School Leaders’ Practices to Foster Change in a School-wide Initiative

Jason Sutton

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There are 2.7 million students with a specific learning disability (LD) in grades K-12 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2018). LD is a term used to describe disorders that impact an individual’s ability to understand or use spoken or written language, do mathematical calculations, coordinate movements, or direct attention (McFarland et al., 2017; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2018). Approximately 80% of students with LD are reading disabled (Lewandowski, Cohen, & Lovett, 2013). Students with LD particularly struggle with fluency and reading comprehension (Kim et al., 2006). The struggles become more significant as they progress through school.

The shifts in learning demands between primary and secondary school are particularly challenging for students with LD because the focus of reading shifts from learning to read to reading to learn (Gajria, Jitendra, Sood, & Sacks, 2007). Previous studies show that this switch can be a challenge for students with LD (Solis et al., 2012; Swanson et al., 2014; Wanzek, Wexler, Vaughn, & Ciullo, 2010). This shift means that students are asked to independently read narrative and expository texts, such as content area textbooks, to understand new information. The shift has a direct impact on students with LD accessing classroom content, which impacts their academic achievement.

In a direct response to this shift, secondary schools are asked to break the traditional format of focusing on teaching their content to embed researched-based instructional practices with their content (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2016; Moje, 2008; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012). This shift can support students with LD accessing classroom content. However, this instructional shift challenges the traditional practices in a classroom setting and can be difficult to foster in a school.

**Gap between research and practice**

It is often difficult for teachers to change their current instructional practices even if there are research-based practices that are proven to be impactful for students with LD. No more is this prevalent in the field of special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

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(Gather-Thurler, 1993; Huberman, 1993; Wagner, 1997; Mortimore, 2000;

Depaepe, 2002; Gore & Gitlin, 2004; Levin, 2004; McIntyre, 2005; Whitty, 2006;

Chafouleas & Riley-Tillman, 2005; Bauer & Fisher, 2007; Broekkamp & Van

Hout-Wolters, 2007). These debates have a long history in many western countries

(Lagemann, 2000; Levin 2004; Oancea, 2005; Stark & Mandl, 2007) and are

dominated by monocausal analyses (Broekkamp & Van Hout-Wolters, 2007).

One argument suggests that this gap reflects two sharply different types of knowl

edge. On the one hand, we have research-based knowledge that is published in scientific

journals. On the other hand, we have pedagogical knowledge which is used by classroom

teachers in their day-to-day teaching (McIntyre, 2005). Bates (2002) argues that tension

exists between researchers and practitioners, as the practitioner asks for new solutions

to operational problems while the researcher seeks new knowledge

In special education, attempts to bridge the research to practice gap of implementing research-based strategies as standard practices in the classroom continues to be a struggle (Cook, Cook, & Landrum, 2013). Even though these strategies have been proven to produce a positive impact on students with disabilities. Special education teachers continue to use practices from their personal experiences, department pedagogy, and opinions of other colleagues to support instruction in their classroom (Cook & Cook, 2011). This behavior leads to special education teachers partaking in instructional practices that have little or no impact on their students. For example, special education teachers have reported using modality instruction as an effective teaching practice instead of practices that are supported by research (e.g., graphic organizer, Cook & Odom, 2013). These results have had a direct impact on students with disabilities, particularly those students with LD.

This resistance of teachers to change with their instructional practices require additional support from their school leaders. Often within a school, the school leaders are the principal, assistant principal, teacher leaders, or individuals designed to lead a change. School leaders must implement leadership practices and a framework that fosters a change with teachers instructional practices.

**School Leadership Practices**

School leaders must understand and know how to provide practices that support change (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009). Typically, schools are structured on an automated platform that offers little support for innovation (Klinger, Arguelles, Hughes, & Vaughn, 2001). Schools have assumptions, values, practices, and cultures that promote the status quo (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). These existing structures make change hard within any school and require leadership practices that foster a systemic change in the daily operations of a school (Kritsonis, 2005). Systemic change, within a school, is defined as identifying the modifications needed to restructure standard operational procedures (work norms and school values) within a school building (Adelman & Taylor, 2007; Bolman & Deal, 2013).

To promote a systematic change with the implementation of a school-wide initiative, school leaders must be aware of their decision-making practices and how it affects teachers and students (Crum & Sherman, 2008). This awareness allows school leaders to make decisions that result in them applying practices that support a school-wide initiative.

School leaders should apply practices that are grounded in a methodology that will foster a systemic change. Within the literature, one method to create a systemic change is a systems design approach (Luhmann, Baecker, & Gilgen, 2014). Within a systems design approach, when fostering change at the school building level, three concepts are critical: (a) soliciting stakeholder ownership; (b) communicating the systemic change process; and (c) addressing the mindset of staff (Blumenfeld et al., 2000; Jenlink et al., 1998; Watson, Watson, & Reigeluth, 2008). A description of how each of these concepts applies to a systemic change in a school, follow.

**Soliciting stakeholder ownership.** School leaders must be responsive to a range of stakeholders. The stakeholders entail students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the community who have direct or indirect involvement in the school. For this study, the stakeholders will be teachers. Teachers are the foundation for the framework of systemic change (Squire & Reigeluth, 2000). Without the teacher’s ownership, systemic change in a school is not achievable (Sullivan & Stewart, 2006).

Teachers provide diverse backgrounds from their work experience. When school leaders bring teachers together in a building, their insight can strengthen the change process. For example, when teachers are left out of ownership opportunities with the new initiative, it can slow up the change process in a school and often results in teachers causing an adverse effect or reaction to the proposed school initiative (Hallinger & Heck, 2011).

Once school leaders create a sense of ownership for teachers, this creates buy-in and allows them to embrace the initiative. Still, with ownership in a new initiatives, several issues arise: (a) teachers encounter organizational conflict; (b) they usually are attempting new practices; and (c) teachers are taking on extra work by engaging with colleagues in planning, implementing, and evaluating improvement initiatives (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Dweck, 2012; Hess, 2005). School leaders to implement practices that help teachers buy-in to combat these issues. To allow opportunities for all teachers to establish ownership in new initiatives, school leaders must provide an avenue to get teachers involved in the efforts. The efforts can translate into teachers leading workshops, mentoring novice teachers, attending or leading PD, and collaborating with their peers or content teams (Muijs & Harris, 2007). Not only does this build teachers’ confidence within themselves, but it allows school-wide initiatives to become part of the instructional culture of the school.

