

A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF NOVICE ELEMENTARY  
TEACHERS' PERCEIVED ABILITY TO IMPLEMENT  
THE NORTH CAROLINA MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM  
OF SUPPORT WITH FIDELITY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to gain a deeper understanding of novice elementary teachers' perceived ability to implement the North Carolina Multi-Tiered System of Support (NC MTSS) model with fidelity in a suburban North Carolina school district. For the purposes of this research, fidelity was generally defined as the effective application of the tenets of NC MTSS according to evidence-based best practices as well as federal, state, and local policy (Hill, King, Lemons, & Partanen, 2012). Conducted under the leadership of Dr. Frank Bailey, this study sought to determine the extent to which a sample of 12 elementary teachers, each with three or fewer years of experience, feel able to fully and effectively implement NC MTSS in their suburban North Carolina schools. The theories that have guided this study are Bandura's (1983) Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and Mitzel's (1960) Theory of Teaching and Learning, as they establish a connection between educators' self-efficacy and the likelihood of an initiative being implemented with fidelity. Thus, gaining a deeper understanding of teachers' self-perceived ability to implement NC MTSS can improve implementation by informing teacher preparation, in-service professional development programming, and related support structures. Data was collected using unstructured and semi-structured interviews, as well as document analyses. Axial coding and conceptualization using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant-comparative method were to identify and isolate emergent themes. Results showed that participants' perceptions of self-efficacy are mixed. Half of participants conveyed moderate to high levels of self-efficacy, while half exhibited relatively low levels.

*Keywords:* Response to Intervention, Multi-Tiered System of Support, academic intervention, behavioral intervention, teacher efficacy, specific learning disability

**Copyright Page**

## **Dedication**

To my daughters, Caroline and Hallie. Do big things, little ones.

### **Acknowledgements**

This would not have been possible without my family, friends, and committee. To my husband, Keith, thank you always being there for me. I could not have done this without your love, encouragement, and willingness take over so that I could work on weekends. And to my parents, thank you for supporting me through all four degrees – and always reminding me to finish this. And to my committee, I am so grateful for the opportunity to work with and learn from each of you. Dr. Bailey, I cannot thank you enough for believing in me and always being there (even when I wasn't). Thank you for holding me to such high standards, and for your guidance and patience while I worked to meet them.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Local Education Agency (LEA)

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)

Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS)

Professional Learning Community (PLC)

Response to Intervention (RTI or RtI)

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

State Education Agency (SEA)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

The following chapter provides a foundation for the study by exposing how little is currently known about new teachers' perceptions of their abilities to implement NC MTSS and underscoring the gap in research. Chapter One also presents an outline of contextual information to introduce and support the study's design. Major sections include the background, situation to the researcher, problem and purpose statements, significance of the study, research questions, and pertinent definitions.

### Background

#### Historical Context

In a speech to public educators in 2011, then-United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, acknowledged that the nation's public schools had entered an era of accountability. In recent years, concerns over efficacy and equity of America's public school system have sparked significant changes to local and state policy. Legislation has been initiated by the federal government, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and its subsequent revisions, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA), and its reauthorization in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). Most recently, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced NCLB and established a renewed focus on achievement and equitable access to a high-quality education (Hurlbut & Tunks, 2016). Scott (2011) suggested interest in student performance, evidenced by numerous programs and the appropriation of billions of dollars, has been steadily growing since The National Commission on Excellence in Education's (1983) report to the United States Department of Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*.

At the intersection of marked achievement gaps and heightened accountability measures, various models for early identification and remediation of academic and behavioral deficits have emerged (Bender & Shores, 2007). Among these models are tiered instruction and intervention models, such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Described by Shapiro (2012) as leveled systems of proactive support, tiered instruction and intervention systems have quickly gained acceptance among education policymakers. As explained by Martin (2016):

The Response-to-Intervention (RtI) movement is enabling public education in the United States to evolve from a reactive model in which students had to seriously deteriorate before being moved on to special education programs, to one that emphasizes early and high-quality research-based interventions in regular programs that generate useful data with which to make key decisions for each struggling student. (p. 1)

### **Societal Impact**

States and LEAs maintain a relatively high degree of independence regarding the specific model in which they follow. While many of those models differ in the details of nomenclature and implementation procedures, most share the same core tenets: universal screening, multiple tiers of support, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2013). In any tiered instruction and intervention model, these pieces come together to form a comprehensive system of early intervention and remediation (Stuart & Rinaldi, 2010). Callinan, Cunningham, and Theiler (2013) noted that tiered instruction and intervention models have also become, in some states and LEAs, accepted modes for identifying learning disabilities. In many cases, they serve as alternatives to the discrepancy model, which

measures students' achievement against their intelligence quotient (IQ) to identify learning disabilities (Speece, Molloy, & Case, 2013).

Though there have been some critics, tiered instruction and intervention has gained wide support and become commonplace in most public schools throughout the United States (Cahill, McGuire, Krumdick, & Lee, 2015). According to Nunn and Jantz (2009), this is largely because the core RTI framework emerged from extensive research from some of the nation's leading education experts and is grounded in evidence-based practices. Wedl (2005) asserted that RTI stands in contrast to many initiatives born in the so-called accountability era in that it offers a real and promising opportunity to shift the focus away from simply compliance to authentic instructional practices that promote student learning.

### **Theoretical Basis**

Any initiative or model is only as good as its implementation (Hord & Roussin, 2013). By applying Bandura's (1983) Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and Mitzel's (1960) Theory of Teaching and Learning, a connection between the efficacy of implementation of tiered instruction and intervention models and teachers' self-efficacy can be established (Isbell & Szabo, 2015). Whether the goal of RTI or MTSS is met is directly correlated to the extent to which it is implemented with fidelity and the efficacy of the implementer (Howardson & Behrend, 2015).

According to Ridgeway, Price, Simpson, and Rose (2011), teacher quality and familiarity with tiered instruction and intervention models are critical to attaining their benefits. Danielson, Doolittle, and Bradley (2007) further assert that any result of implementation cannot be considered valid unless all practitioners are appropriately and adequately trained. Lane, Bocian, MacMillan, and Gresham (2004) use the term "treatment integrity" to refer to the extent to which



teachers implement interventions based upon scientific research (p. 23). Kovaleski, Marco-Fies, and Bonesheski (2013) affirm that without treatment integrity, a causal relationship between an intervention and student achievement or growth cannot be reliably determined. Research has confirmed a connection between educators' reported levels of confidence and observed performance in the classroom and as implementers of interventions (Judge & Bono, 2001). Thus, it is a logical first step to examine teachers' perceptions of skills related to implementation of a tiered instruction and intervention model. While tiered instruction and intervention frameworks are grounded in research, the perceptions of teachers have not yet been assimilated into the related knowledgebase (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015).

### **Situation to Self**

As a former classroom teacher, Response to Intervention and Instruction (RTII) coordinator, and now as an educational consultant, the development of educators and the efficacy of implementation have become very important to me. With experience delivering and directing intervention efforts, I have seen how crucial teachers' confidence and capacity to implement are to the successful and sustainable execution of the model. Due to the increased stakes, student achievement concerns, and specificity of federal and state regulations, it is clear that tiered instruction and intervention systems must be implemented with fidelity (Hill et al., 2012). However, my time teaching, researching, and managing school-wide RTII implementation has led me to question the extent to which educators feel prepared and able to apply the tenets of intervention models as they were designed. I am interested in the perceptions of teachers with three or fewer years of experience, as they have limited exposure to professional development experiences outside of teacher preparation programs. Further, Fox and Peters (2013) assert that

teachers' performance is most strongly correlated with perceptions of self-efficacy in their first years on the job.

Through this research, I hoped to gain insight into novice teachers' perceptions of their own efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS. My assumptions for the work were ontological regarding the nature of human reality through contextual understanding (Yin, 2015). Through an interpretative paradigm, I aimed to articulate multiple relative actualities of participants, though acknowledge that those realities are not fixed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Given my background as an educator and implementer of a tiered instruction and intervention system, I cannot separate from my knowledge and values. Making meaning of participant perceptions requires interpretative approaches of dialogue and analysis from a knowing source (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Thus, semi-structured interviews served as a primary data source and conceptualization followed a constant comparative method.

My aim in conducting this study is to contribute to the existing knowledgebase surrounding teacher efficacy and the implementation of tiered instruction and intervention. This was done by capturing the unique realities of participants and connecting them to the empirical and theoretical underpinnings of teachers' self-perceptions and the ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity.

### **Problem Statement**

Tiered instruction and intervention models have gained a lot of attention and support in recent years, in part because of their presumed ability to identify and address learning deficits and disabilities (Bianco, 2010; Nunn & Jantz, 2009). Moreover, the structures and tenets of tiered instruction and intervention are now recognized as foundational best practices in general and special education, as well as school psychology (Reschly & Reschly, 2014).

The impact of a tiered instruction and intervention model is dependent upon its implementation and the extent to which it is executed with fidelity (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015). While extensive research underpins the tenets of tiered instruction and intervention, and significant resources have been dedicated to professional development and technical assistance, very little is known about the integrity of implementation at the classroom level (Jimerson, Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Vaughn, 2016). According to O'Connor and Freeman (2012), even less is known about the attitudes and beliefs of classroom teachers as implementers of a given model. The problem is that not enough is currently known about how teachers, particularly novice teachers with presumably the least experience and exposure to the model, perceive their own understanding and abilities to execute NC MTSS with fidelity.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions held by novice elementary teachers in a suburban North Carolina public school district regarding their perceived ability to implement the NC MTSS model with fidelity in their classrooms. For the purposes of this research, fidelity will generally be defined as the effective application of the tenets of NC MTSS according to evidence-based best practices as well as federal, state, and local policy (Hill et al., 2012). This study is grounded in the theoretical conceptions of self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1997) as individuals' beliefs regarding their own adequacy, and the relationship Mitzel (1960) identified between self-efficacy and products, or outcomes, of educational initiatives.

### **Significance of the Study**

Tiered instruction and intervention models have become deeply integrated into education policy and bear significant implications for students, educators, and school systems (Nunn &

Jantz, 2009). Given the general approval of tiered instruction and intervention models from a theoretical perspective, attention must now turn to the fidelity of their implementation in practice by examining the self-efficacy of the educators charged with delivery (Kovaleski, Marco-Fies, & Boneshefski, 2013). It is imperative to study participant perceptions of self-efficacy, as a higher sense of agency is correlated with a greater ability to implement initiatives effectively and with fidelity (Bandura, 1997). Further, failure to take into account practitioners' opinions negatively affects the implementation of school-based initiatives (Regan, Berkeley, Hughes, & Brady, 2015).

The immediate and practical significance of this study includes the exposure of participants' perceived abilities and a clearer course of action for administrators and NCDPI officials in establishing relevant support structures for NC MTSS implementation. The results of this type of study can inform the development and potential revision of pre-service curriculum and in-service professional development programming to help ensure all educators are adequately prepared to implement any tiered instruction and intervention system with fidelity (Castillo, March, Stockslager, & Hines, 2015). By shedding light on participants' perceptions of their own efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS, this study may also help district and school administrators better understand teachers' feelings and attitudes. According to Pillay, Goddard, and Wilss (2005), teachers with low self-efficacy are more likely to reach a point of burnout and negatively impact school culture. As Searle (2010) noted, administrator involvement is critical to the successful implementation of tiered instruction and intervention, but they are often the farthest removed from it and risk being out of touch with the intricacies of implementation. The findings from this study may enable administrators to provide more targeted interpersonal support and respond more appropriately if concerns and frustrations are voiced.

Examining teachers' perceptions of efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS may also serve to connect theoretical conceptions with the more pragmatic notions of implementation. Because Bandura's (1982) Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy holds that the ability to implement any initiative is correlated with self-efficacy, this study may add a necessary element to the larger gap in literature related to the fidelity of tiered instruction and intervention implementation. According to Kovaleski et al. (2013), treatment integrity, the extent to which a treatment is implemented as intended, is considered a standard and necessary measure in determining the effectiveness and validity of any model or protocol in any field. However, their research has drawn attention to a pervasive lack of treatment integrity in relation to tiered instruction and intervention. According to Detrich (1999), more is known about the effectiveness of interventions when assuming full treatment integrity than the likelihood of those interventions actually being implemented with integrity.

Beyond its specific participants and setting, this study can also contribute to the limited empirical research base that currently exists focused on teachers, the primary practitioners, and implementation fidelity of tiered instruction and intervention models (Fox, 2012). According to Gerber (2005), "The few RTI studies that exist report little about variations in teachers' thoughts and behaviors during administration of planned interventions" (p. 520). Not enough is currently known about teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding tiered instruction and intervention, or how those beliefs and perceptions impact the integrity of implementation (Mitchell, 2009). By eliciting participants' feelings of self-efficacy through interviews, this study can contribute necessary information and begin to fill the current void in this area.

## Research Questions

The following research questions serve to frame and guide each phase of this study. These questions were refined throughout the earliest stages of the research process to articulate the study's intentions as they relate to participants' lived experiences.

**RQ1.** How do novice teachers perceive their ability to implement NC MTSS in their classrooms with fidelity?

Qualitative data of participant-constructed reality is necessary to support inferences about beliefs, attitudes, and feelings (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). This question was designed to elicit such data and derive meaning from participants' perceived ability to implement NC MTSS. Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy holds that while perceptions of self-efficacy are multifaceted, they can be measured with an acceptable degree of accuracy. By including the concept of fidelity, the question also sets parameters necessary for qualitative analysis (Yin, 2015).

**RQ2.** How do novice teachers perceive the preparation, training, and support they have received related to NC MTSS?

This question was designed to gain insight into participants' preparation, including pre-service coursework and school-/district-led professional development, as it relates to NC MTSS or any tiered instruction and intervention model. According to Grable (2009), it has become the responsibility of nearly every teacher across the country to implement a tiered instruction and intervention model, therefore it is necessary for all teachers to be highly trained. However, as Campsen (2013) asserted, many teacher preparation and professional development programs related to tiered instruction and intervention have proven to be lacking in quality and quantity.

**RQ 3.** How do novice teachers perceive the efficacy of others as implementers of NC MTSS?

This question was designed to understand participants' social contexts and vicarious experiences. According to Howardson and Behrand (2015), "Vicarious experience is the assessment of one's ability and efficacy through a social referent by acquiring information about others' performance" (p. 237). Individuals cannot judge their own efficacy without the reference point of others (Bandura, 1997). Thus, understanding how participants perceive others' abilities will shed light on how they conceptualize their own efficacy.

### **Definitions**

1. *Agency* – The influence individuals have over their functioning through their actions (Bandura, 2009).
2. *Control* – Self-regulation of one's motivations, thoughts, emotions, and actions (Bandura 1997).
3. *Efficacy* – The extent to which individuals can appropriately organize and execute actions necessary to bring about a desired outcome (Bandura, 1997).
4. *Fidelity* – The accurate and consistent application of an agreed upon procedure (Guldbrandsson, 2008).
5. *Intervention* – A specific program or set of steps to help a child improve in an area of need (Pearce, 2009).
6. *Learning disability* – A general term that describes specific learning problems resulting in difficulty obtaining and/or using certain skills (Berhnhardt & Herbert, 2011).
7. *Multi-Tiered System of Support* – A whole-school, data-driven, prevention-based framework for improving learning outcomes for every student through a layered

continuum of evidence-based practices and systems (Colorado Department of Education, 2015).

8. *Perception* – A sense of awareness and ability to regard, understand, and/or interpret a concept through cognitive functioning (Wang, 2009).
9. *Response to Intervention* – A comprehensive and deliberate multi-level instruction and assessment system designed by schools to address the learning needs of all students (Bernhardt & Herbert, 2011).
10. *Self-Efficacy* – Individuals’ beliefs regarding their own competence and adequacy (Bandura, 1997).
11. *Tier* – A term referring to the level of instruction and/or intensity of remediation (Quinn, 2010).

### **Summary**

Chapter One has provided a detailed description of the study and its significance. As of the time of this research, tiered instruction and intervention is explicitly included in various laws and regulations, and there is widespread support for specific models, such as RTI and MTSS among educators and policymakers. While tiered instruction and intervention is underpinned by extensive research and theoretical constructs, not enough is currently known about how teachers perceive their capacity to implement it with fidelity. Following targeted research questions, and through systematic data collection and analysis methodologies, this study aims to determine the perceptions of novice elementary teachers as they relate to their ability to effectively implement NC MTSS.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to gain a deeper understanding of how novice elementary teachers in a suburban North Carolina public school district perceive their ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity. Chapter Two explores the conceptual framework for this study and synthesizes the extensive research base that underpins tiered instruction and intervention. The history and defining features of tiered instruction and intervention models are addressed, as well as the implications of legislation and education policy. Distinguishing features of NC MTSS are detailed, and information is presented to illustrate how little is known about the extent to which teachers, particularly those newest to the profession, feel adequately equipped to implement it in their classrooms.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Maxwell (1996) described a study's conceptual framework as, "The system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research" (p. 39). Emphasizing its importance in qualitative research, Miles and Huberman (1984) explained that a conceptual framework illustrates the researcher's application of relevant theories to the central phenomena under investigation. When applied to a particular study, theoretical constructs within a conceptual framework guide and support the entire research process (Maxwell, 2003).

In this study, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and Mitzel's Theory of Teaching and Learning come together to form the conceptual framework and lens through which phenomena is viewed. Social Cognitive Theory holds that human conduct is a product of a reciprocal relationship between behavior and environment (Bandura, 1986). By integrating the concept of self-efficacy into this understanding, Bandura (1997) suggests that self-efficacy, the

belief in one's capabilities, has a significant impact on both behavior and conduct. Coupled with the Theory of Teaching and Learning which delineates the link between presage criteria and a given product, self-efficacy can be considered a determinant of performance (Mitzel, 1960). According to Barrie and Doyle (2015), presage variables are personal and professional characteristics, such as intelligence level, years of experience, knowledge of the content area, and education that impact a teacher's work.

With tiered instruction and intervention, the success of its outcome is dependent upon the integrity of its implementation (Isbell & Szabo, 2015). Successful implementation of NC MTSS is reliant upon the capacity of teachers, and the capacity of those teachers is directly related to their self-efficacy (Sankey, 2007). Self-efficacy can therefore be considered the presage criteria that determines the product of the initiative's success.

This study aimed to understand the reality of participants as implementers of NC MTSS. It is therefore beneficial to assimilate related theoretical constructs and research paradigms that shed light on the relationship between teachers' perceptions of efficacy and the implementation of tiered instruction and intervention.

### **Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy**

According to Bandura (1997), humans actively seek control in their lives. Consequently, the need for control is observable in nearly every human activity. In this sense, control refers to the feeling of agency or purpose of mind and impression of capability. According to Bandura (1982), agency equates to feelings of self-efficacy and adequacy. A meta-analysis of organizational behavior research correlated agency to performance, reaffirming Bandura's (1986) conception of human behavior as a function of cognition and environment (Stajkovic & Luthens, 1998). Bandura (1997) delineated four factors that impact a person's self-efficacy

beliefs: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, emotional arousal.

Bandura (1997) defined enactive mastery as the attribution of past performance to current proficiencies and competencies. Individuals alter their perceptions of self-efficacy based upon an achieved level of performance (Bandura, 1997). However, Tolli and Shmidt (2008) assert the shaping of self-efficacy through enactive mastery experiences is influenced more by a person's own interpretation of performance than an objective measure or result. Thus, while repeated success is likely to build a strong sense of self-efficacy and repeated failure tends to diminish it, the standards for success and failure are largely subjective (Bandura, 1997). Whether positive or negative, research shows that mastery experiences are the most influential sources of self-efficacy beliefs (Kelleher, 2016).

Verbal persuasion is the influence of others on an individual's self-concept and perception of efficacy through a form of communication (Bandura, 1997). Whether messages are directly conveyed in speech or writing, or symbolically through action or environment, this information can impact self-efficacy beliefs both positively and negatively (Howardson & Behrend, 2015). The concept of verbal persuasion bears significance in the context of education and teacher self-efficacy, as teachers continuously receive messages from multiple sources, including administrator feedback, student assessment results, and the overall culture of the school (Martins, Costa, & Onofre, 2015).

Whereas verbal persuasion is the direct communication of feedback messages to individuals, vicarious experiences are inferences individuals make based upon observations of others' performance (Kelleher, 2016). Bandura (1997) posited that humans cannot assess their own abilities and efficacy without a meaningful social referent. Research conducted on the

impact of vicarious experiences on pre-service teachers' efficacy beliefs shows that self-efficacy increases when individuals observe others successfully execute a given task (Pfitzner-Eden, 2016).

