees.

“I mentor beginning teachers. I'm on the Matthys committee, which was with the standards and Eureka Math implementation at the school so I did trainings. I was on the committee that did trainings for the math. This year I'm on the bookies and that's foundational skills and writing skills. So I'm on a committee for that and then I implement the trainings. I'm on the new teacher technology trainings … So all the new teachers that come to Willow each year I meet with them and show them how to use technology integration in their classroom. …”

Along with empowering those newly hired staff, it was noted through multiple interviews that Willow enacted many training opportunities to build capacity across all staff already at Willow. In these trainings, Willow utilized the humanistic resources around the building to empower as many people within their distributed leadership model as possible. For example, the fifth grade teacher leader outlined the general basis of who within the distributed leadership model enacts these trainings.
“…a team of teachers who are leaders with vocabulary who do really well, whose data shows that they're really good at this specific piece, they were the ones that then led those professional developments and they provided us with research, they provided us with resources, they provided us with time to talk as a team and share our struggles and frustrations and then problem solve around those different things so that we could then implement them in our classrooms. And every single teacher at some point went through that training in some smaller group so that they were all able to make sure they did it and then go back to your classroom and actually do those things.”

One of the frequently noted in-house professional training events enacted was the “What we need to know Wednesdays.” The “What we need to know Wednesdays” was a bi-weekly event where all staff were able to attend trainings that were put on by either those who were apart of the leadership team or others who had interest across the staff. The second grade teacher leader provided a specific example regarding how “What we need to know Wednesdays” were enacted.

“So every other Wednesday we give what's called a What we need to know Wednesdays. So that's our professional development. So all teachers are in different tracks that we've designed so they can pick different pieces of literacy that tie into our school success plan. So it's differentiated approach and we deliver content that goes with our district piece of core instructional practices. So we're really focusing on, … the data feedback that we got from a district walkthrough. So we look at the strengths, the weaknesses and we've developed different professional development courses that they can take based on that. It's just deepening instructional practices, understanding how to move us forward as a school.”
The “What we need to know Wednesdays” trainings were an example of how the leadership team is able to enact distributed leadership to empower all staff members by utilizing in-house humanistic resources. Specifically, the principal and assistant principal talked about how “What we need to know Wednesdays” are a catalyst for Willow to enact distributed leadership and empower staff.

“So I have nothing to do with planning that [What we need to know Wednesdays]. So that's the leadership team as well. So our learning design coach, who's part of the leadership team. It's our, What we need to know Wednesday. She's leading Core Action 3 and then our first grade teacher leader who has a strength in foundational skills, who's also on the leadership team is leading a professional development on foundational skills. So right now I could stay here. Everybody's going to their different places being led by people who have a strength in that particular area that is attached to our school success plan …”

“So that's one thing that we worked on as a leadership team to differentiate the needs of support. So for example, today with What we need to know Wednesdays there were separate sessions going on. It wasn't just one blanket. All 100 staff members come in and hear this PD. But this area is where you're going to go if you're working on foundational skills, this area where you're going to go if you're working on another area…”

Even though Willow seemed to establish a system of in-house professional development, in some cases schools need to reach out to receive district support to empower those to implement MTSS. Willow’s leadership team noted the principal’s relationship with multiple district MTSS coordinators to support their distributed leadership model to implement MTSS.
For example, the fifth grade teacher leader outlined how the principal facilitated conversations around areas of improvement with Greg (district MTSS coordinators).

“She [the principal] works with Greg at district who is the RTI MTSS's guy, and they will look at specific grade levels and the artifacts that we have related to MTSS to help us improve. So they'll share with us individually as teams, like what are our successes and what are some things that we could improve on. They give us little report cards on what we're doing so that we can see like the stuff you're doing great at; this is the stuff that at least they can't see through our artifacts and what we might be able to do to improve upon those things. So the principal works behind the scenes with other MTSS professionals to help make sure that each grade level is doing what they're supposed to, to meet that end goal again.”

The assistant principal also noted the beneficial relationship between Willow and Greg as well as another MTSS specialist within the district (Bernice) to help shape the activities at Willow to empower all staff regarding MTSS implementation.

“Our MTSS specialist [Greg] for district has helped walk through and just professional development. And professional literature … just different pieces, articles and books to really deepen learning and understanding. And then discuss that together to decide implementation needs…. Bernice is a district person that we’ve pulled out to really have an understanding, not only of MTSS as a whole, but who are the experts that could continue to support in as a school district wide and who are the experts within our school such as third grade teacher leader, one of our leadership team members has an expertise in math.”
To this point, I have covered the multiple humanistic resources utilized to enact the distributed leadership approach at Willow. Even though, empowering staff with knowledge can be effective, often educational staff need material resources to facilitate their daily functioning. To conclude this theme, I wanted to highlight the materialistic resources that are used to empower those within the building. To enact the distributed leadership approach the principal provided many other resources that can empower all staff such as relevant articles and information. For example, the following comments from the principal provide an example of the principal’s influence in providing necessary resources.

“…So one of the things I do is I'll provide the data up front…. Then that to me is something I can take off their plates. So I do a lot of the sorting of the data so they can problem solve around it….And I also, I'm very strategic about information that I send to them to read. So if I find a good article that supports our work, I'll send it to them…So I have my Twitter account, I have professional journals and because I know they don't have the kind of time to do that in the classroom, I'll pick and call through information that I think will contribute to their learning. I purchase resources for them in the same way. So we have the, the PLC cycle at work and a couple of books on strengths. I also, when we had the opportunity to go to trainings, the school leadership team went to the trainings with me. So I facilitate their growth and their understanding of MTSS and also as leaders.”

Adding to the comments provided by the principal, the first and third grade teacher leaders expressed their gratitude with getting enough resources for their job.

“…our school is very fortunate to have so many resources. Any resources we've asked for, the principal’s gotten. When we opened, all the team leaders had a handbook from
our RtI about taking action. And before coming to Willow, I was very fortunate. I got to
go to a MTSS training and I had a lot of different things on response to interventions and
things like that. And then all the teams also, everybody has this book and then each team
has the response to interventions.”

“If we need more things for Tier 2 or Tier 3 for our early groups, we just come to her and
say, "we need more of this," and it's like Christmas morning, sometimes. She just comes
with all of these resources that we asked for and that we needed, or ‘Hey, I have this
person who can give you their time for 20 minutes, give me a time slot that works and I'll
share it with them.’"

The other third grade teacher leader also painted the picture of what the principal
specifically does to ensure staff have the necessary resources to provide services.

“We even got to the point to where, even just this year, we have a lot of high needs. And
we went to our administration with concerns with that, and the principal has provided,
'Okay, what do you need? We need extra support, we want to provide a group with this,
we don't have enough teachers.' We have our office secretary, comes down and works
with a BEST group three to four days a week. So I think that's one of the biggest things,
to where the intervention, it isn't just that 30 minute block to where you've got to do it.”

In addition to the resources the principal is able to provide to the staff, it is important to
note the staff ability to enact distributed leadership through sharing resources with each other.
For example, one online resource that is utilized by all staff is Willow’s online learning network
(e.g., OLN). The fourth grade gifted certified teacher leader provided an example of the
importance of this online network to empower all staff through various accessible resources.
“…it's called OLN our online learning network. That's where we have like our standards, our pacing guides, what we teach and there's resources that district puts on there and I think most people say becomes a dumping ground like that people in district or in different, whatever you want to call it, categories of like maybe I'm the math resource person or what have you. They put items on there.”

The fourth grade gifted certified teacher leader also commented on her organization of specific resources to utilize in an upcoming training for gifted instruction.