**Communicating the systemic change process.** To sustain teacher’s ownership and belief in the change process of a new school-wide initiative, school leaders need to communicate with teachers. School leaders must look beyond the daily practices of communication and develop specific strategies with communication. For instance in a school, it is assumed that school leaders: (a) disseminate clarity on goals and standards of professional practice; (b) share with the staff that student achievement is the central focus of the school; (c) emphasize with the staff high expectation on student learning and unrelenting focus on the quality of education and teaching in the classroom; and (d) communicate with teachers directly or with various forms of technology (Hopkins, Stringfield, Harris, Stoll, & Mackay, 2014). For this study, communication entails all of the examples mentioned above but mainly focusing on the school leader's communicating the systemic change process. School leaders, communication and dialogue, is a vital part of the systemic change process. One instrumental aspect of communicating is a school leader's ability to communicate and explain to teachers the process of the change cycle with adopting a new initiative. The capability to describe the change cycle adequately and rationally will decrease stress that can occur in change. The change cycle is defined as a map that depicts the human experience at each stage of evolution – all moves, big or small (Fullan, 2007). With a vast majority of teachers, within a new school-wide initiative, the change cycle can be seen in systematic steps. Initially, teachers do not react to the new initiative. Next, teachers move to signs of internal or external emotions (e.g., anger, confusion, joy, etc.). For example, this may cause teachers to withdraw from their role or volunteer to support the initiative. Finally, teachers may transition to understanding the need for the initiative, and they will accept the initiative (Adelman & Taylor, 2007; Fullan, 2005). School leaders must remember that the change cycle occurs differently based on the pace of the teacher. Some teachers take a significant amount of time in the change cycle, while others need little or no time. Regardless, teachers must be allowed to process the change (Lunenburg, 2010).

School leaders must possess the capability to maneuver their teachers through the change cycle when introducing a new initiative (Fullan, 2007). When school leaders can foresee the sequences with teachers change, they can provide the necessary leadership practices and resources to encourage the continuum of the change to result in acceptance. Foreshadowing this cycle will support a smoother transition with a new school-wide initiative. The overarching goal of this process is to create and provide a paradigm shift that will allow teachers to support the new effort. School leaders must understand that individual mindsets of teachers are unique and require different levels of support at different phases of the change cycle.

**Addressing mindset.** One concept that school leaders may find particularly challenging to address is a teacher’s mindset. Teacher's mindset is their belief system. Addressing the mindset of teachers is focusing on the fixed mindset that they have of a school. With a fixed mindset, teachers believe that people have fixed traits that are inherent and unchangeable, like intelligence (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). In a school, this translates into the belief that intellectual abilities are fixed. That students arrive in the classroom at different levels of skill and nothing changes that (Dweck, 2012). This way of thinking could be detrimental to any school-wide initiative that has the potential to increase the academic achievement of students.

Teachers, depending on their experiences in school, have a pre-developed philosophical vision on what is school. Teachers develop this fixed mindset about a school from their personal experiences that translate into their viewpoints of how a school should function with student learning (Fetter et al., 2002; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013). For example, when teachers think of a school, they may describe a teacher in front of the class lecturing to groups of students sitting in rows. They may define a classroom with textbooks and a whiteboard. They may describe the principal as a person who sits in the office and is never seen by teachers or students (Hamilton et al., 2011). Teachers may categorize student’s ability to learn, as a high achiever, average learner, or slow learner (McCombs, 2003). The teacher’s fixed mindset about students or the school can impede the systemic change process with a school-wide initiative.

The teacher’s mindset is a critical step towards achieving systemic change in a school (Parmar et al., 2010). To influence a teacher's mindset, school leaders must have the skills to interpret teacher’s beliefs and how those beliefs manifest in the dynamic system of the school (Dweck, 2012; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Having those skills allow school leaders to apply practices that support teachers, with addressing their mindset, to support a systemic change. (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

When addressing a teacher's mindset, school leaders should be aware of the decision-making practices that result in them executing leadership practices that are grounded in a methodology that fosters a systemic change. When considering a systematic change to support students with LD, school leaders must identify a framework for practices that can be applied to support students accessing classroom content. A framework that will be the focus of this study is called responsiveness to intervention (RTI).

**Why RTI?**

RTI is a multi-tiered approach using research-based practices to provide screening and early intervention for students at risk for academic failure (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010). For example, in tier 1, RTI can aid teachers in using research-based instructional strategies in their content instruction. Tier 1 is your primary prevention; it refers to the general instruction that all students receive in their classroom. This instruction includes instructional differentiation in their core subjects (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). Tier 1, is an opportunity for teachers to focus on their instructional pedagogy with their classroom content. For instance, school leaders can implement practices that encourage teachers to focusing on implementing research-based instructional strategies in their classroom. This can assist students with LD gaining access to the classroom content material.

Although RTI has been in practice throughout the country for more than 10 years, less is known about what practices a school leader should foster to implement RTI (Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2011). A study conducted by Regan, Berkeley, Hughes, and Brady (2015) sought to understand the perceptions of elementary and secondary educators’ perceptions of their school district RTI initiative. The results from their survey indicated that educators lack the knowledge about RTI and require guidance on how to implement RTI. Guidance is a role that school leaders should practice with assisting in a school-wide RTI initiative.

To gain a deeper understanding of school leaders and their practices with a school-wide initiative, further investigation is required to understand the decision-making practices school leaders implement to foster a systemic change with a school-wide initiative RTI initiative.

**Purpose of This Investigation**

Research on the decision-making practices a school leader chooses to foster a systemic change in a school-wide initiative is limited (Jenkins, Schiller, Blackorby, Thayer, & Tilly, 2013). This study will examine the awareness of the decision-making practices school leaders implement with a school-wide RTI initiative and how those practices directly or indirectly impact teachers and students with LD. The results from the study will shed a more profound light on the decision-making practices of school leaders implementing a school-wide initiative.

The following research questions were addressed:

1. How do school leaders describe their process of thought with implementing a school-wide initiative, and to what extent is it grounded in the principles of a systems design approach (buy-in, communication, mindset) to create a systemic change?
2. How do students with disabilities factor into school leader’s decision making?
3. What are the lived experiences between teachers and school leaders?

**Methods**

The study was grounded on a phenomenology design. The design allows for a deeper understanding of the experiences of school leaders in implementing a school-wide initiative. This design recognized the individual voice throughout the research without conceptualizing their voice through analysis (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The participants in the study were recruited from a convenience sampling technique with a graduate summer class at a large, public mid-Atlantic university in the U.S.