Often referred to as physiological and emotional states, Bandura (1997) also identified emotional arousal as an affective factor of self-efficacy. Stress and tension, whether are from emotional, mental, or physical sources, can impact individuals to the point that they subconsciously lower their feelings of adequacy and competence (Kelleher, 2016). While Bandura (1997) contended that positive affective states elevate confidence levels and self-efficacy, there is little research specific to the field of education to show that this supposition holds true for teachers (Pierce, 2014).

Applied in the context of education, mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and emotional arousal converge to incite teacher's self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). These ideas bear significant implications in education, as teachers' self-efficacy directly impacts their ability to make decisions, set goals, evaluate situations, apply appropriate instructional methods, and persevere in difficult situations (Epps & Foor, 2015). Given that the effective implementation of NC MTSS necessitates each of these abilities in teachers, Social Cognitive Theory is directly applicable to this study (Barrio & Combes, 2015; Kelleher, 2016).

### **Theory of Teaching and Learning**

Also significant to the study is Mitzel's (1960) Theory of Teaching and Learning, which classifies teacher effectiveness based upon the product criteria, process criteria, context criteria, and presage criteria. Product criteria refers to the benchmarks toward which instruction is geared, such as assessments measuring a change in student attributes, including behavior and academic achievement (Figueira, Greco, & Ehrogott, 2005). Context variables are defined as

student traits, while process criteria are the actual interactions between student and teacher that occur in the educational setting. Lastly, presage criteria are those that involve personality, knowledge, aptitude, and other characteristics that influence a teacher's presence in a classroom and ability to teach (Mitzel, 1960).

At the time Mitzel (1977) began his work in the 1950s, theoretical constructs from psychology and sociology were not commonly applied to practice-based educational research. Further, he discerned that teaching and learning was not widely recognized as a scientific process with observable inputs and outputs (Mitzel & Gross, 1958). Rooting himself in prevailing learning theories, including Behaviorism, Cognitive Constructivism, and Social Constructivism, Mitzel focused on the interaction of process variables and their impact on the resulting product variables (Clark & Peterson, 1986). While acknowledging that teacher quality is among the most significant determinants in student achievement, Mitzel (1960) theorized that it is the actual interaction between presage, context, and process variables that determine outcome (Mitzel & Medley, 1963).

While there are few critics of Mitzel's work, many have since appended the Theory of Teaching and Learning to further define variables and interactions (Cruickshank, 1990). Biddle and Ellena (1964) established a relationship between process variables and teacher effects, categorizing seven interactions between teaching and learning: school and community contexts, childhood experiences, classroom cultures, teacher qualities, teacher conduct, intermediate consequences, and lasting consequences. Cruickshank (1990) expanded upon Mitzel's conception of context variables by including student abilities and attitudes, school culture, and classroom climate. More recent applications of the Theory of Teaching and Learning has incorporated Clark and Peterson's (1986) expansion of presage criteria to include gender, race,

religion, socioeconomic status, and training experiences as variables that shape their beliefs, attitudes, and actions (McIllrath & Huitt, 1995). Taken together, the Theory of Teaching and Learning and its subsequent amendments reveal a line between teachers' professional backgrounds and beliefs, their actions, and their impact on student outcomes.

For this reason, Mitzel's work relates to every component of tiered instruction and intervention models and their implementation in practice (Fox, 2012). As a primarily outcome-based, product criteria initiative, NC MTSS is dependent upon the process and context interactions, and particularly the presage criteria of teachers (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2016).

Taken together, Bandura's (1983) Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and Mitzel's (1960) Theory of Teaching and Learning, establish a connection between self-efficacy and outcomes. Conceptually in the context this study, the theories merge to highlight the significance of teachers' beliefs and perceptions of efficacy on the implementation of NC MTSS.

By applying this conceptual framework and grounding the research in the Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and the Theory of Teaching and Learning, there is potential to expand the theories and draw clearer connections between them. Bandura's (1983) conception of agency and Mitzel's notion of presage criteria have specific implications on NC MTSS as effective implementation is dependent upon the self-efficacy of teachers (VanDerHeyden, 2011).

### **Related Literature**

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2013), the nation's public schools have been charged with the duty to meet the needs of all students, regardless of age, race, gender, or intellectual ability. However, because public education was not delineated or even guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, states have had a high level of autonomy in regard to interpreting and implementing statutes through the Tenth Amendment and have historically assumed the primary

role of initiating, implementing, and reforming public education policy (Mitchell, 2009). Despite this, in recent years, the federal government has steadily increased its influence on policy and practice with various initiatives tied to federal dollars, as well as the passing of several laws to ensure the free and appropriate education of all students, particularly those with academic disabilities and delays (Fox, 2012). Early intervention programs are not under the direction of a single law or statute, however. Rather, RTI, MTSS, and other tiered instruction and intervention systems have formed through the convergence of larger movements and multiple laws ratified at both the federal and state levels, as well as special initiatives and policies set forth by various organizations and related local agencies (Barrio & Combes, 2015). While RTI and MTSS as specific frameworks may be relatively new and driven by legislation, the core tenets of tiered instruction and intervention have been in practice for far longer than any law or policy dictating early identification and remediation (Jimerson et al., 2016). Thus, while it may appear that legislation has been the catalyst for all early identification and intervention efforts in US public schools, it is more accurate to consider the laws and regulations to be reinforcements of proven best practices and evidence of the government's increasing sense of responsibility to serve as an agent for equity, particularly throughout and after the civil-rights movement (Turnbull, Huerta & Stow, 2006).

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed into action Public Law 89-10, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), to close the gaps in reading and in math seen widely in children from minority and low-income families through formula funding (Farkas & Hall, 2000). When ESEA took full effect during the following Nixon administration, the federal government began playing a larger role in public education than ever before (Buysee, 2016). Though still far from RTI and MTSS models that exist today, the 1960s signify to many education researchers

the beginning of the US government's recognition of the need for early intervention to achieve equality (Sass, 2008). Since that time, with its various amendments and provisions such as Title I and the No Child Left Behind Act, ESEA has set into motion multiple accountability and compliance measures tied to significant funding incentives that further dictate instruction and remediation efforts in public schools (Mitchell, 2009).

On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed into law Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which effectively reauthorized ESEA and replaced NCLB. According to the Executive Office of the President (2015), ESSA is a bipartisan bill to fix the known inadequacies of NCLB, such as subjective proficiency standards, and incorporate into a single piece of legislation the initiatives set forth by the Obama Administration since 2008. While ESSA redefines and codifies certain accountability, intervention, and support measures for district and school performance, and reallocates funding for special education and district- or school-based instructional and professional development initiatives, the bill does not explicitly address or regulate state-specific tiered instruction and intervention models (Samuels, 2016).

According to Turnbull and Turnbull (1998), one of the federal government's most palpable influences on the development and implementation of tiered instruction and intervention models as they exist in schools today was with the passing of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which aimed to improve access to education for children with disabilities. Specifically, the law assured that all students have access to a free and appropriate education that meets their unique needs. It also guaranteed the protection of student and parent rights, financial assistance for state and local education agencies, and regular assessment of efforts (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2006). In 1990, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was



renewed as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and reinforced in more explicit terms some concepts, such as normalization, the notion that students with disabilities should have social experiences that mirror those facilitated for students without disabilities (Mitchell, 2009). Among various implications for general and special education, IDEA and its subsequent revisions categorized disabilities, with learning disabilities being the largest, and most controversial, classification (Wedl, 2005).

At the time IDEA was signed into action, the U.S. Department of Education determined that the discrepancy between a student's Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and achievement would be the primary determinant of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) identification (Patterson & Beckham, 2008). However, researchers, educators, and legislators quickly acknowledged several problematic patterns with SLD determinations based upon the application of the discrepancy model: overidentification, late identification, variability due to inconsistent practices between states, and a lack of specificity between students with learning disabilities and those who are simply delayed or low-achievers (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002). As Al Otaiba, Wagner, and Miller (2014) noted, the United States had been following a "wait-to-fail" model that was likely contributing to the over-identification and diagnosis of SLDs in students (p. 129).

Acknowledging these problems, the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA provided states with the right to use an alternative mode for early determination of SLDs, including tiered instruction and intervention models, such as RTI (Wilcox, Murakami-Ramalho, & Urick, 2013). Though IDEA 2004 never specifically mandated the implementation of academic and/or behavioral interventions, many states quickly moved to integrating a tiered support framework into their SLD determination process as a result of the child-find provision (Callinan et al., 2013). According to Martin (2016), child-find is the term commonly used to describe the legal duty

placed on public school districts to identify children who may qualify for special education. Furthermore, IDEA guarantees that evaluations must be supported by information from a variety of sources, including family members, teachers, administrators, and specialists, as well as multiple data sets from, for example, observation records, formal assessments, and intervention records (Parents Reaching Out, n.d.).

As a result of IDEA 2004, which permits districts to allocate up to 15% of their special education funding to early intervention activities and initiatives, schools have been able to remediate students prior to special education testing through specific, research-based academic and behavioral interventions and make more informed decisions regarding special education referrals (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2009). As Martin (2016) explained, the greater educational community has since focused on the benefit of intervening before significant deficits become apparent and within the general education classroom. Thus, tiered instruction and intervention models have served to strengthen the link between instruction, evaluation, and special education services (Jimerson et al., 2016).

While the movement to tiered instruction and intervention has ultimately caused the mean age of entrance into special education programs to rise, it has also served to identify and address deficiencies much earlier for many students (Wright, 2007). According to data from the IDEA Data Center (2016), there has been a 12.4% decline in students identified as having a specific learning disability since 2004 that can be attributed to IDEA 2004. Furthermore, the number of students between the ages of six and 21 receiving any special education services under IDEA Part B has decreased by almost four percent (IDEA Data Center, 2016).

## Legal Implications

According to Martin (2016), RTI and other related tiered instruction and intervention models represent a unique dynamic in public schools between the interest in implementing effective educational strategies and complying with specific legal requirements, such as documentation and parent notification. Though RTI was expressly introduced in IDEA 2004 as a mode for SLD identification in students, it is more commonly considered a general education initiative because implementation lies primarily with the general education teacher (Wright, 2007). Thus, according to Zirkel (2012), these legal implications have been frequently overlooked and misunderstood. Still, as Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2009) have pointed out, leading organizations in the field, including The Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Learning Disabilities, The National Center for Learning Disabilities, The National Education Association, and The International Reading Association, expressly advise their members to take all IDEA regulations seriously.

IDEA Part B (2004) regulations specified that states may no longer require a severe discrepancy between IQ and academic performance to be present to identify a learning disability. Additionally, under the law SEAs must permit districts to implement a process that determines if the child adequately responds to a research-based intervention. Thus, in addition to reinforcing concepts such as appropriate education, the least restrictive environment, and non-discriminatory evaluation, the law introduces RTI as an intensive framework that may be implemented before a referral for special education testing is made for a struggling student (Mitchell, 2009). As a result, according to Zirkel (2012), states have been left to choose between permitting or prohibiting the identification of a severe discrepancy and permitting or mandating the implementation of RTI or a similar model. Further, while IDEA does not explicitly define or

establish guidelines for RTI implementation, the law does require LEAs to “consider” one or more of the “essential elements” of RTI (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010, p. 61). Resultantly, SEAs have a high degree of autonomy in how—and even if—a tiered instruction and intervention model is implemented, and many have permitted LEAs to make specific decisions regarding implementation. According to Zirkel and Thomas’s 2010 report on state RTI laws and guidelines, despite the inclusion of RTI in federal legislation and its tie to significant federal funding, criteria for implementation can vary so much between and within SEAs that it is difficult to collect and compare information on how it is being implemented.

Based upon findings from the RTI Action Network (2016), as of July 2016, many U.S. states, including Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, West Virginia, and Wisconsin, have made tiered instruction and intervention models mandatory for SLD identification for all or at least some student groups, for example, certain grade levels. Some states provide LEAs with the option to combine a tiered instruction and intervention model, typically implemented before a referral, and the discrepancy model as part of the special education evaluation process. However, the majority of states, including North Carolina, are considered permissive states, allowing both tiered instruction and intervention models and the discrepancy model to be used in SLD determination (Martin, 2016). This, according to Zirkel and Thomas (2010), provides LEAs with a choice in how they determine learning disabilities, though in most cases they must also comply with specific guidelines that dictate implementation. As Martin (2011) noted, these guidelines are state-level terms, and differ from federal legislation and regulations in their tie to specific liabilities. While failure to comply with federal laws, such as IDEA 2004, may result in

a loss of funding, non-compliance with state-level guidelines typically subjects districts to corrective action and intervention from the SEAs (Walker & Daves, 2010).

Given that federal regulations, particularly the child-find provision, and state-level guidelines do exist, however, educators, including general education teachers, special education teachers, school leaders, and district administrators, are subject to legal recourse from parents and guardians in the event of a claim of non-compliance (Walker & Daves, 2010). Speculating as to whether the regulations surrounding RTI models reflect and support the initiative, Martin (2016) explained the source of some claims that have been made by parents:

Questions may be raised about the timeliness of implementation of high-quality interventions, the rate of the student's progress in the interventions, the timeline for interventions, and situations where parents are encouraged to allow interventions to proceed only to lead to limited response and an ultimately delayed placement in special education. Some parents may feel that participating in the RTI process ultimately led to a delay in having special education services provided to their children and may attempt to seek legal redress in the form of compensatory services. (p. 3)

Under IDEA 2004, parents and authorized agencies may initiate a request for a child to be evaluated for a learning disability at any time. Given the rights afforded to guardians regarding SLD determination and access to a free and appropriate education under federal legislation, the RTI movement has, according to Martin (2016) contributed to and convoluted many disputes between parents and LEAs. Because intervention systems are so loosely defined and vary so significantly across and even within SEAs, Swanson, Solis, Cuiullo, and McKenna (2012) have underscored the importance of teachers' understanding of and adherence to all local policies, particularly those regarding documentation, to safeguard against potential legal

disputes. Noting the potential for legal recourse from parents when student rights under IDEA 2004 have been violated, Buffum et al. (2009) further advised district and school leaders to establish and monitor clear processes and expectations for documentation and parent communication. Despite their assertion that RTI systems should be reinforced by legislation and regulations, Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2012) have expressed concern over the unintended consequences that have resulted from the threat of corrective action and legal recourse: schools and educators that focus solely on compliance and meeting requirements.

### **Definitions and Components of Tiered Instruction and Intervention Models**

As Wilcox et al. (2013) noted, despite its relation to and inclusion in special education policy, as well as its association with learning disability determination, “The RTI provision of IDEA is a general education (regular classroom) initiative,” (p. 76). Defined by Fletcher and Vaughn (2009) as a school-wide tiered service delivery model integrating assessment and intervention to promote academic achievement and reduce behavior problems of all students, tiered instruction and intervention models have integrated research-based best instructional practices, regular assessment, continuous progress monitoring, and timely follow-up measures into general practice (Buysee, 2016). According to Yell, Shriner, and Katsiyannis (2006), “A response to intervention model is designed to identify students who are having academic problems when the problems first become apparent, and then matching evidence-based instruction to their educational needs” (p. 13). As further explained by Forbes, Swenson, Person, and Reed (2008), RTI is an inclusive practice, and, regardless of its various components, should first be considered a mechanism for delivering high-quality instruction to all students. Moreover, as a framework for educational decision-making, the primary objective of tiered instruction and intervention is to improve and increase learning for all students (Hahn, 2012).

When implemented properly, the process also generates the data necessary for special education eligibility determination, which, establishes an inextricable connection between RTI models and special education (Jimerson et al., 2016).

According to Mitchell (2009), on a whole tiered instruction and intervention is a distinctive practice, but its defining concepts are not necessarily new or novel to the field, and have often been referred to by veteran educators and policymakers as common sense. In a report from Hamline University, Wedl (2005) underscored the straightforward nature of RTI and similar models by likening them to the scientific method for problem solving, with student learning being “the problem” to be solved. As Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements, and Ball (2007) explained, multitiered systems of prevention for academic and behavioral concerns existed long before RTI and MTSS models gained particular attention and acceptance as a result of IDEA. Regardless, according to Bianco (2010) the establishment and coining of RTI and other models marked the first time concepts such as remediation, universal screening, differentiated instruction, early intervention, assessment, data-based decision making, and progress monitoring have been streamlined into one cohesive process.

As important as understanding and internalizing what tiered instruction and intervention is, Buffum et al. (2012) assert that educators must also be very clear on what it is not. Specifically, they affirm that tiered instruction and intervention systems are integrated and collective processes designed to provide each child with the additional support and time needed to learn and achieve at expected levels, and not merely methods to qualify students for special education, a set of a few token general education interventions, a checklist for compliance, a mechanism to delay entry into special education, or a process by which parents or schools can more readily place blame for a child’s deficiencies.

Searle (2010) established perhaps the most basic set of principles for tiered instruction and intervention systems by applying the standard-protocol model: (a) universal screening/assessment; (b) data analysis, with focus on any problematic areas identified by the screener; (c) research-based interventions targeting deficiencies identified by data analysis; and (d) continuous monitoring of interventions and instructional practices. As Mitchell (2009) explained, though some organizations and SEAs have created unique graphics to represent the core tenets and processes of their systems, tiered instruction and intervention models have been most commonly characterized and represented as a triangle or pyramid with three distinct levels, or tiers, of different size representing the student population receiving instruction and remediation of a given intensity and frequency. Though they were initially proponents of the traditional pyramid representation of tiered instruction and intervention, Buffum et al. (2012) have since gained recognition and support among the field for their suggestion that an inverted pyramid may be a more accurate representation, as it better illustrates the inclusion of every child in the process.

Despite the fact that tiered instruction and intervention has been revered by many as a logical, systematic process, others have expressed confusion and frustration, citing ambiguity, complexity, and undue exposure to legal implications (Fox, 2009). Hill et al. (2012) liken the model to the inner-workings of Big Ben, and caution that mainstream literature and graphic representations often grossly oversimplify the RTI and MTSS processes.

Likewise, The National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (2004) has promoted a more detailed framework of the essential features of RTI that is generally accepted and followed in the US:



1. High quality, research-based instruction and behavioral support in general education to effectively teach all students.
2. Universal (school-wide or district-wide) screening of academics and behavior in order to determine which students need closer monitoring or additional interventions.
3. Multiple tiers of increasingly intense scientific, research-based interventions that are matched to student need.
4. Use of a collaborative approach by school staff for development, implementation, and monitoring of the intervention process.
5. Continuous monitoring of student progress during the interventions, using objective information to determine if students are meeting goals.
6. Follow-up measures providing information that the intervention was implemented as intended with appropriate consistency
7. Documentation of parent involvement throughout the process
8. Documentation that the special education evaluation timelines specified in IDEA 2004 and in the state regulations are followed unless the parents and the school team can agree to an extension.

The National State Directors of Special Education (2015) advised against even this level of generalization. They further specified several of these core concepts, asserting that assessments alone, for example, serve three distinct purposes within the general RTI framework: (a) screening to identify inadequate progress/growth; (b) diagnostic determination of which academic and behavioral domains students can and cannot perform adequately; and (c) progress monitoring to determine effectiveness of related interventions and instructional practices. Thus, in RTI, MTSS, and similar models, assessments help practitioners understand a student's

baseline performance, identify specific needs, and monitor the effectiveness of instruction and interventions (Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010). However, following this example, assessments alone do not justify SLD determination in tiered instruction and intervention systems. Rather, the data generated from assessments, combined with related progress monitoring and responses to particular interventions serve to facilitate the early identification of academic or behavioral problems (Shapiro, 2012).

### **Student Behavioral Supports and Interventions**

According to Buffum, et al. (2009), “Behavior and academic achievement are inextricably linked. A student’s academic success in school is directly related to the student’s attention, engagement, and behavior” (p. 111). Clear connections between student behavior and academic performance, including links between problematic behavior and special education referrals, have been well established by research (Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lathrop, 2007). For these reasons, Bohanon, Goodman, and McIntosh (2015) have emphasized the importance and benefits of combining academic and behavior supports. Additionally, the core RTI framework provides an ideal opportunity to seamlessly integrate behavior supports in an evidence-based multi-tier structure of increasing intensity (Buysee, 2016).

