LEADERSHIP FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS

by

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(Under the Direction of Karen C. Bryant)

ABSTRACT

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a framework that incorporates assessments and interventions to reduce behavior issues and increase student achievement. Schools utilize Response-to-Intervention (RTI), a multi-tiered approach, to support students with academic and behavioral needs. School and district leaders in rural contexts face challenges apart from their urban and suburban counterparts. Teachers in a rural middle school in the southeastern United States have limited access to targeted professional learning. The purpose of this collaborative action research case study was to explore effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring the effective implementation of the MTSS Framework. Through the development of a targeted professional learning plan and the formation of professional learning communities, school and district leaders successfully developed strategies and interventions to enhance the implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports.

INDEX WORDS: MTSS, RTI, Multi-Tiered System of Supports, Response to Intervention, Rural School Leadership

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DEDICATION

Ecclesiastes 9:11 verse reads, “The race is not given to the swift or to the strong but to the one who endures to the end.” With genuine gratitude and warm regard, I dedicate this work to several important people who traveled this journey alongside me.

To my husband, Deitric, thank you for your unconditional love and support.

Thank you for your love and support to my loving daughter, Callie Rayne (age 6). While you may not understand, know that Mommy did this for you. I pray that I inspired you to be more than I could ever be. Thank you for being my inspiration to persevere through difficult times. I cannot wait to read your dissertation! You will always be mommy’s number one source of inspiration! I LOVE YOU ONE THOUSAND, ONE MILLION!

I cannot express my gratitude to my parents; we have been on this educational journey for roughly 33 years! Your expectations and support as a kindergartner still hold for me as a doctoral student.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Despite numerous educational policy mandates providing guidelines and funding, schools worldwide struggle to secure a solution to improve overall student achievement (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012). Since 2001, schools have operated within the guidelines of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004), and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015). These policies provided guidelines and funding for students at all achievement levels and focused heavily on academic outcomes for students with disabilities. According to Michelman (2018), NCLB mandated schools to implement specific interventions in schools that did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which required states to determine public school students' performance on state-mandated summative assessments. The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 introduced schools to Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI was a framework used for students through early identification of academic and behavioral concerns. An extension of that act, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), focused more on a whole-child approach. Lawmakers made continual changes to educational policies that were intended to positively impact student outcomes in U.S. school systems.

The National Center on Response to Intervention (2010) discussed Response to Intervention as a framework that integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and reduce behavioral problems. School-wide teams are developed to plan, monitor, and evaluate student academic and behavioral needs

(George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2014). According to the National Center on Response to Intervention (2010), school-wide teams use data to determine students' risk for unfavorable learning outcomes. School-wide teams should also monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions, and modify the intensity and nature of interventions. Those interventions and nature depend on their responsiveness to identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities. When combined with numerous factors, professional development can assist change and the extensive use of evidence-based practices (Mason, 2019). Since the introduction of RTI, a new framework, Multi-Tiered System of Supports, was designed. MTSS, introduced in 2015, combined RTI and Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports (PBIS) to maximize student achievement and reduce behavioral problems.

While MTSS sought to improve overall student achievement outcomes, the quality of Tier I instruction predominated. At the Tier I level, schools must ensure all students access highly effective introductory teaching. Several studies revealed that the only way to implement interventions effectively is through professional development within a professional learning community (PLC). Building-level administrators must foster a learning culture that supports teachers' agency, encouraging them to take an active lead in learning alongside their peers (Zepeda, 2019). According to Buffum et al. (2009), to make RTI work, school administrators, resource teachers, reading specialists must accurately identify deficits and design interventions to address them. For this to occur, administrators must facilitate teachers' professional development through professional learning communities where participants focus on learning and results (Buffum et al., 2009). Implementation of multi-tiered systems of support works effectively when it is significantly run and when teachers and staff view themselves as a collaborative unit (Mundschenk, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to explore effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level for teachers in a rural middle school. The desired outcome was to improve the implementation of MTSS through observations, coaching, and professional learning while synchronously pinpointing the leadership behaviors that best supported the process.

Research Questions

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. What conditions are potential barriers for effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at the middle school level?
2. What strategies are developed by a school action research team to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered system of supports?
3. What does the action research team learn from developing and creating interventions to improve multi-tiered system of supports?

As this study examined leadership behaviors and strategies to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered system of supports at Success Middle School, the researcher used specific, key terms to define several concepts that guided the action research study.

The Problem

For decades, schools have grappled with educating a diversified and economically challenged K-12 student population. The underlying premise for multi-tiered systems of support is that schools should not wait until students fall far enough behind to qualify for special

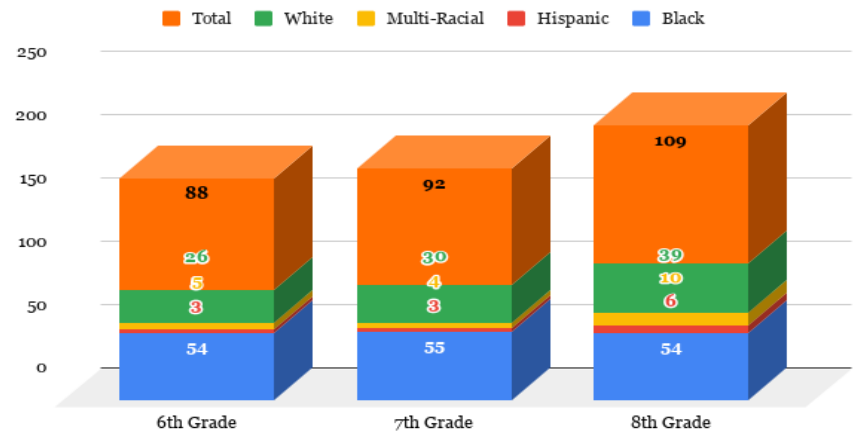
education services to provide them with the help they need (Buffum et al., 2009). Once identified, the academic needs of all students are addressed through targeted and systematic interventions. Many schools previously have only viewed MTSS as a way to qualify students for special education, to meet mandates, and to raise test scores (Buffum et al., 2009). School leaders must address the quality of Tier I instruction through targeted professional development for teachers through professional learning communities.

Overview of the Research Site Context

Success Middle School[1] (SMS) is a rural, public, Title I middle school located in the southeastern United States. In Successtown, 58% of the population is white, while 38.4 % is black. The median income per household was $37,902 and $49,138 per family. As of the 2019-2020 school year, SMS served 309 students in grades six through eight. There was a decline in enrollment for the 2020-2021 school year, with SMS serving 289 students. Fifty-six percent of the students were black, while thirty-three percent were white. One hundred percent of the students were eligible for free and reduced meals. Figure 1 is a summary of the enrollment.

Figure 1

Success Middle School Enrollment Summary



The English Language Learner (ELL) students accounted for four percent of the population. Of the 289 students, there were five gifted students. Forty students were identified as special education students.

Success Middle School employed 40 staff members during the 2020-2021 school year. Teachers served students during four, seventy-five-minute English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies instructional blocks. Students enrolled in a 60-minute course during four, nine-week periods during Connections. Courses included Band, Business and Computer Science, Family and Consumer Science, and Health and Physical Education. Students received additional academic interventions and support for Increased Learning Time (ILT) during the third and fourth periods. ILT was incorporated into the daily schedule to address intellectual deficits in Reading and Math. During the 2020-2021 school year, SMS employed three administrators, one full-time principal, two part-time assistant principals, one counselor, one administrative assistant, one registrar, one media specialist, and 20 teachers. Table 1 depicts the certificate level, gender, average salary, race, and years of experience between administrators and teachers at Success Middle School. Most teachers have less than five years of experience, while only two are eligible for retirement within ten years with 30 years of service. Eighty-five percent of the staff at Success Middle School are highly qualified. The average annual salary is $84,549.27 for administrators and $49,080.57 for teachers. The average contract days for administrators are 220 days, while teachers work 191 days. Few staff members have endorsements and additional certifications.

Table 1

Success Middle School Staff Summary 2020-2021

	Administrators	Teachers
Certificate Level		
4 yr. Bachelor's	0	12
5 Yr. Master's	1	11
6 yr. Specialist's	2	2
7 Yr. Doctoral	0	0
Average Annual Salary	$84,549.27	$49,080.57
Years of Experience		
<1	0	0
1-10	1	12
11-20	2	8
21-30	0	5

An alarming percentage of the students at Success Middle School were classified as beginning or developing learners based on their performance on the Georgia Milestones End of Grades Assessment for English Language Arts and Mathematics. The school leadership team conducted a root cause analysis during the 2019-2020 school year and concluded immediate improvements to instruction were necessary to improve student outcomes. During the 2016-2017 school year, 71.7% of students assessed were beginning and developing learners. The following school term, 73.7% of students were beginning and developing learners. During the 2018-2019 school year, 66.2% of students assessed were beginning and developing learners.

Further analysis concluded several factors contributed to these results. Both sixth and seventh grades experienced high faculty turnover during the years mentioned above. A first-year teacher taught seventh grade English Language Arts during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years; a first-year teacher taught the seventh grade English Language Arts course. During the 2016-2017 school year, three different teachers served in the English Language Arts teacher's sixth-grade team capacity. High turnover rates notably exist in schools serving low-income, non-White, and low-achieving student populations (Rondfeldt et al., 2013).

Table 2

Success Middle School Three-Year ELA End of Grade Assessment Summary

Type of Learner	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
Beginning Learners	31.1%	33.8%	30.8%
Developing Learners	40.6%	39.9%	35.4%
Beginning & Developing Learners	71.7%	73.7%	66.2%

As summarized in Table 2, during the 2016-2017 school year, 71.7% of students assessed were beginning and developing learners. During the following school term, beginning and developing learners increased. In 2018-2019, 66.2% of students were identified as beginning and developing learners, declining from the previous year. Further analysis concluded several factors contributed to these results. During the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years, seventh grade experienced high turnover. Also, a first-year teacher taught Sixth Grade Mathematics during 2016-2017. Table 3 summarizes the data from the End of Grade State Standardized Assessment.

Table 3

Success Middle School Three-Year Mathematics End of Grade Assessment Summary

Type of Learner	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
Beginning Learners	20.5%	20.7%	20.8%
Developing Learners	47.8%	45.6%	49.7%
Beginning & Developing Learners	68.3%	66.3%	70.5%

Definition of Terms

Key terms and definitions are provided to facilitate communication and research (Sloan et al., 2002). For this study, the following key terms are defined:

- “Leadership” in the context of this action research is a team consisting of the principal, assistant principals, department chairpersons, grade level chairpersons, and district personnel, including the district coach and other district leadership personnel.
- “Multi-Tiered Systems of Support” is a vital element of Georgia’s Tiered Systems for students. The Georgia Department of Education defines MTSS as a framework implemented at the school-wide level with support systems and resources designed to provide support matched to student need to maximize student achievement and reduce poor behavioral outcomes.
- "Response-to-Intervention" is a framework that integrates intervention and assessment within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and reduce behavioral problems. RTI describes a multi-tiered approach that identifies all students’ academic needs using evidence-based instructional practices, progress monitoring, and data-driven instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).
- “Professional Development,” as defined in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, includes activities that improve and increase teachers’ knowledge of the academic subjects teachers teach and enable teachers to become highly qualified (Zepeda, 2019).
- “Professional Learning Community” is a shift of the past mentality of traditional teacher development reviewed by outside specialists to lifelong professional learning in the workplace where teachers share their skills and expertise within a community (Tam, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

This action research focused on the leadership behaviors that support the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support. Leaders in low-income schools are expected

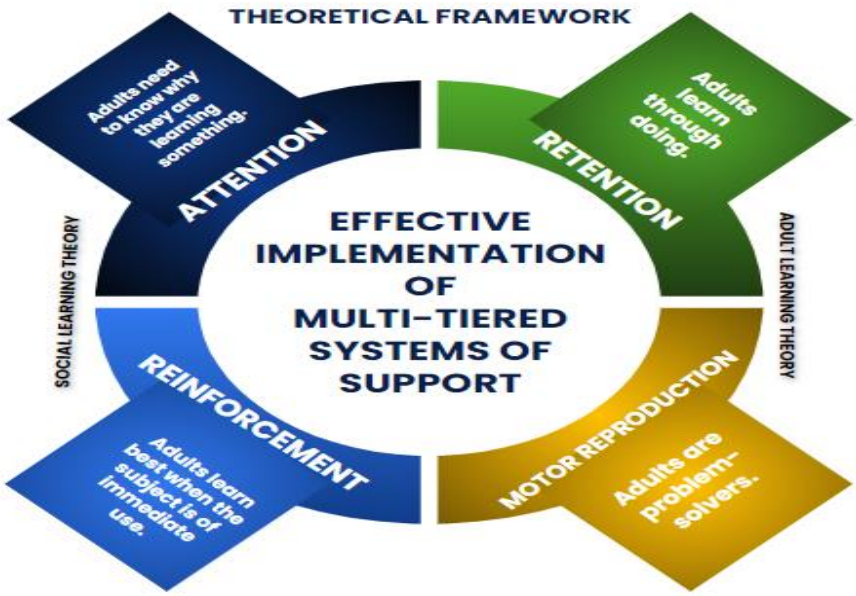
to keenly examine instruction, assessment, and student achievement (Suber, 2011). Leaders can accomplish this through the development of professional learning communities. DuFour et al. (2016) established a working definition of the term professional learning communities as:

> An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLC's operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning. (p. 10)

Figure 2 represents the theoretical framework for the purpose.

Figure 2

Adapted from Knowles' (1984) Adult Learning Theory and Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory



The foundation of successful professional development is how adults are immersed in learning (Zepeda, 2019, p. 36). Hunzicker (2011) supports Zepeda's view of professional development by defining significant professional development as "anything that engages

teachers in learning activities that are supportive, job-embedded, instructional-focused, collaborative, and ongoing" (p. 177).

The theoretical framework that guides this action research is Knowles' (1984) Theory of Adult Learning, which includes four major principles:

1. Adults need to be active in the planning and evaluating of their professional learning.
2. The experience offers the basis for learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects relevant to their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered.

Encouraging reflection and conversation, whether with oneself, another, or a group, allows learning. However, learning to reflect is a developmental process cultivated in adult learning settings.

Another theory that served as a basis for the study is the Social Learning Theory. Four principles guide Bandura's (1977) work:

1. Attention is critical in whether a behavior influences others emulating it.
2. Does the participant remember what they learned?
3. Reproduction is the ability to perform the behavior that the model has just demonstrated, which influences our decisions to try to imitate it.
4. Motivation is the drive to perform the behavior.