“So needless to say it is basically when you go on our learning network, you have to hunt and pack. It's like five clicks away. And so I tried to put together a folder of resources that puts the information in their hands of things like what you could do for a mini lesson. Some of the resources we have available at the school, some of the resources that are online that unless you're purposefully looking for them, you may not find them or be using them. So it's just making them aware of what we do have available here at school to help guide them in reading and writing …”

Overall, empowering staff by utilizing both humanistic and materialistic resources seemed to be a key piece in enacting distributed leadership for MTSS implementation at Willow. In addition, it is a critical component for sustaining MTSS across the staff, which aligns with the literature on implementation of school wide system changes (Critical components of multi-tiered system of supports, 2019; Fixsen et al., 2005). The information gathered from Willow provided a clear picture of empowering all those who are entering and are within the distributed leadership model with professional development opportunities, district support and necessary resources critical for enacting distributed leadership for MTSS implementation.
CHAPTER FIVE:

DISCUSSION

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

Overall, this study looked to investigate the conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership with a school leadership team facilitating implementation of MTSS. Through a qualitative embedded single case study, Willow’s leadership team was interviewed regarding their perspectives of their conceptualization (e.g., their definition of the leadership in their school, the school’s vision for MTSS, their beliefs around the influence of their distributed leadership model) and enactment (e.g., their current role in the distributed leadership model, responsibilities associated with the leadership team, task distribution and alignment of tasks with MTSS) of their distributed leadership model for MTSS. In addition, multiple pieces of data (e.g., interviews, observations, documents, and reflective journal entries) were utilized for the development of all major themes related to the research questions. There were four main themes as well as multiple sub-themes per research question that is outlined in Table 8. In Chapter 4, by presenting the data by research question, I discussed conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership separately. Within this first section of my Chapter 5, I will discuss the connections and alignment between how Willow conceptualized and enacted their distributed leadership approach.
### Table 8. Summary of Study Findings

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<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<td>Collective Responsibility</td>
<td><em>Our Students</em></td>
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<td><em>Daily Functioning</em></td>
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<td>Balanced Leading Qualities</td>
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<td>Student Guided Practice</td>
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Table 8 (Continued)

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<th>How does a school leadership team facilitating implementation of MTSS enact distributed leadership?</th>
<th>Data, Data, And More Data</th>
<th>Data Culture</th>
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I believe that Willow’s conceptualization of Collective Responsibility focused on the idea that all those at Willow were continuously trying to push past “my students” to embody the mentality of “our students.” This conceptualization in many ways drove their enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS implementation. The leadership team worked to incorporate this mindset into the daily functioning of staff. For instance, the leadership team often collaborated
and fell back upon their agreed upon notion of Collective Responsibility to problem solve various issues (e.g., “Blame Game” on student improvement, allocation for intervention materials).

However, it was the data culture (e.g., “Data, Data and More Data”) at Willow that empowered staff to enact their distributed leadership approach by facilitating collective decisions, delegating of tasks and focusing of resources. Without the data literacy and data practices at Willow, I do not believe that the Collective Responsibility conceptualization of distributed leadership could be enacted in the same manner it was. For example, having a focus on student outcomes and specific teams to support grade levels in data collection and strategic planning allowed for Willow’s staff to embody the idea of “our students” and not feel isolated when struggling with student related issues.

In addition to the data culture, I believe that the Strength Based Culture at Willow had a synergistic effect that added to the enactment of Collective Responsibility. For example, Willow’s leadership team seemed to utilize the formal and informal strengths of all staff to provide services and to share the responsibility for student success. Willow’s Strength Based Culture helped to develop a sense of Collective Responsibility and could be seen in how individuals were relied upon for communication, problem solving, and providing various services.

Similarly, the theme of Systemic Coherence also demonstrates how Willow enacted their concept of Collective Responsibility. The idea of Collective Responsibility at Willow focused on removing the silos between staff members and embracing a collective effort for student success. For example, the mission of “Every Tiger Every Day” was articulated by the assistant principal as meaning “the success of all of us, our students, our staff, but it also is that responsibility of all
of us to meet the needs.” Thus, the school’s mission was used as a concrete way to operationalize and calibrate on Collective Responsibility. Additionally, to support and maintain the conceptualization of Collective Responsibility all staff members must empower others. For instance, all staff members need to collaborate and provide the necessary supports to create an atmosphere of Collective Responsibility and break down silos between staff members. I believe that the distributed leadership approach that involved providing in house professional development, accessing district support, and allocating necessary resources in a systemic and coherent way at Willow exemplifies enactment of their Collective Responsibility concept. In other words, Willow’s concept of Collective Responsibility was directly evident in how they empowered all staff members to facilitate the necessary tasks for MTSS through systematically aligning various structures and resources.

Enacting Collective Responsibility through strategies such as building Systemic Coherence and empowering staff required leadership. Throughout data collection, it was evident that the leading qualities differed by staff member and was a major factor in conceptualizing distributed leadership for MTSS. Willow’s Strength Based Culture connected with the idea that leadership needs to acquire specific qualities that relate to managing the specific interpersonal relationships between staff members. With the guidance of the principal, the leadership team members embraced the transition of conceptualizing personal leadership qualities to the enactment of a strength-based approach by both the formal leadership and the informal leadership.

Logistical leadership qualities (e.g., meeting structures and procedures, problem solving staff related issues of time and resources, understanding the state and federal regulations) also were critical to enacting distributed leadership for MTSS. Perhaps the best example of these
qualities could be seen in the in-house staff led “What we need to know Wednesdays.” The leadership team was able to problem solve the time, resources and logistical issues regarding district and state mandated professional development. In addition, Willow’s leadership team and staff continuously shared necessary resources with each other (e.g., OLN). Last, the logistical task of involving district support in the facilitation of MTSS showcased the principal’s ability to reach out to district coordinators to promote the knowledge of the staff and the implementation of MTSS.

The planning and problem-solving engaged in by Willow’s leaders relied on various communication strategies. First, Willow’s communication between the administrators and staff through “feedback loops” and “admin chats” showcased how qualitative data were utilized to improve system facilitation, to address staff needs and to strengthen the data culture. The simple objective of collecting qualitative data through an established communication stream allowed the leadership team to effectively inform their MTSS practice within their distributed leadership model. I also believe that in the busy and stressful world of education, allowing simple conversations or opportunities to express frustration can establish a community of trust and respect. Second, Willow’s various communication strategies also aligned with the systematic coherence present in the processes and structures across grade levels. For instance, the leadership team noted the importance of being communicative and soliciting feedback when it comes to decision making and providing direction for the leadership team (e.g., agenda creation and dissemination, “feedback loops”). If all staff members have a chance to provide input on a particular decision, the leadership team can better align system changes to what the staff need or expect. During the entirety of the study, I felt that regardless of the topic presented, the leadership team was heavily involved in constructing the conversation within meetings.
However, despite the need for leadership to facilitate communication to build staff and systemic coherence, one thing that all staff seemed agree with is that their distributed leadership model for MTSS should be focused on student outcome improvement. Willow’s student focused culture and direct connection to MTSS for student progress seems to align to the context of the education system within which they lived. For example, the notion of “digging deeper into your tiers” was referenced when attempting to serve students who are not responding to instruction. In addition, multiple leadership team members spoke about the use of progress screening and progress monitoring students throughout the year. Even though both of those comments are rooted in a student focused culture, it also directly connects to the data culture established at Willow. For example, logically one cannot screen, progress monitor or identify students who need additional support without some sort of data guiding that conversation. In fact, Willow’s mission statement of “Every Tiger Every Day” aligns with Willow’s comments regarding the staff’s mindset towards their professional roles and the focus on the progress of all students. It was evident that Willow’s leadership team embodied the mission statement in their conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS. Even though each interview that I completed varied, each individual had either an explicit or informal mention of Willow’s mission statement. In many cases, when the participants mentioned the mission statement it was during explanations of conceptualization and enactment of their distributed leadership approach and MTSS. Last, Willow’s leadership team spoke upon their ability to mentor, support through professional development and provide necessary resources for their staff. From the comments regarding “What we need to know Wednesdays”, it was intended for individualized training to serve the students of Willow. I believe that having this type of professional development was not only promoting the student focused culture, but also
empowering those within the building to increase their professional capacity to enact distributed leadership for student success.

In summary, there were many examples of alignment between the conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS at Willow. In regard to the categories of distributed leadership provided by Leithwood et al. (2007), I would describe Willow’s conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership as planful alignment. Willow’s distributed leadership model was characterized by the notion of collective responsibility and frequent communication to be able to facilitate necessary tasks for the implementation of MTSS. Members of Willow had multiple modalities, and opportunities to provide their considerations for any large-scale system change. There were also instances where decisions were worked out through various venues and members of the leadership (e.g., grade level team meetings with leadership team member). Last, the informal and formal strength-based approach at Willow resulted in multiple instances where the delegation of tasks was assigned by position and capacity.

Even though I believe that Willow’s ability to have a sound conceptualization of distributed leadership for MTSS appeared to translate into effective enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS implementation, there were some instances where Willow’s themes of conceptualization and enactment diverged. For example, all themes for both research questions were overly positive and showed little conflict or disagreement among the leadership team members. However, within some themes, I noted where there were instances of conflict or disagreement (e.g., “blame game” situation, staff challenges with student focused mindset) among staff by leadership team members. However, the limited amount of information that reflected conflicts or disagreements at Willow made me question if those challenges were not
being brought to light. My experiences of learning educational legislation and systems, being a school psychology practicum student, and occupying a graduate assistantship that directly works with school and district leadership teams has taught me that conflicts or disagreements are inevitable within any system. This leads me to believe that beyond the noted conflicts embedded within the themes, there may have been more issues or challenges that were evidenced by the findings of this study.