Resultantly, most tiered instruction and intervention efforts implemented in the United States do explicitly address behavior, with some models integrating academic and behavior supports into a single system, as with Pyramid Response to Intervention, popularized by Buffum et al. (2012) and implemented in many US schools, and others pairing paralleled academic and behavior programs, such as Oregon’s Effective Behavioral & Instructional Support Systems (Buenrostro, 2016; Hawken, Vincent, & Schumann, 2008)

The Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) model, which is also known as School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention Support (SWPBIS) when implemented consistently across an entire school or district, is one of the most prominent behavior intervention models, with nearly 22,000 schools implementing it across the country, according to the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) (2016). The predominant theme underpinning PBIS and SWPBIS is that behavioral expectations and lessons should be taught in the same way as core academic subjects (OSEP, 2007). This includes a continuum of supports targeting those who do not respond. Mirroring traditional RTI models, the primary tier, consisting of a core social behavior curriculum, is administered to all, with the expectation that it is sufficient in shaping the behavior of approximately 80% of students. Further, Tier 2 and Tier 3 are characterized by interventions of increasing intensity for approximately 15 and five percent of students, respectively, and the involvement of specialized faculty as necessary (Sugai & Horner, 2009). According to Bohanon, Goodman, and McIntosh (2015), there is also a shared emphasis on progress monitoring, evaluation, problem solving, and decision making characteristic of common tiered instruction and intervention models.

In recent years, SEAs, including North Carolina, and LEAs have increasingly shifted their instructional and behavioral intervention systems to the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) model, as its principles fully align with PBIS and make systems for early intervention even more comprehensive, addressing every facet of student development and achievement (OSEP, 2016). According to the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2011), as an initiative that combines academic and behavioral supports, MTSS can amplify student academic and social-emotional outcomes unlike any other existing model.

## **Multitiered Instruction**

According to Bernhardt and Hebert (2011), tiered instruction and intervention is not designed to prevent or replace special education, but rather, it enables a movement within schools from reactive to proactive with its multi-level system of support. Likewise, the multi-level structure is perhaps one of the most defining characteristics of all RTI and MTSS models. Often represented as a pyramid or triangle, most models feature three levels, or tiers, of instruction and intervention, though some show four, with the top tier representing special education services (Buysee, 2016). According to Fuchs and Fuchs (2009), in a three-tier model, Tier 1 represents the high-quality, research-based core instruction delivered to all students. For approximately 80% of students, Tier 1 instruction should be sufficient and result in adequate academic progress (Bernhardt & Herbert, 2011). For the 20% of students who do not respond to the primary level of prevention, Tiers 2 and 3 provide an increased intensity of intervention and amount of support. If, hypothetically, Tier 1 has proven to be insufficient for a student to make expected academic gains, he or she would be moved to Tier 2, the secondary level of prevention. For approximately 15% of all students, the research-based, targeted intervention and increased instructional time received in Tier 2, in addition to the core instruction of Tier 1, should prove sufficient in supporting academic growth. For those students who do not respond to Tier 1 and Tier 2 efforts and who should account for approximately five percent of all students, Tier 3 provides even further-intensified intervention, assessment, and instructional time, in addition to core instruction (Kovaleski, 2012).

There have been many criticisms of the so-called “80-15-5” conception of the percentage of students expected to be in each tier, as classification and movement between tiers, while they should be rooted in data, are inevitably subjective practices (Callinan et al., 2013). Further,

according to Shapiro (2016), these percentages represent only the ideal scenario and outcomes, when all systems and components are working together with a high degree of efficacy for consecutive years. Most schools have yet to reach these desired levels (Windram, Bollman, & Johnson, 2011). The 80-15-5 representation has also been debated in regard to chronically low-performing schools, which by definition have a disproportionate number of students performing below grade level (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus & Noguera, n.d.).

Depending upon the guidelines set forth by the SEA and LEA, some districts also integrate special education services into their tiered instruction and intervention systems, represented as the fourth, or top, tier of the pyramid (Graner, Fagella-Luby, & Fritschmann, 2005). According to Swanson et al. (2012), this conception is logical, as special education should typically not differ drastically from general education programming, but rather, act as an even more intensive support system targeted to a diagnosed learning disability. Proponents of tiered instruction and intervention have also noted that if and when the point of referral and diagnosis is reached, a wealth of student data is already available to inform SLD determination and the most appropriate instructional programming (Bernhardt & Herbert, 2011). Thus, the RTI process can provide a more comprehensive view of the student's academic abilities and deficiencies, and through implementation, teachers can more accurately infer that lack of progress is the result of a learning disability, as opposed to inadequate instruction and learning opportunities (Kovaleski, 2013).

### **Models for Decision-Making within Tiered Instruction and Intervention**

All tiered instruction and intervention models feature a particular approach to instructional decision making; most commonly, the problem-solving model, the standard protocol model, or a combination of the two (Turse & Albrecht, 2015). While the models are

distinct, they do share similar core requirements: assessment through a universal screener, identification of problems based upon a universal screener, selection of research-based interventions for identified problems, implementation of selected interventions, ongoing monitoring of effectiveness, and adjustment to intervention plans based upon progress and diagnostic data (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Searle, 2010; Wedl, 2005). The models differ, however, in the implementation of interventions. In the problem-solving model, interventions are individualized and presumably different for each student, whereas in the standard protocol model, a set of standard interventions are administered to all students experiencing the same learning difficulties (Bender & Shores, 2007). While both models emphasize the use of research-based interventions targeted to a specific need, the standard protocol model employs a bank of proven interventions from which practitioners choose to meet specific learning needs of student groups at certain points in the process (Turse & Albrecht, 2015). In both the problem-solving model and standard protocol model, interventions occur in a succession between tiers and increase in intensity according to the guidelines of the specific tiered instruction and intervention model in place. Both the problem-solving model and standard protocol model require of educators a high degree of knowledge of interventions and the ability to select the most appropriate intervention based upon student needs (King & Coughlin, 2015).

### **Roles and Responsibilities within Tiered Instruction and Intervention Models**

According to Berkley et al. (2009), “For RTI to be a viable method for determining the existence of an SLD, an RTI model must be formally in place throughout a school” (p 86). Hill et al. (2012) also emphasized the need for all stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, specialists, support staff, and parents, to be highly skilled and knowledgeable of what they referred to as “the many moving parts of RTI” (p. 116). According to Ridgeway et al. (2011),

stakeholders must hold a shared understanding that all components of the intervention process are equally necessary and inherently interdependent.

As a general education initiative with significant implications for special education, tiered instruction and intervention is unique in the professional discretion and relative autonomy given to classroom teachers in regard to instructional programming and decision making (Rinaldi & Stuart, 2011). RTI and similar models call for substantial collaboration between all educators within a school system, yet the majority of the process is carried out by general education teachers. Universal screening, Tier 1 instruction, and in many cases, Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions typically take place in the general education classroom (Hill et al., 2012). Rinaldi and Stuart (2011) noted that effective implementation of a tiered instruction and intervention model requires general education teachers to be competent in data analysis, application of problem-solving models, dynamic instruction, and comprehensive awareness of evidence-based interventions, as they are the primary practitioners and agents of delivery.

Despite the responsibility placed on classroom teachers, RTI and other tiered instruction and intervention models are considered whole-school initiatives and typically involve nearly every faculty and support staff member (Hahn, 2012). According to Morin (2014), in addition to classroom teachers, RTI teams can consist of school administrators, RTI coordinators, special education teachers, school psychologists, speech pathologists, academic specialists, counselors, and school social workers. As Ehren, Montgomery, Rudebusch, and Whitmire (2006) noted, all team members have unique roles, and specific responsibilities may differ significantly between LEAs, as there is no standardized implementation structure in place across the United States. Further, according to Batsche (2015), schools' infrastructures vary greatly and it cannot be assumed that all roles even exist in a given school. In general, however, most districts

implementing a tiered instruction and intervention model do so through the collaborative work of school administrators and program coordinators, general education teachers, special education teachers, specialists, including school psychologists, speech pathologists, school counselors, school social workers, and parents or guardians (Batsche, 2015). According to Morin (2014), school administrators and coordinators provide oversight and support implementation and data analysis, while special education teachers and all other specialized staff, such as school psychologists, provide specific support, including conducting screeners and assessments and selecting and implementing specific interventions.

In addition to teams formed specifically for the tiered instruction and intervention model in place, such as RTI or MTSS, many LEAs also utilize Student Study Teams (SST) or Child Study Teams (CST). An SST is often loosely defined as a collaborative group formed at the school level to analyze and systematically support a student's academic, behavioral, social, and emotional development by proposing interventions and setting goals (Love, 2002). Much like RTI teams, SSTs are often comprised of multiple stakeholders, including the student's teacher or teachers, a school administrator, support personnel, such as a school psychologist, and special education teachers. The student and the student's parents are also generally included in much of the SST's work. According to (Lane, 2010), "Student Study Teams in public education are a function prior to special education placement." Thus, a referral to SST is typically made by the general education teacher with evidence from academic and behavior-related data, as well as documentation of the interventions already attempted and their respective outcomes. Through group data analysis and knowledge sharing, SSTs develop new intervention plans for the student and monitor progress over time (Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, & Cook, 2003).



Much like the SST, a CST is a multidisciplinary group of educators, as well as a student's parents, that provides prescriptive support for a student experiencing academic and/or behavioral difficulties. As with SSTs, CSTs are part of a pre-referral process in which students receive targeted interventions based upon research and best practice (National Association of Special Education Teachers, 2015).

### **Implementation in the United States**

The only specific mention of tiered instruction and intervention in federal legislation is found in IDEA 2004 in specific reference to SLD determination. Given that the law simply requires SEAs to consider at least one essential element of RTI in their SLD identification process, SEAs have maintained a high degree of autonomy in how they implement a tiered instruction and intervention model (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). At the time this study was conducted, all 50 states encourage or require a tiered instruction and intervention model for prevention of academic deficiencies, and most allow or even require it to be used in SLD determination (Jimerson et al., 2016). While all tiered instruction and intervention models share essential components of universal screening, a multi-level system of interventions, progress monitoring, and data-based decision-making, they may differ significantly in regard to implementation procedures and even language conventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). Examples include Pennsylvania's Response to Intervention and Instruction model and the Virginia Tiered Systems of Support.

According to Jimerson et al. (2016), in many states, "RTI implementations have merged with school improvement or school reform efforts and have been retitled multi-tiered systems of support" (p. 2). Cunningham (2015) asserts, however, that while RTI and MTSS are similar in many ways, they are not exactly the same. Rather, MTSS is more comprehensive and explicitly

includes social and emotional supports in addition to the three tiers of RTI for academic instruction and intervention. MTSS also dictates professional development and collaboration structures for educators (Cunningham, 2015).

As Buffum et al. (2009) describe, variations across tiered instruction and intervention models have also formed at the local level, within districts and charter networks, such as Teaming for the Learning of All Children, Excellence: A Commitment to Every Learner, Collaborative Academic Support Teams, and The Washington Model. While these are only four examples of the ways in which RTI models have been adapted and implemented at the local level, they represent the relative variability of implementation and the degree with which the core components may be left up to the interpretation of implementers and application within local contexts. While in some ways the implementation of different models across and even within states may be problematic due to a lack of relevant resources and research specific to each model, the general consensus among the field of education is that there are more similarities than differences between all models, and that local control is essential given the wide spectrums of needs and capacity to implement seen in states and LEAs across the US (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005).

### **Tiered Instruction and Intervention in North Carolina**

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) has specifically adopted a Multi-Tiered System of Support to serve as its model for instructional intervention. According to the North Carolina Public Schools (2016) website, “NC MTSS is a multi-tiered framework which promotes school improvement through engaging, research-based academic and behavioral practices. NC MTSS employs a systems approach using data-driven problem-solving to maximize growth for all.” Additionally, a brief issued by the NCDPI (2016) for parents states,

“By definition, MTSS is a tiered framework, which promotes school improvement through engaging, research-based academic and behavioral practices” (para. 1). Though it shares many of the same core tenets of more commonly known RTI models, such as increasing intensity of supports and data-based decision making, NC MTSS is a distinct system that reflects the state’s diverse needs and disparate access to resources. (C. Watkins, personal communication, August 2, 2016). However, the NCDPI does disseminate resources from RTI-specific sources, such as the RTI Action Network, and model-agnostic sources, such as the National Center for Intensive Intervention, to support implementation across its districts and schools, underscoring the alignment of NC MTSS with more mainstream RTI conceptions.

Under the provisions set by the NCDPI (2016) and outlined in a video shared on the NC MTSS webpage, it is expected that all students receive core instruction aligned to the needs of the district and general school populations. Most students, according to the NCDPI, should be successful and make appropriate academic gains with this core, classroom-level support provided by the general education teacher or teachers. When a student does not make the progress expected based upon a review of relevant data, a supplemental layer of support in alignment with core instruction is provided. If this added layer of support is not sufficient, additional interventions may be administered. While North Carolina has set the expectation that all interventions and supports are research-based and appropriate based upon the student’s age/grade level and academic/behavioral needs, there is not currently a prescriptive set or sequence of interventions that teachers must implement. Rather, teachers and school leaders have autonomy in selecting, implementing, and evaluating the supports students receive, and the state has framed implementation around a community of practice (NCDPI, 2015). Additionally, central to NC MTSS is its emphasis of six critical components: leadership, building the capacity/infrastructure

for implementation, communication and collaboration, data-based problem solving, three-tiered instructional/intervention model, and data evaluation. According to an informational resource distributed by NCDPI (2015), the Critical Components were developed in collaboration with the State of Florida and its work with MTSS and considered in NC MTSS as essential for effective implementation.

Though the implementation of NC MTSS is promoted and supported by the NCDPI, it is not currently mandated in North Carolina by the SEA. According to the NCDPI (2016), however, each Critical Component is expected to be in place or at least in progress in all districts and schools, and implementation of NC MTSS will be mandated by 2020, when the state formally requires it to be a part of the SLD determination process and moves away from basing such decisions solely upon the discrepancy model (C. Watkins, personal communication, August 2, 2016).

While implementation is primarily a district-level process in North Carolina as of the time of this research and many LEAs and schools have their own supports, systems, and even terminology in place to facilitate NC MTSS, the NCDPI does provide resources and technical assistance in an effort to prepare for the shift to full, regulated implementation in 2020 (C. Watkins, personal communication, August 2, 2016). Specifically, this includes a regularly-updated website, resources created by the NCDPI and links to external resources vetted by NCDPI. Additionally, the NCDPI employs a team of regional NC MTSS consultants who facilitate professional learning and coaching for school leaders and teachers (NCDPI, 2016).

### **Educator Efficacy and Fidelity of Implementation**

While teacher quality and preparedness are not new concerns, tiered instruction and intervention models are multifaceted and bear significant implications on student achievement

and compliance with laws and regulations. Resultantly, many have questioned whether teachers, particularly those newest to the profession, are equipped to implement them with fidelity (Fox, 2009). As Bain, Sager Brown, and Jordan (2009) pointed out, teachers often serve as the first line of intervention advisors and implementers, making proper training “absolutely essential” (p. 75). Research has emerged in recent years indicating that while most educators are familiar with the basic features of RTI models, such as universal screening and tiered support, many do not possess the level of understanding necessary for effective application and execution (Spear-Swerling & Cheeseman, 2012). This is particularly problematic, as Wilcox et al. (2013) assert that the success of any reform or initiative, including RTI and MTSS, is dependent upon the efficacy of practitioners and their capacity to implement.

According to Ashton and Webb (1986), teacher efficacy is the concept of influence upon student achievement, and more specifically, the perception of impact teachers hold of themselves. Isbell and Szabo (2015) concluded that efficacious teachers, characterized by the student support they provide and classroom structure they establish, are associated with a greater ability to effectively control “student success experiences” and foster learning. Efficacy is inextricably linked to tiered instruction and intervention, according to Nunn, Jantz, and Butikofer (2009), as research has shown a clear link between educator effectiveness and a willingness to initiate and sustain scientifically-based instructional strategies. Research conducted by Rinaldi and Stuart (2011) showed that it took two years for teachers in their study to assume responsibility for implementation of RTI, and three years to view themselves as integral parts of the collective process and ultimate success of the initiative. Nunn (2007) further explained that there is a strong correlation between effective teachers and the implementation of effective interventions.

## High Quality Instruction

Still, some have cautioned against oversimplifying and understating the connection between educator efficacy and the fidelity of tiered instruction and intervention implementation. Nunn and Jantz (2009) have drawn attention to a particular problem with most existing research regarding teacher efficacy and tiered instruction and intervention: It fails to take into consideration how teachers function outside of optimal, controlled conditions for implementation. Similarly, Spear-Swerling and Cheeseman (2012) have criticized existing research for its narrow focus on teachers' content knowledge and understanding of the RTI process itself, as opposed to their actual capacity to implement. Ridgeway et al. (2011) also concluded that determining the effectiveness of RTI through evaluation of student academic gains, which is another common practice and source of data associated with implementation of RTI, may not yield an accurate representation of the efficacy of the teacher or the model, as limited academic gains could be the result of any one or combination of factors—particularly the quality of the Tier 1, or core instruction.

Cuticelli, Collier-Meek, and Coyne (2016) similarly questioned how educators can be sure a student's failure to respond to general instruction warrants intervention, as opposed to simply a shift within the core instruction. According to Callender (2007), interventions should never be prescribed until and unless the general classroom instruction can be considered high-quality and there has been ample time and opportunity to learn. Despite the push towards research-based instruction under NCLB, high-quality instruction has been difficult to quantify due to multiple confounding variables, such as curriculum, student engagement, and student-teacher ratios. In a comprehensive review of relevant research, Hill et al. (2012) noted that very few RTI-related studies have focused on the fidelity of implementation of Tier 1 instruction.

They noted that this lack of research is problematic, as without it, there cannot be certainty in determining whether a student is non-responsive, or whether poor core instruction is simply leading to false positives and unwarranted movement into Tier 2. According to Ridgeway et al. (2011):

For valid placement consideration purposes, a designated diagnostic team of intervention specialists should always be able to verify that a student in the primary tier has received appropriate and adequate instruction in the general education classroom. Therefore, high quality general instruction is essential when measuring outcomes of both the core curricula and individualized interventions. (p. 88)

For these reasons, Allain and Eberhardt (2011) have referred to Tier 1 as “the forgotten tier” (p. 3). Though the pyramid depiction of RTI is oversimplified according to many researchers, Allain and Eberhardt (2011) noted that Tier 1 is nonetheless portrayed accurately as the foundation and base of the overall “pyramid” model. Thus, while the quality of interventions is key, the entire process, particularly NC MTSS, hinges on strong core instruction (C. Watkins, personal communication, August 2, 2016).

### **Effectiveness of Interventions**

In addition to concerns surrounding the quality of the core instruction, Callinan et al. (2013) concluded that there is not a solid basis for the assumption that all interventions delivered to students are of a consistently high standard. In studying their overall perceptions of a three-year RTI implementation effort, Rinaldi and Stuart (2011) noted that participants were increasingly optimistic and positive about RTI and its ability to identify academic needs early, prevent unnecessary special education referrals, and boost student achievement. However, Meehl and Rosen (1955) have cautioned against accepting such results, as participants and

researchers alike tend to overestimate the accuracy and efficacy of a given treatment, despite a lack of proof and understanding. In a study of 351 teacher candidates, Bain et al. (2009) found that participants tended to endorse interventions, despite admitting no prior exposure to them or knowledge of their evidence base. Furthermore, in their attempt to study teachers' perceptions of RTI, Greenfield et al. (2010) found frequent and common confusion among participants regarding instructional interventions and their appropriateness in given instructional scenarios.

Jacobs, Gregory, Hoppey, and Yendol-Hoppey (2009), noted that preservice teachers in particular may significantly lack in understanding and application of interventions, as they presumably have the least exposure and experience selecting and delivering them, and are in many cases reliant almost solely on the curriculum from their teacher preparation program. In concluding their study of preservice teachers' understanding of interventions, Bain et al. (2009) used the term "gullibility" to describe participants' overall tendency to make incorrect statements and assumptions about interventions (p. 80). While they attributed these findings in part to the natural optimism and hope for positive change that many teacher candidates possess, the researchers urged teacher preparation programs to deliberately instruct pre-service teachers on how to identify promising interventions and draw evidence-based conclusions about their effectiveness. As a result of observed deficits in first year teachers' knowledge of tiered instruction and intervention processes, Cavendish and Espinosa (2009) called for a greater alignment of teacher preparation programs to current practices in school systems. However, such alignment may be difficult to accomplish, given the variations between the different models implemented across SEAs and LEAs (Berkley et al., 2009).



## **Teacher Preparation and Professional Development**

The results of a tiered instruction and intervention model cannot be considered valid unless practitioners are properly trained to implement it (Isbell & Szabo, 2015). Assuring that instruction and interventions are delivered with fidelity has proven to be a significant challenge for teachers, administrators, and researchers, as well as those charged with developing teacher preparation and professional development programming. Kratochwill et al., (2007) asserted that the amount and quality of pre-service and in-service programming may have a major impact on teachers' perceptions of efficacy and the extent to which they can implement a tiered instruction and intervention model with fidelity. Targeted training and ongoing professional development is therefore necessary for educators to be able to find and utilize research-based practices (Castillo et al., 2016).