Conceptual Framework

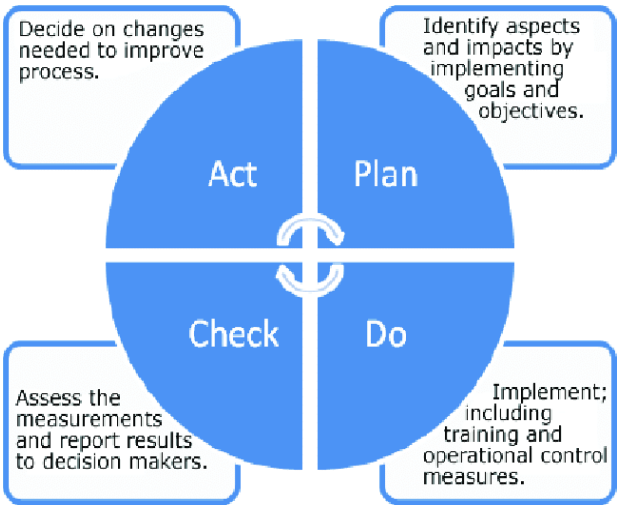
This action research study focuses on leadership behaviors needed for the effective implementation of multi-tiered support systems.

The conceptual framework for this study was constructed around W. Deming's (1993) Continuous Cycle of Improvement. The action research team consisting of teachers,

administrators, and district personnel reviewed responses and data from interviews and surveys given to teachers about multi-tiered systems of support. Teachers participated in monthly, targeted professional learning. After implementation, self-reflection and observations drove the next cycle. The desired outcome was improved performance of multi-tiered systems of support and improved Tier 1 instruction. Figure 3 is a representation of the conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 3

Deming's (1993) Continuous Improvement Cycle



Overview of the Methodology

Action research is a gathering of connected perspectives that combine theory and practice to tackle important issues together with those who collaboratively experience them (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Ferrance (2000) defined action research as a process whereby participants evaluate their educational practices using research techniques. Action researchers create, implement, and analyze the study's goals, activities, and data while simultaneously involving members (Jacob, 2018). The action research for this dissertation connected research to training a group of teachers at a middle school. The research was directly related to the study's purpose: to

explore effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level for teachers in a rural middle school. The training of this focus group that included both administration and teachers was performed with the desired outcome to improve the implementation of MTSS through observations, coaching, and professional learning while synchronously pinpointing the leadership behaviors that best supported the process. The primary researcher conducted the action research process with the school administration team, leadership team, department team members, and special education teachers

The primary researcher selected the action research team members based on their direct involvement in creating and developing school-wide processes. This team was responsible for developing a professional development plan for this action research. The team analyzed data through monthly meetings. The action research team conducted monthly professional learning sessions to improve the implementation of the multi-tiered system. More importantly, this team monitored implementation effectiveness by observing the professional learning communities and implementing interventions. Table 4 summarizes the members of the action research implementation team. The researcher chose members of this team because of their direct connection with the students in the classroom. These members worked with students daily during regular instruction and the intervention period.

Table 4

Success Middle School Action Research Implementation Team

Member	Position
Ms. J. Brooks	English/Language Arts Teacher
Ms. B. Hogan	English/Language Arts Teacher
Ms. S. Holloway	English/Language Arts Teacher
Ms. T. Holder	Classroom Support Staff/Paraprofessional

This study used action research methodology, which included qualitative case study methods informed by quantitative data. Qualitative data measures included interviews with school staff and district personnel and observation summaries of the professional learning communities in action. Quantitative data measures included multiple implementation surveys on professional learning and development and classroom observations during intervention periods. All data measures helped address the three research questions for the action research study.

Intervention

For this action research study, the action research implementation team engaged in three cycles of interventions. The first intervention was the identification of potential barriers for the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support. The second part of the first cycle was professional learning for teachers at Success Middle School to enhance their knowledge of the multi-tiered support system. The study required their participation in weekly sessions at the building level. The second cycle involved the action research design team observing teachers implementing what they learned during the professional learning sessions. The final cycle reviewed observational and academic data from classroom observations and student progress.

Significance

The building principal is responsible for professional learning, teacher supervision, student achievement, and instructional leadership (Suber, 2011). The principal was identified as the primary researcher for this action research study. The action research team strategically developed professional learning communities. To strengthen their teaching performance, teachers must reflect on their instructional practice, examine the effect instruction has on students, and implement insights gained from a meeting to improve their teaching performance (Pirtle & Tobia, 2014). The goal of the district coordinator was to enhance instructional practices

in the district, beginning at the research site. As the action research implementation team, teachers worked to improve the implementation of effective Tier 1 strategies.

The design team was composed of the members of the action research team: principal (researcher), district coordinator, and primary and middle school assistant principals. The implementation team members consisted of English/Language Arts teachers and one support staff member that served as a paraprofessional.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 introduces the study and provides an overview of action research. Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to action research and expounded on multi-tiered systems of support, professional development, and rural school leadership. Chapter 3 describes the research design methodology. Chapter 4 describes the context of the study. Chapter 5 discusses the findings and results from the action research cycles. Chapter 6 summarizes the significant findings related to the literature.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of the study was to explore effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level of multi-tiered system of supports for teachers in a rural middle school. To address the purpose of action research, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What conditions are potential barriers for effective implementation of multi-tiered system of supports at the middle school level?
2. What strategies are developed by a school action research team to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered system of supports?
3. What does the action research team learn from developing and creating interventions to improve multi-tiered system of supports?

To examine the research questions, the researcher collaborated with an action research design team to study effective leadership behaviors to support the successful implementation of MTSS at a rural, Title I middle school.

The researcher sought to reach these goals by reviewing the literature on multi-tiered systems of support, successful schools, effective leadership behaviors in a rural context, professional development, and the presence of professional learning communities. The first section provides a historical overview of the Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support models. The researcher delved into the models at both the national and state levels. The second section explores the effective leadership behaviors of school and district

administrators. The researcher examined research from successful schools. The next section highlights professional development and professional learning communities and their impact on student achievement. Lastly, the researcher touched on leadership in a rural context.

Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a framework that incorporates assessments and interventions to reduce behavior and issues and increase student achievement. MTSS promotes systems alignment to increase efficiency and effectiveness of resources (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). Limited professional development in teacher preparation programs and on-the-job training are contributing factors (Simonsen et al., 2020). Despite attempts to implement a multi-tiered support system, teachers struggle to provide necessary, individual help for students. Therefore, the results negatively affected student achievement and behavior. This study conducted by (Simonsen et al., 2020) expanded on the following: development of a framework of a multi-tiered system of support, access to targeted professional development for multi-tiered system of supports, the impact of targeted professional development for multi-tiered systems of support on student achievement and behavior, and development of a system for monitoring framework implementation through appropriate classroom and school interventions.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a framework developed for educators to meet the needs of all students. With this system, the academic needs of all students are addressed at tiered levels. School-wide teams are developed to plan, monitor, and evaluate student academic and behavioral needs (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2014). To address students' academic and behavioral needs, schools may select to implement the frameworks Response-to-Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). RTI is a tiered

system consisting of three instructional or behavioral interventions based on student achievement or behavior gaps. School-wide teams are established for collaboration to analyze student achievement and behavioral data. During the collaboration, action plans are developed. The first step is to administer a universal screener to all students. The screener guides the identification of students needing additional support. Once students are identified, planned interventions are implemented and monitored. At the Tier One level, all students receive core instruction. Teachers should execute evidence-based instructional practices to ensure all students receive the highest quality of teaching.

Teachers may need to make modifications to their daily practices. Students who display academic difficulties at the Tier One level are referred to Tier Two. Students receive deep, meaningful support (Georgia Lucas Educational Foundation, 2014). At this level, decision-making looks different when analyzing student data (Arden, 2018). Data direct the Response-to-Intervention framework. Students receiving Tier Two support are monitored more frequently. When students respond positively to intense instruction, school-wide teams should collaborate on adjusting instructional support. Students who have negatively responded to core instruction at the Tier One level and deep, meaningful support at the Tier Two level are referred to the Tier Three Level. School-wide teams continue to evaluate data to make individual instructional support (Arden, 2018). Progress monitoring at the Tier Three level increases to weekly assessments.

Successful implementation of the Response-To-Intervention process requires a school-wide model developed by regular and special education teachers and school and district administrators. Shannon Stuart and Claudia Rinaldi developed the Collaborative Instructional Planning and Intervention Framework (Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009). This model guides schools in the beginning stages of implementation. School leaders and team members can use the framework to

establish professional learning communities to develop instructional support and progress monitoring strategies. There are three phases: *planning, execution, and feedback.* A support team is developed during the initial phase and functions as a support system for instructional concerns. Building-level leaders must establish an RTI protocol to determine instructional needs. Teams should collaborate to determine which teachers and paraprofessionals will use evidence-based interventions during the process. The second stage is execution, in which the academic difficulties are identified. The team collects data from universal screenings and baseline assessments. During the execution stage, the team also identifies necessary small-group instruction interventions. This is a crucial stage in the framework because it ensures that all teachers establish and endorse core reading instructions back the last stage of the process suggests that teams evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, which guarantees a cycle of collaborative problem solving that ends in more useful data-informed instructional planning and intervention. (Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009).

School leaders must articulate national, state, and local reforms to teachers as they learn about such initiatives from the principal (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Therefore, leader communication and comprehension are vital. Principals play a critical role in a school's successful implementation of MTSS. Mellard et al. (2012) shared feedback from teachers about the role of the principal in the performance of MTSS. Most teachers felt that principals should facilitate the teachers' understanding of the process. Principals that experienced school success with the effective implementation of MTSS shared the following practices: protecting the master schedule by including time for interventions, being personally involved in the process of planning and implementing activities, establishing MTSS as an expectation, and altering schoolwide priorities.

Professional Learning Communities & Professional Development

Professional development prepares educators for improved performance in a school district's current or future roles. Professional development, along with other factors, can promote change and the use of evidence-based practices (Mason, 2019). Teachers are pulled from the instructional day to receive training for school improvement efforts (Nelson, 2019). While professional development opportunities for teachers exist, they can lack relevance to address the needs of all students in the classroom. When surveyed about professional development opportunities, teachers felt the content was not relevant, nor did it prepare them to run their classes because it provided little to no options for feedback on performance. Facilitators completed sessions in one-day settings (Wood, 2016). Most of the research found that current professional development needed many adjustments.

Professional learning communities (PLC) serve as vehicles to improve the culture of a school (DuFour, 2003). The school leader plays a vital role in their school's success through supporting this idea of learning communities (Copland, 2003). Providing time and resources for collaboration is critical (Wood, 2011). There must be a culture focused on student learning achievement to improve student achievement. A characteristic of successful schools that demonstrate improvement is how they function as a professional learning community (Harris, 2002). Collaborative learning that incorporates reflection, observation, action research, and dialogue supports a change in teacher beliefs (Tam, 2015).

Implementing multi-tiered support systems is significantly run when teachers and staff view themselves as a collaborative unit (Mundschenk, 2016). Classroom teachers must recognize that engaging with colleagues contributes to meeting the needs of all learners (Prasse et al., 2012). Professional learning communities provide a method for ongoing professional learning

and conversation. To provide support for teachers and enable them to meet the demands of MTSS, professional development must be provided to support enhance their fundamental knowledge (Nelson & Hohanon, 2019).

A study at Concordia University Chicago conducted by Nelson and Hohanon (2019) concluded that new, cost-effective ways for professional learning must be developed to meet the diverse needs of teachers. The authors took a closer look at the *blue-ocean shift strategy*, a strategy that is used in the business sector for market development. (Nelson & Hohanon, 2019). There is an assessment process and the identification and development of tools with this strategy. Authors suggest finding new, cost-effective ways to provide professional development for teachers by applying the blue-ocean shift strategy. Additionally, the authors suggest providing support through coaching helps establish a strong partnership amongst staff members. Nelson and Hohanon (2019) recommend instructional coaches be experienced and knowledgeable. Through further research of the blue-ocean shift strategy, Nelson and Hohanon (2019) discovered the different types of coaching: supervisory, side-by-side, and multi-level coaching. By incorporating this model, professional learning communities are established. Collaboration, differentiated instruction, and data-based decision-making are essential principles in establishing professional learning communities (DuFour et al., 2006).

Research confirms that teacher preparation programs must prepare teacher candidates with the knowledge and skills to implement multi-tiered support systems (Prasse et al., 2012). There is very little evidence that these skills are being taught during teacher preparation programs, yet teacher candidates are exposed during their practicum experiences (Prasse, 2012). Although a significant number of reforms in teacher preparation programs are occurring, teacher candidates enter the workforce lacking the necessary skills to improve student achievement

outcomes through the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support. One study at a Chicago University Teacher Education Program (2019) addressed those skills needed to assist teacher candidates through two semester-long runs of learning experiences implanted at their clinical sites, a wide generalship between faculty members at the University through mentorship, and long-term relationships with teacher candidates, clinical site staff, and university faculty.

Rural Leadership at the District and School-Level

Almost 60 million Americans live in rural areas (United States Department of Agriculture, 2022). The context in which this study is located is in the nation's top ten states with the most significant rural student population (Sampson, 2005). Rural school leaders are faced with challenges apart from their urban counterparts. Population and enrollments constantly decline, resulting in lower funding and fewer resources (Duncan & Stock, 2010). The lack of resources prohibits administrators from hiring support staff to lessen their workload. Often, rural school leaders serve in dual roles. Rural school principals devote most of their day teaching across grade levels due to a lack of administrative support (Starr & White, 2008).

On the other hand, a study conducted by Parson et al. (2016), found that principals spent the majority of their time with student discipline instead of instruction, a vital part of their responsibilities. Starr & White (2008) also concluded in a study on the rural school principalship that the most commonly raised concerns of rural school principals are: workload increase, funding disparities, the newly defined role of principalship, increased responsibilities, and school survival. New rural principals tackle additional challenges than veteran rural principals. A novice principal is considered to be one within the first three years of their principalship (Shoho & Barnett, 2010). Professional development for rural school leaders isn't always within reach.

Rural district and school leaders must understand how to provide support to principals and teachers (Mellard et al, 2012).

Leadership Behaviors

Successful superintendents have been said to make good leadership decisions on retention and principal assignment (Branch et al., 2013). In a study conducted by Forner et al. (2012), findings suggested that principles employ seven practices for school improvement and efficiency. Building support for reform through direct conversations, using constructive confrontations to assist struggling students and teachers, removing low-performing teachers and principals, leveraging close working relations with building principals, taking a hard line in union contract negotiations, and realigning financial commitments to match district priorities focused on student outcomes (Forner et al., 2012).

Principals in successful schools implement specific strategies to enhance teacher quality. Buttram & Farley-Ripple (2016) identify four strategies of successful principals in high-achieving schools: creating a vision for instructional quality, identifying and disseminating effective instructional strategies, working directly with teachers to strengthen classroom instruction, and organizing professional development.