**Explanation of Findings**

Findings from the study illustrate and expand upon specific concepts and strategies previously established in the research. The conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS implementation at Willow is discussed in the context of the themes derived from the study and how they relate to the specific concepts displayed in the literature focused on distributed leadership, MTSS, and/or system change. Due to the variability of guidelines for considerations regarding and key components of implementing MTSS, I focused on the considerations that were provided by the statewide project charged with supporting MTSS in the state in which the participating school resided (“Critical components of multi-tiered system supports”, 2019). However, with the other key areas of literature (i.e., distributed leadership, system change, MTSS research and legislation), I utilized an array of sources to illustrate connections (e.g., research, models, theories) among the themes and the literature.

Before examining each theme below, I wanted to note that Willow’s conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS did not appear to illustrate any major criticisms of distributed leadership noted within the literature (e.g., Holloway, et al., 2018; Lumby, 2013; Youngs, 2009). Specifically, I believe that the adoption of the distributed leadership model at Willow was organic, widespread, and was not negatively affected by the
typical bureaucratic and hierarchical structures of a school system. However, the absence of some major criticisms in the illustration of distributed leadership in the current study does not mean that barriers, challenges, or other problems did not exist. With that said, the explanation of findings that follow are organized by key themes presented in Chapter 4.

**Collective responsibility.** Willow’s theme of Collective Responsibility aligns with multiple aspects of the distributed leadership literature. For example, creating a sense of Collective Responsibility across multiple individuals aligns with multiple theoretical frameworks of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). Specifically, Spillane (2006) outlined the importance of shared leadership in the leader-plus aspect (e.g., multiple individuals act as leaders) of his model. Willow embodied the leader-plus model with their notions that all those within the building are responsibility for all student achievement. Willow’s principal clearly noted the connect to the Spillane (2006) model when she commented, “It can't be your class, my class, those kids, these kids. It has to be our grade level, our school.” Willow also displayed some comparisons to aspects of the Gronn (2008) model of distributed leadership. For instance, the main focus of the Gronn (2008) model is that individual, formal leaders remain significant while simultaneously co-existing with collective forms of leadership. Not only was there a formal theme of Collective Responsibility in the findings, multiple leadership team members commented on the influence of the principal in conjunction with the leadership team. In addition, Willow’s leadership team displayed their embrace around Collective Responsibility with multiple leadership team members leading various initiatives (e.g., PBIS, strength-based approach, instructional walk-throughs) regardless of the source of the initiative (e.g., district, formal leadership). The willingness of Willow’s leadership team members shown in that previous example also aligns with the notion from Gronn (2008), that
distributed leadership continuously evolves over time and is dependent on the context and situation. Overall, Willow’s distributed leadership model was founded on the notion that leadership is intended to support all students as well as it is dependent on the context and situation.

**Balanced leading qualities.** Distributed leadership is noted as moving away from a sole leader within an organization (Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2009; Hartley, 2007; Lashway, 2006). However, both formal and informal leaders remain critical catalysts for improving and sustaining practices (Hulpia et al., 2009a). Willow’s noted balance of leadership qualities across formal and informal leaders were effectively utilized to interact with all staff. This was related to the practice-aspect of the Spillane’s (2006) distributed leadership model, in the sense that some form (i.e., formal or informal) of leadership was embedded in the interactions between all staff members. For example, both the logistical and personal leading qualities varied and were noted as effective across leadership team members. Moreover, Willow’s conceptualized Balanced Leading Qualities theme provided a multifaceted example of how those within the distributed leadership model were able to effectively lead others by relying upon both personal and logistical styles to promote MTSS implementation. The description of personal and logistical leadership qualities within this theme relates to Eagle et al.’s (2015) description of both technical (Stacey et al., 2000) and adaptive (Fixsen et al., 2013; Hall & Hord, 2016; Heifetz, 1994; Stacey et al., 2000) leadership styles needed to facilitate MTSS implementation. Leadership is a key part in developing, maintaining and supporting the structure for MTSS at any school (“Critical components of multi-tiered system supports,” 2019).

**Variety of communication strategies.** Communication and collaboration are both noted considerations for the implementation of MTSS and system changes across an organization
Fixsen et al. (2010) outlined that organizations going through system change should focus on the alignment of communication streams and establishing material and humanistic support to streamline communication (Fixsen et al., 2010). Willow showcased similar notions to Fixsen et al. (2010) with their communication between administration, the leadership team and grade levels. For example, Willow’s ability to conceptualize a continuous “feedback loop” across all staff to implement the necessary actions for MTSS directly connects to Fixsen et al.’s (2010) notion of aligning communication streams for system change.

In terms of distributed leadership, Leithwood et al. (2007) noted that distributed leadership formation differs, yet communication and engagement between teachers and administration is necessary for school decision making. Willow showcased ample communication streams to allow for input across all staff members (e.g., “admin chats”, sending leadership team agenda days prior to meetings, feedback loops from grade level teams). Leadership team members across Willow also commented on the ability of the formal leadership to solicit feedback and input with all school wide decisions.

Communication (i.e., interactions) was noted as an enabler and form of bonding for the other major models of distributed leadership (i.e., Gronn, 2008; Spillane, 2006). For example, Spillane (2006) noted the importance of shared leadership through a practice aspect (e.g., leadership is embedded within interactions). Also, each of Spillane’s (2006) distributed leadership patterns (e.g., collaborative distribution, coordinated distribution) require continuous communication for leadership to negotiate tensions or struggles associated with daily functioning of distributed leadership. I believe that Willow’s conceptualization and enactment of their communication streams allowed for an organic development of distributed leadership for MTSS
and aligned with the work of Gronn (2008). For example, Willow’s communication allowed for informal leadership to co-exist with formal leadership (Gronn, 2008), which established their distributed leadership model as a solidified structure and not a mandated process. In addition those same communication streams blended into the enactment of their data culture (i.e., Data, Data and More Data) and systemic coherence for MTSS implementation. Willow was able to leverage communication to create a trusting and transparent data culture that casted away the notions of data as an oppressive requirement and utilized data to strengthen their collective effort for student improvement. In addition, the multiple communication streams at Willow provided flexibility for task completion by showcasing a clear mission and vision while maintaining progress toward specific goals. Overall, I believe that the conceptualization and enactment of those various communication strategies at Willow contributed to the overall clarity, contribution and widespread influence that was noted by the leadership team members.

**Student guided practice.** MTSS scholars have continuously noted that the framework is designed to meet the needs of all students regardless of special education eligibility (Batsche et al., 2006; Bradley et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Mellard & Johnson 2007; Tilly, 2008; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006). Willow’s ability to establish a student focused culture as well as their noted connections to MTSS for student progress showcased their alignment with the established literature and intention of MTSS. For example, Willow’s leadership team’s focus on “digging deeper into their tiers” and providing students necessary supports at all tiers (e.g., “All the tiers: Tier 1 students, Tier 2 students, Tier 3 students … So, that even means enrichment.”) demonstrates their desire to provide the level of support necessary to facilitate growth. Their “student first” conceptual foundation allowed them to differentiate and intensive instruction and intervention based on student responsiveness.
Data, data, and more data. Tian et al. (2016) noted that one of the key items that fosters distributed leadership is the utilization of artifacts (e.g., student outcome data, school wide data) and those artifacts provide a bidirectional relationship between formal leadership and informal leadership. Willow’s data were embedded within its leadership team, SIT, and grade level team processes. The data continuously guided conversations around who had the expertise to lead with specific tasks. Willow’s data culture provided a concrete example how distributed leadership models can be somewhat self-sufficient (e.g., increasing agency and influence in informal leaders and justifying actions of formal leaders) decision making if data are deeply embedded within the interactions between formal leadership and informal leadership (Tian et al., 2016). Furthermore, Willow’s extensive data culture that underpinned their integrated frameworks of service delivery, system fidelity monitoring and specific teaming and meeting structures illustrated the importance of institutionalized practices outlined in the Gronn (2008) distributed leadership model. For example, Willow’s SIT team or PBIS initiative developed specific data focused structures within the school, which allowed both formal and informal leaders to enact their data culture.