As explained by Borghese (2015), professional development and training for tiered instruction and intervention is multifaceted and must account for various factors, including the conceptual, practical, and methodological aspects of a model. According to Kratochwill et al. (2007), one of the most significant challenges in preparing educators to implement tiered instruction and intervention models is the limited knowledge base and lack of research that supports each practice or core component of the model. Training materials have been limited and are only recently becoming readily available (Kratochwill & Hoagwood, 2006). Furthermore, Shernoff, Kratochwill, and Stoiber (2003) noted that the lacking research base and inaccessibility of high-quality, relevant resources has resulted in a situation in which many trainers and professors are under-qualified and do not possess the level of expertise needed to support current and prospective educators.

Despite the growing concerns over the practicality and efficacy of professional development for RTI, professional development has always been a core component of most models (Allain & Eberhardt, 2011). Defined by Kratochwill et al. (2007) as learning activities aimed at fostering the skills needed to fulfill duties and meet the expectations of one's role, professional development is often referred to as staff development, training, continuing education, and professional learning. It has been established many times over that professional development can influence teachers' practices and lead to improvements in student achievement, and accordingly, an emphasis has been placed on professional development within the RTI framework (Danielson et al., 2007). As Cunningham (2015) asserted, professional development is also an explicit component of MTSS. Bernhardt and Herbert (2011) have cautioned against professional development in its standard, traditional form in regard to RTI, though, explaining, "Professional development events are not sufficient for increased staff learning and performance" (p. 48). Instead, they call for professional learning opportunities that transcend typical workshops and meetings by providing deep, collaborative, experiential learning in context. A study conducted by Nunn and Jantz (2007) supported the hypothesis that targeted training and personal investment in a tiered instruction and intervention process, such as serving on a committee, discussing interventions in professional learning communities (PLC), or regularly attending Student Support Team (SST) meetings, contribute to teachers' increased perceptions of self-efficacy. From their study on teachers' perceptions of RTI within a school reform effort, Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, and Cardarelli (2010) concluded that a deeper form of professional learning, particularly a partnership between a school and university, is needed to successfully scale a tiered intervention and instruction initiative.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Spear-Swerling and Cheeseman (2012) revealed that the mean accuracy of beliefs regarding the effectiveness of interventions was still only about 60% after participants had received approximately ten hours of professional development over the course of two months. While most states who have adopted a tiered instruction and intervention model have also incorporated increased and model-specific professional development, Berkley et al. (2009) raised concerns over the variability between programs and their overall efficacy.

### **Summary**

This section has detailed the history and foundations of tiered instruction and intervention as an educational initiative in US public school systems. As a result of legislation and regulations tied to special education, student achievement, and accountability, components of tiered instruction and intervention systems have been adopted and implemented in every state in the country, including North Carolina with NC MTSS (Deni & Lynch, 2014; Martin, 2016). However, given the complexity and differences between the models, the fidelity of implementation and preparedness of educators has become a concern throughout the field (Kovaleski et al., 2013). This study is rooted in the theoretical conceptions of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and Mitzel's Theory of Teaching and Learning. According to the NCDPI (2016), the primary objective of NC MTSS is to advance student academic and behavioral progress. Thus, the effectiveness of the initiative is based upon the outcome, or what Mitzel (1960) refers to as the product. Viewing it as a product-based initiative, Mitzel's conception of presage criteria, teachers' characteristics, can also be directly applied to NC MTSS. Bandura's (1997) work furthers these ideas by connecting teachers' agency, or self-efficacy, with the ability to implement an initiative with integrity. Based upon this conceptual

framework, there is reason to study the extent to which teachers perceive themselves as effective implementers of NC MTSS. Though professional development is a defining feature of NC MTSS and most tiered instruction and intervention frameworks, there is little evidence that it has been sufficient in preparing teachers to understand the intervention models and to implement them with fidelity (Kovaleski et al., 2013).

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

This study is designed to gain insight into novice teachers' perceived ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity in a suburban North Carolina public school district. This chapter details the study's design and methodology, including the research questions, setting and participants. Data collection, data analysis processes, and the study's trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and ethical considerations are also addressed. With the information presented, the nature and quality of the study can be evaluated and replicated.

### **Design**

This qualitative research employed a transcendental phenomenological design to study the constructed realities of novice elementary teachers as implementers of NC MTSS. Given that the nature of this study is descriptive as opposed to predictive, and its purpose is to make meaning of participants' perceptions, a qualitative methodology is most fitting (Gall et al., 2007). Further, because human experiences, beliefs, and insights are dynamic in nature, the interpretive, naturalistic approach applied in qualitative research designs such as phenomenology was necessary for the interpretation of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Defined by Husserl (1931) as the rigorous exploration and philosophical interpretation of phenomena, phenomenology was chosen as the study's research design. Phenomenology yields significant insights by relating participants' consciousness with phenomena and therefore enabled the researcher to make meaning of participants' whole experiences through interviews (Kaufert & Chemero, 2015). According to Woodwell (2014), "The most direct way of gaining a better understanding of individuals' perceptions is to talk to them" (p. 65). Thus, specific research questions were designed to target the essence of participants' experiences, and the

resulting perceptions they form. This study's conceptual framework holds that self-efficacy beliefs are influenced by the interactions between a multitude of variables. Thus, its significance lies in the assimilation and conceptualization of consciousness that phenomenology enables (Gall et al., 2007).

The study employed a transcendental phenomenological design to see the phenomena through an impartial and unknowing lens (Sheehan, 2014). Husserl (1931) used the term *epoche*, meaning to avoid or abstain from, to describe the process of consciously identifying and restricting the researcher's own thoughts and setting aside current opinions and beliefs (Moustakas, 1994). According to Blum (2012), through *epoche*, transcendental phenomenology allows "things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time" (p. 1032). A transcendental phenomenological approach is appropriate in this study given the researcher's personal experiences as a teacher in a different state and implementer of a tiered instruction and intervention model that is significantly different from NC MTSS. Thus, the researcher's personal experiences were not relevant to this study and may confound interpretations if considered.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1. How do novice teachers perceive their ability to implement NC MTSS in their classrooms with fidelity?

RQ2. How do novice teachers perceive the preparation and training they have received related to NC MTSS?

RQ 3. How do novice teachers perceive the efficacy of others as implementers of NC MTSS?

## Setting

This study took place in a suburban North Carolina school district. To protect anonymity, the pseudonym Parkland School District is used. At the time this study was conducted, Parkland School District was among the 20 largest LEAs in North Carolina with over 50 schools. In recent years, the district has grown considerably due to its proximity to an expanding metropolitan area. The percentage of students in Parkland School District receiving special education services is typically below the state average, while the District's gifted population is often greater than the state average (NCDPI, 2014). Further, 2013-2014 LEA report cards disseminated by NCDPI (2016) show that Parkland School District's graduation rates and pass rates on end-of-grade examinations frequently exceed the respective state averages. Approximately 30% of Parkland School District students receive free and reduced lunch.

Nearly all of Parkland School District's teachers are considered fully licensed and highly qualified. Approximately 25% of teachers in Parkland School District have zero to three years of experience, while nearly half of teachers have 10 or more years of experience. The teacher attrition rate in Parkland School District has historically been close to the state average of 14%.

The leadership structure of Parkland School District is similar to other large suburban districts across the United States. The school board and district administration, including the superintendent and departmental directors oversee all operations. Each school is led by building-based administrators, including one or more principals and assistant principals. The district also employs instructional coaches who provide teachers with additional resources and supports related to instructional planning and delivery (J. Jones, personal communication, May 17, 2017).

Parkland School District was chosen for this study for several reasons. Districts in North Carolina are not currently required to implement NC MTSS though the expectation has been set by NCDPI that all districts will be implementing NC MTSS by 2020 when the state will move to require it as part of the special education referral and identifications process. At the time of this study, Parkland School District reports that it is conducting a phased rollout of NC MTSS across its schools. Unlike many SEAs across North Carolina, Parkland School District employs an MTSS coordinator who provides centralized guidance, oversight, and support to schools.

### **Participants**

According to Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso (2010), in any study, the sample is at the heart of the research, and should be selected so that the larger population is represented and extraneous variables are limited. Maxwell (1996) noted that a sample selected for homogeneity and typicality can provide more confidence in a study by eliminating accidental variation. Thus, the participants in this study were selected through random purposeful sampling to ensure only elementary teachers with three or fewer years of experience were selected. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) define this method of sampling as the systematic selection of cases that is not based upon knowledge of participant characteristics or ultimate outcomes. Other forms of purposeful sampling, such as intensity and maximum variation, did not apply because participant perceptions were not readily observable at the time of selection (Gall et al., 2007).

According to Patton (2015), there is no set minimum or maximum sample size in qualitative research. The number of participants included in a study reflects the study's context, practical limitations, and the researcher's desire for either breadth or depth of data. The sample size should enable the data to reach a point of redundancy to increase the certainty of findings (Yin, 2015). For these reasons, 12 to 15 novice elementary teachers from Parkland School



District were sought to participate in this study. Each year, the district employs fewer than 100 new teachers per year, thus the sample size is reflective of this limitation. Further, given that all participants were novice teachers in the same school district, the population was relatively homogenous in the context of this research. According to Mason (2010), the point of diminishing return, where additional data does not lead to additional insights, is often 15 participants in phenomenological studies with a homogenous population. To identify the population of potential participants, a list of teachers with three or fewer years of experience was obtained from Parkland School District. An introductory email was sent to these teachers explaining the purpose of the study and specific qualifications for participation (see Appendix A).

As noted by Locke et al. (2010), when designing a sample for any study, the objective is to do so in a manner that reduces superfluous variables and bias within the context of realistic abilities and limits of the population. Thus, extraneous participant variables such as age, race, and gender are not considered to be confounding and were not be taken into consideration when selecting participants, nor was level or location of post-secondary education. However, qualifying participants were required to have completed an accredited teacher preparation program, hold an active North Carolina teaching certificate, and be serving their first three years as a general education elementary classroom teacher. Those with special education credentials or previous experience as a teacher's aide were not selected for participation, as they may have been exposed to different or additional training than that of general education teachers.

### **Procedures**

In order to begin this study, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured (see Appendix B for IRB approval documentation). Next, the site must grant consent and participants

must commit to the study. To elicit participants, a list of all elementary teachers with three or fewer years of experience was obtained from Parkland School District's Human Resources Department. These teachers were then sent an email describing the nature of the study, as well as qualifications for participants and what would be required of them throughout the study (see Appendix A). Due to district policy, an incentive to participate in the study could not be offered. Once it was determined that potential participants qualified for the study and agreed to participate, they signed and returned consent forms (see Appendix C).

As asserted by Sapsford and Jupp (1996), in any legitimate study, multiple data collection methods must be deliberately selected and systematically employed based on the unique nature and focus of the research. According to Woodwell (2014), interviews are often the cornerstone of qualitative research and, depending on the specific design, provide the bulk of data to the researcher. Therefore, data collection began with an unstructured interview with the district's NC MTSS Coordinator to capture program-level information and establish a clearer context for participant perceptions of NC MTSS implementation (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996). Additional data was then collected through semi-structured interviews with participants (see Appendix D). A document analysis of participants' teacher preparation program records and the district's calendar of professional development offerings related to NC MTSS took place last to avoid any unintentional researcher bias related to the schools attended, grades attained, etc. during interviews. Interviews were transcribed and coded following a systematic process of open coding to identify distinct concepts and categories within the data, and then axial coding to confirm and explore the emerging concepts (Biddix, 2009). All confirmed concepts were transferred into a data table to organize and further isolate results (Miles & Huberman, 1984). To authenticate the data, member checks were conducted. Participants were provided with

interview transcriptions, as well as the recordings, to verify accuracy. Document analyses were also coded following this process to better unify the data. Bracketing, described by Gupta (1998) as a method of suspending all presuppositions and natural conceptions, was employed in order to isolate the data and exclude any personal views.

### **The Researcher's Role**

As the human instrument of this phenomenological study, my role was to conduct the research and “mediate the data” with as much objectivity as possible (Simon, 2011, para. 1). This included strategically probing, listening, and reflecting upon data and relevant research and theory to form a deeper level of understanding (Greenbank, 2003). According to Arzubigi, Artiles, King, and Harris-Muri (2008), the role also requires a mindfulness of the filters through which I view the world. I committed to being forthright about any bias, presupposition, or connection I brought to this study. Though I did not have any direct relationship with the participants outside of this study, I do live in a neighboring city. Further, while I do not have experience implementing NC MTSS or working with Parkland School District or NCDPI, I have served as a Response to Instruction and Intervention Coordinator in Pennsylvania. Thus, my knowledge of tiered instruction and intervention processes and policies in Pennsylvania may have impacted my perceptions of NC MTSS implementation in the Parkland School District. My own experiences and opinions were not disclosed in interviews, and the participants were assured that I did not have any influence in their current positions and would not discuss their participation in this study with others.

### **Data Collection**

The research began with an unstructured interview with Parkland School District’s NC MTSS Coordinator, followed by a series of semi-structured interviews with participants, and an

analysis of relevant documents. Such combinations have been frequently utilized in transcendental phenomenology, as they can be used to compare and contrast the participants' subjective reality with that of the objective researcher (Creswell, 2007). According to Richardson (2000) method triangulation, the use of multiple methods of data collection, corroborates findings and increases a study's validity. Given this study's conceptual framework grounded in the Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and the Theory of Teaching and Learning, theory triangulation was also employed. Defined by Mills (2014) as the use of multiple theoretical perspectives to interpret data, theory triangulation can enrich findings and support researchers in explaining phenomena.

The first method of data collection was an unstructured interview with the district's MTSS coordinator to establish a necessary foundational understanding of Parkland School District's NC MTSS implementation plan. Following what Patton (2002) described as the natural flow of human interaction, the researcher conversed directly with the NC MTSS coordinator in an extended interview.

Participant interviews were semi-structured, with the expectation that participants elaborated as much as they saw fit to address his/her perceptions of NC MTSS and level of confidence in implementing it with fidelity. Following Gall et al.'s (2010) conception of semi-structured interviews, the researcher guided participants to expand upon their responses. Though in-person options were offered, all participants chose to conduct the interviews over the phone.

Document analysis further validated and distinguished participants' statements. The researcher analyzed Parkland School District MTSS implementation programming and resources, as well as participants' preservice teacher preparation program curricula, to identify

participants' previous and forthcoming exposure to MTSS and tiered instruction and intervention.

The research followed an intentional sequence of interviews and document analyses to obtain the most authentic data as possible. According to Merriam (1998), interviews should typically be the first method employed, as responses may become less authentic later in the study when participants feel more connected to the study and its results. Further, interviewees tend to consciously and subconsciously skew responses to match other data that has been collected. Document analysis was therefore the last method of data collection. This sequence also afforded an adequate amount of time to acquire all available and necessary documents without impacting participants' schedules (Gall et al., 2007).

### **Interviews**

Doody and Noonan (2013) described the importance of interviews as a means of explicit data collection, stating, "Interviews generate deeply contextual accounts of participants' experiences and their interpretation of them," (p. 28). This study employed two interview methods: an unstructured interview with the district's MTSS coordinator, Karen, and semi-structured interviews with participants. Sapsford and Jupp (1996) described the continuum of interview styles, from unstructured to highly structured, and distinguished between them by applying the procedural, structural, and contextual dimensions of qualitative interviews. Woodwell (2014) also noted the degrees of structure within interview designs noting that, unlike those with a high level of structure, unstructured and semi-structured interviews facilitate a conversational nature and tend to illicit the feeling of a free-flowing discussion related to perspectives and perceptions. According to Woodwell (2014), unstructured and semi-structured

interviews require significant preparation on the part of the researcher in order to effectively deviate from a script, but can oftentimes be more effective in eliciting meaningful responses.

**Unstructured interview with the district's MTSS coordinator.** Glesne (1999) asserted that interviews give outside researchers an inside perspective and an opportunity to understand things they otherwise could not. For the purposes of this study, a foundational understanding of Parkland School District's MTSS implementation and professional development efforts was needed to establish an accurate context for other data.

In a similar study of teachers' perceptions of professional support structures, Wilson (2004) effectively employed unstructured interviews to initiate fieldwork. Necessary information about the research site, including its personnel structure, student discipline system, professional development offerings, and other related initiatives, was obtained to establish a full and accurate view of participants' contexts.

As Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) explained, unstructured interviews are often the best data collection method when the researcher does not have enough information about a topic to pre-determine interview questions. Because little about Parkland School District's MTSS program was published and readily available to the public at the time of the study, the researcher did not want to limit the information shared by following a set of specific, and potentially shortsighted, questions. However, in line with Patton's (2002) conception of unstructured interviews, the researcher did prepare extensively for the interaction and approached it with clear intention and goals. Defined by Burgess (1984) as a broad agenda, an aide memoire was developed prior to the interview by the researcher to ensure relevant topics were addressed and enough information was elicited (see Appendix E).

In line with Zhang and Wildemuth's (2009) best practices for unstructured interviews, the researcher worked to build a rapport with Karen at the beginning of the interview. As the district's MTSS coordinator, it was imperative that Karen understand the purpose and value of the study. Further, successful unstructured interviews depend upon mutual trust between the researcher and the interviewee (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The researcher must have confidence in the interviewee's knowledge and truthfulness, while the interviewee must feel safe enough to speak openly and honestly. Thus, the researcher spoke with Karen about her own experiences in education and with tiered instruction and intervention, as well as some relevant personal information. The researcher clarified that the purpose of the study was limited to understanding participants' perceptions of their abilities to implement NC MTSS with fidelity, as opposed to obtaining an actual measurement of their efficacy. The researcher also assured Karen that the name of the district and the identities of participants would not be disclosed. With Karen's permission, the interview was audio recorded and the researcher took hand-written notes.

**Semi-structured interview with participants.** As with Karen, open and uninhibited conversation was desired during participant interviews. However, a high degree of consistency was necessary to enable meaningful analysis of the data generated from the interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Thus, all participants were asked the same interview questions in the same sequence (see Appendix D). Some research suggests that recording of interviews may affect the participants' responses (Al Yateem, 2012). However, interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy. Participants were notified of the recording device, and only the interview was recorded. A back-up recording device was also utilized as a precaution in the event of an error or malfunction with the primary device.

As explained by Maxwell (1996), “There is no necessary similarity or deductive relationship between your research questions and the methods you use to collect your data (including your interview questions)” (p. 73). Interviews must generate data that can be used to answer the research questions. Sapsford and Jupp (1996) described the standardized method of interviews, which follows a “schedule” to ensure the questions are conversational, unbiased, and properly understood by the participant. Setting a schedule also allows the researcher to maintain a controlled environment that ensures each question is appropriately and fully addressed (Seidman, 2013). In a similar study of pre-service elementary teachers’ perceptions of RTI, Hurlbut and Tunks (2016), noted that their use of a schedule in semi-structured interviews enabled deeper probing and the formulation of clearer coding categories. According to Woodwell (2014), best practice in interviews dictates that questions may vary in style if deemed appropriate and beneficial to the study. This research used the following combination of open-ended, retrospective, and factual questions designed with impartial, appropriate language in this order:

1. Please describe your general perceptions of NC MTSS —in theory and in practice.
2. On a scale of one to ten, please rate your current level of confidence in terms of implementing NC MTSS in your classroom.
3. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your actual effectiveness as an implementer of NC MTSS and ability to implement it with fidelity?
4. Describe the major components of the NC MTSS framework.
5. Please explain the purpose and goal of NC MTSS as an educational initiative.
6. Describe the formal training on NC MTSS or any tiered instruction and intervention model that you have received.



7. In what ways has your training prepared and not prepared you to effectively implement NC MTSS in your classroom?
8. Please describe your impression of NC MTSS implementation at your school.
9. How effectively do you believe other teachers at your school implement NC MTSS?
10. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your experiences with and feelings toward tiered instruction and intervention and NC MTSS?

According to Kvale (1996), interviews are, at the most basic level, conversations. Thus, while they are aligned to the first research question, questions one, two, and three are experience questions that were designed to elicit introspective responses (Patton, 2015). Given that humans are inherently “intelligent systems” and have a unique ability to perceive the world in which they live, these non-empirical questions led to a better understanding of participants’ perceptions (Stufflebeam, 2006, p. 3). Questions two and three are similar, but the nuances between confidence and perceived effectiveness addressed different components of Bandura’s (1997) Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy. Confidence is an internalized belief and feeling that may be informed primarily by enactive mastery experiences and emotional arousal, while effectiveness is more objective and can be shaped through vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1997; Kelleher, 2016).