School and district leadership support plays a vital role in the effective implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports. While the school leader's efforts matter, district-level leadership is a necessary factor. (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012) highlighted three factors that promote an effective multi-tiered system of supports: the leader's knowledge of the principles and practices of a tiered system, leadership structures, and organizational frameworks.

Chapter Summary

MTSS frameworks have become increasingly prevalent in schools as they work to ensure students' academic and behavioral needs are met. Designing and implementing this preventive framework poses numerous challenges. Still, an essential component is having transparent, clearly distinguished levels of increasingly intense interventions and rules for students' movement among the tiers. Intensity is the operative word (Mellard et al., 2010, p. 224). To successfully implement a framework, educator preparation programs and school districts must provide extensively targeted professional learning to teacher candidates during their practicum and teachers in the field during the year. More research is needed on the novice rural school leader.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The National Research Center on Learning Disabilities describes the Response to Intervention (RtI) process as an assessment and intervention process developed to monitor student academic progress and make decisions based on the need for instructional modifications or intensified services through the use of progress monitoring data (National Research Center, 2006). Further research concluded that educators should monitor the effectiveness of an intervention by evaluating the students' responses to the intervention to determine the next level of necessary support (Santetti & Collier-Meek, 2015). While the efforts of educational institutions to effectively implement Multi-Tiered System of Supports have been recognized, research shows that questions remain about what has successfully impacted student outcomes (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012).

The purpose of the study was to explore effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level for teachers in a rural middle school. To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided the inquiry:

1. What conditions are potential barriers to effective implementation of multi-tiered system of supports at the middle school level?
2. What strategies are developed by a school action research team to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered system of supports?

3. What does the action research team learn from developing and creating interventions to improve multi-tiered system of supports?

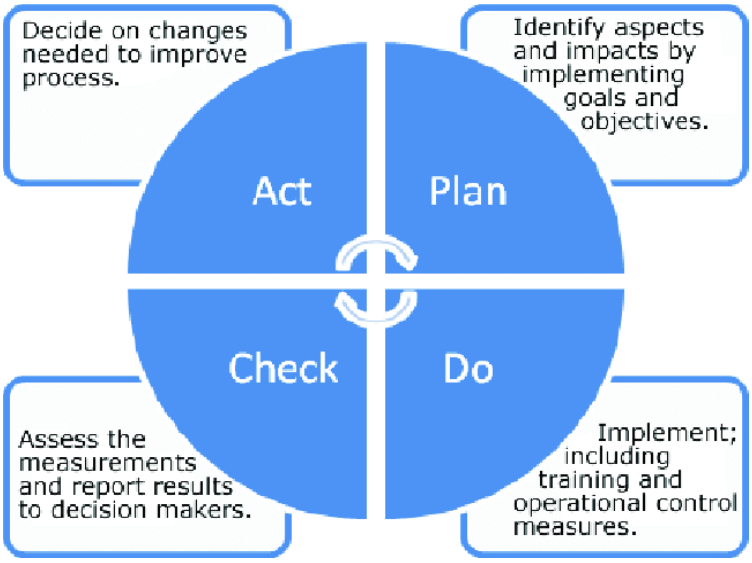
This chapter describes the methodology used for this action research study which includes conceptual framework, action research, action research design team, action research implementation team, action research timeline, interventions, research design, contextual setting, selection, data collection methods, analysis, reliability, validity, and limitations study.

Conceptual Framework

The action research study combined with the literature review contributed to the conceptual framework for this study, which was rooted in Deming's (1993) Cycle of Continuous Improvement. This process involves four stages: plan, do, check, and act. Organizations use this cycle to make continuous improvement changes. This cycle has a background of using an analysis of experimental data to produce successful results. (Taylor et al., 2014). The context in which this action research study was situated involved school and district administrators leading the process. The conceptual framework also builds on related research that states that multiple levels of support are necessary for effective implementation of Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports. “The term continuous school improvement has recently manifested in education to describe a process of strategic planning and frequent review of effectiveness at the broadest levels of the system” (O’Connor & Freeman, 2012, p. 298). Figure 3.1 represents Deming's (1993) Cycle of Continuous Improvement which guided the conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 4

Deming's (1993) Cycle of Continuous Improvement



Action Research

Action research is a group of related approaches combining theory and action to attend to organizational, community, and social issues (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Ferrance (2000) defined action research as to how participants evaluate their educational practices using research techniques. Stringer (2014) expressed action research as a collaborative approach to inquiry that gives the researcher the means to take methodical actions to resolve specific problems.

The action research for this dissertation connected research to training a group of teachers at a middle school. The research was directly related to the study's purpose: to explore effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level for teachers in a rural middle school. The training of this focus group that included both administration and teachers was performed with the desired outcome to improve the

implementation of MTSS through observations, coaching, and professional learning while synchronously pinpointing the leadership behaviors that best supported the process.

The primary researcher conducted the action research process with the school administration team, district leadership, classroom teachers, and support staff. An assessment of data concluded the team should conduct school-wide research, which focuses on school-wide issues. According to Stringer (2014), focus groups provide the researcher with an additional source of information and a framework for facilitating these groups. The framework outlines the following steps:

1. Set ground rules.
2. Explain procedures.
3. Assign roles, such as facilitators and recorders, and explain their duties clearly.
4. Provide feedback and clarification.
5. Collaboratively analyze the issues and plan the next steps.

The researcher collected data for this case study through surveys, interviews, observations, and focus groups. After the cycles concluded, the researcher coded the data to develop themes from the perspectives and experiences of the action research design and implementation teams.

Collaborative Action Research

For the purpose of this action research case study, the researcher implemented a collaborative action research approach. Collaborative action research involves a group of professionals working together to improve schoolwide concerns through research and practice (Aldridge et al., 2021). This approach allows teachers to adopt a critical, but reflective mindset when assessing their teaching capabilities. In the context of Success Middle School, this approach to action research provided members of the action research implementation team to

collaborate with their colleagues. Participants served students at different grade levels. Therefore, they did not have a common planning time and limited department meetings. Collaborative action research allowed the implementation team to build connections across the school through the English Language Arts connections, which removed seclusion (Skyhar, 2021).

Action Research Facilitator

For this action research study, the researcher served as the facilitator and coordinated the plan for the action research design team. As the action research facilitator, the researcher piloted all efforts and utilized a collaborative approach. During the initial meeting in July 2021, the researcher emphasized to potential members of the action research design and implementation teams that collaboration was vital to the upcoming process. Through prior knowledge of members of both teams, the facilitator assigned potential members to suitable roles. To gain buy-in for the process, the facilitator interviewed each member individually. Through these interviews, the researcher allowed each potential member the opportunity to ask intimate questions before agreeing to participate.

Serving as the building instructional leader and member of the district-wide leadership team, the researcher was able to access background information linked to the case study. This information was obtained during focus group meetings with district leadership team members.

Action Research Design Team

Collaborative action research guided the work of the action research team. Members were selected based on current student involvement for this action research, each with their own experiences. Members of the action research design team consisted of school and district-level administrators. The action researcher also served as the principal of Success Middle School, with

14 years of teaching and administrative experience. The District MTSS Coordinator also served as the Assistant Director of Special Education in Successtown School District and a veteran educator who served special education students for over 14 years. The other two administrators served as assistant principals and veteran teachers before entering school administration. A detailed description can be found in Table 5 and their primary duties at school and job titles during the action research study.

Table 5

Explanation and Description of Action Research Design Team Members

Team Member	Position	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher & Principal- Mrs. T. Smith	Principal	Leads and conducts all research with the action research design team for data analysis—five years of administrative experience and nine years of classroom teaching experience.
Assistant Principal- Ms. A. Johnson	Assistant Principal of Curriculum and Instruction for Success Middle School	Master teacher with proven student achievement results. Twelve years of classroom teaching and one year of administrative experience.
Assistant Principal- Ms. N. Walker	Assistant Principal of Curriculum and Instruction & School MTSS/RtI Coordinator for Success Elementary School	Master teacher with proven student achievement results. Brings 11 years of classroom teaching and 14 years of administrative experience.
District Coordinator- Dr. C. Payne	District RtI/MTSS Coordinator & Assistant Special Education Director	Master special education teacher with proven student achievement results. Brings 16 years of classroom teaching and ten years of administrative experience.

This team was responsible for developing a professional development plan for this action research. Through weekly meetings, the team analyzed data. The action research team conducted monthly professional learning sessions to improve the implementation of the multi-tiered system. More importantly, this team monitored implementation effectiveness by observing the interventions in practice.

Action Research Implementation Team

The information in Table 6 provides information about the action research implementation team members. The participants were selected based on their roles in the classroom as English Language Arts teachers. Each member served 65-85 students during the instructional day. Members of the action research design team in Table 5 differ from participants in Table 6 because they served in a leadership capacity at the school or district level.

Table 6

Explanation and Description of Action Research Implementation Team Members

Team Member	Position	Action Research Role
Teacher- Ms. Brooks	ELA Teacher	Participates in professional learning & implements interventions
Teacher- Ms. Hogan	ELA Teacher	Participates in professional learning & implements interventions
Teacher- Ms. Holloway	ELA Teacher	Participates in professional learning & implements interventions
Support Staff- Ms. Holder	ELA Support Staff	Participates in professional learning & implements interventions

Action Research Timeline

The researcher submitted a proposal to the university's Institutional Research Board and was approved to conduct an action research study at Success Middle School. The researcher also received a local board of education approval at the monthly board of education meeting to conduct action research. Following a basic action research cycle method, Table 7 summarizes the timeline for the action research study.

Table 7

Timeline for Action Research

Date	Activity
July-September 2021	Implementation of Cycle 1-Action Research Team Meetings/Professional Learning and Intervention Planning for school and district leadership and classroom teachers and paraprofessionals/Focus Groups
September 2021	Administration of surveys to and interviews of action research team members. Administrator meetings/Professional Learning- MTSS and Close Reading/Focus Groups
October-November 2021	Implementation of Cycle 2- Professional Learning, Implementation of Intervention Plan for Action Research Implementation Team members and Classroom Observations by Action Research Design Team; Focus Groups
November 2021-February 2022	Implementation of Cycle 3- Implementation of Intervention Plan for Action Research Implementation Team members and Classroom Observations by Action Research Design Team; Focus Groups/Interviews/Surveys
February 2022	Follow-up as needed

Intervention

The interventions in this study were created and implemented by the primary researcher and school and district administrators in Successtown School District. Along with one elementary administrator and district coordinator, the school administrators served as the design team for this action research study to plan and execute the professional development and interventions for the implementation team members, which included sixth through eighth-grade staff at SMS. The first cycle of interventions lasted for seven weeks. The second cycle also lasted for seven weeks. Both the action research design and implementation teams met bi-weekly to discuss outcomes of the professional learning sessions and implementation of interventions. The action research team members conducted observations and shared notes from the walkthroughs. As the cycles continued, the team reconvened to determine the next steps guided by the conceptual framework.

The team also developed a weekly intervention schedule for Tier II and III students. Table 8 is an outline of the schedule.

Table 8

Success Middle School Intervention Schedule

Intervention Group	Frequency	Time/Period
Tier II students	Twice weekly	Weekly on Tuesday and Thursday during 7th period for 30 minutes
Tier III students	Three times per week	Weekly on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday during 7th period for 30 minutes

Using the interventions and implementation developed by the action research design team, the implementation team followed a weekly schedule. At the end of each two weeks, the teams met to discuss the findings for Tier III interventions, and at the end of each four weeks, the

teams met to discuss the results for Tier II interventions. Monthly professional learning sessions involved action research implementation team members and were conducted by the action research design team members and district instructional support staff members. Participants engaged in 45-minute sessions engaging in learning about MTSS, Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies, and Close Reading Strategies. Table 9 illustrates the specific professional learning sessions.

Table 9

Professional Learning Sessions

Intervention	Focus Group	Frequency/Date
MTSS Overview Best practices for Tier I Instruction/Close Reading	Action Research Implementation Participants	Once/August 2021
MTSS- Implementation of Interventions	Action Research Implementation Participants	Once/August 2021
Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies- Session I	Action Research Implementation Participants	Twice/Fall Semester 2021
Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies- Session II	Action Research Implementation Participants	Twice/Fall Semester 2021
Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies- Session III	Action Research Implementation Participants	Twice/Fall Semester 2021
Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies- Sessions IV & V	Action Research Implementation Participants	November 2021

The action research design team developed an evaluation tool to monitor the fidelity of implementation of the intervention plan. An observation schedule was set, which provided each administrator with an obligation to multiple classrooms through a rotation of visits. During monthly team meetings, the action research design team conducted data analysis using the

information from the observation form. Design team members shared observational notes with the implementation team and adjusted professional learning plans as needed.

While the primary intervention was to be implemented inside the classroom by the implementation team, the school and district-level administrators monitored the implementation of the interventions through classroom observations during the scheduled intervention periods. The first intervention was the identification of potential barriers for the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support. The researcher and the team developed pre/post surveys for the action research design team. The design team created a professional learning plan to enhance teacher knowledge of the multi-tiered support system. The study required their participation in bi-weekly sessions at the building level. The second cycle involved the action research design team-observing teachers implementing what they learned during the professional learning sessions and implementing the interventions. The final cycle reviewed observational and academic data from classroom observations and student progress.

Research Design

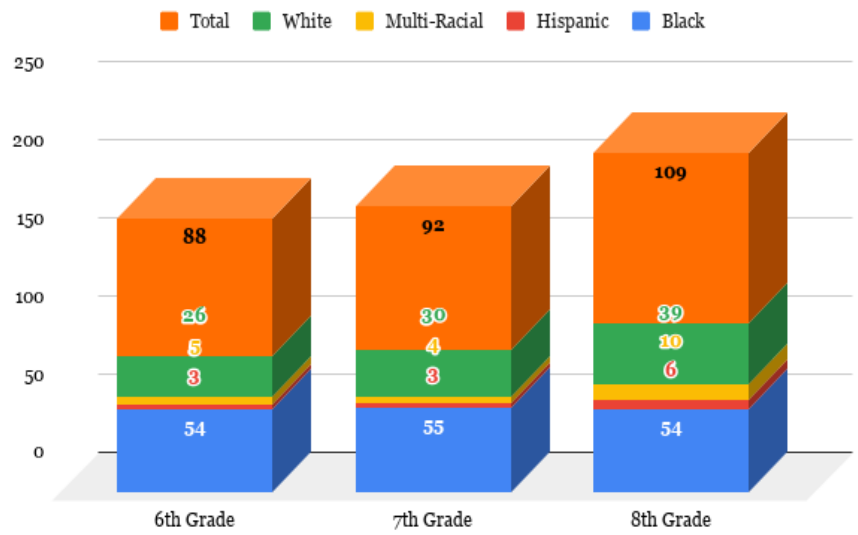
This study used a qualitative action research approach informed by quantitative data to report results. Qualitative data measures included interviews with school staff and district personnel and observation summaries of the professional learning communities in action. Quantitative data measures included multiple implementation surveys on professional learning and development and classroom observations during intervention periods. Focus groups were also used during the action research case study. Members of both the action research design and implementation teams participated in the focus group sessions. All data measures addressed the three research questions for the action research study.