The data culture that undergirded their distributed leadership model also allowed the school to enact an essential element of MTSS implementation. In order to facilitate MTSS implementation, data-based decisions must inform instruction and intervention and instruction (Batsche et al., 2005; Batsche, 2014; “Critical components of multi-tiered systems of support”, 2019; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Using data to make decisions and establishing data systems to identify, implement, and evaluate interventions are also key factors in any system change (Fixsen et al., 2009; McIntosh et al., 2010). Willow provided multiple examples how staff were able to collectively (e.g., school wide assessment data, strength-based data) and individually (e.g.,
progress monitoring, screening) use data to maintain the MTSS framework. Although the principal was involved in creating an environment that allowed for the development of data systems to track, monitor and evaluate interventions, the responsibility for facilitating the use of data was distributed among leadership team members and the staff at Willow.

**Strength based culture.** MTSS can be a dynamic and complex process, which may involve modification of professional roles across staff (Eagle et al., 2015). The notion of fluidity in professional roles was illustrated in how Willow’s Strength Based Culture molded the school’s atmosphere to allow for all staff to contribute effectively. The leadership responsibilities at Willow were dependent on strengths or passions of individuals, not necessarily professional titles. In addition, Willow utilized the formal strengths of staff as a guiding principal for communication and task distribution, which aligns with the practice aspect of the Spillane (2006) model (e.g., leadership is embedded in interactions). In fact, Spillane (2006) argued that leadership can help create a positive school atmosphere that promotes staff willingness and ability to improve student outcomes. Furthermore, Willow’s strength-based approach may have contributed to overall positive culture that empowered teachers with positive attributes. I believe that Willow’s ability to have school staff continuously focus on areas of strengths with each other may have contributed to their success in student achievement. Silins and Mulford (2002) similarly suggested that student outcomes can improve when school staff are empowered in areas of importance to them.

**Systemic coherence.** Hulpia et al. (2009a) found that a high amount of coherence and support can result in more organizational commitment and reported job satisfaction of staff within a distributed leadership model. Willow’s ability to enact Systemic Coherence within their school appeared to illustrate Hulpia et al.’s (2009a) findings. Willow’s widely shared and
referenced mission statement and strive for integration of support frameworks for student success and promoting MTSS fidelity (e.g., Model PBIS school, Tiger Tags) were examples of how school leaders attempted to integrate and align messages, practices, and other structures. The strategic emphasis on establishing systemic coherence appeared to contribute to their enjoyment of their professional positions and work within the school. In addition, Willow’s Systemic Coherence aligned with multiple noted models of distributed leadership. First, Willow had multiple leaders working separate but unified tasks to achieve the goals laid out by Willow’s school success plan, which closely aligned to the collective distribution pattern in Spillane’s (2006) model. Second, Willow’s distributed leadership model displayed a connection to intuitive working relations (Gronn, 2008) with their ability to have common understandings (e.g., shared mission and vision) and shared approaches in problem solving (e.g., strength-based approach). Last, Willow aligned with the spontaneous collaboration pattern outlined by Gronn (2008). For example, multiple leadership team meetings were focused on facilitating interactions among staff to accomplish a specific task. The leadership team aimed to facilitate these tasks through existing structures and frameworks at Willow (e.g., World Café activity, observation system for resource funding).

**Empowerment through humanistic and materialistic resources.** Tian et al. (2016) outlined that distributed leadership models must move past a formal leader guiding others and focus on interactions and capacity building with all individuals within a school. Willow exhibited this trait during the implementation of their “What we need to know Wednesdays.” These in-house professional development sessions were led by those who were either passionate about the or held expertise regarding the topic, rather than someone with a specific professional title. Willow’s leadership team also followed that same trend of building collective capacity by having
meetings facilitated by specific team members (e.g., third grade teacher leader, first grade teacher leader, learning design coach) who were able to speak more extensively than the formal leaders on topics such as curriculum, instructional strategies, and technology within the classroom. Relating to specific distributed leadership models, Willow’s empowerment of all staff is closely connected to the follower component articulated by Spillane (2006). Specifically, the Willow’s “What we need to know Wednesdays” displays the notion of training assistance that is led by various staff members to support the capacity of all staff and that ultimately support leader’s various initiatives discussed by Spillane.

Willow’s distributed leadership model also specifically focused on building capacity of those who are new to the school. For example, Willow enacted multiple mentoring and capacity building opportunities for all newly hired staff that was intended to have those entering the system assimilate into the way of work. Aligning with the notion of competency drivers from Fixsen et al., (2005), the mentoring and capacity building opportunities at Willow were intended to facilitate growth in all hired and incoming staff’s values, knowledge and general expertise in various areas. In addition, Willow’s leadership team focused on both initial and continuous supports and coaching for those new and in need of support, which also aligned with Fixsen et al., (2005). Furthermore, capacity building (e.g., professional development, mentoring and coaching) has been articulated as a key part in developing, maintaining and supporting the structure for MTSS (“Critical components of multi-tiered system supports,” 2019). For example, continuous professional development matched to educator responsibilities and job embedded coaching can relate to the ways leadership teams can support educators to align and assimilate multiple initiatives, streamline procedures and have high fidelity in data-based problem-solving (“Critical components of multi-tiered system supports,” 2019).
Quality Criteria Evaluation and Limitations

**Quality criteria.** Although I attempted to explain the findings of this study in the context of the literature on distributed leadership, systems change, and MTSS implementation, it is important to note that this study was one case of a school leadership team implementing MTSS. However, the case study did provide a narrative focused on how a school leadership team conceptualized and enacted their distributed leadership approach to MTSS implementation. This narrative contributes to the literature by illustrating the intersections between distributed leadership, systems change, and MTSS implementation that exist in practice, but are not described by existing studies. Although I believe these contributions to be important, the reader should evaluate the quality of the study in the context of the following criteria and limitations.

In terms of the quality of this research study, I noticed evidence of meeting several of the criteria for quality qualitative research outlined by Tracy (2010). For instance, at the time of the study, educators were in the “age of accountability” and still continue to bare the educational responsibility of positive student academic outcomes and yearly student progress. At the same time, educators were attempting to implement MTSS with the utilization of distributed leadership to provide a continuum of services for all students. This study provided a significant and practical contribution to the field of education, considering it is a narrative that can illustrate how teams distribute responsibilities to promote MTSS implementation. Increasing the amount of available knowledge on the intersection of distributed leadership and MTSS implementation advances the literature on leadership for MTSS. Much of the extant research discussed the importance of leadership teams (Freeman, et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2011; March et al., 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003), but does not articulate how these team members work together to promote MTSS implementation.
In addition to contribute to the literature, the study produced a thick description of findings through triangulation of multiple interviews, observations, and documents. Quotes, descriptions of meetings, and content from documents provided a thorough and in-depth illustration of how Willow conceptualized and enacted their distributed leadership model for MTSS implementation. This thick description was produced through a rigorous data collection and analysis procedure (See Table 3). For instance, I continuously and consistently (e.g., adhered to the procedure outlined in chapter three) collected data for multiple months through interviews with nearly a dozen leadership team members, observations of multiple leadership teams, various meetings with formal leadership regarding relevant documents and over a dozen journal entries. Moreover, the rigorous data collection and analysis procedures were coherent with my research aims, which addressed gaps in the literature. In other words, I collected and analyzed these data to address my research questions from a school conceptualizing and enacting distributed leadership for MTSS implementation.

Finally, I believe that I was transparent and sincere throughout the research process. I articulated my biases, challenges I believed I would encounter given my training, and the paradigm through which I would interpret the findings prior to the study. I also used reflective journaling to record my thoughts and to help me to process the data. I also shared these perspectives from my journal in the findings where relevant. My ability to showcase sincerity and self-reflexivity provided more insights of my process in collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data from this study to allow the reader to more thoroughly evaluate how I arrived at the conclusions presented.

**Limitations.** Although I believe the study demonstrated several quality criteria outlined by Tracy (2010), there are limitations that should be considered. First, the data collected within
this study represented a relatively short period of time (e.g., approximately 15 weeks). Although bounding a case study within an established timeframe consistent with case study frameworks, the data provided a relatively small window into how leadership teams distribute roles and responsibilities for MTSS implementation. MTSS implementation is an ongoing effort that takes years to facilitate (Fixsen et al., 2015), and this study was only able to provide a cross-section of implementation.

Second, observations of leadership team meetings and document reviews were stopped due to a global pandemic that closed the school in the final weeks of the study. Even though I was able to collect data through multiple observations and documents, I was unable to collect additional data due to the closing of the school. This information may have provided additional insights that could have further contributed to the findings regarding the school’s conceptualization and/or enactment of distributed leadership.