One group of participants were school leaders. School leaders were referred to as an assistant principal and a teacher leader who has led an RTI initiative. School leaders participated in individual interviews. The school leader's interview questions consisted of seven questions aimed at understanding a school leader's decision-making process when implementing a school-wide initiative and their perception of how those decisions impacted teachers and students with LD. Appendix A was the interviews questions.

Another group was a teacher focus group. The teacher focus group had veteran teachers, academia instructors, specialists, and teacher leaders. With the focus group, seven questions aimed at understanding the perception of the teacher's lived experiences with the implementation of a school-wide RTI initiative. Appendix B was the focus group questions.

Appendix A and B are revisions of an initial school leadership and teacher focus group questions used previously in a school-wide reading internship. The interview questions and focus group questions were developed with the embedded themes, of a systems design approach, that address communication with staff, stakeholder buy-in, and the teacher’s mindset (See Appendix D & C).

**Participants**

School leaders (*n*=2) were used for individual interviews. The participants were females and identified as white/Caucasian (*n*=2). They had a minimum of three years of leadership school building experience in a public-school setting. One was an assistant principal, whose alias was Elena, of a high needs school; while, the other was a teacher leader, who alias was Red. Red worked in a high performing school. They both had experiences in participating in an RTI initiative and working with students with LD.

The participants in the focus group were teachers or individuals that had teaching experience (*n*=7). This group consisted of females (*n*=6), male (*n*=1) and white/Caucasian (*n*=7). Teachers had a minimum of three years of teaching experience and had worked in a public school setting (*n*=6). The teachers held a state-certified license (*n*=6). The teachers had previous experience working in an environment that implemented RTI (*n*=6). Teachers worked directly or indirectly with students with LD either in a general education setting or special education setting (*n*=6).

**Data Sources**

To approach the phenomenon directly, data was collected with individual interviews and a focus group (Marshall & Rossman, 2010).

**School leader’s interviews.** The interview questions were open-ended questions with semi-structured (face-to-face) interviews. Appendix A was the questions used in the interview. The semi-structured questions gave the flexibility to change the level of deepness, with the conversation, of the questions to gain a broader perspective of an individual’s thinking and feeling. According to Patton (2002), open-ended responses permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents. Interviews reveal an individual’s experiences, knowledge, opinions, and events that relate to the phenomenon (Bevan, 2014).

All interviews took place outside the school leader’s workplace. The interviewees chose the location for the interview. One interview took place in a library and one in an outside eating facility. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer explained the study and the purpose of the interview. At this time, the interviewer received permission to record the interview. The interview was conducted in English. Each interview lasted an hour. The interviews included questions related to: (a) the decision making process (e.g., “Were you involved in deciding rather RTI would be implemented in your school?”); (b) communication with staff ( e.g.,” Tell me how RTI was introduced to your staff?”); (c) role of school leaders in a school-wide initiative (e.g., " Is there anything unique that you did to support the implementation of RTI?"); and (d) dealing with the mindset of teachers (e.g. "What strategies do you implement with teachers who are having difficulty buying into RTI?").

**Teacher focus group.** The focus group allowed information to be captured about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about the phenomenon (Bevan, 2014). Appendix B was the focus group questions revised from a previously used focus group questions used in an internship for teachers implementing a reading initiative in a middle school. Teachers and an immediate supervisor vetted the focus group questions. The focus group questions focused on: (a) the mindset of the teachers (e.g., “How are students in your school doing compared to other schools in your district?”); (b) communication from school leaders (e.g., “How are new initiatives introduced at your school?”); and (c) buy-in from teachers (e.g., “What supports have you received with RTI?”).

The focus group was conducted in a classroom at a local university. The focus group had a group facilitator. The facilitator explained the purpose of the focus group and discussed expectations to all participants. The focus group lasted 45 minutes. The focus group was recorded.

**Data Analysis**

The interviews and focus group were transcribed from a professional transcription company. When the transcriptions arrived from the interviews and focus group, they were read through while listening to the auto-recording to ensure their accuracy (Creswell, 2009). There was a continuous review of reading the interview and focus group transcripts, a summary of field notes, and listening to the audio of the interviews and focus groups. Consistently writing notes on what was heard and developing ideas about categories and relationships (Maxwell, 2003). This approach provided multiple perspectives on the phenomenon.

Open coding was conducted to identify categories and themes (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). The identification of themes was aligned with the research questions. This technique deciphered between explicit information and implicit information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Information was classified as being irrelevant if it did not directly align with the research questions. Information was also irrelevant if it could not be categorized into a theme. Throughout the coding process, the categories were revised and changed to ensure that they were aligned with the research questions. Field notes were used as additional support to explain topics or categories that develop when coding the data.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness described the degree to which the reviewer was convinced that a research study had captured a significant experience related to their research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Morrow, 2005). Measures were taken to ensure credibility in the data analysis process. For example, the interview and focus group was conducted using open-ended questions that allowed the participants to express their feelings, emotions, and perception (Creswell, 2013). This information was captured using a recording device to ensure the data was accurate. The transcribed information from the interview and focus were compared to the recordings. Member checking with the school leader's interviews was confirmed verbally to ensure their thoughts were captured and interpreted, correctly. As the themes were created, another doctoral student reviewed the data and themes. Any theme that was not agreed upon by both parties was disregarded, and another theme was developed. Field notes were used throughout the whole process to compare initial reactions and observations with the focus group and interviews (Philippi & Lauderdale, 2017).

**Identity memo.** A researcher must be able to allow the reader to understand any bias, beliefs, and personal values that the researcher might have that can persuade the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). With this notion of transparency, I believe that everybody has their interpretation of the world. In personal thinking, it is not feasible to think that there is a traditional way that people interpret information to create their reality. Individuals create their truth with the experiences that they encounter. Those experiences dictate their reaction to the world.

**Personal bias.** Methods used to ensure trustworthiness in the design may be influenced by personal values, questions, and beliefs. Data collection was sought to understand the perspectives and experiences of participants not to support my own bias. The multiple sources of data allowed the translation from the data to the study. This method encouraged accurate and credible data from the study.