Contextual Setting

Success Middle School (SMS) is a rural, public, Title I middle school located in the southeastern United States. The current building was constructed in 1968. SMS has had minimal renovations. Multiple unsuccessful Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) have hindered the potential opportunities for students and the community. The city of Successtown comprises seven towns and a population of 9,653 residents. Fifty-eight percent of the population is white, while 38.4 % is black. The median income per household was $37,902 and $49,138 per family. As of the 2019-2020 school year, SMS served 309 students in grades six through eight. There was a decline in enrollment for the 2020-2021 school year, with SMS serving 289 students. Fifty-six percent of the students were black, while thirty-three percent were white. One hundred percent of the students were eligible for free and reduced meals. There was a decrease in enrollment for the 2021-2022 school year, with Figure 5 summarizing the 2020-2021 enrollment.

Figure 5

Success Middle School Enrollment Summary



The English Language Learner (ELL) students accounted for four percent of the population. Of the 289 students, there are only five gifted students. Forty students were identified as special education students.

SMS employed 40 staff members in the 2020-2021 school year. Teachers served students during four, seventy-five-minute English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies instructional blocks. Students enrolled in a 60-minute course during four, nine-week periods during Connections. Courses included Band, Business and Computer Science, Family and Consumer Science, and Health and Physical Education. Students received additional academic interventions and support for Increased Learning Time (ILT) during the third and fourth periods. This period is built into the daily schedule to address student intellectual deficits in Reading and Math. During the 2020-2021 school year, SMS employed three administrators, one full-time principal, two part-time assistant principals, one counselor, one administrative assistant, one registrar, one media specialist, and 20 teachers. Table 1 depicts the certificate level, gender, average salary, race, and years of experience between administrators and teachers at SMS. Most teachers have less than five years of experience, while only two are eligible for retirement within ten years with 30 years of service. Eighty-five percent of the staff at Success Middle School are highly qualified. The average annual salary is $84,549.27 for administrators and $49,080.57 for teachers. The average contract days for administrators are 220 days, while teachers work 191 days. Few staff members have endorsements and additional certifications.

A majority percentage of the students at SMS scored as beginning or developing learners based on their performance on the state end of grades assessment for English Language Arts and Mathematics. The school leadership team conducted a root cause analysis during the 2019-2020 school year and concluded immediate improvements to instruction where necessary to improve

student outcomes. During the 2016-2017 school year, 71.7% of students assessed were beginning and developing learners. The following school term, 73.7% of students were beginning and developing learners. During the 2018-2019 school year, 66.2% of students assessed were beginning and developing learners.

Further analysis concluded several factors contributed to these results. Both sixth and seventh grades experienced high turnover during the years mentioned above. A first-year teacher taught seventh during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school year; a first-year teacher taught the Seventh Grade English Language Arts course. During the 2016-2017 school year, three different teachers served in the English Language Arts teacher's sixth-grade team capacity. High turnover rates notably exist in schools serving low-income, non-White, and low-achieving student populations (Rondfeldt et al., 2013).

During the 2016-2017 school year, 68.3% of students assessed were beginning and developing learners. During the following school term, beginning and developing learners decreased. In 2018-2019, an alarming 70.5% of students were identified as beginning and developing learners. Further analysis concluded several factors contributed to these results. During the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years, seventh grade experienced high turnover. Also, a first-year teacher taught Sixth Grade Mathematics during 2016-2017. Figures 6 and 7 summarize the data from the End of Grade Georgia Milestones Assessment.

Figure 6

Success Middle School ELA End of Grade Assessment (Three-year summary)

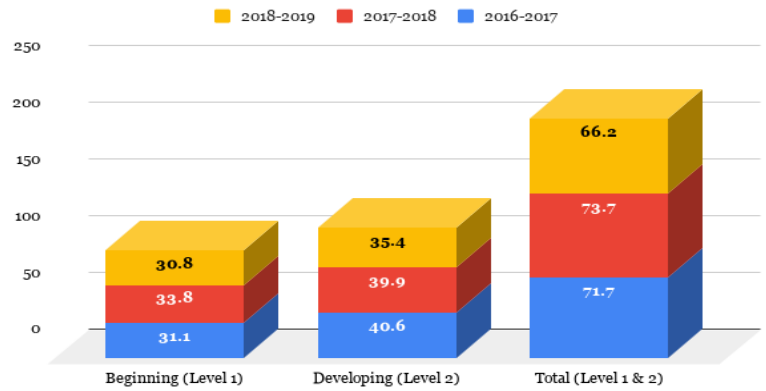
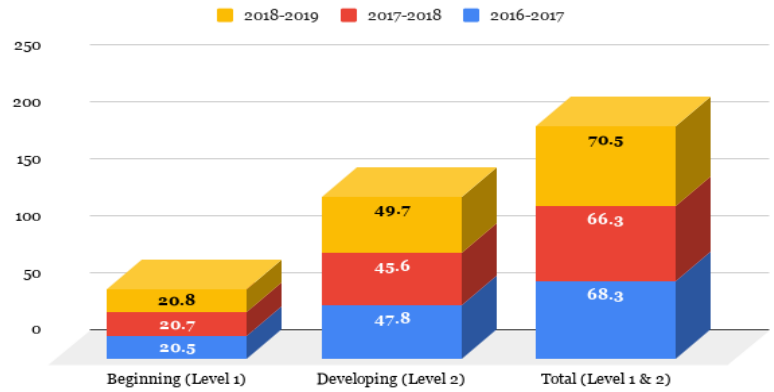


Figure 7

Success Middle School Mathematics End of Grade Assessment (Three-year summary)



In July 2021, the researcher met with nine employees in Successtown School District. This meeting was held at the research site. During the meeting, the researcher presented findings through an analysis of assessment data of student achievement on state standardized assessments over the last three years. Upon deciding on the problem of practice, the researcher began to collect school-wide data to present to potential team members.

Selection

For this action research study, members of the action research implementation team were selected based on their roles in the district and school and their affiliation with students in the classroom. The primary researcher selected the action research design team members due to their direct involvement in creating and developing school-wide processes. The researcher received approval from the Institutional Review Board for all data collection methods. After this approval, members of the action research and design and implementation team were formed. Upon meeting with all potential members, the researcher found that each candidate wanted to play a role in the action research process. However, due to professional conflicts, two of the potential action research design team members were forced to decline participation, which resulted in 60% of the potential action research team members participating. Therefore, 79% of the potential members agreed to participate. All members invited to be members of the action research implementation team agreed to participate. The researcher obtained a consent form from each participant. Information in the consent forms described the purpose of the study and participation requirements.

Each participant in this study was employed at SMS and was hand-selected by the principal/primary researcher based on their job description and role during the instructional day. Two of the participants had less than two years of teaching experience. After teaching Science for three years, the veteran educator on the action research implementation team returned to the English/Language Arts classroom. One participant was enrolled in an education program at a four-year university working towards a degree in Education.

This case study featured eight members of a rural, school district and their perceptions and experiences with MTSS implementation and leadership behaviors. To address the research

questions during the qualitative research study, the researcher along with the action research teams, planned specific activities for the action research cycles. To seek an understanding of what needed to be done to effectively implement MTSS and the behaviors of school and district leaders, three research questions guided this action research study. The researcher had to obtain conceptual, perceptual, and demographic information to answer these questions.

Contextual Information

As stated in previous chapters, the research site was based in a rural area. Upon an extensive review of the district as a whole and of each school within the district, the action research team met to assess the current state of MTSS implementation and leadership behaviors. The team agreed that interviews, personal data sheets, surveys, and focus groups would further provide opportunities to dig deeper into the district's practices for implementation. The team also reviewed the job descriptions of the members of the action research design team. Assistant principals served dual roles as the School MTSS Coordinator and PBIS Coach. Teachers were responsible for implementing interventions in the classroom due to a lack of support staff.

Perceptual Information

Through semi-structured interviews, this action research case study captured each participant's perception of the current state of MTSS at their respective locations, as well as the leadership behaviors of their administrators.

Demographic Information

The researcher developed a personal data sheet to be completed by all participants to obtain demographic information for this case study. Each participant's information was protected through the use of pseudonyms and personal details were omitted.

Data Collection Methods

During the action research study, the researcher collected data through several methods, qualitative and quantitative. The primary purpose of gathering information was to deepen the researcher's understanding of the stakeholders' perspectives (Stringer, 2014). Data collected for this action research study sought to identify potential barriers and leadership behaviors necessary to the effective implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports. This study data included qualitative data, namely, pre/post surveys, interviews, observational notes, and participant observation. Table 10 below portrays the sources of data collected and the timeline for collection.

Table 10

Data Collection Timeline

Sources	Timeline
Interviews, Surveys	July- August 2021, February 2022
Participant Observation Notes	October 2021- February 2022

The researcher interviewed all participants before the collection of data. In qualitative research, some and occasionally all data are collected through interviews (Merriam, 2016). Interviews were conducted on Zoom, a video-conferencing platform that allows for one-on-one or group meetings, and face-to-face. The researcher transcribed each interview. After the transcription process was completed, the action researcher, along with the action research design team, reviewed and analyzed the data to find out what themes emerged. All participants were provided interview questions in advance to allow time for reflection.

Surveys were administered using Google Forms. The researcher sent each member a copy of the survey to their email address. After all surveys were completed, the researcher

provided copies for the action research design team members. Data were coded by hand to find out what themes emerged.

Focus groups were held to foster opportunities for discussions at the conclusion of each cycle and obtain feedback from the action research implementation team members. During these sessions, all action research participants had a role as active participants to provide input on the action research process and make any suggestions for changes.

Data Analysis

During the initial cycle, the design team analyzed the data from the pre-surveys. There are three categories in the analytic process: organizing the data; generating types, themes, and patterns; and testing emergent hypotheses. Data from the surveys were re-read, and the researcher made pertinent notes and shared them with the action research design team. Members of the action research design team conducted observations during the second and third cycles. During the last two cycles, observational data were analyzed and discussed during action research design team meetings. The team analyzed the data by identifying patterns in teaching practices and the implementation of interventions.

Reliability and Validity

Qualitative research relies on trustworthiness, while quantitative analysis considers reliability and validity. Reliability is the degree to which instruments are error-free and generate dependable results (Thanasegran, 2009; Mohajan, 2017). It measures a research study's consistency, precision, repeatability, and trustworthiness (Mohajan, 2017). If an instrument measures what it is intended to measure, it is considered valid (Thanasegran, 2009). The triangulation of data is one way researchers test reliability and validity.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, the researcher conducted individual, semi-structured interviews. Action research team members also completed a survey comprised of open-ended questions.

In accordance with the institutional review board's requirements, the researcher exercised tremendous caution care to guard the identities of the action research participants. Personal details about individuals were removed. Pseudonyms were assigned for participants, cities, and schools.

Chapter Summary

This chapter addressed the research design, methodology, and data analysis for the action research study on leadership behaviors for implementing multi-tiered support systems. The chapter also discussed in detail the interventions and implementation plan. The researcher described the conceptual framework as it guided the work of the action research design team. Because the purpose of this action research study was to explore effective leadership behaviors for successfully implementing multi-tiered systems of support, the researcher carefully selected school and district leaders to serve on the action research design team. Observational notes and interview and survey data were additional data collection elements. To measure the quality of professional development, the action research team thoroughly analyzed observational notes collectively. The next chapter focuses on the context of SMS, frames the problem in the context by describing the problem framing based on the site.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASE

The purpose of the study was to explore effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level for teachers in a rural middle school. To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided the inquiry:

1. What conditions are potential barriers to effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at the middle school level?
2. What strategies are developed by a school action research team to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
3. What does the action research team learn from developing and creating interventions to improve multi-tiered systems of support?

This chapter includes the context, problem framing, and problem framing based on the site. A summary of information from interviews, focus groups, researcher notes, action research team artifacts is also presented in this chapter.

The Context

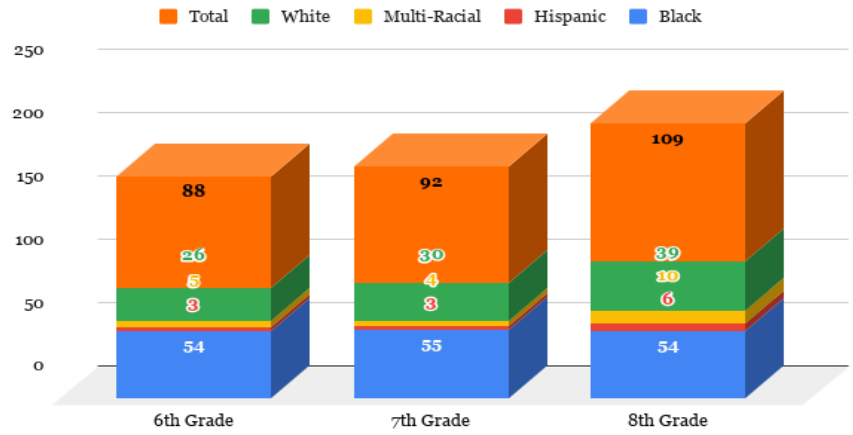
Success Middle School (this and all proper nouns related to the context of the problem are pseudonyms) opened in 1968 as the only middle school in Successtown. SMS was opened as a result of integration. SMS has been identified as a Title I school with one feeder school, Success Elementary School. Students from Success Elementary School feed into the middle

school. Students from SMS feed into one high school, Success High School, which is the largest school in Successtown School District (SSD).

Located in rural, southeastern United States, SMS is adjacent to multiple school districts in a fifty-mile radius, with various demographic and economic makeups. Successtown School District serves less than two thousand students. This number represents a massive decrease in enrollment over five years, from 2016-2021. There was a slight decrease in registration during the 2021-2022 school year. Figure 8 summarizes the district's enrollment.

Figure 8

Success Middle School Enrollment Summary



Over 30 staff and personnel are employed with SMS, and 20 are certified teachers. They teach a diverse student population of under 500 students, thirteen percent of whom are special education students and/or have a 504 education plan. Three percent are served in the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program. SMS serves a gifted population of only two percent of the student body. Historically, over fifty percent of students were identified to be served through the Response to Intervention process. English Language Arts (ELA) Assessment Data from 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 revealed that many students, ranging from

66.2 % to 73.7%, were classified as beginning and developing learners. SMS consistently scored below the state average on the state assessment. Assessment results have become a growing concern at school and district levels.