Third, there were technical difficulties with the digital recorder used for one of the interviews. Because the digital recorder did not record the interview for the learning design coach, I had to code the notes taken during the interview instead of their verbatim transcript. Transcribing the notes taken during the interview of the learning design coach limited the interpretation and analysis of their data.

Fourth, all participants were notified prior to consenting to the study that the data from their interviews and the observations would be de-identified (e.g., only providing their professional role) and utilized within the findings section of this paper. Although the participants’ identities were kept confidential, participants still might have felt uncomfortable sharing conflicting opinions regarding the functioning of the leadership team. This issue might have limited what was shared by participants, which may have prevented more information
regarding difficulties or challenges with Willow’s distributed leadership model from coming to light. Relatedly, I only complete one interview with each leadership team member at Willow. The lack of multiple interviews might have limited my ability to gain enough rapport or trust, which in turn may have limited participants ability to speak candidly. Also, the lack of follow-up interviews limited the overall amount of information or insight that I might have gathered for the study (e.g., I did not have the opportunity to ask for information to address the questions or issues that arose as I reflected on the first interviews).

Fifth, I believe that I might have been limited by my previous experiences as a school psychology graduate student as well as occupying a graduate assistantship that directly relates to promoting MTSS. These experiences may have only granted me a positive light on the service delivery framework. This in turn might have led me to not question or view distributed leadership for MTSS implementation at Willow with a more critical lens, which could ultimately have narrowed my interpretation of their conceptualization and enactment.

Sixth, only 11 out of the 14 leadership team members at Willow choose to participate in the study. The three individuals who choose not to participated could have potentially influenced the themes and added more context regarding distributed leadership at Willow. In addition, I limited the data collection to only the members of the leadership team due to the case study format. I did not collect data from all educators within Willow who interacted with the leadership team and facilitated MTSS implementation. Since the distributed leadership model at Willow did not stop at the members of the leadership team, I believe that this might have limited the overall scope of the findings. Seventh, to protect confidentiality I restricted information regarding the participating school district and elementary school (e.g., specific demographics, history of MTSS
implementation, location). Limiting that information might have minimized the school’s context for the consumers of this research and my ability to be fully transparent with my findings.

Finally, in my reflective journaling I expressed multiple frustrations regarding the paradigm utilized in this study as well as my novice qualitative researcher capacity. Throughout this study, I was also enrolled in a graduate school psychology program, that was involved mostly in quantitative research. I reflected on my struggles of shifting from a post-positivist paradigm focused on hypothesis generation and confirmation to the interpretivist paradigm that relies on subjectivity. I noted in my reflective journaling that I often struggled with accepting my biases in conjunction with my interviews (e.g., observations, researcher reflection, noting my perspectives on documents). I also felt more comfortable with avoiding subjectivity and solely looking for confirmation within the collected data. My struggles in shifting and maintaining the selected interpretivist paradigm may have influenced the way that I analyzed and interpreted data for this study. In addition, I noted multiple times in my reflective journaling that I felt my novice qualitative researcher status influenced my overall theme construction. I often reflected on how I had feelings of “imposter syndrome” when analyzing and theming the collected data. My struggles with self-efficacy might have limited my overall interpretation and dissemination of the findings in the study.

Implications for Research and Practice

I believe that the study’s findings include implications for both research and practice. In terms of practice, even though this was one specific case study about distributed leadership for MTSS, the derived themes can possibly increase clarity for distributed leadership in schools. Practitioners can consider this study’s findings in terms of how they may inform their school leadership team’s approach to distributed leadership for MTSS. For example, practitioners that
are facilitating MTSS through a distributed leadership model can consider how Willow’s conceptualization (e.g., Collective Responsibility, Student Guided Practice) of distributed leadership may be relevant to their system’s conceptual foundation to potentially improve their distributed leadership model. In addition, providing a specific example around distributed leadership and its intersection with MTSS implementation can empower educators with knowledge not currently found in the literature. For instance, Willow’s specific activities around their enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS (e.g., Data, Data and More Data, Systemic Coherence) can provide context on how leadership teams can operate to facilitate MTSS. It also may help educators transform potentially prescribed school leadership team roles and responsibilities into a more organically embraced distributed leadership model.

In terms of research, this study provided an authentic narrative of a leadership team’s conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership for implementation of MTSS. As such, it may advance the literature base on distributed leadership, which to-date does not include many studies illustrating how school leadership conceptualizes and enacts distributed leadership models. For example, this study provided addressed a gap within the literature noted by various researchers around the functions and voices of those within a distributed leadership model in a naturalistic setting (Angelle, 2010; Harris, 2003; Hulpia et al., 2009a; Ritchie & Woods, 2007; Tian, Risku, & Collin, 2016; Seashore, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010).

Additionally, findings illustrate one way in which a school negotiated the intersection between distributed leadership models and the implementation of MTSS. For instance, Willow’s leadership team’s conceptualization (e.g., Variety of Communication Strategies, Student Guided Practice) and enactment (e.g., Data, Data and More Data, Systemic Coherence, Empowerment Through Humanistic And Materialistic Resources) of distributed leadership illustrated
established notions of school leadership teams for MTSS implementation (e.g., data based
decisions, communication and collaboration, building staff’s capacity, focusing on student
progress and aligning policies and systems; “Critical components of multi-tiered system
supports,” 2019. Freeman et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2011; March et al., 2016; Neufeld &
Roper, 2003; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and
Supports, 2015). Although this information may resonate with and be applicable to some
contexts, additional research is needed to identify and articulate other ways that leadership teams
may conceptualize and enact distributed leadership for MTSS. Moreover, Willow’s strength-
based approach is a finding not typically discussed in the MTSS literature. Additional research is
needed to understand how strengths of leaders and staff can be relied upon to facilitate different
aspects of MTSS implementation.

The study also provides a number of insights into the conceptualization and enactment of
distributed leadership for MTSS implementation that may complement and inform existing
implementation science and system reform research. For instance, Willow showcased clear
examples of both competency and organizational drivers that are noted to be enablers of the
implementation process for any organization (Fixsen et al., 2005). In addition, Willow’s student
focused culture, systemic coherence, and strength-based approach also connected to other
models of system reform evident in the literature (Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2016). The
stagewise and technical concepts and guidelines provided by various models for implementation
science and system reform provide approaches to implementation of innovations like MTSS;
however, they do not describe how teams actually enact the change process. This study provided
a concrete example of how these processes were enacted through a distributed leadership
approach. Studies that converge the conversations of scholars from the realms of distributed
leadership, MTSS, system change, and implementation science may create a more cohesive literature base for both researchers and practitioners. Specifically, researchers and implementers who study and/or support MTSS implementation at the school, district and state level (e.g., statewide projects, school-based researchers, educational consultants) should consider how case study’s focused on distributed leadership can inform their efforts to use implementation science to promote effective enactment of MTSS practices.

Finally, further inquiry into distributed leadership for MTSS implementation is needed. It is imperative for researchers and practitioners to collect more data on distributed leadership applications for MTSS in schools. Due to the diversity of school settings, educators, and students, gathering information on distributed leadership approaches for MTSS across a variety of sites can provide other illustrations of how educators and researchers may distribute leadership responsibilities. In addition, other studies should focus on specific factors within distributed leadership models that are facilitating MTSS. For instance, considering that Willow’s conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership included staff and not just their leadership team, future research should investigate how staff throughout the school think about and enact distributed leadership. Additionally, researchers could examine the influence of formal leadership within distributed leadership models and specific barriers to and facilitating factors of MTSS implementation within distributed leadership approaches. Both foci of future research would provide schools with more information around key factors that likely influence distributed leadership approaches to MTSS implementation.

**Conclusions**

Educators are currently situated within the age of accountability with the passing of multiple pieces of federal legislation that require a focus on improving student outcomes (ESSA,
2015; NCLB, 2002) and that have mandated and reinforced schools to utilize MTSS as one way to address those outcomes. Considering the many different and dynamic components (e.g., screening, assessment, instruction, problem solving, progress monitoring) that are required for the implementation of MTSS, the process may be too cumbersome for a sole leader (e.g., school principal). This reality has contributed to the pervasive use of distributed leadership (e.g., school leadership teams) throughout the literature on implementing MTSS (Freeman, et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2011; March et al., 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). However, the current literature base has a lack of articles examining how leadership teams conceptualize and enact their distributed leadership approach to implementation of MTSS.