**Results**

While trying to capture a school leader's decision-making practices with implementing a school-wide RTI initiative, the school leaders used the terminology RTI, RI, or MTSS. For this study, RTI/MTSS will be used in place of the terminology. The school leaders discuss the significant themes of administrator roles, change, teachers, and implementation. Although not explicit, rooted within the themes was information about the school leader's decision-making with students with LD while implementing the initiatives. There were subthemes within several themes that either supported or prohibited the success of a school-wide RTI/MTSS initiative. With trying to understand the lived experiences between teachers and the principal in a school implementing a new initiative, the themes discovered were supports, empowerment, and leadership behavior.

**Research Question 1**

**Administrator roles.** This theme was developed from the description that school leaders described as their daily tasks. School leaders consistently explained what their job duties required them to do varies tasks that they saw as creating barriers with the implementation of RTI/MTSS. Within the theme of administrator roles, three subthemes emerged. They were: (a) distractors; (b) support; and (c) lack of knowledge.

***Distractors.*** The school leaders described distractors as a critical theme that consistently created barriers with the implementation of RTI/MTSS in their school. School leaders would describe receiving several calls from central office about new initiatives that they were expected to implement in the school. Often, noting that there is a lack of direction on how to use the initiative. The lack of direction made it hard for school leaders to focus on a single initiative. As Elena stated,

“Our county informed us that we were going to implement I-Ready to support MTSS next year. However, they did not invest in an intervention program. Money was invested in the screener portion but not intervention. We had to figure out how we are going to implement this in our school.”

Red noted, “We often get county directives, so we have to find resources to support the directive and shift our school focus, to support the county directive, for the new year new.” Red described this example as a distractor they often encounter in her school. She noted that central office initiatives often result in the school changing their direction in the middle of the summer. The school leaders describe other distractors coming from teachers, community, and other schools in the district.

***Support.*** The lack of financial support from their district and resistant teachers impacted the school leader’s role with the implementation of RTI/MTSS. In the district, school leaders noted that when they wanted to purchase additional resources to support RTI/MTSS in their school, they were often informed by central office that they would have to use their school funds to make the purchase. For example, Elena described an intervention that she wanted to use to support RTI/MTSS in her school. She was denied the additional funds request to purchase the intervention and told to use the intervention that was provided by the district. Often, it was up to the school to secure funding to support additional interventions not supplied from the district. When there was a district-wide initiative, the district provided the materials needed.

With resistant teachers, school leaders described teachers feeling overwhelmed and lacked the skills or desire to implement the initiative. This response caused them to become resistant to the initiative. The feeling impacted the school leader’s role because they would have to figure out how to make the teachers feel supported. For example, Red remembered when she first tried to inform teachers about the implementation of RTI/MTSS practices in the classroom,

"I was surprised to discover that some of the teachers did not like kids. So, they were not as helpful as some others that I have worked with. They were not eager or willing to help support the initiative. They would just complain that the kids should have already learned this in their previous years. Why do they have to fix their mess? I even offered to assist them in the classroom, but that had little impact on their willingness to support the initiative."

Teacher resistance led to tension with the administration and teachers. The school leaders described having to sell the initiative to the teachers. One school leader said, "If the teachers don't support RTI/MTSS, it will be difficult to implement. You have to learn how to sell it to them."

***Lack of knowledge.*** School leaders reported that their role was affected by the lack of understanding of RTI/MTSS for their teachers and themselves. For example, school leaders said that they were often required to implement the initiative that they have little knowledge or background of the initiative. Often they had to rely on district appointed personnel or teachers in their school to spearhead the initiative. If that did not work, they would have to find outside resources to support them. This left school leaders with a lack of confidence to roll out the initiative. For instance, Red recalls how RTI/MTSS was introduced to her staff and how her principal wanted nothing to do with the initiative. She said,

“I introduced it at our summer meeting in August before school started. My principal didn't know what the initiative was. Actually, it took him several years to feel comfortable to discuss it with the staff. He just kind of let me do it, and I did. He just sat back and said nothing."

Elena had a similar experience. She noted,

“We didn’t actually roll that out. I mean, I was told about the initiative when we were coming into our faculty meeting at the beginning of the year. I felt like it wasn't really a shared kind of understanding with us. This made it difficult because we didn’t understand what it was. We had no idea how to approach the initiative.”

This lack of understanding of RTI/MTSS made it difficult for the school leaders to understand their role in the implementation of the initiative.

**Change.** Change was a theme that was one-directional with the school leaders. The focus of change was on teachers. School leaders reported that teachers struggle with any new initiative that required a shift in their instructional practices. The school leaders indicated that when teachers find gaps in their knowledge, they are more resistant to try new things. They described this resistance as shifts in their thinking. For instance, Elena considered a conversation that she had with a general education teacher. The teachers seemed concerned that they had to work with students who are struggling during intervention time. Elena said,

“The general ed teacher would say okay, well, like I’m not sure why I’m working with this student. I know that they are going to be special ed soon. So, like, your special ed team should work with the kid.”

The school leaders described change as the teacher’s unwillingness to change the way they teach. When asked about the willingness of school leaders to change, the response was, "Our principal says we do what central office tells us to do." There was not an apparent connection with school leaders and change. During the interview, the school leaders were asked about strategies related to change. Red responded, "I have been there for a while, I tell them what they do, and they usually do it. They want what is best for the kids."

**Novice verse veteran teacher.** There was a theme that emerged with school leaders with their practices with novice teachers compared to veteran teachers. Novice teachers had teachers with less than three years of teaching experience. Veteran teachers have over three years of teaching experience. The subthemes that emerged were: (a) staff buy-in; (b) communication; and (c) professional development.

***Staff buy-in.*** Staff buy-in was a theme that was discovered from the school leader’s interviews. However, the approach was addressed differently depending on the seniority of the teacher. Typically, novice teachers were often told what to do. Elena gave an example of what her principal would do with new staff. She stated he would walk in the room and tell them that this is the process for RTI/MTSS and this is how it looks in our school. He would not solicit questions or comments.

On the other hand, teachers who had more seniority were asked by the principal to participate in the initiative or at least have an avenue to express their concerns or frustrations with the initiative. For instance, Elena discussed that her principal was trying to tighten up on some protocols for RTI/MTSS. He stated to her, “We need to make sure to have teachers be more involved in the process and also kind of build a better understanding for teachers…” This was the same individual who told the new teachers that this is RTI/MTSS and this is how we do it in this school.