Through this action research case study, a district and school administrators team collaborated to identify leadership behaviors necessary for implementing a multi-tiered support system. With the principal being the primary researcher, her role enabled the work to be carried out. With several implementation team members, it was vital to review historical academic and assessment data from the past five years to enhance understanding. Previous response-to-intervention data were made accessible to all design team members to identify a starting point for the upcoming process.

Problem Framing Based on the Site

Across the district, SSD continued to experience below-average assessment scores in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Each school in the community had a large percentage of students scoring in the beginning and developing learners' categories. Year after year, district leaders reverted to the drawing board and developed action plans to improve assessment outcomes. However, with the district emphasizing a focus on improving literacy outcomes, district and school leaders focused on English Language Arts during collaborative sessions. District professional learning primarily focused on improving English Language Arts and Reading instruction.

In March 2020, SSD schools and schools across the nation transitioned to virtual learning using teleconferencing to deliver instruction. With the COVID-19 pandemic spreading worldwide, educators and school and district leaders were faced with the challenge of determining how to provide students with a quality educational experience using

teleconferencing platforms. SMS educators found it challenging to implement interventions to serve Tier 2 and Tier 3 students. SMS had not previously delivered instruction virtually. Therefore, the staff and personnel faced many challenges for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.

SMS returned to face-to-face instruction in February 2021, but SSD continued to offer virtual education to families. Forty-three percent of families opted to remain in virtual learning. Teachers struggled with delivering both in-person and virtual instruction simultaneously.

The English Language Arts Department experienced a continual issue of teacher turnover. During the 2016-2017 school term, each of the three staff members serving SMS in the capacity of grade-level English Language Arts teachers resigned their positions and pursued job opportunities outside of the district, which caused school leaders to replace staff. After the 2016-2017 school term, SMS hired new 6th and 7th grade English Language Arts teachers. It was not until the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school terms that SMS would have the same teacher serve 6th and 7th grade students in English Language Arts. One of the teachers was new to the profession, and the other teacher had transitioned from serving in the capacity of special education teacher to general education teacher. New teachers relied on mentors, often in different grade levels, for support during the year. Mentors were often not accessible to new teachers. Therefore, they struggled to implement the best instructional practices, negatively impacting student achievement.

During the next two years, the same teacher served as 8th grade English Language Arts teacher and Department Chairperson until her resignation in May 2021. For the 2021-2022 school year, SMS hired three new ELA teachers replacing the entire English Language Arts Department. While the Reading Endorsement was offered by the district through the regional

educational service agency, three of the four members of the action research participants' team did not qualify due to years of service and teacher certification.

The Story and Outcomes

Successful and effective RtI systems call for district-level leadership and support (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012). Improving the implementation of a multi-tiered system of SSD support began before my action research case study as a doctoral student. As a classroom teacher at the elementary school, I felt the process was implemented among the team members, but I did not know the school-wide or district implementation of the process. When I became Assistant Principal, my vision changed, and the opportunity to implement the system was presented. However, finding a starting point proved to be the most significant challenge.

The timeline of this action research case study spanned from July 2021 through February 2022. During our annual leadership academy with district leadership, I met with the cabinet members that would be vital action research design team members. When asked if they would be willing to participate in this study, each member agreed the work was necessary and would be more than ready to assist in the process. Once they agreed, I provided each member with two copies of the consent form. The design team consisted of the researcher, two principals, and the district MTSS coordinator.

During the summer of 2021, I developed a presentation on the identified practice problem. The presentation featured the district's vision and mission and the school theme. Also included were the school demographics of students and staff. I highlighted all special populations of the students that SMS served to paint a clear picture for the action research team. It was important to highlight our performance status on the following assessments and academic tools: Reading and Math Inventory and state end-of-grade assessments. Charts highlighted the most

recent administration of 2020-2021 data and a summary of the previous assessment data from the three last years for English Language Arts and Mathematics. While data were shared from both content areas, it was communicated that the focus of this study would be placed on English Language Arts. The problem statement was communicated to all team members, and I solicited their opinions. All team members agreed that improving Tier I instruction by identifying leadership behaviors necessary for successful implementation was the group's common goal. The presentation also highlighted the research in the focus area and issues at the national, state, and local contexts. According to Buffum et al. (2009), to make MTSS work, school administrators, resource teachers, reading specialists must accurately identify deficits and design interventions to address them. To occur, administrators must facilitate teachers' professional development through professional learning communities in which participants focus on learning and results (Buffum et al., 2009). This research was vital in determining the next steps for the action research team. A further study conducted by Maier et al. (2016) concluded that school building leaders (principals) who were considered transactional and transformational leaders instead of passive/avoidant benefitted from making school decisions. The study also concluded that the transformational leadership style was the most foretelling of successful implementation of MTSS at the school level.

I shared with the action research design team the selected members for the design implementation team and provided the rationale: Since we were focusing heavily on literacy in the district and the entire department was either new to the profession or the content area, it was necessary to move in this direction. Upon meeting with the action research implementation team members, the researcher obtained completed consent forms from each member.

Action Research Design Team Members

Mrs. T. Smith

The researcher was named the principal of SMS in May 2020. As the instructional leader, it was the responsibility of the researcher to assist in the planning, development, organization, coordination, and supervision of instructional programs and activities, interpret and implement the district-approved curriculum program based on individual school needs. During that year, she was assigned as the School Response to Intervention Coordinator. Her responsibilities included appointing grade-level chairpersons, providing leadership for the entire staff, attending and providing professional learning related to the Response to Intervention process, monitoring the implementation of the process, and maintaining confidentiality. The researcher also was responsible for conducting monthly chairperson meetings and bi-monthly student meetings. In appointing grade teachers and grade level chairpersons, the researcher tasked these individuals with the following obligations: informing and assisting all faculty in the understanding and implementation of the Response to Intervention process, coordinating and scheduling meetings, appointing the recorder for meetings, maintaining all student files with the proper paperwork, providing timely notification to all team members, facilitating group decision making, and communicating regularly with the school's Response to Intervention coordinator. The responsibilities of the teachers were also defined during this process. Teachers were tasked with understanding, supporting, and implementing the strategy, attending scheduled meetings and providing the necessary documentation and paperwork, discussing student efforts to work with families to improve academic and behavioral concerns, identifying the most significant areas of concern, collaborating with team members to determine necessary interventions, completing required forms promptly, and regularly monitoring and documenting study progress as specified.

The researcher also served as System Testing Coordinator from January 2019 until August 2021. In that role, the researcher coordinated all test administration activities within the school system, ensured local calendars were planned so all tests were administered according to the state-published testing calendar, furnished all district testing information to the state department of education, provided coordination for district testing and accountability programs, managed all facets of achievement testing, facilitated and delivered appropriate training regarding test administration requirements for school and district staff, and coordinated all testing and test-related activities that were a part of the district testing program. Specializing in early childhood education, the researcher served as a teacher in the same district for nine years. The researcher obtained both a Reading and Gifted Endorsement and three graduate degrees during that time.

This action research study attempted to identify the leadership behaviors of the primary instructional leader at a rural, southeastern middle school that supported the effective implementation of a multi-tiered system of support. As the instructional leader, my role in this action research study enabled me to conduct this research.

Ms. A. Johnson

Ms. Johnson served in her second year as the Assistant Principal of SMS. During her educational career, spanning over 14 years, she spent 12 years as a general education classroom teacher and a grade level and department chairperson. Ms. Johnson has spent all 14 years in the same district and school. She holds Reading, Mathematics, and Gifted Endorsements and is certified by the State Professional Standards Commission. As a classroom teacher, she regularly demonstrated success through test scores on the state assessments year after year.

Ms. N. Walker

Ms. Walker was serving in her 14th year as an assistant principal. In her 25 years of educational experience, she has worked in three districts and four schools as a general education teacher and assistant principal. She also served in the capacity of District Gifted Coordinator. As the school's RtI Coordinator, Testing Coordinator, PBIS Coach, and EIP Coordinator, she primarily assisted with all operational and instructional components of SMS and assisted with data disaggregation, evaluations, teacher recruitment, and retention. Ms. Walker holds Gifted Endorsement and is certified by the State Professional Standards Commission.

Dr. C. Payne

For the last 25 years, Dr. Payne has served in various roles in her educational career in two districts and two schools. She served as a Special Education teacher for 16 years and nine years in her current positions as District RtI Coordinator and Assistant Special Education Director. As a special education teacher, she also served as department chairperson. At the time of the study, Dr. Payne oversaw the implementation of RtI for the entire school district. She assisted the Special Education Director in ensuring that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enforced district-wide.

Action Research Design Implementation Team Participants

Ms. Brooks

Ms. Brooks was a first-year teacher that had no prior educational experience. She was preparing to enroll in a state teacher preparation program to obtain her certification in English Language Arts.

Ms. Hogan

Ms. Hogan was a first-year teacher with limited educational experience. She completed her field experience during her undergraduate degree program, which provided her with the experience of working with middle grades students.

Ms. Holloway

Ms. Holloway was in her 21st year of education. She was certified in English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies. This was her first year teaching English Language Arts at SMS. She previously taught Science at SMS for one year. She had been a classroom teacher for her entire educational experience.

Ms. Holder

Ms. Holder was a new employee with SMS and served as Classroom Support Staff/ Paraprofessional. She had four years of educational experience working with kids under age five at the elementary level. She had worked in the daycare setting and served as a classroom teacher for two- and three-year-old children. She was working on her Bachelor's Degree in Education at the time of the study and hoped to obtain a classroom teacher position once she completed her degree.

Member roles and titles are summarized in Table 11.

Table 11

Action Research Design Team Members

Members	Role/Title
Mrs. T. Smith	Primary Researcher & Principal
Ms. A. Johnson	Assistant Principal
Ms. N. Walker	Assistant Principal
Dr. C. Payne	District MTSS Coordinator

Research Timeline

Cycle 1

For this research, the design team met monthly from July 2021 through February 2022. During the first cycle, the researcher conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with the action research design team in July 2021. Interviews were structured for the researcher to assess the current state of MTSS implementation and leadership behaviors at both the district and school levels. The researcher also conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the action research participants to assess the current status of understanding of the MTSS process. The District RtI Coordinator conducted a school-wide training for SMS staff in July 2021 on the Response to Intervention process and MTSS implementation. Prior to the school-wide training, the design implementation team met to discuss the plans for the upcoming school term.

The design implementation team developed a professional learning schedule that is detailed in Table 12. Professional learning focused on MTSS, the development and implementation of interventions and the process of progress monitoring, and Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies. The district instructional support specialists led the sessions on Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies, while members of the design team conducted the sessions about MTSS.

Table 12

SMS Professional Learning Schedule

Date	Professional Learning Session
August 2021	Overview of MTSS/Close Reading Strategy
August 2021	Implementation of Interventions
September 2021	Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies Session I
September 2021	Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies Session II
September 2021	Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies Session III

The researcher presented an Overview of MTSS and the Close Reading Strategy in August 2021 during a Professional Learning Monday session. Professional Learning Mondays allowed teachers to engage in professional learning by forming professional learning communities. This was an initiative implemented by district leadership. In the overview of MTSS, the researcher presented several vital terms: data-based decision making, differentiated instruction, evidence-based practices, the fidelity of implementation, framework, high-leverage practices, interventions, progress monitoring, and multi-tiered prevention system, and screening. Most of the terms were unfamiliar to the new staff members but were not so for the veteran teacher on the team. Several team members expressed their lack of knowledge of MTSS terminology. The researcher assured team participants this process would facilitate their learning and implementation of this tiered support system.

Also during this session, team participants were introduced to the Close Reading Strategy. Close reading is a tool used in reading instruction to teach comprehension and critical thinking skills (Hathaway, 2015). During this session, participants reviewed the following terms: annotation, chunking, guided reading, shared reading, text-dependent questions, and scaffolding. Participants had the opportunity to engage in practice during the two-hour session.

The second session led by the researcher was on the implementation of the interventions in August 2021. During the multi-session series of Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies, district staff introduced three strategies for each of the three sessions. These sessions were conducted in September 2021. In between each session, teachers implemented each strategy during classroom instruction. Prior to the start of the next professional learning session, teachers provided feedback on implementation.

A monthly intervention schedule was developed to provide sufficient time to serve struggling students. Using recommendations from the National Center on Response to Intervention (2010), the team developed an intervention plan to meet the specific needs of SMS.

At the conclusion of the professional learning sessions, the design team reconvened to discuss the sessions and review the observational tool to be used in Cycle 2, which began in late September 2021.

Cycle 2

Cycle 2 began in late September 2021 and lasted through November 2021. During this cycle, the action research team conducted bi-weekly observations to observe the implementation of Close Reading Strategies. Using the locally developed observational tool, design team members conducted observations three times during Cycle 2, twice in October and once in November. The observational tool focused on the standards from the statewide teacher evaluation tool, incorporated local initiatives, and highlighted glows and grows. Observers had to select which strategy was observed in practice and record the behaviors and responses of the teacher and students.

At the beginning of Cycle 2, students were assessed on the Fall 2021 MAP assessment. This data, along with the Winter 2021 MAP assessment data would be analyzed. Text annotation and shared reading were in heavy rotation in the English Language Arts classes. During the Increased Learning Time (ILT) block, all teachers were instructed to use the shared reading strategy for at least twenty minutes daily. During each ILT observation, the design implementation team observed all action research participants using the shared reading strategy. The design implementation team selected a novel for each grade level and developed text-dependent questions for the participants' use. At the conclusion of Cycle 2, participants shared

that having the lessons prepared in advance with the use of text-dependent questions "lifted weight off their shoulders."

The design implementation team met at the conclusion of Cycle 2 to debrief the findings from the twelve observations conducted. Table 13. shows the Cycle 2 Observation Schedule.

Table 13

SMS Cycle 2 Observation Schedule-Close Reading Strategies

	Action Research Participants/Observers			
Week	**Ms. Brooks**	**Ms. Hogan**	**Ms. Holloway**	**Ms. Holder**
October 11-15, 2021	Mrs. Smith	Dr. Payne	Ms. Johnson	Ms. Walker
October 25-29, 2021	Dr. Payne	Mrs. Smith	Ms. Walker	Ms. Johnson
November 8-12, 2021	Ms. Johnson	Ms. Walker	Mrs. Smith	Dr. Payne

Design Team Members decided to select a day that worked best for their schedule as long as the observation occurred during the selected weeks for observations. The next round of professional learning was conducted in mid-November by a member of the school-wide leadership team. Action research team participants engaged in two sessions during the week of November 15-19, 2021 to revisit Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies prior to the beginning of Cycle 3.