The study used a qualitative embedded single case study format. Through interviews, observations, existing documents, and self-reflection, the study four major themes for the conceptualization of distributed leadership for MTSS (i.e., Collective Responsibility, Balanced Leading Qualities, Variety of Communication Strategies, Student Guided Practice) as well as four major themes for the enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS (i.e., Data, Data, And More Data, Strength Based Culture, Systemic Coherence, Empowerment Through Humanistic And Materialistic Resources). Considering that there is little known about the intersection between the topics, the findings from the study can be utilized to (1) inform how leadership team models evident in the literature on implementing MTSS may operate to promote implementation among educators, (2) provide practitioners, school leadership and researchers a reference and narrative point for future facilitation of MTSS implementation and (3) raise additional questions regarding leadership team functioning, distributed leadership and MTSS implementation.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Participant Demographic Sheet

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age (Please Fill in)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main Position Held Currently (Please Write in)</td>
<td>________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience at Current Position (Please Fill in)</td>
<td>________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience on Current Leadership Team (Please Check one)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Less than one year _____</td>
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<td>More than one year _____</td>
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*If more than one year, fill in years of experience on the current leadership team__

leadership team __________
Appendix B: Interview Questions Guide

Research Question 1: How do school leadership teams facilitating implementation of Multi-tiered systems of support conceptualize their distributed leadership approach?

Opening Topic(s) (Neutral Initial questions):

- How long have you been at this school?
- What are your roles and responsibilities at the school?
- What do you think about the school?
- What do you think are the most pressing issues at the school?
- How do you think your leadership team is compared to the average school based leadership team?

Prompt:

- “Thank you for sharing. Now we are going to talk about distributed leadership model such as the leadership team that you are a part of.”

Specific Questions

i. How do you conceptualize the leadership dynamic at your school?

1. What does leadership mean to you?
2. How do you describe it?

ii. What is a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS)?

1. What is your school’s vision for multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)?
2. In your opinion, how is implementation of MTSS going? How is the team contributing to implementation?

iii. How would you describe the current distribution of leadership within your school?
1. How are tasks distributed throughout the leadership team?

2. What types of tasks are shared? How are they shared?

Prompt:

- “Thank you for sharing your perspectives of how you believe the tasks are distributed throughout your leadership team within your school. Now we are going to shift the discussion to talk about how the leadership team functions on a daily basis.

Specifically, we will be looking at the actions related to the implementation of MTSS.”

Research Question 2: How do school leadership teams facilitating implementation of Multi-tiered systems of support enact their distributed leadership approach?

   iv. What is your current role within the leadership team?

   1. What responsibilities do other team members have?

   2. Who is the leader? Who chooses who is responsible for each task?

   i. What are some of the tasks that are paired with your current role in the leadership team?

      1. What else do you do?

   ii. What are some tasks that are paired with your current role in the leadership team that directly aligns with the implementation of MTSS?

   iii. How would you describe the leadership team’s current implementation of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)?

      1. How does the leadership team contribute to the implementation of MTSS?

      2. What are the roles and responsibilities of your team for facilitating implementation of MTSS?

      3. How is MTSS enacted by multiple people in the school?
"Thank you for sharing your perspectives of the distributed leadership model within your school. Now for the second part of this interview, we will be focusing on the factors that influence the implementation of MTSS."

What do school leadership teams identify as barriers to and facilitators of leading efforts to implement MTSS?

Opening Topic(s) (Neutral Initial questions):
• Please briefly explain me to the successes and/or struggles of this leadership team’s implementation of MTSS during this current school year.

Specific Questions

i. What are some factors/that helped facilitate the leadership team’s ability to implement MTSS?
   1. What facilitating factors have helped the leadership team implement MTSS?
   2. What is helping implementation to go well?
   3. How is the team contributing to those things?

ii. What are some factors (either humanistic or materialistic) that been barriers to the leadership team’s ability to implement MTSS?
   1. What is stopping implementation from going well?
   2. What is getting in the way?
   3. How is the team contributing to those things?

Prompt:
“Once again, thank you so much for sharing your perspectives. For the last section of the interview, we’re going to focus on the influence of the principal on the distributed leadership model and implementation of MTSS.”

What is the influence of the school principal on a school leadership teams facilitating implementation of Multi-tiered systems of support within a distributed leadership approach?

i. How does the principal involve herself with the leadership team?
   1. What does the principal say?
   2. What does the principal do?
   3. What role does the principal have within the leadership team?

ii. How does the principal influence the distributed leadership approach?
   1. How does the principal work within the leadership team?
   2. What does the principal do that works well within the leadership team?

iii. How does the principal contribute to the implementation of MTSS?
   1. What does the principal do that contributes to the leadership team’s ability to implement MTSS?
   2. What is the principal’s role in the implementation of MTSS?
   3. What is the principal’s influence on the implementation of MTSS?
Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

Title: Distributed Leadership: Leadership Teams and Implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Pro # 00041689

Overview: You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this document should help you to decide if you would like to participate. The sections in this Overview provide the basic information about the study. More detailed information is provided in the remainder of the document.

Study Staff: This study is being led by Joseph Latimer who is a doctoral school psychology graduate student at the University of South Florida. This person is called the Principal Investigator. The Principal Investigator is also being supervised by faculty advisor Dr. Jose Castillo.

Study Details: This study is being conducted at XXXX Elementary in XXXX School District and is supported/sponsored by Principal XXXX, the University of South Florida and XXXX School District. The purpose of the project is to study the daily functioning of a school leadership team and their efforts to implement school wide systems (e.g., multi-tiered systems of support; MTSS). The Principal Investigator will use interviews, observations, and existing documents (e.g., school data, meeting notes) to explore the leadership team’s functioning over a 15 week period.

Participants: You are being asked to take part because you are a part of a school based leadership team that will allow the Principal Investigator to develop knowledge in leadership teams and MTSS implementation. Also, the leadership team that you are a part of has consistent membership in the last three years and is within a school district that requires the implementation of MTSS.
Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits or opportunities if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your job status, employment record, employee evaluations, or advancement opportunities. Since you are a part of the XXXX Elementary School Leadership Team, the Principal Investigator will be observing multiple leadership team meetings over the course of the study regardless of your participation in the research study. If you choose to not participate in this research study, the observation notes taken by the Principal Investigator will not contain any specific information on you or your functioning within the XXXX Elementary School Leadership Team Meeting. The Principal Investigator will be sure not to record any comments from individuals who choose not to participate. The Principal Investigator will not be audio- or video-recording the sessions so there would be no information directly involving individuals who choose not to participate.

Benefits, Compensation, and Risk: The potential benefits of participating in this research study include gaining access to the completed research document. After the completion of the study, the Principal Investigator will grant you access to the completed document. The findings from the document might inform how your leadership team can implement multi-tiered systems of support and that can promote implementation among XXXX educators. Additionally, the document may provide your leadership team and all practitioners in XXXX a reference point for future facilitation of multi-tiered systems of support implementation. There is no cost to participate. You will not be compensated for your participation. This research is considered minimal risk. Minimal risk means that study risks are the same as the risks you face in daily life. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Confidentiality: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep your study information private and confidential. Anyone with the authority to look at your records must keep them confidential. We will do our best to keep your records private and confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Certain people may need to see your study records.

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator, study coordinator, and all other research staff.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, and 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.

**Why are you being asked to take part?**

For the purpose of the study, the Principal Investigator purposefully recruited the school leadership team that you are part of because it will allow him to develop knowledge in distributed leadership and MTSS implementation, has kept the majority of team members consistent for 3-5 years and has been implementing MTSS for 3-5 years and contains individuals that have expertise in MTSS implementation. Also, the Principal Investigator recruited a school that is within a school district that requires the implementation of MTSS.

**Study Procedures:**

For this research project, the Principal Investigator will be interacting with the XXXX Elementary school leadership team members for a total of 15 weeks. The Principal Investigator will use interviews, observations, and existing documents (e.g., school data, meeting notes) to explore the leadership team’s functioning. The Principal Investigator will conduct separate interviews with each leadership team member. Additionally, the Principal Investigator will also schedule follow up interviews with the necessary team members (if needed) within a year of the completion of this study. Along with the interviews, the Principal Investigator will observe each leadership team meeting during the study period (e.g., 15 weeks). Last, the Principal Investigator will also be reviewing documents that relate to XXXX’s demographic information, leadership notes and any documents created by the school leadership team or that were provided to the school from the district regarding the implementation of MTSS. Below is a description of the required tasks for this study.