Questions four and five are knowledge questions, as they aimed to determine participants’ understanding of an established process (Patton, 2015). These questions were also key in answering RQ1 because they indicated participants’ understanding of fidelity as it related to NC MTSS implementation. These questions were not dwelled upon during interviews, as knowledge questions may cause participants to feel threatened and self-conscious (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Questions six and seven required participants to recall the training they have received on NC MTSS. These questions were critical as they evoked knowledge of personal experiences and provided information directly in line with RQ2. Using the word “describe” in question six as opposed “to what extent” or another phrase referring the quantity and quality of training, rendered a non-leading question that allowed participants to respond freely (Gittelsohn, 1996).

Question nine is a probing question that encourages participants to expand upon their initial thinking and responses to question eight (Bernard, 1995). Both questions helped direct participants to a deeper level of thinking and serve to answer RQ3. The final question allowed participants to add any additional information that they wished to mention regarding NC MTSS and their related experiences. It is a one-shot question that signaled the end of the interview and a final opportunity for participants to express their thoughts (Patton, 2015).

### **Document Analysis**

While interviews tend to provide the bulk of data in many qualitative studies, Sapsford and Jupp (1996) asserted that existing documents can also be rich in data and serve to complement other sources. While the selection of documents varies based on the nature of the given study, all fall into particular classifications—most commonly primary and secondary (Gall et al., 2007). Sapsford and Jupp (1996) distinguished between primary and secondary sources, asserting that primary sources are original or raw material. In contrast, secondary sources address or contribute to a topic of study after the initial event or issue has passed.

A critical practice analysis of RTI implementation in an urban school district utilized similar documents to study teachers’ perceptions of RTI (King-Thorius, Maxcy, Macey, & Cox, 2014). After an analysis of district-provided RTI support materials and resources, the researchers distinguished a connection between teachers’ confusion and frustration with the RTI

process and insufficient and outdated RTI resources. Documents offer more objectivity and classification capabilities than other data sources in qualitative research (Maxwell, 1996).

In this research, primary documents in the form of official NC MTSS manuals and training documents from NCDPI, program requirements and syllabi from participants' teacher preparation programs, and implementation calendars and resources from Parkland School District, was obtained. These served to further ascertain the exposure to NC MTSS or other tiered instruction and intervention model participants had prior to taking on their first role as a teacher and that which has and/or will be provided by the school.

### **Data Analysis**

As noted by Maxwell (1996), "Analysis is often conceptually separated from design, especially by writers who see design as what happens before the data are actually collected. However, data should be treated as part of the design, and as something that must itself be designed," (p. 77). Thus, the seven steps of data analysis delineated by Moustakas (1994) were applied to the research from its beginning:

1. Discovering a topic and question rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social meanings and significance.
2. Conducting a comprehensive review of the professional and research literature.
3. Constructing a set of criteria to locate appropriate co-researchers.
4. Providing co-researchers with instructions on the nature and purpose of the investigation, and developing an agreement that includes obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and delineating the responsibilities of the primary researcher and research participants, consistent with ethical principles of research.
5. Developing a set of questions or topics to guide the interview process.

6. Conducting and reporting a lengthy person-to-person interview that focuses on a bracketed topic and question. A follow-up interview may also be needed.
7. Organizing and analyzing the data to facilitate development of individual textural and structural descriptions, a composite textural description, a composite structural description, and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences. (p. 103)

Upon completion of data collection, the focus must shift to the transformation of raw data into variables for analysis (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996). Maxwell (1996) urged researchers to begin data analysis immediately upon the completion of the first interview, and follow this routine for every subsequent interview. Thus, this research simultaneously employed transcription and pre-coding techniques. Miles and Huberman (1984) concluded that interviews followed by immediate analysis produce more valid data and increase the reliability of subsequent interviews. According to Sapsford and Jupp (1996), this preparation of data should not necessarily be extensive, but should provide a general summary of the subject of study and better position the data for deeper coding and analysis.

Following the transcription and preparation of the data, coding was employed. Maxwell (1996) asserted that coding is a method of segmenting data and arranging it into categories to enable a meaningful comparison within and across the categories. Because coding categories are grounded in the data and often determined by the researcher during data collection and analysis (Woodwell, 2014), the set of categories was not pre-determined for this study. Though there are various approaches to coding, this study utilized the representational conception identified by Sapsford and Jupp (1996) which views data as surface content, reducing it to the essentials. Textural and structural descriptions were also applied, as they help to ensure accurate descriptions and inferences for thematic evaluation (Roberts, 2009). Qualifications and

exclusions were clearly defined. Both positive and negative examples were also developed for reference to mitigate potential confusion throughout the process (Boyatzis, 1998).

Because the purpose of this inquiry is to understand the participants' perceived ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity, only the surface expression of data, as opposed to any additional, implicit, or theoretical meanings, were considered. The analysis in this study followed Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant-comparative method, in which categories are clarified, allowing for comparing and contrasting and the development of sub-categories where necessary. Gall et al. (2007) emphasized that this was designed to be a process, noting the elaborations beyond initial categorizations that are often necessary as data is specified. Therefore, it was understood in this research that coding would be a lengthy and dynamic undertaking, which involved the ongoing application of data to a broader context and re-contextualization where necessary (Yin, 2015).

### **Trustworthiness**

Sapsford and Jupp (1996) highlighted the importance of viewing data not as something that naturally exists, but rather, as constructs. Therefore error, whether originating within the interview, observation, or analysis, is possible in this study. Maxwell (1996) specified that a researcher should understand and explicitly address the likelihood of bias and error from the outset of study.

In this research, trustworthiness and validity were increased through method triangulation, theory triangulation, member checks, and peer review. Triangulation, the use of multiple methods or sources of data, can reduce the risk of bias, increase validity, and enable the researcher to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). Method triangulation was accomplished using

two forms of interviews and document analysis. Theory triangulation was achieved through the study's application of two theories—the Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and the Theory of Teaching and Learning. Member checks, defined by Woodwell (2014) as the systematic solicitation of feedback about the data and conclusions from the participants, were also employed to increase trustworthiness. Participants had the opportunity to review the transcribed interviews and collected documents to ensure accuracy and avoid misinterpretation or misunderstanding.

### **Credibility**

According to Trochim (2006), in order for a study and its results to be considered credible, it must be perceived as legitimate and logical by participants. Moreover, the findings must be representative of reality (Shenton, 1994). To increase the overall trustworthiness of the study through credibility and ensure accurate analysis of data, I remained in frequent communication with superiors and peers who have expertise in both tiered instruction and intervention and qualitative research methodologies (Alkin, Daillak, & White, 1979). Additionally, member checks provided opportunities for participants to evaluate and contribute their feedback to help ensure accuracy of data and findings (Woodwell, 2014).

### **Dependability**

In conducting and reporting the results this study, the dynamic nature of educational initiatives, such as NC MTSS, was carefully considered and documented. According to Williams (2011) dependability increases through thorough documentation and consistent implementation of research processes. Thus, all inquiry processes were explicitly designed, and records were kept detailing any deviations in the research and analysis process. Additional efforts to improve the dependability of the study included peer reviews and member checks for

corroboration and confirmation of methodologies and findings (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

### **Confirmability**

To increase the confirmability of this study, an audit trail, defined by Gall et al. (2007) as documentation of a study's procedures, was conducted. Serving as a chain of evidence, the audit trail facilitated meaningful connections between the research questions, data, and results, and ensured others could trace the findings to the data (Trochim, 2006). Furthermore, a data audit was conducted to find support for interpretations of data in relevant literature, as well as any potential areas of bias or distortion (Williams, 2011).

### **Transferability**

Taking into account the transferability of this study, the researcher provided a rich description of the specific setting and context among which the study was conducted. In doing so, the necessary information was given to enable others who may wish to transfer the findings to make informed judgements about the extent to which they may apply to other contexts (Orb et al., 2001). Additionally, peer-reviews and supervision from experts in the respective field have been identified by Maxwell (1996) as effective methods to identify bias and flaws within the research and were employed to increase the transferability of this study (Boyatzis, 1998).

### **Ethical Considerations**

It was of the utmost importance to ensure that the study was conducted ethically and in line with sound research standards. IRB approval was obtained, and the specifications of it were closely followed at all stages of the study (see Appendix B).

While this research bore no direct or likely risks to participants and did not involve deception, efforts were taken to minimize any side effects or unintended consequences. In

soliciting participants, an email detailing the purpose of the research, the personal and professional background of the researcher, requirements for participation, potential risks, and assurances of anonymity were sent to all potential participants (see Appendix A). Participants were also informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The protection of privacy and participant rights were a priority throughout this research. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms and participation in the study was not disclosed to others by the researcher. The setting of the study was anonymized following Tolich's (2016) conceptions of generalization. While pertinent demographic information was accurately depicted, it was generalized in such a way that Parkland School District cannot be distinguished from other large suburban LEAs in North Carolina. Selective deletion, the omission of problematic data, was also employed for data that the researcher felt could jeopardize the anonymity of the setting or participants (Thomson, Bizdel, Golden-Biddle, Reay, & Estabrooks, 2005). Interviews were conducted over the phone, thereby avoiding any observable association to the study for participants. Codes were used during all data collection and analysis processes instead of participant names or other identifying information. Thus, identifying information is not present on any raw data. The document linking participant identities to the data was, and continues to be, restricted to the researcher. Deception was not applicable for this research at any stage.

All data have been stored in password-protected computer files and locked document storage. All digital files will be permanently erased and paper-based documents will be destroyed after the required three-year retention period.



## Summary

This chapter has provided a description of the research design and methodology. Employing transcendental phenomenology to make meaning of participants' constructed realities, this study sought to determine novice teachers' perceptions of their ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity. The sample consisted of 12 novice elementary teachers in Parkland School District, a suburban district located in North Carolina. Data was obtained through an unstructured interview with the district's MTSS coordinator, as well as semi-structured interviews with participants, to generate deep contextual accounts of beliefs and experiences (Carter et al., 2014; Doody & Noonan, 2013). An analysis of relevant documents was also employed as an additional method of data collection. This form of method triangulation added to the richness of data, helped to confirm findings, and increased the study's validity (Polit & Beck, 2012). Theory triangulation was also employed through the application of Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and the Theory of Teaching and Learning. Data was systematically analyzed following Moustakas' (1994) seven steps for data analysis, including the creation of textural and structural descriptions of data. Coding was employed for thematic categorization and evaluation (Roberts, 2009). At each stage of the study, the researcher abided by all ethical standards and took measures to increase its credibility, confirmability, and transferability.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of Chapter Four is to present results from this study of novice elementary teachers' perceived ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity. The qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was designed to understand how a sample of 12 elementary teachers, each with three or fewer years of experience, perceive themselves as implementers of the NC MTSS initiative. An introduction to each participant is provided, as well a synthesis of the context relative to NC MTSS implementation within Parkland School District. Following the data collection and analysis processes described in Chapter Three, this chapter outlines how meaning was made of data from interviews and relevant artifacts through thematic development. Results are discussed in narrative form organized by theme and further presented as answers to the study's research questions. The research questions that guided this study are:

RQ1. How do novice teachers perceive their ability to implement NC MTSS in their classrooms with fidelity?

RQ2. How do novice teachers perceive the preparation and training they have received related to NC MTSS?

RQ 3. How do novice teachers perceive the efficacy of others as implementers of NC MTSS?

### **Participants**

Of the 84 elementary teachers in Parkland School District who qualified for participation in this study, 12 agreed to participate by providing information regarding pre-service preparation and engaging in a one-on-one semi-structured interview. All participants were in their first three years of teaching and led an elementary classroom in one of 25 elementary schools across

Parkland School District. Participants are described in greater detail below using pseudonyms and generalized demographic descriptions to preserve anonymity.

### **Kerry**

Kerry is in her second year teaching second grade at one of the largest elementary schools within Parkland School District. She graduated from college in 2015 with a degree in elementary education and considers herself a natural-born educator. She is inspired by her former teachers and believes she has found her calling as an educator. She has had a positive experience in her role thus far and describes her school as collegial with great support from parents and the community.

### **Monica**

Monica is in her third year as a second grade teacher at Parkland School District. She also completed her student teaching experience in the district. In addition to her undergraduate degree in elementary education, Monica recently completed a Master's program at a local university. She enjoys being a teacher, but is also considering becoming an administrator in the near future.

### **Sherri**

Sherri is a fifth grade teacher and came to Parkland School District after working for over a decade in other industries. She describes teaching as sometimes being more difficult than she expected, citing behavior management as a primary challenge. However, she has greatly enjoyed her experience in the classroom so far. She plans to remain in education until she retires, but might consider moving into special education or administration in the future.

**Desiree**

Desiree is a third grade teacher at one of the lowest-performing elementary schools in Parkland School District. She graduated in 2014 with a degree in education from a local university and served as a substitute teacher for a year before accepting her current position. She is interested in school administration in the future, as her stepmother is a principal in another state.

**Molly**

Molly has two years of experience as a fourth grade teacher in Parkland School District. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in reading education at a local university. Though she describes teaching as being more difficult and more political than she had imagined, she has enjoyed teaching so far and hopes to continue as either a classroom teacher or reading specialist.

**Talia**

Talia is in her first year as a third grade classroom teacher, but was a substitute for one year at the elementary level prior to accepting the position. In addition to holding a Bachelor's degree in elementary education, she recently completed training to obtain an endorsement for English as a Second Language. Though she has enjoyed teaching, she cites unsupportive leadership as a key challenge in her work. Several of her family members are educators in other districts in North Carolina and Talia credits them with helping her make it through her first year as a teacher.

**Erin**

Erin is in her third year of teaching in Parkland School District. She is currently teaching second grade, but has two years of experience as a third grade teacher. Erin holds a Bachelor's and Master's degree in elementary education and curriculum and instruction, respectively, and is

considering enrolling in either an administrator certificate program or doctoral coursework. Erin graduated from Parkland School District and plans to stay in the area for the foreseeable future.

### **Shana**

Shana is in her second year teaching third grade in Parkland School District. She completed her teacher preparation program in 2013, but worked for over two years in another industry before she was hired as a teacher. Shana explained that teaching is more stressful than she'd realized and feels that her health has suffered as a result. Due to this and other personal circumstances, she is considering leaving the field or possibly obtaining the credentials to become a school media specialist.

### **Claudia**

Claudia is in her second year teaching, but her first year teaching fifth grade at Parkland School District. Previously, she taught third grade in another county in North Carolina. She explained that Parkland School District is more innovative in terms of its instructional practices and integration of technology, and has a much more supportive and active community than her previous school district. Claudia is currently pursuing a Master's degree in instructional technology and holds a part-time job in retail.

### **Tawni**

Tawni is in her first year teaching second grade in one of Parkland School District's highest achieving schools. Outside of school, she also works as a personal trainer. Tawni shared that she struggles with balancing her time and often feels overwhelmed with her various responsibilities. She does hope to enroll in an online Master's program in the future, but is planning to wait until she feels more comfortable teaching. Though Tawni did not attend

Parkland School District as a student, her parents currently live in the county. She visits them regularly and her mother is a regular volunteer in her school.

### **Julie**

Julie is a first grade teacher with two years of experience. She works at one of Parkland School District's largest elementary schools and is also a faculty leader for a school-sponsored student club. She expects to graduate from a Master's program in educational leadership.

Though she plans to remain as a classroom teacher for several more years, she hopes to become an instructional coach or curriculum coordinator in the future.

### **Marcus**

Marcus is in his second year teaching fourth grade at Parkland School District. Marcus moved from another state to North Carolina for his job at Parkland School District. Though he was initially interested in adolescent education, a positive experience working at the elementary level during a job shadowing experience prompted Marcus to earn Bachelor's and Master's degrees in early childhood education.

## **Results**

I explored how participants perceive their ability to implement NC MTSS in their elementary general education classrooms. A transcendental phenomenological design was used to understand phenomena from an unbiased and unknowing perspective. Data were gathered and then analyzed following Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant-comparative method. A broad list of codes was created to categorize findings and then formulate themes aligned to the study's research questions. The following section presents findings, including participants' own words and excerpts from documents, to describe the phenomena being studied and answer the research questions.

## Theme Development

Following the seven steps outline by Moustakas (1994) and the processes described in Chapter Three, I made meaning of the data by identifying 17 invariant horizons.

Horizontalization is the concept in research that all data is equally valid and significant (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Data from interviews and artifacts supported the development of thematic categories with textural and structural descriptions. Further coding of the data and categories yielded four central themes:

1. Understanding of the tenets of tiered instruction and intervention and NC MTSS.
2. Awareness of state and local expectations for NC MTSS implementation.
3. Availability of relevant resources and supports.
4. Confidence as an implementer of NC MTSS.

Table 1 illustrates the horizons of open-codes and their relative frequencies, as well as the classification process through which themes were rendered. Each reference to open-codes made during interviews was counted. To avoid skewing interview data, open codes identified in artifacts were counted only once per artifact category if present due to the number and similarity of documents included in the analysis of artifacts (see Appendix F for documents reviewed by category).

Table 1

### *Open-Code Frequency and Identified Themes*

Open-Code	Frequency of open code across data sets	Theme
Exposure to tiered instruction and intervention in preservice training	14	Understanding of the tenets of tiered instruction and intervention and NC MTSS
Gaps in preservice training	12	
MTSS as a new name to an old/standard instructional practice	12	

Multi-component initiative	16	Awareness of state and local expectations for NC MTSS implementation
Proactive support and early identification of academic deficiencies and disabilities	9	
Phased Implementation	8	
Stakeholder Responsibilities	19	
District mission/vision	9	Availability of relevant resources and supports
Canvas course/professional development	10	
PLCs and team meetings	7	
Communication/messaging from district and school leaders	8	
Knowledge level of colleagues and supervisors	8	
Characteristics of novice teachers	26	Confidence as an implementer of NC MTSS
Identification of student needs	12	
Intervention selection, implementation, and evaluation	11	
Feedback from colleagues and administrators	9	
Barriers to effective implementation of NC MTSS	17	

### **Understanding of the Tenets of Tiered Instruction and Intervention and NC MTSS**

As the first to be identified, this theme helped to answer research questions one and two by shedding light on participants' conception of NC MTSS and understanding of implementation fidelity. Analyzing exposure to NC MTSS and tiered instruction and intervention, as well as revealing perceived gaps in training, helped to draw conclusions about how participants perceive their training and therefore themselves as practitioners of NC MTSS. The theme is comprised of five distinct sub-themes: (a) Exposure to tiered instruction and intervention in preservice training; (b) Gaps in preservice training; (c) MTSS as a new name to an old/standard instructional practice; (d) Multi-component initiative; and (e) Proactive support and early identification of academic deficiencies and disabilities. As elementary general education



classroom teachers, participants are expected to understand and implement NC MTSS according to state and local expectations (Millhouse-Pettis, 2011).

**Exposure to tiered instruction and intervention in preservice training.** While every participant recalled addressing tiered instruction and intervention in preservice training, only two were enrolled in one or more courses that concentrated on it. Analysis of participants' preservice programming records and course syllabi confirmed that all participants were exposed to RTI, MTSS, or another tiered instruction and intervention system in at least one course. For most participants, tiered instruction and intervention was covered in coursework related to teaching exceptional children. Only four of the 12 participants recalled engaging in RTI or MTSS implementation with lead teachers during practicum experiences and while student teaching. Tawni shared,

I guess I knew that interventions were being done, and I did have some part in, like, planning them. But I never really got to see the real data from the interventions. I also wasn't part of data meetings that my lead teacher had with the principal or RTI coordinator, or special ed. teacher. I'm not sure why actually. Every once in a while, we'd talk about interventions during PLCs, but I don't remember those talks being real, very specific about students or interventions. (personal communication, July 24, 2017)

As Kerry explained about her student teaching placement, "Interventions happened I think, but it didn't seem like they were following any particular program or process. It wasn't like what I do now—a lot more laidback I guess. There wasn't much documentation or anything like that."

(personal communication, July 19, 2017)

Ten participants graduated from teacher preparation programs within North Carolina, but only two recalled learning specifically about NC MTSS, as opposed to a more generalized

conception of tiered instruction and intervention. Molly, Talia, and Shana described more generalized instruction about three-tiered models and interventions of increasing intensity. Of those prepared out of state, Marcus learned about state-specific models, while Sherri learned about tiered instruction and intervention in a very general sense. Further, analysis of teacher preparation programming records revealed that tiered instruction and intervention was most often introduced in coursework related to special education and education law.