With staff buy-in, school leaders reported that including teachers in RTI/MTSS helped. However, this strategy was not the only one noted. Red talked about using teacher capital with her staff to support RTI/MTSS (Watson, Watson, & Reigeluth, 2008). Red stated,

"My colleagues and I have taught with me for 20 years. We are social friends, our kids have grown up together, so we would talk about initiatives outside of school. They were always on board if I told them that it would help the kids.”

***Communication.*** Communication was a theme that school leaders used to describe the way they introduced RTI/MTSS to the staff. Communication was described as directly talking to the staff. When school leaders were asked to describe the direct approach, the school leaders stated, “The principal would tell the staff in a meeting. This is the initiative, and this is how we are going to do it.” The school leader’s direct interaction had positive and negative impacts on the teachers. For instance, one school leader reported that the principal introduced the initiative in an all-staff faculty meeting. This strategy frustrated the teachers because the principal introduced the initiative on the teachers back to school week when the teachers already felt overwhelmed with all the additional initiatives described earlier in the week.

It was reported that school leaders would also use the teacher's content learning time (CLT) to implement new initiatives. For example, Red told a story about her assistant principal attending their CLT meeting and telling the attending members that they were moving towards a different direction with RTI/MTSS. These practices by the school leaders had various outcomes on teachers. Elena tells a story about communication and the negative impact a direct approach had with teachers in her building. She said it was in a CLT meeting, where teachers were describing a struggling student. The special ed team asked the teacher where are they in the RTI/MTSS process? The teacher responded, “What is MTSS?” Elena stated, "It was apparent, that the teacher, who was present in the faculty meeting, did not hear the principal introduce MTSS."

Furthermore, Red discussed concern she had with communication in her building. She described the only communication she receives in her building is,

“The principal was giving directives in a faculty meeting where no one is really listening, assigning teacher leaders in the building to communicate initiatives to their colleagues, or sending out random emails about expectations with initiatives.”

***Professional development****.* The school leaders would discuss professional development as a strategy to support teachers with RTI/MTSS. Professional development could be provided by the school district, outside consultants, or within the building. There was not a clear decision on what method provides the best support for their teachers. Red noted,

"We have tried it in different ways, like, all the same time for the whole school. Tried to stagger times. We tried to bring in other people to come in and help. We have even tried working with other schools. Over the past seven years, we have tried many ways to implement MTSS. I can't say which was the best method."

**Research Question 2.**

**Implementation.** This theme was developed from the school leader’s perspective on what practices they strategically discussed to implement RTI/MTSS and how those practices impacted students with LD and teachers to gain school buy-in. The school leaders also reflected on practices that did not go as well with RTI/MTSS implementation. Subthemes developed under implementation. They were:(a) strategic plan; and (b) accountability.

***Strategic plan.*** The strategic plan was a theme that developed from the school leaders discussing implementing RTI/MTSS. They all expressed the importance of having a definite plan. Within the interview, they explained the positive and negative examples they have seen. A positive strategy that school leaders discussed when implementing RTI/MTSS was introducing the practices through the special ed department. The school leaders had more confidence that their special education teachers could implement the practices within RTI/MTSS. The school leaders noted that they would have the special education teachers use interventions for students with LD for a couple of months and collect data. After the data was collected, they would have the special education teachers share the data with the general education teachers in CLT and faculty meetings. One school leader noted, their principals said, “If the general education teachers saw that interventions worked on students with LD, they would be more likely to buy-in into MTSS.” This strategy was discussed on multiple occasions as part of their plan for implementation. The school leaders considered that this strategy worked well in the building. They reported that, "The special education teachers felt like they were part of the teaching staff with the general education teachers." It was not clear if the school leaders implementing this strategy decided to support students with LD or if they considered less resistance from the special education teachers.

Elena described an implementation plan for RTI/MTSS that needed to be revised. The example Elena used was a prior principal who did not have a firm intention to implement RTI/MTSS. She stated,

“The principal walked into the faculty meeting with a flowchart. We were not aware that the principal was going to discuss the initiative. He had his back to the staff the whole time as he was discussing the flowchart. The teachers looked at each other with confusion."

An impactful impact Elena provided was her principal having key school members participate in a discovery phase of RTI/MTSS. She explained that the principal talked to the special education teachers. Then the principal had a meeting with teacher leadership, administrators, and the special education department chair. The principal discussed how RTI/MTSS could support all students. The principal had the special education department chair talk about how the students with disabilities were making academic growth with the research-based instructional practices they were using. Then the special education department chair stated that this was part of RTI/MTSS. Next, the principal had all members in the leadership meeting visit other schools that were implementing the initiative. Finally, the principal informed the members that they would implement RTI/MTSS next year. Elena reported, “When it was time to implement the school-wide MTSS initiative, there was more buy-in from the staff.” Elena noted, "The staff seemed to understand why we were implementing MTSS and how.”

***Accountability.*** Accountability was a factor that school leaders described as crucial to implementing and sustaining the initiative. The importance of accountability was used to describe all students, especially students with disabilities. School leaders and teachers were holding each other accountable for implementing the initiative. For example, Red was using accountability language with resistant teachers. When a teacher would come to her to complain that a student is not making progress in their classroom, she would respond with questions like,

“What have you tried in your classroom to help them? What research-based strategies do you use? How long did you implement the strategies? What specific problems have you identified?”

Red also discussed how teachers would inform her when other teachers were not implementing RTI/MTSS inventions in their classrooms. Elena noted that some of her teachers, on her team, would tell her when teachers were not supporting interventions in their class.

**Research Question 3**

**Teacher Supports.** While describing teachers lived experiences with a school-wide initiative, varying degrees of support became a theme. Supports from the teachers were reported as having a positive and negative impact on the implementation of RTI/MTSS. The teachers described their perception of supports from central office to their building school leaders. Two subthemes surfaced under teacher support: (a) district-wide; and (b) administrators.

***District-wide.*** With the teachers, there was an overall consensus that either the district provided resources or did not provide the necessary resources to implement RTI/MTSS. Those who supported the notion that the district did not provide enough support through resources had concrete examples. The teachers shared feelings of frustration, disappointment, and exhaustion with their district. For example, several teachers said,

"I feel like every time I come back to school; we have a new district-wide initiative. Our school leadership team always tells us that this is a district-wide initiative, and we will support this initiative in our school. Why is it always up to us to figure out how to support the initiative?”

“We have the I-Ready screener. Our county implemented it last year with MTSS, and they're phasing it out already. It's frustrating trying to support an initiative, and they just give up on it. I guess they found a lower price from another company. I'm sure we'll have another screener next year."