Cycle 3

The last cycle began in late November 2021 and lasted through February 2022. An observation schedule found below in Table 14, was developed for the final cycle in the action research process.

Table 14

SMS Cycle 3 Observation Schedule-Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies

Action Research Participants/Observers				
Week	**Ms. Brooks**	**Ms. Hogan**	**Ms. Holloway**	**Ms. Holder**
November 30-December 4, 2021	Ms. Walker	Ms. Johnson	Dr. Payne	Mrs. Smith
January 10-14, 2022	Ms. Johnson	Dr. Payne	Mrs. Smith	Ms. Walker
January 24-28, 2022	Dr. Payne	Mrs. Smith	Ms. Walker	Ms. Johnson

Design team implementation members used the observation tool that had been modified to record the strategy in practice at the time of the observation. Along with the nine strategies, participants were taught about effect sizes and which strategies were viewed as having the most impact. Participants were given a choice of which strategy they wished to be observed. While the team agreed to observe Marzano's strategies during Cycle 3, several strategies were observed in practice during Cycle 2.

During the final week of Cycle 3, the researcher conducted post-interviews with both the action research design implementation team members and participants. Interviews were conducted in an individual setting. Team members completed surveys. The design implementation team debriefed to review observational data from Cycle 2 and agreed to follow-up as needed for the remainder of the year.

Interviews

The researcher completed individual interviews with the action research design team and design implementation team members during the initial data collection. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain their primary perceptions of the district's current status and school execution of MTSS. According to McGrath et al. (2019), there are a variety of interview formats, both individual and group. McGrath et al. (2019) provided twelve tips to researchers when

conducting research interviews: identify when discussions are suitable, prepare yourself as an interviewer, create an interview guide, consider culture and power relationships within the interview situation, build rapport with respondents, remember that the researcher is the co-creator of the data, listen more than you talk, adjust the interview guide, be prepared to manage unforeseen reactions, transcribe the interviews promptly, review the data, and begin analysis in good time. In this study, the researcher considered several tips offered by McGrath. The researcher used multiple qualitative data methods to conduct this action research study, including individual interviews with both the action research design team members and design implementation participants, focus group interviews after the completion of the second cycle, and follow-up interviews at the end of the third action research cycle. All interviews conducted during this research process were semi-structured. Galletta (2012) described the semi-structured interview:

> The semi-structured interview, valued for its accommodation to a range of research goals, typically reflects variation in its use of questions, prompts, and accompanying tools and resources to draw the participant more fully into the topic under study. Semi-structured interviews incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions, eliciting data grounded in the experience of the participant as well as data guided by existing constructs in the particular discipline within which one is conducting research. (Galletta, 2012, p. 45)

Design team members were asked questions that focused on leadership behaviors and the effectiveness of implementation at both the school and district levels. Upon the conclusion of individual interviews with the researcher, the design team assembled in July 2021 to formulate a plan. The group discussed the district's current level of implementation, and each school

representative was allowed to expound on their school's current level of performance. Each member was asked to bring school data from the previous two years and student files and documentation of the implementation process. The team was excited about the upcoming development of an implementation plan.

As noted in Chapter 3, Deming's (1993) Cycle of Continuous Improvement guided the work of the action research design team. The cycle consisted of four steps: plan, do, check, and act. During the planning stage, the team identified goals and objectives for the action research study. The second stage involved doing, which also involved training. For the purpose of this action research case study, Stage 2 of Deming's Improvement Cycle was implemented in Cycles 2 and 3. The third stage involves the assessment of the measurements and discussion of the findings from the cycles. The fourth and final stage focused on making changes needed to improve processes.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are used in research to identify a variety of perspectives on a research topic and secure an understanding of the concerns from the participants' viewpoint (Hennick, 2014). Participants can hear from other participants during a focus group discussion, share their views, and possibly change their way of thinking after hearing from other participants. (Hennick, 2014). Focus group participants provide the data for the analysis, and the most accurate data ascends from the discussions of the focus group participants (as cited in Danner et al., 2014).

The researcher conducted three focus group sessions during this action research study. The focus groups sessions were held in September and November 2021 and February 2022. The action research design team could hear first-hand the participants' perspectives in the action research study. During these sessions, the participants' frustration was high due to their lack of

knowledge of the process. Participants were allowed to share individual experiences from their classroom implementation of the interventions and how the professional learning enhanced their practice. The focus group members were selected due to their roles and daily interaction with students through classroom instruction.

Researcher Notes from Participant Observations

During this process, the researcher, the design implementation team, and the district staff conducted classroom observations of the action research participants. Observations were performed using a school-developed tool by the researcher and assistant principal. These observations occurred between September 2021 and January 2022 to collect data on implementing the multi-tiered system of support and instructional practices in Tier 1 instruction. Observation notes provided the team with an accurate depiction of the implementation of the interventions and the results from professional learning sessions in MTSS, Implementation of Interventions, and Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies. Upon the conclusion of the observations, the design team met to discuss the findings and identify common themes, which will be elaborated upon in Chapter 5.

Action Research Team Artifacts

The researcher developed agendas for each meeting held with the design team to ensure team effectiveness. The documents served as meeting tools to discuss the next steps in each cycle after professional learning and observations were conducted. Team members also kept a journal of important things of notice that may not have been included on the observation form.

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the context of SMS and the problem framing based on the site, which included SSD. The purpose of this study was to explore the effective leadership strategies

for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level for teachers in a rural middle school. Due to the nature of the study, the researcher relied on heavy use of interviews, focus groups, and research notes of design team members and other district staff. Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to the background of the action research participants to capture individual perspectives. The researcher also selected members of the focus groups based on their daily roles in the English Language Arts classes. The researcher used observational notes from the locally developed tool to add additional data. Finally, agenda information from the monthly team meetings assisted the researcher during this process with determining the leadership behaviors necessary for effective implementation and assessing the current status of school-wide implementation.

Chapter 5 will discuss the findings and the emerging themes and results from the action research cycles.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to explore effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level for teachers in a rural middle school. To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. What conditions are potential barriers to effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at the middle school level?
2. What strategies are developed by a school action research team to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
3. What does the action research team learn from developing and creating interventions to improve multi-tiered systems of support?

This chapter includes a description of the data collection from multiple sources to establish findings for each research question. This chapter also provides a description of the members of the design implementation team at SMS. Detailed information on the district staff members from the district leadership team and a detailed description of the action research process conducted during fall semester 2021 and spring semester 2022 is also included in this chapter. This chapter describes the collaborative process of the groups to determine the facets of leadership behaviors in a rural school district that directed the successful implementation of multi-tiered systems of support; the need for targeted, ongoing professional development through professional learning communities, the factors that contribute to the understanding and

performance of a multi-tiered system of supports, and the support provided by school and district leaders to classroom teachers.

This chapter presents key findings from a thematic analysis of the data collected during the action research cycles. The researcher illustrated the themes from this data collection during the action research cycles detailed in Chapter 4. Data sources were coded by hand, using the descriptive coding approach (Saldana, 2021). A summary of the findings' analysis through the connection of themes is displayed in Table 15.

Table 15

Research Findings Summary

Research Question	Theme
1. What conditions are potential barriers to effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at the middle school level?	**Theme 1:** Need for an interventionist **Theme 2:** Importance of scheduled intervention time in the daily instructional schedule **Theme 3:** Fundamental knowledge of effective instructional practices is essential
2. What strategies are developed by a school action research team to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?	**Theme 1:** Targeted Professional Learning Plan and formation of PLCs **Theme 2:** Selection of research-based interventions **Theme 3:** Engaged leadership through coaching cycles
3. What does an action research team learn from developing and creating interventions to improve multi-tiered systems of support?	**Theme 1:** Scheduling enhances the implementation of interventions **Theme 2:** Improved outcomes from targeted professional learning **Theme 3:** Improved visibility and courageous conversations from leadership through non-punitive coaching cycles

An analysis of the findings from this study was based on the collection of data from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations, and surveys the researcher conducted with the

action research design and implementation team. Several themes connected to the research questions emerged from the data analysis. The themes emerged from individual interviews with the action research team, which occurred in July 2021 and February 2022. In general, the analysis of the data collected at Success Middle School showed an apparent connection between targeted professional learning and improved teacher efficacy. Further investigation revealed improved, increased, non-punitive visibility from leadership, improved academic outcomes, and collective teacher efficacy.

Data Collection Connected to the Research Questions

Research Question 1

This study aimed to examine leadership behaviors for the effective implementation of a multi-tiered system of support in attempting to address the conditions that are potential barriers to effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at the middle school level. The research questions guided the study by supplying a framework for individual, semi-structured interviews and surveys, along with the data analysis. Three themes emerged from the data analysis related to research question 1: 1) need for an interventionist to implement interventions; 2) importance of scheduled intervention time built into daily bell schedule; and 3) fundamental knowledge of effective instructional practices is essential.

Theme 1: Need for an Interventionist

One of the challenges faced by rural principals is limited funding. Limited funding intensifies existing issues (Preston et al., 2012). The absence of specialized staff is one of those issues. In the context of Success Middle School, that would be the absence of an interventionist to implement research-based interventions. Therefore, a solution is creatively assigning faculty who teach Connections (band, health and physical education, computer science) to an

intervention period. (Averill et al., 2014). One action research team member shared that improvements have been made district-wide, but an interventionist is needed:

> *Support staff, an interventionist, is needed to implement the interventions and progress monitor.*

Another team member spoke about the current implementation model and how the absence of an interventionist impacts other students in the classroom.

> *A pull-out intervention model is needed, with an interventionist well-versed in researched-based strategies. RtI students served in the classroom during our Increased Learning Time (ILT) block. In a primary setting,* [primary school, grades Pre-Kindergarten through Second] *this is extremely difficult because the teacher has to focus on the small group of RtI students while maintaining control of the remainder of the class and keeping them on task.*

Theme 2: Scheduled Intervention Time

Nationwide, schools are incorporating a school-wide intervention period to provide the delivery of interventions. Students needing Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions can receive specialized or individualized instruction (Averill et al., 2014). Several members of the action research design team discussed the inability to create an isolated intervention period that would interfere with the regular instructional period.

Success Middle School utilizes a 50-minute remediation period in which general education teachers serve 15-20 students in their specialized content areas. Support staff push-in to classrooms and provide instructional support as needed. During individual interviews with the action research participants, one member shared that this built-in instructional time helps students achieve academic success.

> *ILT is a remediation time/period built into the school day that is designed to remediate students through Classworks, Thinking Maps, and remedial activities to help reach the goals of academic success. It is also used to support students in the multi-tiered design.*

Theme 3: Research-based instructional practices

When all components of a multi-tiered system of supports are implemented, research shows results include improved Tier 1 instruction when 80% of students respond to the basic curriculum. (State Department of Education, 2022). During a focus group session, the action research design team members identified an ongoing concern of using research-based instructional practices in the classroom. For the 2021-2022 school year, SMS employed two English Language Arts teachers with no previous classroom experience. While the support staff member had some experience managing a classroom, instructing students was new. During walkthroughs between August 2021 and October 2021, the action research design team collectively identified instructional strategies as a significant concern. One design team member shared:

> *Additional work is needed to provide teachers with professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The majority of teachers lack the fundamentals of teaching and learning due to being new to the profession. Hence, tackling delivering instruction is even more difficult. Not impossible, but very difficult. I think significant efforts should be made to improve Tier 1 instruction.*

Professional knowledge is the teacher's understanding of the curriculum, subject content, and students' developmental needs as demonstrated by providing relevant learning experiences. (Stronge, 2018). Other action research design team members expressed concerns about the correlation between years of experience and content knowledge. Over half of the district's

teachers in the English Language Arts department have less than three years of classroom experience, most beginning their first year during the 2021-2022 school term.

Summary of Analysis of the Themes for Research Question 1

In attempting to address Research Question One, the primary researcher uncovered three themes from the data analysis. During the action research process, the researcher and the action research design team sought to identify potential barriers for the effective implementation of a multi-tiered system of support. Each focus group session addressed potential barriers. Through individual interviews the researcher conducted, several themes emerged.

The first theme was the need for an interventionist. Having support staff, specifically an interventionist, would enhance the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support. In addition, with adequate training, creatively assigning other staff to the role of an interventionist would also support the implementation of a multi-tiered support system. During the Fall of 2021, the action research team discussed the job description of an interventionist. The details of the description were aligned to Success Middle School's specific needs for MTSS implementation.

The second theme that emerged was the suggestion for a scheduled intervention time built into the daily schedule. Data collected from the focus group sessions and semi-structured interviews with the action research design team and participants supported this finding.

The final theme that emerged from the data collection was that teachers need a fundamental knowledge of effective instructional practices. During the focus group sessions, district and school administrators spoke candidly about the individual needs at their respective campuses. Data collected from surveys administered to the action research participants supported

the importance of fundamental knowledge due to limited experiences in the classroom or profession. Table 16 outlines the sources of the data collection for Research Question 1.

Table 16

Findings for Research Question 1: Data Sources

Themes	Sources of Data Collection
Need for an interventionist	Interviews, Action Research Design Team Meetings, Focus Group Meetings
Importance of scheduled intervention time in the daily instructional schedule	Interviews, Action Research Design Team Meetings, Focus Group Meetings with all participants
Fundamental knowledge of effective instructional practices is essential	Interviews, Action Research Design Team Meetings, Focus Group Meetings, Participant Surveys

Research Question 2

This study aimed to examine leadership behaviors for the effective implementation of a multi-tiered system of support in attempting to address the strategies developed to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at the middle school level. The researcher analyzed data collected from individual, semi-structured interviews and surveys, observations, and focus group sessions. Three themes emerged from the data analysis related to research question 2: 1) targeted professional learning plan and formation of professional learning communities; 2) selection of research-based interventions; and 3) leadership support through a hands-on approach coaching cycle. This action research process was a collaborative effort with the action research design team but included the individual perspectives of all team members. The team was comprised of members outside of SMS.

Theme 1: Targeted Professional Learning

The action research design team for this case study met in July and August 2021. The team shared input about the individual needs for professional learning at their respective campuses. One action research design team member also shared feedback from a broader view.

> *During monthly meetings, I'm in attendance, so, through conversation, I'm able to decipher what their needs are before they can even tell me. Our district RtI coordinator provides the beginning of the year orientation and professional learning at the beginning of the year, and I build my monthly professional learning around what is discussed at that session. I also do a mid-year pulse check and an end-of-the-year PL on creating a plan of action for RtI students going to the next school term.*

The participant shared that the instructional framework was the focal point of the professional learning on their campus.