**Gaps in preservice training.** While all participants recalled learning about tiered instruction and intervention in their teacher preparation programs, each noted what they now perceive to be gaps in training related to the specific tenets of tiered instruction and intervention systems and implementation protocols. Monica shared,

We talked about things in such a vague way, but my whole program was really like that. I guess, yeah, there's no good way to teach us about every different initiative out there. But it would have been really helpful to me to understand, like, how MTSS worked and what it looked like when it was done right. We never got to practice interventions and analyzing data. And I never got to be part of, in the meetings before I started doing it here for real. (personal communication, July 29, 2017)

Others shared Monica's sentiments, expressing frustration over the limited exposure to tiered instruction and intervention in their coursework and its lack of relevance to their current roles. Four participants stated that they did not understand NC MTSS to be the primary responsibility of the general education classroom teacher until they were expected to implement it in their roles. As Kerry stated, "I thought it was a special ed thing really. I knew it had to do with early identification and referrals, but I didn't really get how big of an impact it would have on what I do in my teaching." (personal communication, July 24, 2017)

Among other gaps in preservice training, three participants stated that they were unaware of the extent to which data is involved in the selection of interventions. Furthermore, three participants shared that they did not understand that behavioral initiatives, such as PBIS, could be integrated into a tiered instruction and intervention system.

**MTSS as a new name to an old/standard instructional practice.** During interviews, five participants referred to MTSS as a standard instructional method and noted the similarities between the initiative and other best practices. The terms “normal teaching,” “common sense,” and “good teaching” were used to describe NC MTSS. Sherri asserted, “Now that I know more about it, MTSS is what teachers have been supposed to do forever. There’s nothing new or special to it I don’t think. But there’s more data and documentation I guess” (personal communication, July 20, 2017). Similarly, Erin shared, “We weren’t doing MTSS when I was in elementary school, but we sort of were—like interventions and grouping were there” (personal communication, July 27, 2017). One participant described NC MTSS as a version of differentiation, with a more complex monitoring and documentation component.

Though some participants spoke specifically about the similarities between NC MTSS and general instruction, district documents more often emphasize the shifts in practice required for effective implementation. Within its online training program in the “Why MTSS for PSD?” section, NC MTSS is referred to as a structural redesign. In an overview presentation designed for school staff, a shift in focus is identified, moving from a process for some students to a framework for total school improvement. Further, four different documents reviewed from district and state resources stress the importance of building and maintaining a common and shared vision of NC MTSS. Thus, while some participants see NC MTSS as a standard

instructional practice, there are clear efforts at the district and state levels to demonstrate how NC MTSS is different than previous practices.

**Multi-component initiative.** When asked to describe the components of NC MTSS, nine participants described multiple interrelated parts. Claudia shared,

It seems simple, but it's actually kind of complicated. So there's the academic and the behavior sides that come together. And within both, there are three tiers. Most students are in the first tier. When that's not enough, they go up. That's where the intervention and tracking part comes in, right. That's rolled all in with the big problem solving part, too. (personal communication, July 28, 2017)

When probed to consider all components, including those outside of the classroom, Erin added, "Yeah, there's a lot—all the stuff principals do—I guess mostly data and training stuff" (personal communication, July 27, 2017). Additionally, six participants elaborated on the three-tiered instructional framework, and five participants went into greater detail about the interrelation of academic and behavioral interventions.

While three participants did reference the six Critical Components of the NC MTSS model, none were able to recall all of them. Documents from NCDPI and Parkland School District do frequently address the six Critical Components of NC MTSS: (a) Leadership; (b) Building the capacity/infrastructure for implementation; (c) Communication and collaboration; (d) Data-driven problem solving; (e) Three-tiered instructional/intervention model; and (f) Data-based evaluation. As Molly explained, "MTSS happens in the classroom for the most part, but these Critical Components include a lot of other things happening in the district to support it. Still, I think teachers are responsible for, like, the bulk of it" (personal communication, July 26,

2017). Notably, while three participants did mention the problem solving component of NC MTSS, none described it as a process for school improvement as state and district documents do.

### **Proactive support and early identification of academic deficiencies and disabilities.**

Based upon interview responses, most participants understand NC MTSS to be, at least in part, a system for the early identification of academic deficiencies, disabilities, and at-risk students.

According to Marcus, “When even tier 3 doesn’t work, a student then goes to testing” (personal communication, July 25, 2017). Talia also noted, “I think the goal is to prevent referrals when it’s really just the classroom instruction that’s not right or the student is behind on something. It’s putting more, I guess responsibility on us to figure it out” (personal communication, July 28, 2017). However, while some tiered instruction and intervention models are specifically designed to support referrals for testing and early identification of SLDs, NC MTSS is not explicitly promoted at the state or district level this way. Even as North Carolina works toward statewide implementation of NC MTSS, LEAs retain the authority to choose how they will determine eligibility for students with SLDs (Hussey, 2016). As explained in an August 2016 memo from the Director of NCDPI’s Exceptional Children Division, LEAs must submit a document expressing their intent to implement NC MTSS as an alternative to the discrepancy method for analyzing student progress and identifying SLDs. According to district documents, Parkland School District has not used NC MTSS a part of its eligibility determination process but may elect to in the future.

### **Awareness of State and Local Expectations for NC MTSS Implementation**

Consistent with an understanding of the core tenets of tiered instruction and intervention and NC MTSS, the second theme to emerge through analysis of the data was participants’ awareness of state and local expectations for implementation. Overall, participants demonstrated

a very high level awareness of the goals of NCDPI and Parkland School District related to NC MTSS, as well as their role in the initiative's implementation. As Shana shared,

I know that by 2020, I think, we're all going to be doing MTSS, like across the state. I don't really get how they are going to monitor that or, uh, if they will, but I guess the point is that we're all following similar practices. I mean I think that makes a lot of sense because of professional development and evaluations. We can all, like, be trained and evaluated on the same things. And for the students it's important that we are all following researched methods for increasing achievement and, um, identifying needs as soon as we can. (personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Five participants referenced the statewide implementation directive, and nine participants articulated the district's expectations for teachers to implement strong Tier 1 instruction, administer research-based interventions, and monitor progress towards achievement. Additionally, eight participants conveyed an understanding of the district's intention for all teachers and administrators to be trained in NC MTSS.

This theme and its sub-themes further substantiate answers to RQ1 and RQ2 by exposing participants' collective knowledgebase and conception of responsibilities as they relate to NC MTSS. By analyzing participants' sentiments against the messaging from the state and local levels, some conclusions may be drawn regarding participants' understanding of NC MTSS and the responsibilities incumbent upon them.

**Phased Implementation.** In response to a question about NC MTSS implementation in their schools, two of the 12 participants referenced the phased implementation process in place across Parkland School District. District documents, including the MTSS Timeline and MTSS Action Plan, illustrate the systematic NC MTSS rollout process extending from April 2016

through 2020 in which faculty engage in training and adhere to implementation expectations based upon role and school. In an interview, the district's MTSS coordinator confirmed that implementation across the district is paced to ensure the proper training of staff, allocation of resources, and alignment to a collective vision among all stakeholders. As she explained, the district is often conceptualized as having distinct regions based upon the demographics and needs of the student population. Thus, training and implementation expectations have been set for each region.

Though all teachers across the district will ultimately engage in the same or similar training prior to full NC MTSS implementation in 2020, professional learning is scheduled and paced differently across the regions. Resultantly, at the time this study was conducted, participants had been exposed to varying amounts of training. Table 2 shows the training each participant recalled and reported completing by the time of this study.

Table 2

*Participant Training Status*

Participant Name	Status of District and School-Led Training at the Time the Research was Conducted
Kerry	Completed the required Canvas course modules and attended three or four half-day trainings led by district staff.
Sherri	Completed the required Canvas course modules and attended one or two district-led trainings.
Monica	Participated in one district-led assessment of school MTSS readiness. Has not completed or been assigned any training within the Canvas Course.
Desiree	Does not recall participating in any MTSS-related training at the district or school level.
Molly	Completed the required Canvas course modules and attended several half-day trainings led by district staff. Has also participated in two or three sessions at her school focused on MTSS implementation.
Talia	Attended one school-led training on MTSS. Has not completed or been assigned any training within the Canvas Course.

Erin	Participated in one MTSS-related session led by district staff. Recalled a school-led training that was scheduled but that she did not attend due to personal circumstances.
Shana	Attended a few district-led trainings on MTSS and completed the required modules in the Canvas Course. Has been observed twice by school leaders and received feedback on MTSS implementation.
Claudia	Has not participated in any district or school-led training on MTSS.
Tawni	Participated in one district-led training and two school-led trainings. Completed some of Canvas Course.
Julie	Attended one school-led training on MTSS, but has not engaged in any district-sponsored professional development.
Marcus	Engaged in several district and school-led trainings. Has not been assigned any training within the Canvas Course.

The district’s phased implementation process and varied exposure to training among participants is pertinent to all three research questions, as engagement in training may impact perceptions of efficacy (Mitchell, 2009).

**Stakeholder Responsibilities.** Like their expressed understanding of their own responsibilities in NC MTSS, participants conveyed a general understanding of all stakeholders and their respective responsibilities throughout implementation. Desiree shared that the assistant principal in her building is a vocal advocate for NC MTSS and is very involved in the process. Moreover, 10 participants indicated that there are multiple roles, including principals, assistant principals, classroom teachers, and special education teachers that work together throughout implementation. Nine participants identified and discussed the unique responsibilities of each role involved, describing a generally collaborative process. Marcus stated, “I know I’m responsible for a lot—sometimes it seems like I’m taking on everything. But I do realize administrators do things that I guess I don’t even know about” (personal communication, July 25, 2017).

Six participants referenced the district’s MTSS coordinator as a key role charged with managing the logistics of implementation, including training, messaging, and ensuring



compliance with state and district mandates. The district's MTSS coordinator described her role similarly.

According to the MTSS Teaming Structures section of the district's MTSS Canvas course, the district-level implementation team consists of the MTSS coordinator, PBIS/behavior support, curriculum specialists, school psychologists, and instructional facilitators, and is responsible for designing and implementing NC MTSS district-wide. This includes professional development, coaching and technical assistance, research and evaluation, and communication and visibility. The MTSS Teaming Structures section further outlines suggested school-level MTSS leadership team structures, listing the MTSS coordinator/coach, and representatives from grade level/spans, academics, and behavior. Core functions of the school-level MTSS leadership team include data/information sharing, school-wide problem solving, and examining the effectiveness of tiers and implementation. This allows teams to then identify key problems and filter information to grade level PLCs to inform problem analysis and implementation planning. At both levels, MTSS leadership teams should consist of five to seven members according to the documents.

As shown in Parkland School District's MTSS Staffing Pyramid (see Appendix G), the entire NC MTSS process is comprised of roles at varying levels. The process begins at the classroom level, and then moves up to PLCs, the school-level MTSS team, the school administration team, principals, the implementation team, and then ends with the district-level MTSS team. The MTSS coordinator is depicted as being active and involved at all levels.

**District mission/vision.** The final sub-theme that emerged throughout data analysis was the awareness and prevalence of the district's mission and vision in relation to NC MTSS. Four participants articulated the district's mission and described how Parkland School District's

commitment to NC MTSS supports this mission. According to its website, the district's mission is to prepare all students to succeed. As Claudia stated, "I think we do MTSS because it helps kids achieve and succeed—maybe more than they would have doing things the old way and not finding needs as fast" (personal communication, July 27, 2017). Similarly, Kerry explained, "As teachers, our job is to make sure all of our students can succeed. MTSS gives us a way to do that by working together and determining what is most effective for each child and who needs help" (personal communication, July 24, 2017). Several district-created documents and resources, including the Canvas course and the MTSS Action Plan featured the district mission, emphasizing the connection between it and NC MTSS.

### **Availability of Relevant Resources and Training**

The third theme identified through data analysis involved the resources and training that have been made available to Parkland School District faculty and staff. Overall, participants acknowledged that the state, district, and individual schools have made significant efforts to provide support through trainings, job aids, and other informational resources. While some expressed frustration with the format and amount of training required of teachers, more than half of participants conveyed an appreciation for the supports available and the efforts that have been made at various levels to facilitate implementation. Three participants described NC MTSS as a regular topic in their schools' professional development, while four participants could not recall any professional development related to NC MTSS at their schools. Six of the 12 participants discussed the way in which NC MTSS is addressed during PLCs and other school or team-level meetings.

This theme and its sub-themes substantiate answers to all three research questions. RQ2 specifically addresses teachers' perceptions of preparation and training. Furthermore, and in line

with the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of this study and RQ1, the perceived amount and quality of training teachers receive related to an initiative directly impacts their feelings of self-efficacy (Kratochwill et al., 2007). Relative to RQ3, collaborative environments such as PLCs and team meetings provide participants with opportunities to gauge and form judgements of others' efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS.

**Canvas course/professional development.** During an interview, Parkland School District's MTSS coordinator identified professional development as an area of focus across the district and one of her primary responsibilities. She stated, "I do my best, but obviously can't work with every teacher at every school. We have some district-wide face-to-face things, but the Canvas course is maybe the best way to get to everyone. The early phases of implementation involve a lot of administrator and coach training" (personal communication, July 6, 2017). The Canvas course is an online platform that houses asynchronous training modules and resources. Unique user accounts enable the district to control the type and flow of information, as well as monitor progress through the modules. As confirmed in its MTSS implementation timeline, Parkland School District is following a phased rollout in which administrators and teachers engage in professional development, including the Canvas course, at different phases/stages. While all stakeholders will be fully trained by the end of the 2018-2019 school year, not all teachers had been assigned to engage in training in the Canvas course at the time of this research (see Table 2).

During interviews, four participants discussed the canvas course as a key source of information and training related to NC MTSS. Based upon the training participants reported engaging in (see Table 2), these four participants were the only ones who had engaged in the Canvas Course at the time this research was conducted. Among these participants, feelings

about the course were somewhat mixed. As Kerry stated, “I think it’s great and really easy to use. It’s really helped me, uh, understand MTSS. And there’s a lot of helpful information in there” (personal communication, July 24, 2017). Conversely, Shana asserted, “I honestly think it’s pretty crazy that we have to do it. I feel like we hear so much about how simple RTI is, but I mean the stuff I’ve seen in the course doesn’t make it seem simple. There is a lot of stuff to watch and do, but I don’t think any of it has, like, changed what I do. Maybe it will at the end, I don’t know” (personal communication, July 25, 2017). Two participants reported generally positive feelings about the Canvas course, while two others expressed some level of frustration with it, citing the amount of time required to complete modules, redundancy of resources, ambiguous/conflicting information, and volume and complexity of materials.

While participants were not explicitly asked to reflect upon the Canvas course or any other specific professional development experience, they were asked to describe the quality and effectiveness of training they have received relative to NC MTSS. Six participants described it in positive terms. Molly commented, “I know I need all the help I can get, so I’ve tried to make the most out of what I’m given. I think the trainings have been pretty good. I definitely, um, get what I’m supposed to do now more. I think it also has helped me start to see how all of the pieces of MTSS fit together. So yeah, I think the content is good and so far it’s helped me know what I’m supposed to be doing” (personal communication, July 26, 2017). Tawni stated, “The trainings are fine. I know it’s stuff I need to know, and I like that I can do most of it online” (personal communication, July 24, 2017). Two participants expressed an appreciation for the collaborative feeling and approach to the training sessions. Two other participants noted the quality of the content and the clarity with which it is presented.

On the contrary, six participants did express negative sentiments toward their professional development experiences. Tawni noted,

Honestly, I think it's kind of ridiculous. I don't really see why we need to know some of the things that have been covered, especially, I mean, because it takes so much time.

There's got to be a better way to do that. But I think they also need to think about what's actually important to know. And I mean, right now it seems like just things we should know, but nothing exactly saying what we should do. I'd like it if there was more actual information for teachers, like how to do stuff. I don't know, maybe videos or something. Like, I just need to see good interventions or something, you know? And not a bunch of different charts or lists. I guess what I'm saying is that I, I mean, I don't think what we've done so far is very practical. (personal communication, July 24, 2017)

Sherri and Marcus had similar sentiments, explaining that what they've learned in the course and other trainings so far has not felt relevant to their work and therefore has not been fully effective. As Sherri explained, "We went to sessions in the middle of the year. I couldn't just walk into my class the next day and start doing things totally different. It's just tough to start new practices in the middle of the year, you know" (personal communication, July 20, 2017).

**PLCs and team meetings.** A major component of Parkland School District's implementation of NC MTSS is PLC meetings. Considered a school-level teaming structure, district documents depict grade level PLCs as collaborative groups consisting of an MTSS leadership team member, grade level teachers, and department teachers. The purpose of these PLCs in Parkland School District's NC MTSS process is to share and analyze core and supplemental group data and identify problems. The school leadership team then analyzes the problem and initiates a problem-solving protocol as needed. While they were not directly asked

about PLCs, four participants did reference these meetings while describing their impression of NC MTSS implementation in their school and perceptions of others as implementers of the model. As Talia stated,

Our PLCs are awesome. I don't know if we really do them the way we should, but I mean the collaboration is there and we do look at data. I've started to be more comfortable sharing things about my classroom and data, but some people on my team, I mean, have a ton of experience and that's super helpful. I've come out of my shell a little more now and like getting their opinion and advice on things because I guess I think they're doing it better. They all say that this MTSS stuff is new, but I still think, like, they just have a lot more experience in general. So I guess for me, PLCs have been really good in helping me learn more about MTSS. (personal communication, July 27, 2017)

Furthermore, Claudia explained that her team's PLCs focus on data and are good opportunities to share ideas and resources. Shana stated, "I consider PLCs to be professional development. It's probably some of the best PD we do actually" (personal communication, July 25, 2017).

While most expressed positive sentiments about PLCs, one participant shared that she feels PLCs aren't an effective use of time relative to NC MTSS. As Julie stated, "They feel kind of disorganized still. We usually end up talking about something totally different than what we had planned. But I mean it's after a whole day of school and we're all fried by that point, you know" (personal communication, July 28, 2017).

### **Efficacy as an Implementer of NC MTSS**

The fourth theme that emerged was participants' efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS. Five sub-themes aligning to distinct components of and factors contributing to NC MTSS implementation were also identified: (a) characteristics of novice teachers; (b) intervention

selection; (c) feedback from colleagues and administrators; (d) identification of student needs; and (e) time for implementation/competing initiatives.

The findings show that participants' perceptions regarding their own abilities to implement NC MTSS with fidelity are generally mixed. Half of the participants expressed feelings of insecurity and described themselves as largely ineffective implementers of NC MTSS. Conversely, the other half of participants expressed moderate to high levels of confidence and described themselves as mostly effective implementers of the initiative. Thus, the findings extracted from this theme and its sub-themes directly relate and influence the answer to RQ1.

**Characteristics of novice teachers.** Though they were not explicitly asked to comment on or consider their experience level, each participant referenced being a new teacher at least once throughout the interviews. In total, participants referenced their limited experience as teachers 26 times. When asked about her level of confidence implementing NC MTSS, Julie stated, "I'm new here, so I'm not confident with anything yet" (personal communication, July 28, 2017). Claudia, Kerry, Monica, Shana, and Molly articulated similar sentiments throughout interviews. Shana explained,

I feel like the new teachers are taking things one step at a time. So I know MTSS is part of our work and all, but I haven't really felt like I was expected to be great at it yet. Because I'm still so new I guess. We're kind of taught to look to other people on our team for help. So, uh, even though I don't always know what I'm doing or feel good at it, I think that's kind of assumed at this point. I'm trying to remember that I'm a beginning teacher and everything is new and confusing, you know. And that includes all of the MTSS stuff. (personal communication, July 25, 2017)

In analyzing interview recordings and transcripts, it became clear that several participants used their newness as a reason, or justification, for feeling less than confident. Though all participants referenced being a new teacher, those who referenced their brief tenure more than once were the same six participants who reported generally low feelings of self-efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS. There did not appear to be any discernable difference in how participants referred to themselves as “new” or “beginning” teachers between those who had two or three years of experience and those who had just one or less.

**Identification of student needs.** When asked about their confidence and effectiveness as implementers of NC MTSS, six participants described a strong ability to identify the academic and behavioral needs of their students, while six expressed some uncertainty or an incapacity to do so. Desiree explained, “Oh I know my students and I think it’s pretty easy to tell what they need in a given moment. Where the problem started, I may not always know—but the data speaks for itself with gaps” (personal communication, July 25, 2017). Also referencing data, Claudia stated, “Yeah it’s all there in our data—the kids do a lot of different assessments, so there’s always chances to see what they get and don’t get. But, like, either way, I feel like I know anyway. Even at the beginning of the year some things are pretty obvious about students and I feel like I can tell what they are going to struggle with” (personal communication, July 28, 2017). Later in her interview, Claudia also shared, “It’s not like every student is stuck on just one or two things. It’s more like kids either get it all or they don’t get much of it. So it’s not like I automatically assume anything, but I know there are patterns that I should be watching and I do” (personal communication, July 28, 2017).