- **Pre-15 Week Timeframe**
  - Listen to the outline of the study provided by the Principal Investigator
  - Schedule a time with the Principal Investigator to provide consent in a 10 to 15 minute meeting before or after normal school hours and in a private setting within the school
  - Schedule a time with the Principal Investigator to conduct 30 to 60 minute interview before or after normal school hours and in a private setting within the school.

- **15 Week Timeframe**
  - Interview (30-60 minutes)
    - Fill out the Participant Demographic Sheet
    - Informed and provided with an option of agreeing to be recorded.
- Answer questions that will be asked during the interview session.
  
  - Observations
    
    - Participate within each leadership team meeting as usual.
  
  - Document Analysis
    
    - *Schedule a 60-90 meeting with the Principal Investigator to examine school related documents
      
      - *Note: This will only apply if your principal appoints you as the designated school leadership team member who will work with the Principal Investigator

- Post-15 Week Timeframe
  
  - *Schedule a 30 to 60 minute interview with the Principal Investigator
    
    - *Note: This will only apply if the Principal Investigator determines that they need more information from you to inform either their Educational Specialist thesis project or Doctoral Dissertation.
  
  - Informed and provided with an option of agreeing to be taped.
  
  - Answer questions that will be asked during the interview session.

Overall, the level of time commitment will vary across all leadership members. At the most, a leadership team member would have to commit to roughly four hours of time over the course of two years (e.g., 15 minute consent form meeting, 60 minute interview, appointed to discuss online portal in a 90 minute meeting and chosen for a 60 minute follow up interview). At the least, a leadership team member would have a time commitment of 45 minutes (e.g., 15 minute consent form meeting, one 30 minute interview) should they not be available for follow-up interviews.

Total Number of Participants

Up to 15 individuals will take part in this study at USF.

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

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Joseph Latimer at XXXXXXXX. If you have questions about your rights, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu.

Consent to Take Part in Research

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.
Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization

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 participant speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research participant has provided legally effective informed consent.

______________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent       Date

______________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
## Appendix D: Code Book

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Aligning With Mission And Vision</strong></td>
<td>Any mention of aligning the work or expectations at the school with either the mission, vision, school success plan or overall goal of the school</td>
<td>“The expectation that we have that vision of every tiger every day. And I think that’s it is she sets the expectations. And I know like for example, she fully respects that we’ve hired you here, we love having you here, but if you are not in line or you don’t believe in these core values, then you’re more than welcome to go”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Being Creative</strong></td>
<td>Any mention of adapting instruction based on student response in a non-traditional way or working within the restrictions of the school’s environment</td>
<td>“So it's breaking the norm of a traditional classroom and connecting with the kids on different levels. I really enjoy the technology aspect. We’ve been given flexibility with whatever I’ve wanted to try with different classroom structures, to how we organize the day. We’ve started using Minecraft in the classroom for the kids, the kids love it. And I'm learning it along with them, so it's been really neat to have that support to go through and just see what works.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Big Picture Mindset</strong></td>
<td>Any mention of having a mindset focused on building on small changes to amount to a larger system change or goal</td>
<td>“So that's where I've always seen ... I view progress as a multi-year ... I'm not a, &quot;We've got to get the data up now.&quot; It's how can we get a little bit better? How can we get a little bit better? So I think that that's where my experience brings me with that.... And I just see progress as, how do we get a little bit better? Either get the kids a little bit better, or how do I get a little bit better at doing it, to hopefully transfer to the kids?”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Coherence</strong></td>
<td>Any mention of having either low or high coherence between staff for system implementation</td>
<td>“I mean we share different curriculum pieces that we have. So if fourth grade has a student who's functioning at a second grade level they come to us a lot of times and ask what pieces that we use. So that's a cohesive structure and that came out of leadership.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration For MTSS</strong></td>
<td>Any mention of staff working together to implement MTSS (e.g., PBIS, RtI) to support student needs or increase implementation fidelity</td>
<td>“Once we come together, everybody's there, school psychologist, school nurse, we have the whole team. We present what we've discovered, where we're at with progress, and then they give suggestions, feedback, and then we continue with individual concerns that we may have as well for specific students”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Collective Responsibility</strong></td>
<td>Any mention of the term Collective Responsibility or providing information that all staff are responsible for student achievement</td>
<td>“I think leadership means working side by side together. I'm a huge proponent of servant leadership such as over there making the pancakes. But also more than that of just really being there as one of the team members that shared leadership, servant leadership of I'm here to do whatever is needed at the time. To me, leadership is anything from helping empty the trash, to helping dig deeper into the core actions and into the standards that help or help desegregate data to make decisions. It's really being whatever is needed and not only my own leadership, but having all of us have that Collective Responsibility across not just the leadership team but the entire staff because we're all leaders in a different area and finding the strengths of individuals and using that for leadership to grow and guide to move forward.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Any mention of having those within the leadership team spread information from the leadership team meetings to other staff</td>
<td>“Well, I am responsible, as I gather the information that we have shared at leadership, sometimes I’m required to bring some of it back. Work with my team to see what our collective vision is, as far as whatever the goal outcome”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connectedness To Staff</td>
<td>Any mention of the principal or any staff member connecting or engaging with another staff member through ongoing support, feedback cycles or seeking input.</td>
<td>“Like I said earlier, making sure that my team ... our data supports our goals and our plans for our grade level, that we have a plan and we follow our plan, if something needs to be tweaked with our plan because of the way that things are moving with our grade level, then you do it”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistent Staff</td>
<td>Any mention of having a consistent set of staff returning to a team or school</td>
<td>“But I think we’re lucky with our leadership team because our leadership team has pretty much stayed the same.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data Reviewing/Strategic Planning</td>
<td>Any mention of reviewing, analyzing, collecting or requesting data to track progress or make a decision that relates to the functioning of the school staff at all levels (e.g., individual, group, grade, school)</td>
<td>“One of the tasks would be to look at the data of the school and talk about the needs of the school to differentiate that based on grade level needs. So what fifth grade needs is very different than what kindergarten needs. Monitoring data to ensure there is evidence of that.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing System Structure</td>
<td>Any mention of developing different roles or responsibilities to ensure the systems or processes embedded in the school are running effectively</td>
<td>“I think she sets the structure, but then she allows us as a team to discuss and to get there and to analyze and getting that feedback in that sense. So a clear plan, a clear structure, but then that's where we come in and bring it to life.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversity Within The Leadership Team</td>
<td>Any mention of having multiple professionals from varying backgrounds within the leadership team</td>
<td>“I think we all bring certain pieces to the table, but there's different strategies that come from different perspectives.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empowerment Of Others</td>
<td>Any mention of providing development opportunities, coaching, mentoring or resources to staff members to increase professional capacity</td>
<td>“We also have an individual who is our mentor liaison and she helps to support new teachers because her developer strengths is something that she's passionate about using.” “So it gives them an opportunity to reach that higher level. And so I would expect my gifted kids to be reaching that higher level, whereas some of my other students may only get to question one or two solid. Other ways is we have best time, which is where we do intervention groups. And so we have intervention and what I would call a prevention. A prevention is where we give those gifted kids projects based on their goals.”</td>
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<td>Enrichment</td>
<td>Any mention of meeting students’ needs that have mastered the grade level standards or who have qualified for the special education classification of “gifted”</td>
<td>“Fidelity. I think that our job is to make sure that what we do in our private PLC groups and our grade level PLC groups is really implementing what MTSS is looking for.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ensuring MTSS Fidelity</td>
<td>Any mention of completing various tasks or procedures to ensure high fidelity of MTSS implementation</td>
<td>“Each year at the beginning of the year, we have the opportunity to sign up for what committees we would like to serve on for that school year. Things have been tweaked and changed over the last three starts to a school year.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexibility In Roles</td>
<td>Any mention of fluid responsibility or leadership based on tasks and/or objectives or grade level needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus On All Tiers</td>
<td>Any mention of addressing all tiers (e.g., tiers I, II, and III) within a MTSS framework to support student success</td>
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<td>“We believe that all students need to receive tier one instruction. So you can’t take students from tier one in order to give tier two and tier three. We believe that tier one is that understanding of those standards through specific learning targets and really delivery of instruction on the standards. Tier two is also on grade level standards, but more of the core we call it. So going deeper into that core instruction of tier one as needed through common formative assessments across the team and taking a look at where students are and what's needed”</td>
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<td>Grade Level Differences</td>
<td>Any mention of having differing levels of expertise across grade levels</td>
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<td>“It depends on the grade level. I see some strengths in certain grade levels of the data collection piece would be really strong. Some grade levels using MTSS structure with math is a strength. Some grade levels it is truly having a deeper understanding of foundational skills and how to do that. So it really, I'd say each grade level has a different strengths.”</td>
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<td>Integrated Frameworks</td>
<td>Any mention of attempting to integrate systems of supports (either academic, behavioral or social-emotional) for students</td>
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<td>“Yeah, so a lot of the behavior pieces we support as well, which ties into the PBIS. But we have quite a few students who need to go through the tiered systems of support for that. So a lot of times we’re working with our behavior specialist and she’s on our leadership team.”</td>
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Logistical Leadership Qualities
Any mention of having specific qualities that relate to maintaining the daily functions of the school. Such as following through with tasks and commitments for staff, gaining consensus on a decision, utilizing administrative powers to come to a decision, and establishing standards for practice.