The two teachers that did not agree with the district’s lack of support stated, “Our district provides us with additional funds, consultants, or central office designee for MTSS.” It was not clear how different schools receive different supports when they are in the same district.

***Administrators.*** Administrators, in general, emerged in the data with a variety of themes. The lack of support from the administration was a theme that teachers consistently brought up. There were a few outliers who did not agree that they experience a lack of support from their school leaders. For example, one teacher outlier reported,

“I went up to my administrator and told him I couldn't reach this student with this program, but I have an alternate program that would help him. My administrator told me to go get what you need, get a copy of it. I'll call somebody and make sure you get it. They just provided me with what I needed."

Still, this specific example was few and far between. Most teachers gave particular examples of administrators telling them they had to implement RTI/MTSS with no direction on how to implement the initiative. Concerns they discussed included no plan for implementation, lack of resources, lack of knowledge, lack of communication with expectations, and administrators lack interest in RTI/MTSS. There was even a specific example from a teacher about the authenticity of her principal (e.g., He asked me to be part of the group and then walked away. I felt like he just checked a box).

**Teacher empowerment.** Empowerment was a theme developed from the practices of the school leaders. Regardless of their school leader’s communication, level of support and practices, the teachers were still able to implement RTI/MTSS. It was discovered that teachers had an underground communication system with each other that allowed teachers to know when RTI/MTSS was coming to the school. For instance, a teacher stated,

“Those of us who have been in the system for a while we have been promoted and moved around the district. When any initiatives are coming to a school, we call the teachers that we know in the school to give them a heads up.”

This communication allowed teachers to share information. When teachers got promoted into positions of power, they still share the information. Resulting in an underground networking system that supplies information to teachers throughout the district. Teachers have a communication system throughout the district that allowed them to have access to information that some of their school administrators were not privy to. Furthermore, there were countless examples of teachers taking the initial step and adopting an initiative before the principal announced it. Some teachers noted,

"I have a friend that I used to work within an elementary school who now sits on the committee with new initiatives. She tells me when the district is going to adopt a new initiative. This allows me to go research the initiative and tell the teachers in my school".

"My friend sits in the office of the bigwigs. She tells me what is going on behind closed doors. I always hear about the initiatives that we are going to stop doing even before my principal."

“Last year, I started hearing about MTSS in our child study meetings. The principal never really announced it, we just kind of started talking about it and doing it in our school.”

“I heard MTSS was coming, so I went and found a book on it. For us, it is common to hear things before they come to our school pertaining to a new school-wide initiative.”

With teacher empowerment, teachers were collaborating and supporting each other in the school. One teacher said, “When we started implementing interventions, we would support teachers who were struggling with using the interventions.”

Additionally, teacher empowerment was delegated to the teachers from the school leaders. Teachers reported that they often were allowed to implement the initiative and had to report back to their school leaders on how things were going. They collaborated about interventions and what was working best for the students. Teachers often ran their own CLT meetings, academic meetings, and intervention teams with no administrator.

**Leadership practices.** Another theme that emerged with the teachers was leadership practices. The teachers described these practices as causing a wide range of feelings from anger to support. The words the teachers used to describe these practices were helpful, hindrance, harmful, impactful, and disconnected. Some of the examples included with leadership practices mentioned were,

“My administrators allow me to work with teachers with our school-wide initiative (MTSS).”

“My administrator attends our CLT meeting and always talks about MTSS.”

“When we talk about our struggling readers, our administrator just sits there on their laptop and says nothing. When I try to talk to my administrator about interventions, he just responds good, keep up the great work.”

“My administrator does not care about teachers. He has never been in my classroom.”

“My principal doesn’t talk to us at all. I like it that he just stays out of our way. Just tell us what you want to do and get out the way.”

The leadership practices that were discovered, from a teacher’s perspective, displayed more negative feelings than positive.

**Discussion**

This study aimed to investigate the decision-making practices of school leaders when implementing an RTI school-wide initiative and if those practices were grounded in the principles of a systems change design. To understand how school leaders practices created the lived experiences between teachers and the principal with a school-wide initiative and what impact it had on teachers and students with LD. School leaders discussed their role in the implementation of a school initiative and described how they had to think and prepare for distractors, levels of support from central office and teachers, lack of knowledge about the initiative, and the strategic practices they implemented to impact change, teachers, and accountability with RTI/MTSS initiative.

The findings portrayed a limited understanding of a school leader's thought process when implementing practices to foster systemic change in the school-wide initiative. It was not clear if school leaders thought about teachers or students with LD and their impact their decisions had on them. Nevertheless, it showed that the school leader’s practices were not consistently grounded in a systems design approach. The literature noted that the school leaders could foster systemic change, with a school-wide initiative, by implementing a systems design approach. The school leader’s practices should include: (a) soliciting stakeholder ownership; (b) communicating the systemic change process; and (c) addressing the mindset of staff (Blumenfeld et al., 2000; Jenlink et al., 1998; Watson, Watson, & Reigeluth, 2008).

These findings contribute to the literature by revealing the school leader’s practices when implementing a school-wide initiative. As a result, four main findings from school leaders practices that were discovered were: (a) teacher empowerment; (b) building implementation practices; (c) school leader’s practices with teachers; and (d) change and communication

**Teacher empowerment.** There were direct practices from the school leaders that resulted in teachers evolving into a feeling of empowerment. The teachers often felt isolated from school administration. They reported that their school leaders did not communicate with them effectively with RTI/MTSS in the school. As a consequence, this left the teachers wondering what was going on in the school. Teachers began to create a networking system, with other teachers throughout the district, which allowed them to be aware of the initiatives coming down the pipeline and their requirements. With this information, teachers noted that they would often conduct their research to prepare for upcoming initiatives. The actions of the teachers created a buy-in from the teachers to adopt the initiative, a practice noted in a systems design approach (Sullivan & Stewart, 2006). The teacher’s actions also resulted in the successful implementation of the RTI/MTSS initiative in their school. However, with a systems design approach, the buy-in should be facilitated by the leadership team (Lunenburg, 2010). The teachers created their buy-in. Consequently, empowered teachers, who do not support an initiative, can disrupt the implementation of the initiative. (Lee & Nie, 2014). As a result, it created tension with the administration in the building.