On the contrary, Sherri explained, “I can guess, but I honestly don’t feel like I am doing it the way it’s supposed to be done. I can look at my data and I obviously know my kids, but I



think it's supposed to be more complicated or prescriptive and certain or something" (personal communication, July 20, 2017). Moreover, Molly stated, "Sometimes I feel like I'm just kind of guessing (personal communication, July 26, 2017).

Though half of participants did express consistently high levels of self-confidence in identifying student needs in their classroom, none went so far as to say that they could make judgements about referrals to special education based upon intervention outcomes. Further, only one of these participants specifically referenced interventions and the district's problem solving model when describing how she identifies student needs. Based upon resources disseminated from the state and district, student needs are to be identified through the collaborative work of a problem solving team in which individual student data is analyzed against other students' response to instruction and intervention. From there, the team may be able to determine why the problem is occurring and how to effectively individualize instruction moving forward.

**Intervention selection, implementation, and evaluation.** When discussing their confidence implementing NC MTSS, seven participants specifically referenced their ability to select high quality interventions. While three of those participants expressed a lack of self-assurance when selecting interventions, four conveyed confidence and certitude in the area. As Talia stated, "I definitely think I know what types of interventions and things work when I'm dealing with my kids. I can see, like, if number sense is an issue, I can just pull out those flashcards or number lines and get right to it" (personal communication, July 27, 2017).

Moreover, Erin explained,

Yeah, I mean, I don't think I've ever doubted the interventions I've used. And I haven't really had much problem in finding new ones. There's a lot of talk about research-based interventions and all, and so I always make sure I find stuff online or use other resources

from the school. I know if I just guessed and made stuff up myself, it probably wouldn't be as effective, but I mean, there's a lot of stuff out there. (personal communication, July 27, 2017)

Like Erin, four other participants referenced the availability of high quality interventions, either from the school/district or online.

Though participants' self-efficacy was generally higher in selecting interventions, when probed to consider implementation and evaluation of interventions, only three participants expressed similarly elevated levels of confidence and self-efficacy. Monica shared,

Oh no, when it comes to whether I'm actually doing the interventions perfectly, I don't think I can say that. I'm probably doing them fine, but I am probably not doing them the same way someone else would—or maybe, like, exactly the way they were written. But that's also maybe because I know my students and know they don't need every single step. I don't know. But I guess it's just like teaching, right? Someone can come in and observe my normal instruction and be like, 'Um you're not doing that right.' (personal communication, July 29, 2017)

In discussing her ability to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of initiatives, Sherri stated,

That's something I'm, like, not too sure about honestly. It seems like it'd be subjective, and what works for one kid might not work for another, so how would you really judge overall quality? And I think a lot of times it takes a while to know if an intervention worked. Even then, how would you be able to tell it was that one single intervention that did it, instead of something else? Just seems like there are a lot of variables and other things that would make it hard to know. (personal communication, July 20, 2017)

Similarly, Marcus shared, “I don’t think it can be as simple as something worked or it didn’t. I believe learning takes time. So in that sense, I guess I don’t really know how to figure if an intervention works” (personal communication, July 25, 2017).

When further probed about interventions and alignment to expectations for intervention implementation at the various tiers, Marcus and Sherri stated that they were unsure of the exact expectations set by Parkland School District and NCDPI. “I know it’s like increase intensity and rigor,” Sherri affirmed. “But I’m not sure that there’s rules set. I know I keep hearing that, you know, MTSS isn’t just a process” (personal communication, July 20, 2017). Review of state and district documents did, however, reveal that some specific expectations for interventions have been set. According to Critical Component Overview document disseminated by NCDPI, three-tiered instruction and intervention is a defining element of NC MTSS in which Tier 1 includes the general classroom instructional all students receive and Tiers 2 and 3 feature increasingly intensive supports for some students in small group or individual settings. A draft intervention implementation plan created by Parkland School District further distinguishes between core instruction, supplemental support, and intensive support, with intensive support being highly individualized based upon identified student needs. The district’s intervention matrix and instructional playbook specify five essential elements: instruction, curriculum, environment, documentation, and data/evaluation. Supplemental support in Tier 2 will be determined based upon the matrix developed following a standard protocol method. No participant referenced the intervention matrix or instructional playbook during interviews.

**Feedback from colleagues and administrators.** Throughout interviews, nine participants referenced the feedback and comments from others to describe their efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS. Relating back to Bandura’s (1997) conception of verbal persuasion,

it does appear that participants' perceptions of self-efficacy are associated with and possibly influenced by the views and feedback of others. Five participants described receiving mostly positive feedback on their practices thus far. Those five participants also conveyed moderate to high levels of self-efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS. Conversely, the four participants who described receiving negative feedback or criticism had among the lowest levels of self-efficacy of the entire study sample.

While participants were not specifically asked to describe when or how they have received this feedback, four referenced PLCs. Erin stated, "Yeah, I mean, I guess I feel like I've been shot in my PLC a few times, so I've, uh, taken that to mean that I'm not doing something right. Sometimes it's just other people ignoring what I say. And sometimes I know when I've said what I do in my classroom, people disagree" (personal communication, July 27, 2017). Further, Claudia shared, "Some people in my PLCs have told me that I should read some book or ask for help from my coach. But I also think that's because I've told them how confused I am about everything" (personal communication, July 28, 2017). Kerry described positive feedback she's received from her PLC, stating,

Yeah, my PLC has been pretty great and supportive. I feel like we're all in this together and even the oldest teachers are in the same boat as me with learning MTSS and all of the different pieces. We talk about a lot and it seems like they're always waiting for my take on things. I have some strong opinions. I learned some about RTI in college, so, yeah, I do feel like I might know a little bit more current stuff, and maybe all the other teachers appreciate that. (personal communication, July 24, 2017)

In addition to PLCs and feedback from colleagues, three participants referenced comments made by administrators and instructional leaders. Of those, Shana and Kerry reported

receiving positive feedback, while Molly felt as if her school's principal was critical of her practices. Molly shared, "I don't think we really get evaluated on MTSS specifically, but I've gotten some low marks on evaluations for things that I know are related to, like, my core instruction. We have talked a lot about how strong core instruction is the key obviously, so I'm a little worried considering that" (personal communication, July 26, 2017).

Though no participant explicitly mentioned it, Parkland School District has initiated an MTSS Walkthrough checklist in which an observer documents and assesses the following indicators of implementation: observed purpose statements, focused instruction, guided instruction, collaborative learning, independent learning, technology integration, formative data collection and application, and student behavior.

**Barriers to effective implementation.** Throughout interviews, participants identified various impediments to effective implementation of NC MTSS, including unclear communication from district and building leaders, a lack of whole-school buy-in, pushback from parents, and unclear expectations. However, with a total of 16 references from nine participants, the barrier most commonly described was a lack of time to engage in the work related to NC MTSS. As Marcus explained, "I get that it's a whole school improvement thing, but there's a lot of other stuff way different going on in my classroom that I've got to handle" (personal communication, July 25, 2017). Erin also stated, "It's a shift in teaching, but it's not like it's that easy to change everything I'm doing overnight. Plus, it's not even just the teaching part. There's parent communication, grading papers, planning lessons, and a bunch of other things that I'm responsible for. I'm honestly not sure what is most important" (personal communication, July 27, 2017). Further, Molly shared, "The day and my instruction time goes by so fast. It's really hard to find a way to cover the curriculum, but also get in things like collaborative work

and formative assessments, especially when there are behavior issues happening, too” (personal communication, July 26, 2017).

In addition to issues identified with instructional time, participants referenced the additional time they are expected to spend engaging in PLCs and professional development related to NC MTSS. Julie stated, “It’s tough. I mean, at the end of the day it’s hard to think about anything. And our planning periods during the day should be used for planning, and gosh, maybe going to the bathroom. I feel like I don’t have any time to do all of the other jobs I have just to keep my classroom running anyway. So I end up doing things at night, and I don’t think that’s right” (personal communication, July 28, 2017). Tawni also stated, “I feel like we’re being asked to do a lot to get ready for this, like all of the PD and meetings. It takes up a lot of my time, and that’s time, like, I feel I could be doing better things for my kids” (personal communication, July 24, 2017).

Moreover, Kerry described the district’s timeline for implementation. She stated, “I just feel like it’s a lot really fast. We’re supposed to all be trained and ready to do this by the end of next year I think, and that just seems like a lot for a district like ours. I know for me, just learning about something isn’t enough. I need to see it and do it for a while before I’m good at it, so I’m upset that we’re already expected to be doing certain things. I don’t want to be negative about it, because I understand the value of MTSS, I just can’t imagine how we’re going to be ready. I know I’m not ready. (personal communication, July 24, 2017)

## Research Question Responses

Three questions guided this research and the analysis of its data. By exploring and examining the horizons and themes described in the previous section, answers to the research questions were formulated.

**RQ 1. How do novice teachers perceive their ability to implement NC MTSS in their classrooms with fidelity?** Participants' perceptions of self-efficacy and confidence in implementing NC MTSS were mixed. Six of the 12 participants expressed moderate to high levels of self-efficacy and self-assurance in the effectiveness of their practices. When asked to rate their confidence and their effectiveness as implementers of NC MTSS, these participants responded with ratings of six or above. Conversely, six participants conveyed lower levels of self-efficacy. These participants also indicated uncertainty in the fidelity of their practices, including their alignment to state and local expectations for implementation. When asked the same questions about confidence and effectiveness as implementers of NC MTSS, these participants responded with a rating of four or below. None of the participants responded with a rating of five for confidence or effectiveness.

Though participants had engaged in different amounts of district-led training on NC MTSS at the time this research was conducted, there appears to be no connection between completion of training and perceptions of self-efficacy. Further, there does not appear to be any relationship between participants' perceived self-efficacy and years of teaching experience. Those with the most experience did not consistently report high levels of self-efficacy, while at the same time, those with the least experience were not characterized by low levels of self-efficacy.

**RQ 2. How do novice teachers perceive the preparation and training they have received related to NC MTSS?** Participants' perceptions of district-led and school-led training were generally positive. However, their reflections upon their preservice coursework related to tiered instruction and intervention within teacher preparation programs were generally more negative.

While three participants expressed frustration over the amount of information presented within district-led trainings and unrealistic expectations for implementing new practices in the middle of the school year, they each acknowledged that the information presented was important and has helped them feel more confident implementing NC MTSS. As Sherri explained,

The training itself is good. I think it's been the right content and it has probably helped me to wrap my head around all of this stuff—just as good as anything else. But it was kind of hard to hear it in the middle of the year. So what am I supposed to do when I leave one of those trainings, you know? I can't just change what I've been doing all year just because I went to PD. I think starting this year will be good, though. I know what I'm supposed to do and have it all—rather than just the pieces I got last year. (personal communication, July 20, 2017)

Two other participants shared that the training they've received within their schools has been valuable and effective in helping them grow their practices. Though only four participants had engaged in the Canvas Course at the time of this research, three spoke positively of the format and relevance of the content.

Of the 12 participants, all were exposed to tiered instruction and intervention in their undergraduate or graduate programs. While Marcus described engaging in extensive coursework related to RTI and asserted that it has helped him in his current role, Kerry, Shana, Desiree, Julie,



Talia, and Erin could only vaguely recall addressing tiered instruction and intervention and do not believe their coursework has helped prepare them for their current roles relative to NC MTSS implementation. As Julie explained, “I think the issue is that the classes were not talking about what I’m as the teacher supposed to do. It was kind of like oh, you know, what RTI is and why we need to do it. I wish it would have been more like what I need to know as a teacher actually do interventions and like keep track of the data” (personal communication, July 25, 2017).

**RQ 3. How do novice teachers perceive the efficacy of others as implementers of NC MTSS?** By determining how participants view others, this question was designed to help establish a point of reference for participants’ perceptions of their own self-efficacy. In general, participants described others, including administrators and teachers, as either equally or more knowledgeable and effective than themselves. No participant described colleagues as being less effective implementers of NC MTSS. Notably, the participants who rated themselves at a six or above on a scale of one to 10 for confidence and effectiveness as an implementer of NC MTSS considered others’ efficacy to be the same or slightly better as their own. Those participants who reported being less confident and effective perceived others to be significantly more effective than themselves. Rationale for these ratings was mixed. While some participants described veteran teachers’ experience as the reason they are more effective in implementing NC MTSS, others cited what they viewed to be veteran teachers’ resistance to new initiatives and change.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four presented the results of the research conducted on novice elementary teachers’ perceived ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity. This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study sought to understand how a sample of 12 elementary teachers, each with three or fewer years of experience, perceive themselves as implementers of NC MTSS.

Results were presented in narrative form organized by theme, followed by answers to each of the three research questions that guided the study. Results show that participants' perceptions of self-efficacy are mixed. Half of the participants conveyed moderate to high levels of self-efficacy, while the other half expressed low levels of confidence and self-efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS. Likewise, the six participants who demonstrated higher levels of self-efficacy tended to identify others as less effective in implementing NC MTSS, while those who had lower levels of self-efficacy perceived others as more effective. Further, though some participants' experiences with district and school-led training relative to NC MTSS were generally positive, its impact on participants' practices and perceptions of self-efficacy is unclear. At the time this research was conducted, participants' exposure to professional learning related to NC MTSS varied significantly (see Table 2). This study's findings are notable in many ways and, as discussed in Chapter Five, may have significant implications on the way in which tiered instruction and intervention initiatives are implemented, as well as teacher preparation and professional development programming.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how novice teachers in their first three years of teaching perceive their ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity in their classrooms. As an academic and behavioral initiative, tiered instruction and intervention has the potential to help educators proactively identify and address learning deficits and disabilities (Bianco, 2010). Related models, including NC MTSS, are now recognized as best practice and have been mandated through various federal and local policies (Reschley & Reschley, 2014; Martin, 2016). Though the tenets of tiered instruction and intervention are grounded in research, recent studies have emerged indicating that its success is dependent upon the extent to which it is executed with fidelity (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015). Currently, very little is known about the integrity of implementation at the classroom level and even less about the attitudes and beliefs of classroom teachers as implementers (Jimerson et al., 2016; O'Connor & Freeman, 2012).

Given this study's conceptual framework, teachers' perceptions related to NC MTSS implementation are significant. Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy holds that self-efficacy has a significant impact on behavior and conduct. Moreover, Mitzel's (1960) Theory of Teaching and Learning holds that teachers' personal characteristics impact the outcome of their work with students. When viewed together, these theories suggest that a teacher's perception of self-efficacy as an implementer of NC MTSS can be considered a determinant of performance and effectiveness (Bandura, 1986; Mitzel, 1960; Sankey, 2007). The perceptions of novice teachers, those with three or fewer years of experience, were

specifically sought, as they presumably have the least experience with and exposure to NC MTSS.

This study was guided by three research questions:

RQ1: How do novice teachers perceive their ability to implement NC MTSS in their classrooms with fidelity?

RQ2: How do novice teachers perceive the preparation and training they have received related to NC MTSS?

RQ3: How do novice teachers perceive the efficacy of others as implementers of NC MTSS?

The research began with an unstructured interview with Parkland School District's NC MTSS Coordinator, followed by a series of semi-structured interviews with participants, and an analysis of relevant documents.

This chapter summarizes the study's findings and highlights the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the findings based upon relevant literature. Implications, delimitations, and limitations of the study are presented, and recommendations for future research are made.

### **Summary of Findings**

Analysis of the data revealed four central themes: (a) understanding of the tenets of tiered instruction and intervention and NC MTSS; (b) awareness of state and local expectations for NC MTSS implementation; (c) availability of relevant resources and supports; and (d) confidence as an implementer of NC MTSS. Results show that participants' perceptions vary considerably regarding their own efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS. Likewise, participants' beliefs regarding the impact of training on their abilities, as well as the effectiveness of others as

implementers of NC MTSS were somewhat mixed. Six of the 12 participants expressed moderate to high levels of self-efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS, while the other half conveyed lower levels of confidence and self-efficacy. In general, the participants with lower levels of self-efficacy perceived themselves to be less effective than their colleagues in implementing NC MTSS, while also describing the related training they have received to average. Conversely, half of participants expressed higher levels of self-efficacy and described their abilities to implement NC MTSS with fidelity positively. These participants generally perceived themselves to be as effective as their colleagues, and described the training they've received relative to NC MTSS in more positive terms.

The first research question sought to determine how participants perceive their abilities to implement NC MTSS with fidelity. In interviews, participants were specifically asked to rate their levels of both confidence and effectiveness. While there were no ratings of five for either question, half of the participants rated themselves at six or above, while the other half rated themselves at four or below.

Pertinent to RQ2, which asked how participants perceive the preparation and training they have received relative to NC MTSS, exposure to district and school-led professional learning varied significantly at the time this research was conducted (see Table 2). Despite this and some specific frustrations, participants expressed overall neutral or positive sentiments regarding training provided at the district and school levels and its impact on their practices. On the contrary, participants' perceptions of preservice coursework related to tiered instruction and intervention were mostly negative due to a lack of alignment to NC MTSS and relevance to their responsibilities as classroom teachers.

The final research question, which focused on participants' perceptions of others as implementers of NC MTSS, revealed that all participants perceive their colleagues to be more or equally knowledgeable and effective as themselves. Even participants with the highest levels of self-efficacy did not rate themselves higher than the teachers and administrators with whom they work.

Taken together, these questions and answers show that participants' perceptions related to NC MTSS and their ability to implement it with fidelity vary considerably. Likewise, there appear to be differences between participants' experiences with preservice coursework and training, as well as how they perceive others as implementers of NC MTSS. In the case of RQ1, the data showed a pattern toward the extremes—participants perceived themselves to be either effective or ineffective, as opposed to average. Though their exposure to training varied significantly at the time this research was conducted, RQ2 revealed participants' perceptions of both pre-service training and district and school-led professional development related to NC MTSS were relatively consistent. While pre-service preparation was perceived to be inadequate, participants described the effectiveness of district and school-led professional development in mostly neutral to positive terms. Relative to RQ3, participants' perceptions of others as implementers of NC MTSS were also generally aligned. All participants perceived others as being as or more effective as themselves in implementing NC MTSS with fidelity.

### **Discussion**

As presented in Chapter 2, this research was grounded in rich theoretical and empirical literature. The following section sheds light on the relationships between the study's findings and the information presented in the literature review. Through this discussion, the study's impact on existing research can be determined.

## **Theoretical Literature Discussion**

This study of novice elementary teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS was approached through a conceptual framework consisting of Bandura's (1983) Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and Mitzel's (1960) Theory of Teaching and Learning. Together, these theories established the connection between teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy and outcomes of NC MTSS as an educational initiative.

According to Bandura's (1997) work, humans actively seek agency, or a sense of self-efficacy and feeling of adequacy, in every aspect of their lives. This sense of agency was later confirmed by Strajkovic and Luthens (1998) to be a function of cognition and environment, meaning that people actively seek information from a variety of sources to form self-perceptions and beliefs. According to Bandura (1987), past experiences, direct and indirect communication from others, personal observations, and physiological and emotional states serve as the primary sources of information that humans use to inform perceptions of self-efficacy and agency. In this study, participants often cited these sources, including accounts of previous implementation experiences, feedback from colleagues and supervisors, observations of others, and emotional states, when describing their perceptions of their ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity. Further, there was alignment across participants' discussion of each source and their overall feelings of self-efficacy. Those who conveyed high levels of self-efficacy also described NC MTSS-related training in more positive terms and rated the efficacy of colleagues as the same as their own or slightly higher. Those who expressed lower levels of self-efficacy tended to describe related training somewhat less positively and rated colleagues as much more effective than themselves. According to Bandura (1987), this alignment between each participant's

experiences, observations, and feelings is significant because it indicates higher and lower senses of agency, respectively.

In the context of the Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy, Mitzel's (1960) Theory of Teaching and Learning was also corroborated in this study. Mitzel (1960) asserted that specific criteria, including outcomes, student traits, teacher-student interactions, and personal characteristics and attributes come together to determine teacher quality. While this study was not designed to determine participants' actual competence or effectiveness as implementers of NC MTSS, Bandura's (1987) work confirms that self-efficacy, determined by what he ascertained to be past experiences, direct and indirect communication from others, personal observations, and physiological and emotional states, can be considered key personal characteristics impacting outcomes.