Lowest Students
Any mention of the students who are consistently performing below the expected rate, scored below the expected rate for a statewide exam or are at the bottom 25% of academic success schoolwide.

Matching Interventions
Any mention of attempting to match interventions with student needs

Meeting And Group Structures
Any mention of having specific structures (e.g., establishing norms, preparing materials, displaying data) for meetings that facilitate staff effectiveness

“We know the buck stops with her. It's her job. I joke around, we've got all these core actions, I believe in core action zero, which is, mortgage comes first. I can disagree and commit all I want, but I'm not the boss, I'm not going to get ... Unless stuff rolls downhill, but she's never one to push it downhill. She takes responsibility for everything there. But she is the leader, the guiding principal of the school.”

“I think our biggest problem that we still come across is, students that consistently do not perform at level, so what the principal would usually refer to as our lowest 25%.”

“Well, just analyzing student data and matching the intervention to what is truly the most pressing or concerning behavior or academic concern with students”

So in all of our team meetings, I have people that are the timekeeper, the recorder. People that help write down the data. People that also write down questions that we have for upcoming meetings. So everybody has responsibilities on the team, and everybody has the responsibility of putting their data in SharePoint, doing the interventions that we planned. It's a Collective Responsibility.
Personal Leadership Qualities

Any mention of having specific qualities that relate to managing the specific interpersonal relationships between staff members such as promoting positivity, showcasing empathy, establishing a core set of values, model correct behavior or allowing for open and honest conversations

“You have to be approachable. You have to, also, not wait for your team to come to you. I mean, I believe, anyway, that, you know? I periodically check in with my team individually, as well as when we have our weekly PLC meetings or whatever.”

Previous Leadership Experience

Any mention of previous experiences as an administrator, district level leader, leadership team member from a non-administrative staff member

“Because I've been in different roles. I've done some leadership, I helped run a Christian pre-school for a while.”

Prioritizing Goal Or Actions

Any mention of prioritizing the actions of staff based on the school mission or the most pressing issues

“Well, we have to identify our essential standards. So when we go to plan a unit, say we're planning reading, we would start by identifying the essential standards that we want our kids to get. Every unit has a bunch of standards and we obviously want to make sure that their kids are meeting all of those standards. But the biggest thing is to make sure that we pick the three or four standards that we want to make sure and guarantee that all children get, the really big ones.”

Proactive And Planning Practices

Any mention of using proactive practices (e.g., screeners, indicators) or having prior planning conversations to facilitate systems or services for students

“At our school, we look at those universal screeners I told you about and then we plan, like in K-1, we focused on reading right away because the students have to be able to read throughout the curriculum so that was our critical, those interventions.”
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<th>Category</th>
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<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>Any mention of staff using problem solving strategies to determine action plans to support students, support staff, increase clarity, or promote normal professional functioning.</td>
<td>“Then we problem solve things, like I was just saying, the shortage of subs. We problem solve the things about school, where we look at, for instance, they might discover that something is not working, so what can we do to improve that”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Progress Monitoring</td>
<td>Any mention of documenting intervention progress</td>
<td>“And go back to see, did we see the growth that we're looking for? And if not, what do we... Do we just need more time? Because that might be the issue, or is it like back to the drawing board? Do we need to start all over again?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognition Of Success</td>
<td>Any mention of utilizing external sources to showcase school wide success (e.g., Model PBIS School)</td>
<td>“And currently we're also working on the goal of becoming a PBIS model school. So our most recent work has been looking at model school walkthrough applications and really thinking about what it is we do well.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflectiveness</td>
<td>Any mention of the leadership or other staff either prompting a reflective question or reflecting on the alignment of certain processes or data and the goals of the school</td>
<td>“So the principal constantly having us reflect on, okay step out of the academic piece, what can we do to make sure that students are loved and welcomed here and I think that's a huge piece of making MTSS successful because if you don't have all those factors they will get stuck in the tiers.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Any mention of resources that are utilized or accessed to support staff</td>
<td>“Then those of us that were part of the initial staff for four days in July prior to the school year starting, we had installation is what they called it. That's when we really established what our norms would be as a school. We came up with our every tiger every day. We came up with our vision and our mission and we came up with what were the expected behaviors for PBIS. Then how that committee would help drive that, and so it's just evolved from there”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff Capacity</td>
<td>Any mention of the knowledge and skills of the staff</td>
<td>“I think it depends on teams, depends on that kind of stuff, what people maybe are comfortable with...”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff Evaluation</td>
<td>Any mention of using various methods (e.g., walk throughs, observations) to evaluate the performance of staff</td>
<td>“We still have those walkthroughs and what she's made one of the responsibilities is we're the ones doing the walkthroughs. So I might be going to a couple of different grade levels.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Responsiveness To Student Needs</td>
<td>Any mention of staff being efficient with supporting student needs</td>
<td>“So we're looking at kids a little bit more specifically and we're also the bridge between Phonics, the awareness, those foundational skills moving to the comprehension. So we really start to see some students struggle differently than they did in K-1.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths Based Culture</td>
<td>Any mention of the utilization of the Gallup® Strength Based Survey to promote communication, problem solving or strategic planning.</td>
<td>“I love that we have built a strengths based organization through the Gallup® StrengthsFinder that not only with our staff but with our fifth grade students that we're able to really look through on a positive lens to help everybody grow and work toward the vision together using their strengths rather than a punitive method.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Focused Culture</td>
<td>Any mention of having practices or decisions guided by students’ need for academic or behavioral supports</td>
<td>“Every tiger every day. It's making sure, how are we reaching every student that needs it the most efficient and effective way possible? Using the best strategies, using our screeners, ensuring that we're constantly revisiting those data to make sure that we're pushing our students forward.”</td>
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</table>
“We focus on growth. As long as we see the kids growing and we know that we're doing, we're heading in the right direction and ultimately we would love to see them get that passing score on that final assessment, but in the long run, if they went from a one to a two or they even were in a two and they went up in their scaled scores and we see that they have that growth…”

“Oh, it's called OLN our online learning network. That's where we have like our standards, our pacing guides, what we teach and there's resources that district puts on there and I think most people say becomes a dumping ground”

“Every year we have very targeted professional development for all of our teachers to help make sure that we are implementing our tier one instruction to the best of our ability to try to keep those kids that… try to get those kids to meet the standards that we're asking them to meet the first time around so that we're not having a lot of tier two and tier three instruction going on”

“And the principal allowed me to, my focus is the classroom and my students and their progress. And I'm just looking to help support our leadership team as they're moving forward, as an invested stake member, but also because it allows me to continue my passion with mathematics and still contribute with that”
| Vertical Communication | Any mention of having conversation around expectations or standards among multiple grades | “Well, there's definitely, in digging deeper into your tiers. So, you can spread that across your grade levels. You can get input from the grade above you or the grade below you as far as what do you need for these kids going in, or what are we missing? What do we need to do to get them ready for this next grade?” |
November 6, 2019

Joseph Latimer
Educational and Psychological Studies
12356 Olive Jones Road
Tampa, FL 33625

RE: expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB#: Pro00041689
Title: Distributed Leadership Leadership Teams and Implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Study Approval Period: 11/6/2019

Dear Mr. Latimer:

On 11/6/2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below. Please note this study is approved under the 2018 version of 45 CFR 46 and you will be asked to confirm ongoing research annually in place of a full Continuing Review. Amendments and Reportable Events must still be submitted per USF HRPP policy.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
  Protocol, Version #1, 10.28.19.docx

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
  Adult Consent, Version #1, 11.5.19.docx.pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent documents are valid until the consent document is amended and approved.
It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that: (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for nonresearch purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis).

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB via an Amendment for review and approval. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) business days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subjects research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board