**Building implementation practices.** The school leaders reported that they often receive little or no support, from central office, when implementing RTI/MTSS. This caused the school leader to display practices that demonstrated a lack of support for the initiative. Their lack of support was captured as the school leader, not understanding the initiative or feeling like they did not have the time to support the initiative. When school leaders do not support an initiative, it is less likely to be implemented with success. A practice noted with the literature on school leaders implementation (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010). This practice was evident from the statements reported by the teachers. Teachers reported that they often received limited information on how to implement RTI/MTSS. For example, teachers noted that the principal walked into a faculty meeting in August with a flow chart and said this was RTI/MTSS. The principal told them they would use this framework in the new school year. The principal’s lack of understanding of RTI/MTSS resulted in him attempting to implement an initiative that would not be successful in the school. Still, it was not clear what was the principals thinking behind this practice.

With RTI/MTSS implementation, school leaders reported that they often had so many distractors that it was difficult for them to focus on RTI/MTSS. This statement is consistent with the literature that school leaders must be responsive to a range of stakeholders (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). When the school leaders had to implement RTI/MTSS in their school, it was not apparent how those distractors impacted their thinking when making discussions about RTI/MTSS implementation. For example, the school leaders often described asking veteran teachers to implement RTI/MTSS. The school leaders expressed using this practice allowed the teachers to feel like they are part of the initiative. Although this was a practice that had a positive impact on the teachers, it was not clear, if this practice was to solicit teacher buy-in or alleviate an initiative that school leaders deemed a distractor?

**School leader’s practices with teachers.** School leader’s practices with introducing RTI/MTSS differed with novice teachers and veteran teachers. The school leaders reported that they often told the novice teachers what to do and how they should do it. It was noted that when school leaders would talk to novice teachers about RTI/MTSS, they would tell them this is what we do in our school. Nonetheless, with the veteran teachers, the school leaders noted that they often talked to them about the initiative. For example, with RTI/MTSS, the school leaders would find a way for the veteran teachers to participate. When taking into consideration a systems design approach, the school leaders missed an opportunity to address the teacher’s mindset. The literature states that not addressing a teacher’s mindset can result in teacher resistance with the initiative or be slow into acceptance (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015).

**Change and communication.** School leaders described the themes of change and communication as part of their implementation practices with RTI/MTSS. Change and communication are vital in a systems design approach. With change, school leaders focused on change from the teacher’s perspective but did not consider change within themselves. They discussed how teachers had a hard time with change. They offered limited practices that could be implemented to support teachers and change. With communication, school leaders practiced talking to teachers about the initiative. They missed the opportunity to discuss with all staff what changes would occur with the initiative. This would have been an opportunity not to tell them about the initiative but describe the change process and how it will impact teachers with the initiative (Lunenburg, 2010). School leaders understanding change and using communication, as more than talking at teachers, could have a direct impact on their practices when implementing the initiative.

**Implications for Practice**

This study emphasizes the need for school leaders to have a greater awareness of their decision-making practices and how it impacts teachers and students with LD. The study highlighted: (a) school leader’s practices with the implementation of RTI/MTSS and its inconsistencies with a systems design approach; and (b) disconnection between school leader’s practices and how it impacted RTI/MTSS initiative.

School leaders should ground their practices in a methodology that supports change. In this study, a systems design approach was introduced as an example of a method that can support school leaders. When implementing an RTI/MTSS initiative school leader’s practices should focus on providing an opportunity for stakeholder ownership, communicating the change process, and being aware and prepared to address the mindset of the teachers (Blumenfeld et al., 2000; Jenlink et al., 1998; Watson, Watson, & Reigeluth, 2008). Implementing these practices foster a systemic change that can provide support to teachers to implement the initiative.

School leaders implementing a systems design approach would focus on stakeholder ownership. This approach states the importance of having teachers involved in the RTI/MTSS initiative. To provide teachers with an opportunity for stakeholder ownership, teachers should sit on committees, attend professional development, or provide professional development to the staff. The strategies would further help teachers feel less isolated and create a buy-in process that would promote a systemic change within the building to implement RTI/MTSS.

A systems design approach indicates that communicating the systemic change process is essential to create change in a building. This practice emphasizes that the school leader's communication and dialogue is a vital part of the systemic change process (Watson, Watson, & Reigeluth, 2008). As the findings indicated, school leaders were not consistent with communicating with their staff, and as a result, the staff developed their system of communication, which led to teacher empowerment. Although, for some schools, teacher empowerment helped implement RTI/MTSS. Even so, it has the potential to have an adverse effect if the teachers, who are empowered, decided it was not the best initiative for students.

With addressing a teacher's fixed mindset, there was tension with teachers and school leadership. The teachers were vocal about their frustration. The teachers reported that school leaders do not know what is going on or do not care what is going on. They made references that school leaders need to get out-of-the-way, and they will implement the initiative. The response from some of the teachers was an indicator of their fixed mindset. There seemed to be a division between teachers and school leaders. In a systems design approach, the school leader would practice preparing for a teacher’s mindset. The school leader’s practices include communicating the school's vision and detailed expectations to staff about student success. Provide all teachers, especially resistant teachers, with direct opportunities to have leadership roles with the initiative, having individual conversations with the teachers to solicit their input to influence their mindset, and creating a culture that promotes students learning.

**Limitations**

The study had two fundamental flaws. First, the study used convenience sampling to capture the experience of school leaders and teachers. All the participants in the study were doctoral students who were veteran teachers. There insight and information collected may not reflect novice teachers or teachers in the field. The majority of the students were female and all identified as Caucasian. In the focus group, there was a combination of teachers, teacher leaders, and one administrator that made up the focus group. Two of the participants, in the focus group, were used for the school leader’s interviews. Second, the data collected from the participants involved a wide range of schools across the district. The wide range of schools made it challenging to create themes that were reflected by teachers and school leaders in a building.

Additionally, neither school leader was a principal. One was an assistant principal, with limited decision-making authority, and one was a teacher leader. Without a principal who has full decision-making authority, it is difficult to pinpoint if the themes that were developed represent a majority of school leaders.

**Future Research**

Future research should include the recruitment of a more extensive selection of participants for the teacher focus group and school leaders’ interview. With the teacher focus group, the selection should focus on having participants from novice teachers to veteran teachers. Teachers within the focus group should be classroom teachers, special education teachers, teacher leaders, and paraprofessionals. The selection should focus on having participants from all genders and ethnic backgrounds. Having this selection variety will allow a more in-depth discussion and a higher perception of the lived experiences of teachers.