This study did yield a notable extension to the theories that formed its conceptual framework. Four themes emerged through analysis of the data: (a) understanding of the tenets of tiered instruction and intervention and NC MTSS; (b) awareness of state and local expectations for NC MTSS implementation; (c) availability of relevant resources and supports; and (d) confidence as an implementer of NC MTSS. While these themes were used to answer the study's research questions, they do not seem to be fully aligned to any of the four factors outlined by Bandura (1986): past experiences, direct and indirect communication from others, personal observations, and physiological and emotional states. Given the themes that emerged from this research, the Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy seems to overlook the concepts of content knowledge and understanding of expectations.



## **Empirical Literature Discussion**

As described in Chapter Two, tiered instruction and intervention models are backed by extensive research (Buysee, 2016). But as Reschly and Reschly (2014) noted, implementation varies widely across and even within states. Results from the study reflected this, as multiple conceptions of NC MTSS were revealed across data sets.

Both participants' teacher preparation programming records and district documents emphasized the legal implications and influence of federal state, and local policies that underpin NC MTSS and related initiatives. However, while tiered instruction and intervention was most often introduced in preservice programs in connection with education law and special education, district documents more often referred to NC MTSS as a vehicle for district-wide strategic improvement and achievement. District documents also echoed the sentiments of Forbes et al., (2008), who referred to tiered instruction and intervention as a primary mechanism for ensuring high quality instruction. Furthermore, when asked to describe its purpose, participants generally described NC MTSS as a process to provide additional support to at-risk students. While each of these conceptions aligns in part with the literature, it is noteworthy that pre-service programming, district documents, and participants tended to refer to different aspects of tiered instruction and intervention.

Moreover, though many district documents and some pre-service programming records emphasized the importance of data and data-based decision making in NC MTSS and other models, participants generally did not discuss the use of data in their implementation processes during interviews. This is significant, as the efficacy tiered instruction and intervention models hinges upon the persistent and accurate application of student performance data (Buffum et al.

2009). Furthermore, data-based decision making is a Core Component of the NC MTSS model (NCDPI, 2016).

When analyzing participant interviews, the data revealed the same dichotomy regarding both the perceived simplicity and complexity of tiered instruction and intervention observed in the literature. Among the open-codes recorded were: (a) MTSS as a new name to an old/standard instructional practice; and (b) Multi-component initiative. Taken together, these open-codes can be considered somewhat contradictory. This reflects the contrast also seen in the empirical research base, as Wedl (2005) referred to RTI as a common-sense initiative, while Hill et al. (2012) compared the model to the inner workings of Big Ben. Notably, some of the same participants expressed both sentiments about NC MTSS during the interviews. For example, Julie stated, “MTSS makes a lot of sense, you know. It’s kind of what we’ve always been doing and what we know we’re supposed to be doing, I think.” Later in the interview, however, she stated, “There’s just a lot to it—a lot of requirements and rules it seems like. And the thing is, I know my school isn’t doing the full blown MTSS yet, and it still seems kind of overwhelming and like too much.”

While nine participants did refer to the multiple components of NC MTSS, participants generally did not demonstrate a strong knowledge of the specific NC MTSS framework established by NCDPI. This was the case even for participants who had completed district-sponsored training, which described each of the Six Core Components of NC MTSS in detail. This is significant, given research from Katochwill et al. (2007), which found that the amount and quality of professional learning has a major impact on teachers’ self-efficacy and ability to implement tiered instruction and intervention with fidelity. Notably, however, there did not seem to be a connection in this study between participants’ exposure to professional learning

related to NC MTSS and their perceptions of self-efficacy as implementers of the initiative. The district's professional learning efforts have thus far been in the form of one-day sessions led by district staff and an online course comprised of multiple modules that teachers complete asynchronously. This is also significant, as Greenfield et al. (2010) concluded that a deeper form of professional learning, such as a partnership between a school and university or others with specific expertise, is required to successfully increase teachers' knowledgebase and capacity of tiered instruction and intervention.

### **Implications**

This study brought to light several key implications spanning theory and practice for teachers, administrators, and policymakers across the country. Further, these implications may even extend beyond tiered instruction and intervention to other academic and behavioral initiatives.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

This study was grounded in two prominent theories that are commonly applied to educational research: Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and the Theory of Teaching and Learning (Mills & Gay, 2015). Both come together to suggest that the success of an initiative such as NC MTSS is determined, at least in part, by teachers' characteristics—including self-efficacy. According to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007), new teachers are commonly believed to present lower levels of self-efficacy, but little research exists to prove that notion. Findings in this study revealed that participants' perceptions of self-efficacy were mixed; some participants reported relatively high levels of self-efficacy, while others conveyed lower levels. This is noteworthy, because it shows that there may be a wide variation of self-efficacy among even teachers within the same cohort. Taken with the Social Cognitive Theory of Efficacy and

Theory of Teaching and Learning, the study's findings have implications for district administrators, school leaders, policymakers and teacher preparation programs. Though some new teachers may have low levels of self-efficacy, the same should not be assumed for all new teachers. Additional research is needed to determine whether those reporting high levels of self-efficacy are actually implementing NC MTSS with fidelity and vice versa, but in the meantime, those responsible for planning and delivering professional learning should work to identify those with low self-efficacy and provide additional supports.

### **Empirical Implications**

In considering the results of this study and its empirical foundation, significant implications arise for federal and state policymakers, as well as district and school leaders and teachers. Given the significance of legislation related to tiered instruction and intervention such as IDEA, as well as the consequences LEAs can face for noncompliance and denying students their rights, more attention should be paid to how confident teachers feel as implementers of these initiatives (Zirkel, 2012). Particularly in cases of low-self efficacy, LEAs should recognize the risk of improper implementation and exposure to legal recourse.

Moreover, analysis of the data sets revealed various conceptions of tiered instruction and intervention. Teacher preparation programs largely referred to the initiative in connection with special education and related laws, while district documents described NC MTSS as a mechanism for district-wide improvement and student achievement. However, when asked to describe the purpose of NC MTSS and related initiatives, participants tended to refer to its ability to proactively identify and remediate at-risk students. While each of these conceptions aligns with segments of the literature, none captures the breadth of tiered instruction and intervention initiatives like NC MTSS. This variance is significant for all stakeholders, because there is some

degree of misalignment in the way NC MTSS is understood. State and district leaders should consider that teachers' preservice coursework may have presented tiered instruction and intervention differently than it is applied locally, or that it may not have been addressed at all. Thus, SEA and LEA professional learning providers should not assume that new teachers have a strong foundation for tiered instruction and intervention concepts. To that end, teachers should be prepared to expand their thinking about the purpose and practices of tiered instruction and intervention. As confirmed by Buffum et al. (2012), understanding what tiered instruction is, as well as what it is not, is a critical step in ensuring implementation fidelity.

Moreover, research has repeatedly shown the importance of consistent communication and high quality training in the success of RTI or similar models (Bernhardt & Herbert, 2011). Given that participants reported specific frustrations and opinions regarding the quality and effectiveness of the training they have received, district administrators charged with NC MTSS-related professional learning should consider the deeper forms of professional learning recommended by Greenfield et al. (2010), such as job-embedded experiences and partnerships with experts and universities.

### **Practical Implications**

While some of the theoretical and empirical implications revealed by the research demand significant shifts in existing practices, there are some practical implications that can be more readily addressed. The sample of participants included in this study represent only a portion of the entire population of novice elementary teachers in Parkland School District. However, district stakeholders could infer there is a wide range of self-efficacy beliefs across its novice elementary teachers. Knowing this, Parkland School District could take steps to identify those with lower self-efficacy and provide additional supports. Further, participant interviews

indicated that they may be some inconsistent communication across the district and mixed levels of understanding regarding the district's expectations for implementation. Though every teacher will engage in the same training by the time full implementation is required by NCDPI in 2020, Parkland School District may find it beneficial to disseminate more centralized messaging regarding NC MTSS, training, and implementation expectations.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Though all formally recognized tiered instruction and intervention models are grounded in evidence-based practices and have been reinforced by federal, state, and local policy, implementation is largely planned and monitored at the state and district levels (Fox, 2009). Frameworks can differ considerably from state to state and tend to look different in every context (Quinn, 2010). Therefore, this study cannot be generalized for other states or LEAs. Additionally, this research aimed only to study novice teachers with three or fewer years of experience in a suburban school district. Thus, the results are not intended to reflect the experiences of veteran teachers or those in dissimilar contexts, such as rural districts, private schools, or virtual education programs. Novice teachers were chosen for this study, as they presumably have had the least exposure to NC MTSS and related professional learning and therefore represent the baseline among implementers of the initiative.

Specific delimitations, including the sample size, location, and research timeframe, provided boundaries for this study. In the research design, the study was limited to a sample size of 12-15 participants. Only twelve teachers responded to my inquiry and completed the required steps for participation. The location of the study was chosen based upon its relative proximity, number of potential participants, and willingness to participate. A total of 10 districts denied the request to carry out this study. The timeframe for this study was chosen based upon convenience

for the researcher, as well as participants. Parkland School District stakeholders recommended making initial contact with participants at the end of the school year and conducting interviews and all other research processes in the summer, as teachers would have more flexibility and time to participate.

Aguinis and Edwards (2014) asserted studies that rely on self-reported data are also susceptible to factors that are largely uncontrollable amongst participants, including selective memory, telescoping, attribution, and exaggeration. The subjective nature of qualitative research also presents limitations to the study, as any information gleaned can be open to misinterpretation and observer bias (Rolly, 2012). Similarly, according to Anderson (2010), the quality of the research itself is dependent upon the individual skills of the researcher and can be influenced by the researcher's personal experiences and idiosyncrasies.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Given the study's findings, as well as its delimitations and limitations, additional research is recommended. Though NC MTSS is to be implemented at all levels by all classroom teachers, this research focused on only elementary teachers with three or fewer years of experience. Thus, further studies should be conducted with teachers representing all grades and content areas, as well as levels of experience. This study was also limited to one suburban district and therefore cannot represent teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy across the state. This study should be replicated in diverse districts across the state for a more accurate representation of teachers' perceptions relative to NC MTSS implementation. Additionally, while NC MTSS is an initiative specific to North Carolina, tiered instruction and intervention models, including RTI, MTSS, and RTII, are being formally implemented in many states across the country. Thus, additional

studies should be conducted throughout the United States to understand teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy within and across different models.

This study also gave light to some significant questions that cannot be answered with just the data obtained and should be researched further. For example, a mixed methods study may determine if there is a relationship between teachers' perceptions of their ability to implement a tiered instruction and intervention model and their general self-efficacy as an educator. If a correlation does exist, linking teachers' overall levels of self-efficacy and self-efficacy in relation to a specific initiative, there may be important implications for professional learning and related supports. Furthermore, while basic analysis did not show an apparent connection between participants' perceived self-efficacy as implementers of NC MTSS and the amount of professional development they had engaged in at the time of this study, a mixed methods study is recommended to determine a more exact correlation. These results will also serve to inform professional learning programming and possibly its funding.

Finally, this study did not attempt in any way to determine the actual efficacy of participants and the fidelity of their implementation of NC MTSS. A quantitative descriptive study should be conducted to determine the correlation between teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy and their actual, measured levels of efficacy relative to a codified tiered instruction and intervention model.

### **Summary**

This study sought to understand novice teachers' perceptions of their ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity. Because implementation of the initiative will be mandated by 2020 across North Carolina, districts throughout the state are charged with ensuring teachers and administrators are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to be effective. As



indicated through the study's conceptual framework and empirical literature base, self-efficacy is a key determinant of effectiveness as an implementer of an initiative like NC MTSS.

Results from the study revealed that participants had mixed levels of self-efficacy. Six of the 12 participants exhibited relatively high levels of self-efficacy, while six displayed lower levels. These results have significant implications for SEAs, LEAs, policymakers, teacher preparation programs, and teachers. As shown through this study's conceptual framework, teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy may be considered determinants of their actual ability to implement an initiative, such as tiered instruction and intervention, with fidelity. Training and related supports must be prioritized for all teachers, and stakeholders must work to proactively identify those with lower levels of self-efficacy. Further, efforts should be made to streamline messaging and communication related to the initiative and expectations for implementation. Above all, stakeholders at every level must recognize the role teachers' self-efficacy plays in implementation and find methods to boost knowledge, skills, and abilities that translate into increased self-efficacy.

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## APPENDIX A

### Participant Letter

Hello <Name>-

I hope this finds you well. My name is Amy Jackson, and I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University. I live in the Fayetteville area and am currently conducting research on novice elementary teachers' perceptions of their ability to implement the North Carolina Multi-Tiered System of Support (NC MTSS) with fidelity.

I was given your name by the Parkland School District as a potential participant. I am hoping to identify 12-15 participants who meet the following qualifications:

- Teaches in the elementary grades
- Has three or fewer years of experience as a teacher
  - Must not have prior experience in any other grade level/content area, or as a teacher's aide
- Willing to participate in a 30-60 minute interview and provide honest and accurate (to the greatest extent possible) responses to interview questions

It is anticipated that this research will be conducted between July and August 2017.

The data collected will be used in a doctoral dissertation, and participant identities and name of the school district will not be disclosed. If you choose to participate, your anonymity will be fully protected. Only I will know that you have participated, unless you choose to disclose this information to others on your own. The results of the study will have no bearing on your role as an educator, and you will have the opportunity to review all data and terminate your participation at any time.

If you are willing to participate or if you have any additional questions about this study, please contact me directly at XXXXXXXX@liberty.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

I look forward to hearing from you and carrying out this important research!

My very best,  
Amy Jackson

**APPENDIX B****IRB Approval Documentation****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 19, 2017

Amy Jackson

IRB Approval 2845.051917: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of First-Year Elementary Teachers' Perceived Ability to Implement the North Carolina Multi-Tiered System of Support with Fidelity

Dear Amy Jackson,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

## APPENDIX C

### Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM

A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Novice Elementary Teachers' Perceived Ability to Implement the North Carolina Multi-Tiered System of Support with Fidelity

Amy Jackson

Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of novice elementary teachers' perceptions of the North Carolina Multi-Tiered System of Support (NC MTSS). You were selected as a possible participant because you are a novice teacher with three or fewer years of experience in an elementary setting within the Parkland School District. I ask that you carefully read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Amy Jackson, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to determine:

1. How (in what ways) are novice teachers prepared to implement a tiered instruction and intervention model, such as NC MTSS?
2. How confident are novice teachers in their current ability to implement NC MTSS with fidelity?
3. How do novice teachers perceive the efficacy of others as implementers of NC MTSS?

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an audio-recorded interview. Interview transcripts will remain confidential and audio recordings will be secured. It is expected that interviews will last approximately 30 minutes. Interviews will be conducted in a private location within the school of your choice or via phone based upon participant preference.
2. Permit the researcher to conduct an observation of classroom instruction, either in person or via video. It is expected that this observation will last approximately 60 minutes. You may choose the day and time of the observation. Data collected will remain confidential and only be used for the purpose of this study.
3. Review all data collected, including interview transcriptions, observation notes, and artifacts collected by the researcher for accuracy and consent. It is expected that this process will take approximately 20 minutes and will be conducted via email.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, no more than you would encounter in everyday life.

Aside from compensation (see below), there are no direct benefits to participants for participating in this study. However, this data may have implications on teacher preparation and professional development programming.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be stored securely in a password-protected computer, and only the researcher will have access to the records. In compliance with federal regulations, all research-related data will be stored for three years upon the completion of this study. After that time, data will be destroyed. All audio and video recordings will remain confidential and will not be labeled with any identifying information. Recordings will be erased three years after the completion of this study. All interactions entailed within the study (interviews and observations) are private, thus it is reasonable to assure complete confidentiality and privacy. The researcher will never disclose participants' identity or their participation in the study.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the Cumberland County School District. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Amy Jackson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at XXXXXXX@liberty.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Frank Bailey, at XXXXXXX@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and/or video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of Investigator

Date

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Questions

1. Please describe your general perceptions of NC MTSS —in theory and in practice.
2. On a scale of one to ten, please rate your current confidence in terms of implementing NC MTSS with fidelity in your classroom.
3. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your effectiveness as an implementer of NC MTSS and ability to implement it with fidelity?
4. Describe the major components of the NC MTSS framework.
5. Please explain the purpose and goal of NC MTSS as an educational initiative.
6. Describe the formal training on NC MTSS or any tiered instruction and intervention model that you have received.
7. In what ways has your training prepared and not prepared you to effectively implement NC MTSS in your classroom?
8. Please describe your impression of NC MTSS implementation at your school.
9. How effectively do you believe other teachers at your school implement NC MTSS?
10. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your experiences with and feelings toward tiered instruction and intervention and NC MTSS?

## APPENDIX E

### Aide Memoire

- I. Introductions
  - a. Relevant personal information
- II. Purpose and description of the study
  - a. Rationale for study
  - b. Why Parkland School District
  - c. Research questions
  - d. Research methodology
  - e. Limitations and assumptions
- III. Parkland School District's NC MTSS implementation
  - a. General context and overview
  - b. Readiness (per NCDPI survey)
  - c. Implementation plan
    - i. Phased rollout
    - ii. District and building-level buy-in and involvement
  - d. Available resources and training
  - e. Barriers
    - i. Competing initiatives
    - ii. Buy-in
    - iii. Fidelity (transition to IV)
    - iv. Other (Karen to add)
- IV. Teacher Efficacy and Readiness

- a. Classroom observations
  - b. Other performance indicators/metrics
- V. Extension – Karen to add additional relevant points
- VI. Closing
- a. Opportunity for Karen to ask questions about the study
  - b. Next steps/follow-up



## APPENDIX F

### Artifacts Collected and Analyzed

#### District-Level Documents

- Parkland School District MTSS Timeline
- Parkland School District MTSS Action Plan
- Parkland School District MTSS Critical Component Implementation Percentage Summary – 2015-2016
- Parkland School District MTSS Critical Component Implementation Percentage Summary – 2016-2017
- Parkland School District MTSS Overview landing page
- MTSS Canvas Course Materials
  - Introduction to MTSS
    - NC MTSS Factsheet
    - Critical Components
    - Parkland School District MTSS Vision
    - Why MTSS for Parkland School District?
    - Compelling Why Video
    - Compelling Why Poster
    - MTSS Overview PowerPoint – General Principal’s Meeting
    - Shifting Perceptions and Elevator Speech
    - Common Language Chart
    - Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation
    - SAM Description

- SAM Activity
- Tiered Fidelity Inventory
- Teaming Structures
  - Teaming Videos
  - District Leadership Team
  - District MTSS Team
  - School Leadership Team (MTSS Team)
  - PLC – Three Big Ideas
  - Grade Level PLC
  - Individual Student Problem-Solving Team
  - Pyramid of Teaming Structure
- Problem Solving Model
  - Problem Solving Model
  - Problem Identification Flowchart
  - General Questions for Core Problem Solving
- Gradual Release of Responsibility
  - Gradual Release of Responsibility Overview; December 2015, January 2016, March 2016
  - Resources
- Administrator Briefs
  - DPI Communications
  - May 2016
  - August 2016

- September 2016
- October 2016
- November 2016
- December 2016
- January 2017
- February 2017
- March 2017
- MTSS Tier 1 Training
  - Foundations/Core Instruction
  - Tier 1, Part 1 Lesson Plan
  - Tier 1, Part 1 Content Presentation
  - Tier 1, Part 2 Lesson Plan
  - Tier 1, Part 2 Content Presentation 2-4
  - Tier 1, Part 2 School-Wide Systems
  - PBIS Tiered Fidelity Inventory
  - Student Promotion and Accountability
  - Tier 1, Part 3 Overview
  - Tier 1, Part 3 Lesson Plan
  - Tier 1, Part 3 Content Presentation 1-4
  - Tier 1, Part 4 Lesson Plan
  - Tier 1, Part 4 Content Presentation 1-4
  - Distributed Practice
- Module 1 – Purpose Statement Lesson 1-7

- Module 2 – Focused and Guided Instruction Lesson 1-6
- Module 3 – Collaborative Learning Overview Lesson 1-6
- Module 4 – Data and Small Groups Overview Lesson 1-3
- PLC Overview
  - What is a PLC
  - PLCs at Work
  - The Team Cycle
  - PLC Resources

#### State-Level Documents

- MTSS Critical Component Summary
- Leadership in an MTSS Framework
- Data and Evaluation in an MTSS Framework
- Problem Solving in an MTSS Framework
- Exceptional Children Accountability Tracking System (ECATS) Overview
- SLD Eligibility Webinar
- SLD Factsheet 1-3

#### Participant Documents

- Kerri's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence
- Monica's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence
- Sherri's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence
- Desiree's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence
- Molly's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence
- Talia's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence

- Erin's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence
- Shana's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence
- Claudia's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence
- Tawni's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence
- Julie's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence
- Marcus's Teacher Preparation Program Sequence

## APPENDIX G

### Parkland School District MTSS Staffing Structure