> *Our professional learning is aimed to help teachers deepen their understanding of how to implement the instructional framework to maximize instructional time. We spend a lot of work on the instructional framework because it's the basis of instruction. That's always a beginning of the year focus, and then we shift our focus to a more targeted approach depending upon the need.*

The district coordinator shared information from a district's viewpoint and acknowledged the need for more professional learning opportunities in the district.

> *Professional learning is conducted in-house by district administrators and individuals from the state department. These professional learning opportunities have been face-to-face or through webinars provided by the state education department. Teacher leaders have also attended state and national conferences to extend their knowledge of MTSS*

> *(SSTAGE Conference). Professional learning opportunities have included the topic in behavior, interventions, strategies, and progress monitoring.*

Participants were also interviewed and shared similar sentiments regarding professional learning.

> *Being a first-year teacher, I'm not sure of what I need. I know that I need something. I know that I'm having a hard time with differentiation and making my lessons accessible for everyone. I plan out my week strategically, but I have quickly realized that I am not making it through more than one activity.*

During a focus group meeting, the action research team collaborated to develop a plan for professional learning (summarized in Table 3.6). Action research team participants would participate in two sessions centered on MTSS and Close Reading. The subsequent four sessions would focus on Marzano's Best Instructional Strategies. The basis for the choices of the sessions was finalized with the individual needs at the research site.

Theme 2: Research-Based Interventions

During interviews with the action research design team and participants, there was a group consensus that selecting research-based interventions was an ongoing, district-wide concern. One action research design team member shared her role in the intervention selection process.

> *I create RtI notebooks and discuss interventions at one of my professional learning sessions. These notebooks contain best practices regarding interventions, additional progress monitoring probes, and handouts of past professional learning sessions I've led. I also lead professional learning sessions on technological intervention programs to demonstrate how these can be effectively used within the classroom during intervention time frames.*

Theme 3: Engaged Leadership Through Coaching Cycles

Marcellino & Burton (2012) identified "strong foundational leadership" as one of the most critical factors for implementing a multi-tiered system of support. They stated:

> The most critical element in the RtI framework is setting a clear vision and gaining the full commitment of the school leadership, from the district office to the principal's office, as well as teacher leaders, instructional specialists, and those who influence teacher practice throughout the school (Maier et al., 2016; O'Connor & Freeman, 2012). (Marcellino & Burton, 2012, p.155)

One RtI coordinator shared during an individual interview with the researcher the importance of her role as a building-level leader.

> *I am extremely vested. It is continuous that I attend conferences and webinars to stay abreast of the most current information in relation to interventions and strategies as well as the overall process. I continuously interact and collaborate with district and school administrators and teachers on each campus in relation to the implementation of interventions, progress monitoring, parent meetings, and the referral process.*

Members of the action research design team and action research team participants shared sentiments about the current district and school-level support.

> *As the school RtI coordinator, I conduct a minimum of three trainings per year to include the following: referring a student to the RtI process, moving up or down tiers, conducting effective progress monitoring, tracking progress monitoring implementation, data collection, conducting effective RtI meetings, and taking comprehensive meeting minutes. It is important that in my role as school coordinator that our teachers feel supported. That's why I'm in the trenches with them. I am extremely vested as the school's*

coordinator. I ensure that the process is implemented with fidelity, that consistency across grade levels is established regarding progress monitoring tools, and that meetings are held efficiently and effectively. One way I provide further support to the teachers is by charting the number of meetings and meeting dates of each RtI student on a school spreadsheet along with initial placement dates, last hearing/vision dates, and pertinent notes regarding RtI students.

Summary of Analysis of the Themes for Research Question 2

In attempting to address Research Question Two, the primary researcher uncovered three themes from the data analysis. During the action research process, the researcher and the action research design team sought to develop strategies to enhance and support the effective implementation of a multi-tiered system of support. Each focus group session addressed the current state of the district in relation to the findings. Through individual interviews conducted by the researcher, several themes emerged.

The first theme was providing targeted professional learning. Administrators can facilitate teachers' professional development through professional learning communities where participants focus on learning and results (Buffum et al., 2009). Table 17 outlines the sources of the data collection for Research Question 2.

Table 17

Findings for Research Question 2

Themes	Sources of Data Collection
Targeted professional learning	Interviews, Action Research Design Team Meetings, Focus Group Meetings
Selection of research-based Interventions	Interviews, Action Research Design Team Meetings, Focus Group Meetings
Engaged leadership through coaching cycles	Interviews, Action Research Design Team Meetings, Focus Group Meetings

Research Question 3

This study aimed to examine leadership behaviors for the effective implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports in attempting to address what an action research team learned from developing and creating interventions to improve a multi-tiered system of support. The research questions guided the study by supplying a framework for individual, semi-structured interviews and surveys, focus group meetings, and data analysis. Three themes emerged from the data analysis for research question 3: 1) scheduling enhances the implementation interventions; 2) improved outcomes from targeted professional learning; 3) improved visibility and courageous conversations from leadership through non-punitive coaching cycles.

Theme 1: Impact of Scheduling

Scheduling intervention times has proven to be a challenge for SMS. Data collected from several focus group sessions supported this statement. District and school-level administrators met with school-wide leadership team members in an effort to formulate a plan for intervention by creatively scheduling classes. Several studies offered suggestions on building intervention time in the daily bell schedule. Intervention Central (2010) suggested reducing the amount of instructional time from each period/block to free up time for an intervention period. The development of a school-wide RtI team to manage this task of reconfiguring the schedule was an idea offered by the National Center of Response to Intervention (2011). School-wide intervention time is defined as a designated time during the day, lasting at least 30 to 45 minutes, in which Tier 2 or Tier 3 students would be served (Averill et al., 2014).

In a focus group session, action research team participants shared that the development of an intervention period lessened their concerns with the implementation of interventions.

> *Now that I know the exact time that interventions should be implemented, I'm able to implement the interventions to my Tier 2 students as they should be. I now see that I didn't use the ILT period the way it should be. Adjusting the master schedule is just like having regular class time to address student weaknesses.*

Theme 2: Outcomes from Targeted PL and Formation of PLCs

Through interviews with the researcher, the action research design team members formed a consensus to develop a plan based on the needs of the research site, SMS. After the plan was developed and implemented, participants shared in a focus group session the impact of the sessions.

> *I feel like I actually know what I'm doing. I was able to observe other teachers and several used the same strategies. Through this professional learning, I'm able to place a strategy name with the practice. I can also determine which strategy works best for my different classes of students. I liked the fact that we were able to study several reading strategies to improve student outcomes. Close reading has benefitted my students so well that they are able to restate how to use the strategy in the classrooms. Also, the sessions on Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies were very helpful. The structure of professional learning has really improved my practice as a teacher. I'm ready to begin the next year using these strategies and planning lessons in August!*

The formation of professional learning communities allows teachers to learn from and with each other while concentrating on the implementation of practices personalized to individual strengths and abilities (Mundschenk & Fuchs, 2016). The action research team participants shared in a focus group session the importance of learning together.

Learning with other English teachers about reading strategies and instructional strategies made the process easier. It's nice to know that I'm not struggling alone. I was able to learn from their daily routines and use some in my own practice. The shared space was safe. We were able to talk about the results from our observations without feeling horrible about what we do.

Theme 3: Leadership Behaviors

As the instructional leader of the school, the principal is charged with several responsibilities for the effective implementation of a multi-tiered system of support. The principal must participate in designing a strong school-based curriculum, developing interventions that are aligned to the curriculum, exposing teachers to research-based instructional strategies to enhance their practice, assisting in the development of assessments, mentoring new staff members, supervising professional learning of new and veteran teachers and staff, and facilitating professional learning communities (Marcellino & Burton, 2012).

Focus group sessions and interviews spanning from July 2021 to February 2022 provided an opportunity for the action research team to collaborate with the researcher to ensure an action plan was developed for the research site. The team developed an intervention plan for implementation in English Language Arts classrooms to be delivered by certified personnel. A professional development plan and the schedule were developed that focused on multi-tiered systems of support, the Close Reading strategy, and instructional best strategies. Within those sessions, professional learning communities were formed. School administrators at the research site developed all assessments for English Language Arts teachers to ensure alignment to the state standards.

Monthly observations were conducted in each of the classrooms. The action research design team agreed to take a more collaborative, non-punitive approach. Participants shared a positive reaction to this approach.

> *Soliciting my feedback on the areas that I need to improve upon made me feel good as a teacher. I was able to express my fears and shortcomings in a safe space within my professional learning community. I am thankful for the opportunity that leadership provided.*

Summary of Analysis of the Themes for Research Question 3

Three themes emerged from the data analysis. During the action research process, the team met to further understand their perceptions and experiences with developing targeted professional learning and creating an intervention schedule. The team set a goal to determine what could be learned from developing and creating interventions to improve the multi-tiered system of supports. Findings from the focus group sessions addressed the current state of the district in relation to the findings. Through individual interviews conducted by the researcher, three themes emerged.

The first theme discovered was that scheduling enhances implementation. A second theme emerged: improved outcomes from targeted professional learning. The third theme that was discovered was improved visibility and leadership support through coaching cycles. Findings suggested Table 18 outlines the sources of the data collection for Research Question 3.

Table 18

Findings for Research Question 3

Themes	Sources of Data Collection
The Impact of a Scheduled Intervention Period	Interviews, Action Research Design Team Meetings, Focus Group Meetings
Improved Outcomes from Targeted Professional Learning through the Formation of PLC's	Interviews, Action Research Design Team Meetings, Focus Group Meetings
Leadership Support through Coaching Cycles	Interviews, Action Research Design Team Meetings, Focus Group Meetings

Results from Action Research Cycle 1

The first action research cycle was conducted from July 2021 through September 2021. Data from pre-semi-structured interviews and surveys indicated the perception of the current state of MTSS implementation at the middle school level.

The researcher was able to obtain the perceptions and experiences of the action research design team members and participants through semi-structured interviews, surveys, and focus group sessions. As a group, the action research design team collaboratively developed a monthly intervention schedule and targeted professional learning plan that began in August 2021. Monthly focus group sessions were held and the team shared results from the professional learning sessions. Participants were also afforded the opportunity to share their experiences from the professional learning sessions.

Results from Action Research Cycle 2

The second action research cycle was conducted from September 2021 through November 2021. Data from semi-structured surveys indicated the perception of the current state of MTSS implementation at the middle school level.

Through focus group sessions, interviews, and surveys, participants, and action research team members were able to share their perceptions of the current state of MTSS implementation and the impact of professional learning.

Results from Action Research Cycle 2 suggested that focus group sessions were critical for the district and school-level planning. Also, a targeted professional development schedule based on the needs of teachers and staff is vital in enhancing multi-tiered systems of support. Professional learning for English Language Arts teachers should enhance their practices. Therefore, the action research team decided upon MTSS, Close Reading, and Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies. Classroom observations were scheduled and afforded action research team participants the advance notice they so desired. Each action research design team member had the opportunity to visit each of the four classrooms to view the planned, research-based interventions in practice.

Results from Action Research Cycle 3

The third and final action research cycle was conducted from November 2021 through February 2022. Data from post-semi-structured interviews and surveys indicated the perception of MTSS implementation at the middle school level after the action research cycles were implemented.

Observations continued in Cycle 3 and focused on Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies. The researcher conducted individual and group interviews, surveys, and focus group sessions to obtain feedback on professional learning sessions and the observations using the coaching cycle. Findings concluded that a non-punitive coaching cycle with the formation of professional learning communities is vital in the enhancement of implementation of a multi-tiered system of support. Findings also concluded that teacher's ability to choose the observed

strategies and interventions improved their teaching practices, which in turn enhanced MTSS implementation.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained the findings of this action research case study through an analysis of the data collected through action research cycles guided by research questions. Through an analysis of qualitative data, several themes emerged. The focus of this action research study was to determine the leadership behaviors to support the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at a rural middle school in the southeastern United States. Action research design team members and action research team participants shared their experiences and perceptions while working as a collaborative unit.

Using three guiding research questions, the action research team identified nine themes from the data analysis. The findings provided meaningful information for the action research design team to develop a successful framework that would enhance the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support. Focus groups sessions provided the teams to reflect on current practices and the implementation of MTSS. During these sessions, team members addressed individual and group strengths and weaknesses. Through the data collection, the team gained a better understanding of the work that must be done to improve both the school and district as a whole. The team also concluded that professional learning communities are the best approach to the development of teachers and leaders.

In all, the action research study was a successful way to determine leadership behaviors that enhance and support the implementation of a multi-tiered support system.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

No Child Left Behind, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and Every Student Succeeds Act have guided educational policymakers and school districts across the nation. These policies encompass federal legislation related to public education. The restructuring of IDEA in 2004 presented the concept of Response to Intervention to schools. Response to Intervention is a framework that integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-tiered approach to maximize student achievement (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). With the passing of Every Student Succeeds Act, a Multi-Tiered System of Supports was developed. The purpose of the study was to explore effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level for teachers in a rural middle school.

This action research study used both qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry to collect data by conducting semi-structured interviews, administering pre/post-surveys, leading focus group sessions, and collecting data. Participants in this study were all employed by SSD in the following positions: general education teacher, support staff, and building or district administrator. Data collected was hand-coded, examined, and systematized by the three guiding research questions. Chapter 2 summarized the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided the study. To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. What conditions are potential barriers to effective implementation of multi-tiered system of supports at the middle school level?
2. What strategies are developed by a school action research team to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
3. What does the action research team learn from developing and creating interventions to improve multi-tiered systems of support?

Summary of the Findings

The previous chapter presented the researcher's findings during three action research cycles. This chapter will summarize the significant findings related to the literature and guiding research questions, highlight limitations to the action research study, and provide implications.

The action research case study began in July of 2021 at Success Middle School. Success Middle School is a rural school in the southeastern United States. Through an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, several themes emerged. The researcher led the action research design team through three action research cycles concluding in February 2022. The action research design team met monthly to share experiences and perceptions of the current state of implementation for MTSS at a district and school level.

The data collection for this action research study was conducted by the primary researcher and included the following methods:

1. Individual, semi-structured interviews with all action research design team members and the action research participants team. The researcher coded the information obtained from the interviews using the descriptive coding method. These interviews included assistant principals, coordinators, general education teachers, and support staff. Interviews were conducted in all the first and third action research cycles.

2. Focus group sessions with the action research design team and participants in different group sessions. The researcher took notes with paper and coded them by hand during these sessions. The researcher coded the information obtained from the focus group sessions by hand using the descriptive coding method. Focus group sessions were conducted in all three action research cycles.
3. Surveys were administered to each action research design team member and action research team participants individually. The researcher coded the information obtained from the surveys by hand using the descriptive coding method.