School leader’s participants should be assistant principals, principles, or district-wide representatives. These participants will allow a more in-depth analysis of the decision-making practices of school leaders. The participants should be various genders and represent multiple ethnic groups.

A deeper level of research should be investigated to determine a school leader’s awareness of decision-making practices when implementing a school-wide initiative. It is not clear from this research if school leaders rely upon a methodology with implementing a school-wide program. Further research is needed to understand the awareness level of school leaders when implementing a school-wide initiative.

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Appendix A

**School Leader Interview Questions**

**Intro-**Thank you so much for your time. As a former educator, I know how precious time is in your role. I am a doctoral student at George Mason University. My area of interest is understanding practices school leaders implement for a school-wide RTI initiative. I am interested in understanding, from a school leader’s perspective, what actions are necessary to adopt and sustain RTI successfully.

1. How does your school decide which schoolwide program/initiatives to invest resources?

2. Were you involved in deciding whether RTI would be implemented in your school?

* How was the RTI initiative described to you?
* What was your initial reaction to RTI in your school?

3. Tell me about how RTI was introduced to your staff.

* Why was the decision made to roll it out in that way?

4. What role, if any, do school leaders play in the implementation of RTI? What do you believe benefited your teachers the most?

* How do you know?

5. Is there anything unique that you did to support the implementation of RTI?

6. When implementing a new initiative, there are always those outliers (teachers) who have a hard time dealing with change. Where there any teachers that had, difficulty buying-in to RTI? How did you know?

* What strategies did you implement to gain teacher buy-in?
* Why did you use those particular strategies?

7. Is there anything you wish you would have done differently?

**Conclusion-** Once again, I would like to thank you for taking the time to give me your honest feedback. The information that you shared will aid me in interesting what is needed to adopt and sustain RTI in a school. Your input will help “us” move forward on how we introduce and implement programs in schools to maximize student success.

Before we wrap it up, is there anything that you might want to add that we did not discuss? If not, and you think of something later, please feel free to email me at [jsutton1@gmu.edu](mailto:jsutton1@gmu.edu). Thanks again and keep moving your building forward, putting students first.

Appendix B

**Focus Group Interview Questions**

**Intro-** My name is Jason Sutton, and I am a doctoral student at George Mason University. My area of interest at Mason is understanding the decision-making practices of school leaders. The purpose of this focus group is to get your perspective on how to sustain a school-wide RTI initiative. I want to know what is working well and what needs to be refined to work even better. Please remember that we discuss here is confidential and will not be shared with your school leadership team.

1. How are students in your school doing compared to other schools in your district? How do you know that?

* Do your school leaders encourage you to focus on student learning? How?

2. What are some academic struggles you see with students in your classroom?

* What do you do to help students if they are struggling academically in your classroom?

3. What supports do students with LD receive in your school?

* Are there additional supports that you think students with LD require?

4. How are new initiatives introduced at your school? Are the teachers involved?

* What opportunities are there for teachers who would like to be involved in leadership roles with new initiatives?

5. Tell me how you learned about RTI.

* After the introduction about RTI, were you clear about the purpose? What were the next steps? How was it going to be implemented in the school?

6. Who are the school-based leaders of RTI?

* Have any administrators played a role in the RTI? Tell me about the role.
* Is there any other staff that you would consider leaders in the RTI initiative? What role did they serve?

7. What supports have you received with RTI?

* Are there parts of RTI in your school that are not working as well as you would like? Any suggestions for how it could work better in the future.
* What precisely, have you learned from using RTI that you will continue to use as part of your teaching pedagogy? Why?

**Conclusion-** Once again, I want to thank you for your time. This information we discussed is essential and will help me to understand, from a teacher’s perspective, what is needed to implement RTI in a school. If there is additional information, you would like to add, please feel free to email me at [jsutton1@gmu.edu](mailto:jsutton1@gmu.edu). If not, have a great day.

**Appendix C**

**Alignment of School Leader Interview Questions to Theoretical Framework**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| School Leader Questions:  Semi-Structured Interview Questions | Mindset | Communication | Stakeholder buy-in |
| 1. How does your school decide which schoolwide program/initiatives to invest resources? |  |  | X |
| 2. Were you involved in deciding whether RTI would be implemented in your school?   * How was the RTI initiative described to you? * What was your initial reaction to RTTYI in your school? |  | X | X |
| 3. Tell me about how RTI was introduced to your staff.   * Why was the decision made to roll it out in that way? |  | X | X |
| 4. What role, if any, do school leaders play in the implementation of RTI? What do you believe benefited your teachers the most?   * How do you know? | X | X | X |
| 5. Is there anything unique that you did to support the implementation of RTI? |  | X | X |
| 6. When implementing a new initiative, there are always those outliers (teachers) who have a hard time dealing with change. Where there any teachers that had, difficulty buying-in to RTI? How did you know?   * What strategies did you implement to gain teacher buy-in? * Why did you use those particular strategies? | X | X | X |
| 7. Is there anything you wish you would have done differently with the implementation of RTI? |  | X | X |

**Appendix D**

**Alignment of Teacher Focus Group Questions to Theoretical Framework**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Teacher Focus Group:  Semi-Structured Interview Questions | Mindset | Communication | Stakeholder buy-in |
| 1. How are students in your school doing compared to other middle schools in your district? How do you know that?   * Do your school leaders encourage you to focus on student learning? How? | X | X | X |
| 2. What are some academic struggles you see with students in your classroom?   * What do you do to help students if they are struggling academically in your classroom? | X |  | X |
| 3. What supports do students with LD receive in your school?   * Are there additional supports that you think students with LD require? | X | X | X |
| 4. How are new initiatives introduced at your school? Are the teachers involved?   * What opportunities are there for teachers who would like to be involved in leadership roles with new initiatives? |  | X | X |
| 5. Tell me how you learned about RTI.   * After the introduction of RTI, were you clear about the purpose? What were the next steps? How was it going to be implemented in the school? |  | X |  |
| 6. Who are the school-based leaders in RTI?   * How have administrators played a role in RTI? Tell me about the role? * Is there any other staff that you would consider leaders in the RTI initiative? What role did they play? |  | X | X |
| 7. What supports have you received with RTI?   * Are there parts of RTI in your school that are not working as well as you would like? Any suggestions for how it could work better in the future. * What precisely, have you learned from using RTI that you will continue to use as part of your teaching pedagogy? Why? | X |  | X |