Several important conclusions could be drawn from the findings regarding leadership behaviors to enhance a multi-tiered system of support. When taking into account how to support the effective implementation of MTSS, the study revealed the following conclusions:

1. Improved teacher practice and enhanced foundational knowledge through targeted professional learning through the formation of professional learning communities.
2. Rural schools face numerous challenges apart from urban schools.
3. Building an intervention period into the daily instructional schedule is a critical component of the successful implementation of MTSS.
4. Commitment from district and school leadership improves the fidelity of MTSS implementation.

With these conclusions, implications were revealed for local schools and districts and leaders of rural schools and districts that desired to improve student outcomes by enhancing effective multi-tiered system of supports.

Major Findings Related to the Literature Reviewed

The findings in this action research study related to leadership behaviors and the effective implementation of MTSS. In the rural context, district and school leaders experience many challenges. Rural communities are often in economic distress, which limits the possibilities of the recruitment of highly-qualified individuals and support staff (Budge, 2006).

School-level and district-level leadership must collaborate and commit to improving the curriculum based on the principles of MTSS. As the instructional leader of the building, the principal must listen thoughtfully to suggestions from staff and capitalize on their instructional knowledge. (Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox, 2012). A key component of this collaboration is distributed leadership. Murakami-Ramalho & Wilcox (2012) elaborated on the importance of this concept in the successful implementation of MTSS. By tapping into the creativity and experiences of teachers, school and district leaders can collectively address school-wide instructional challenges and obstacles towards the effective implementation of MTSS.

Major Findings Related to the Research Questions

Rural school leaders experience challenges that their urban and suburban counterparts cannot relate. One of the challenges faced by rural principals is limited funding. Limited funding intensifies existing issues (Preston et al., 2012). Funding for staffing would provide additional support staff to implement MTSS. A strong presence of district and school leadership is vital to the successful implementation of MTSS. Leadership must be distributed throughout the building (Marcellino & Burton, 2012). With many rural school leaders at the district and school-level serving in dual roles, teachers and staff must operate outside of their normal purview and engage in the work required for the successful implementation of MTSS.

Screening, progress monitoring, multi-level prevention, and data-based decision-making are essential components of MTSS. When all components of a multi-tiered system of supports are implemented, research shows results include improved Tier 1 instruction when 80% of students respond to the basic curriculum. (State Department of Education, 2022).

Teachers and staff must continue to grow into high-caliber educators. Through professional development and the establishment of professional learning communities, fundamental knowledge of best practices is enhanced. Professional knowledge is the teacher's understanding of the curriculum, subject content, and students' developmental needs as demonstrated by providing relevant learning experiences. (Stronge, 2018). Administrators can smooth the process of teachers' professional development through professional learning communities where participants focus on learning and results (Buffum et al., 2009).

Limitations of the Current Study

An analysis of the findings in this action research study is not exclusive of limits. All work was conducted within the specific context of SMS and SSD. As a result, the results and validity may likely be limited. This action research case study has not been repeated in another school and district setting.

To address the issue of size and time, this study was limited to a total of eight participants that included school and district-level support staff, general education teachers, building administrators, and central office staff. It was conducted in a short timeframe of seven months. While there was a variety of representation from the different entities within SSD, a more extensive sample representation is recommended to improve the action research study's overall findings. To determine the impact on student achievement, the duration of the study would need to last longer.

In addressing the above limitations, the researcher used pseudonyms and codes in the transcription of data to decrease bias.

Implications for Practitioners

Findings from the action research case study at SMS and SSD proposed implications for practitioners at Success Middle School and Successtown School District and other practitioners in other school and district contexts. Significantly, enhancing fundamental instructional practices and teacher knowledge through targeted professional learning and the development of professional learning communities is vital. Further implications for rural school leaders suggest building relationships to increase teacher retention. In the context of SMS, teacher retention has been a challenge over the last five years. Not only should principals focus on teacher retention, but findings also suggest that districts focus on leader retention. Providing a daily built-in period for teachers to implement interventions allows for implementing MTSS. School leaders should go beyond the regular education content classroom when creatively scheduling staff interventionists.

Implications for Researchers

This action research case study highlighted the experiences and perspectives of eight educators from a rural school district on implementing MTSS in their district and school. This case study was designed to develop strategies to enhance implementation while learning from interventions implemented through three action research cycles. Findings suggested that the research in rural school leadership is limited, so further research is suggested. MTSS is not limited to implementation in rural schools. Therefore, research on MTSS in both small and large contexts is suggested.

Implications for Policy Makers

With the transition from NCLB (2001), IDEA (2004), and ESSA (2015) over the last twenty years, school and district leaders have experienced numerous changes in educational policy. In 2015, Congress approved the Every Student Succeeds Act, and MTSS was introduced to improve student achievement. Each state would need to monitor local districts' adherence to federal guidelines outlined in ESSA. District and school leaders should engage in discussions and provide local guidance to ensure compliance at their respective levels. Soliciting teacher input at the local, state, and national levels should be considered to determine what changes may need to take place. While state organizations encourage members to share feedback, efforts from the national level must increase. Lastly, in the policy development process, national leaders must take into account the needs in rural contexts.

Chapter Summary and Final Thoughts

As the action research case study concluded, the action research team gathered to reflect on the action research process and findings. The purpose of the study was to explore the effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level for teachers in a rural middle school. Since this was an action research case study, the researcher and the action research design team collaborated to develop interventions and used multiple tools to collect data. Results from the study aligned to the theoretical framework (Figure 2). The action research design team learned that action research cycles comprised of interviews, surveys, focus group sessions, and observations would enhance the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support. The study revealed the following conclusions:

1. Targeted professional learning through the formation of professional learning communities improves teacher practice and enhanced foundational knowledge.

2. Rural schools faced numerous challenges apart from urban schools.
3. Building an intervention period into the daily instructional schedule is a critical component of the successful implementation of MTSS.
4. Commitment from district and school leadership improves the fidelity of MTSS implementation.

Through the conclusion analysis, the researcher determined the implications for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. When considering the next steps for leadership behaviors for the effective implementation of MTSS, the researcher suggests the following:

1. School and district administrators should focus on enhancing fundamental instructional practices.
2. When developing professional learning plans, sessions should be targeted and include participant choice.
3. The formation of professional learning communities is a vital part of improved educational outcomes.
4. Building relationships to improve teacher and leader retention should be a priority of school and district leaders.
5. The daily instructional schedule should include a built-in intervention period.
6. Conduct further research in a larger context on the successful implementation of MTSS.
7. Adherence to federal guidelines should be monitored closely by individual state education departments.

Overall, this action research case study allowed the researcher to examine the current state of implementation from the perspective and experience of eight educators for developing

strategies for a rural school and district to gain further knowledge on the practical implementation of MTSS.

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APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA IRB APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Tucker Hall, Room 212
320 E. Campus Rd.
Athens, Georgia 30602
TEL 706-542-3199 | FAX 706-542-5638
IRB@uga.edu
http://research.uga.edu/hso/irb/

Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

August 16, 2021

Dear Karen Bryant:

On 8/16/2021, the Human Subjects Office reviewed the following submission:

Title of Study:	Leadership for Effective Implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support
Investigator:	Karen Bryant
Co-Investigator:	Tiffany Crockett
IRB ID:	PROJECT00003397
Funding:	None
Review Category:	Flex Exempt 7

The Wilkinson County Board of Education has approved this action research project. We have determined that the proposed research is Exempt. The research activities may begin 8/16/2021.

The researcher has confirmed that the IRB submission and materials contain descriptions of voluntary research activities only, and participant consent will be obtained for research activities under conditions that minimize the possibility of coercion or undue influence.

Since this study was determined to be exempt, please be aware that not all future modifications will require review by the IRB. For more information please see Appendix C of the Exempt Research Policy (https://research.uga.edu/docs/policies/compliance/hso/IRB-Exempt-Review.pdf). As noted in Section C.2., you can simply notify us of modifications that will not require review via the "Add Public Comment" activity.

A progress report will be requested prior to 8/16/2026. Before or within 30 days of the progress report due date, please submit a progress report or study closure request. Submit a progress report by navigating to the active study and selecting Progress Report. The study

may be closed by selecting Create Version and choosing Close Study as the submission purpose.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Kate Pavich, IRB Analyst
Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia

APPENDIX B

SCHOOL DISTRICT IRB APPROVAL

WILKINSON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT
PO Box 206 | 197 W Main Street | Irwinton, GA 31042
Ph: 478.946.5521 www.wilkinson.k12.ga.us **Fx:** 478.946.5565

Dr. Aaron G. Geter Jr.
Superintendent

Dr. Virginia Rozier
Assistant Superintendent

Date: August 12, 2021

To: University of Georgia Institutional Review Board

From: Dr. Virginia Rozier, Asst. Supt.

Subj: Mrs. Tiffany Crockett-Approval of Research Study

On August 10, 2021, the Wilkinson County Board of Education approved the recommendation of the Superintendent to grant Mrs. Tiffany Crockett permission to conduct a research study at Wilkinson County Middle School entitled "Leadership for Effective Implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support". If you have questions or concerns, please contact the Board of Education.

Thank you,

Virginia Rozier

Dr. Virginia Rozier
Assistant Superintendent
Wilkinson County Schools

APPENDIX C

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is unclear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: *Dr. Karen Bryant*
Lifelong Education, Administration & Policy
bryantkc@uga.edu

Co-Investigator: *Tiffany Crockett*
Lifelong Education, Administration & Policy
Tiffany.Crockett@uga.edu

The purpose of this research was to explore effective leadership strategies for developing, implementing, and monitoring effective interventions at the Tier I level for teachers in a rural middle school. The desired outcome is to improve the implementation of MTSS through observations, coaching, and professional learning while synchronously pinpointing the leadership behaviors that best supported the process. The questions guiding this action research are:

1. What conditions are potential barriers for effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at the middle school level?
2. What strategies are developed by a school action research team to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
3. What does the action research team learn from developing and creating interventions to improve multi-tiered systems of support?

You are being invited to be in this research study because you are a current staff member at Wilkinson County Middle School and Wilkinson County School District and identified by the action research design team to participate.

If you agree to participate in this study, the action research activities will include:

- We will collect information about your background knowledge and implementation of multi-tiered systems of support. The design team participating in the initial planning process will conduct several observations at 30 minutes each.

After several observations, the design team will conduct professional learning sessions for 45 minutes each. Implementation team members will spend no more than five hours per week in related activities to the desired strategy for the entire time action research cycles are implemented.

- We will ask you to participate in a pre/post survey, interview, focus group, and professional learning at various points of the action research cycles. Interviews will last no longer than 30 minutes for a total of no more than four interviews.
- We will follow up in six months by Spring of 2022.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your participation in *any* programs at WCMS nor your performance evaluation through *Teacher Keys Effectiveness System*.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Some questions may make you uncomfortable. You can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

Your responses may help us understand how to pinpoint the leadership behaviors that best support the process. They may also improve Tier I instruction and student achievement.

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk, we will identify you using a pseudonym or number code. If Google Forms is used for any data collection, IP addresses could be determined, but the researcher has no explicit plans to gather that information. Email addresses would be collected via Google Forms to ensure/verify survey completion, but only the researcher would know that information. No direct identifiers will be used when/if the responses are presented to the action research team. This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

De-identified information obtained from this research may be used for future studies or shared with other researchers without obtaining additional consent.

Audio/Video Recording/Photographs

Interviews and focus group sessions will be recorded for reference after the initial interview/focus group in order to ensure the accuracy of responses. Recordings will be archived and destroyed after three years.

Participant relationship with Researchers

A decision to participate or not participate in the study will have no impact on the participant's status at WCMS or in the Wilkinson County School District.

Group activities

The investigator will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the group activities or interview sessions should be kept confidential. However, participants may repeat comments outside of the group.

Withdrawal from the research study

If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study or the investigator terminates your participation, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal or termination will be kept as a part of the study and may continue to be analyzed.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Karen Bryant, at 706-817-8442 *bryantkc@uga.edu*, or the Co-Investigator, Mrs. Tiffany Crockett, at 478-946-2541, Tiffany.Crockett@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

Tiffany Crockett	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

APPENDIX D

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What conditions are potential barriers for effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at the middle school level?
2. What strategies are developed by a school action research team to enhance and support the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
3. What does the action research team learn from developing and creating interventions to improve multi-tiered systems of support?

BEFORE ACTION RESEARCH

Participants' Open-Ended Questionnaire

1. How many years have you served as a classroom teacher?
2. Define multi-tiered systems of support.
3. Describe the multi-tiered systems of support implementation process within your classroom.
4. What are current interventions used in your practice?
5. To what extent have your students' academic performance adjusted based on implementing multi-tiered systems of support within your classroom?
6. What support, if any, is needed to improve the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support within your classroom?

Participants' Interview Questions

1. Describe the current professional learning structure related to the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at Success Middle School.
2. Describe the ideal day of effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support in your classroom.
3. What changes, if any, would you make related to supporting teachers and support staff in feeling like they can improve the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
4. What barriers, if any, impact the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
5. What are current support systems in place for you as a teacher or support staff member to effectively implement multi-tiered systems of support?
6. Describe an ideal structured professional learning structure for the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support.
7. Is there anything else you'd like to share about the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?

Design Team Members' Interview Questions

1. As it relates to leadership behaviors at Success Middle School, describe the current school-level support provided for teachers to implement multi-tiered systems of support.
2. As it relates to leadership behaviors at Success Middle School, describe the current district-level support provided for teachers for the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support.
3. How invested are you as a district or school leader in improving the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
4. Elaborate on the current practices provided by leaders at Success Middle School in supporting professional learning to teachers in implementing multi-tiered systems of support.
5. Elaborate on the current practices provided by leaders at Success School District in supporting professional learning to teachers in implementing multi-tiered systems of support.
6. What barriers, if any, impact the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
7. Is there anything you would like to add related to leadership behaviors that impact the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at Success Middle School?

AFTER ACTION RESEARCH

Participants' Open-Ended Questionnaire

1. How many years have you served as a classroom teacher?
2. Define multi-tiered systems of support.
3. Describe the multi-tiered systems of support implementation process within your classroom.
4. What are current interventions used in your practice?
5. To what extent have your students' academic performance adjusted based on implementing multi-tiered systems of support within your classroom?
6. What support, if any, is needed to improve the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support within your classroom?

Participants' Interview Questions

1. Describe the current professional learning structure related to the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support at Success Middle School.
2. Describe the ideal day of effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support in your classroom.
3. What changes, if any, would you make related to supporting teachers and support staff in feeling like they can improve the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
4. What barriers, if any, impact the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?
5. What are current support systems in place for you as a teacher or support staff member to effectively implement multi-tiered systems of support?

6. Describe an ideal structured professional learning structure for the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support.
7. Is there anything else you'd like to share about the effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support?