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Distributed Leadership: Formal Leadership, Barriers, and Facilitators for Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

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by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the following people who have unconditionally supported and celebrated with me during this long journey of graduate school. First, thank you Mom for always challenging me to be better and helping me realize my full potential. Next, thank you Dad for being that consistent laugh and escape from the stresses of life. Ann, thank you too. I always appreciated your calm, happy demeanor during times of uncertainty. For my siblings, (Ryan, Carlee, Ben, and Anna) I am thankful to have you all by my side and excited to celebrate with you. Finally, thank you Makenzie for always saying, “you can do it.” I dedicate this dissertation to all of your unconditional support and faith in me.

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ABSTRACT

Currently, educators are exposed to an increased environment of accountability, which prioritizes student academic achievement. That environment of accountability is reinforced by multiple pieces of legislation that also call attention to the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). Even with these federal mandates, educators are continuously overwhelmed implementing MTSS and often leverage distributed leadership practices such as school leadership teams to carry out school improvement tasks. Both distributed leadership practices and MTSS are directly impacted by the practices of formal leadership (i.e., principals). In addition, enablers of and barriers to distributed leadership for MTSS should be investigated. This current study will utilize qualitative data to examine the facilitators of, and barriers to distributed leadership in a school that is implementing MTSS as well as the influence of the principal on a distributed leadership model. An embedded single case study was conducted with one elementary school leadership team that was facilitating MTSS implementation. Data from interviews, observations, documents, and journal entries were analyzed with a thematic analysis and constant comparison technique. The findings yielded multiple facilitators of (i.e., leadership experience, trust and flexibility, communication, collaboration and consistency, the utilization of data) and hinderances to (i.e., mindsets, resources, personal and professional shortcomings) distributed leadership for MTSS. Additionally, the study highlighted the role of the principal (i.e., engaged leading, supporting of learning, accessing collective capacity) within a distributed

leadership model for MTSS. Theoretical, practical, and policy advancements for the field of education in light of this study's findings are discussed.

CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

Public education is challenged each year to uniquely address students' academic, behavior, and social-emotional needs in hopes of increasing overall student academic achievement. This monumental task is fueled by multiple pieces of federal legislation that reinforce more proactive, inclusive, and comprehensive systems as well as establishes more accountability at the school and district levels. Many educators have relied on the implementation of multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to address the needs of all students. However, the implementation and sustainability of such a complex framework often requires the distribution of leadership power and tasks. Even with the distribution of power and tasks, formal leaders (i.e., principals) still coexist and influence that distributed environment. Additionally, there might be factors that facilitate or hinder the functioning of distributed leadership for MTSS in a school environment.

Within this chapter, I will provide an overview of how (a) federal legislation reinforced MTSS, (b) how leadership is spread for MTSS implementation and its relationship with distributed leadership models, (c) the role of formal leadership coexisting with distributed leadership, and (d) what helps and hinders MTSS, distributed leadership and system change

efforts. Overall, this information had guided me to conduct specific research on MTSS implementation and distributed leadership, which will conclude this chapter.

A Brief Story Behind MTSS

MTSS is a service delivery framework that was modeled after public health models of service delivery and is used within education to provide supports based on students' responsiveness to the services provided across differing tiers of support (Batsche et al., 2005). There are three major tiers within any MTSS; Tier I (e.g., universal intervention), Tier II (e.g., supplemental services in conjunction with universal intervention), and Tier III (e.g., intensive services in conjunction with Tier I and Tier II interventions; Jimerson et al., 2015). Throughout each of the Tiers, students' progress is monitored through data-based decision making and support is adjusted based on their response to interventions provided (Batsche et al., 2005). MTSS evolved from Response to Intervention (RtI) models, which focused solely on supporting students' academic success (Batsche et al., 2005), and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012) focused on supporting students' social and behavioral success (Sugai & Horner, 2009). More recently, educators began calling for an integrated framework of MTSS to promote comprehensive (e.g., academic, behavioral, social emotional) supports for all students (Gamm et al., 2012 as cited in Eagle et al., 2015; Lane et al., 2010). However, before moving into the current atmosphere for models of service delivery, it is important to examine the historic pieces of legislation and events that promoted MTSS as a model for improving student outcomes.

The first major piece of legislation that served as a catalyst for MTSS implementation was the landmark reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA, 2004). IDEIA (2004) changed how Local Education Agencies (LEAs) could go about

identification of and intervention for students who needed additional support to be successful. Specifically, IDEIA (2004) noted that a student's response to scientifically based instruction and/or intervention (i.e., RTI) could be utilized to determine eligibility for special education services under the Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) category. The main reason for the push for RTI through IDEIA (2004) was the concern from educational stakeholders (e.g., The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education; PCESE) regarding the lack of effectiveness of the "traditional model" of service delivery for students who had or were suspected of having an SLD (i.e., test-and-place, IQ-Achievement Discrepancy). The PCESE recommended that educators should direct their focus on student progress with proactive and responsive systems that match students' overall needs (e.g., academic, behavioral, and social-emotional), promote evidence-based instruction and intervention, and create a more inclusive educational setting (e.g., developing coherence between special and general education). Thus, IDEIA (2004), through provisions regarding RTI, was the catalyst for schools to act upon the recommendations of the PCESE, which began the movement toward widespread use of MTSS.

The recommendations of the PCESE (2002), IDEIA (2004) legislation, and the emergence of RTI occurred within a broader education system that was at the start of the Age of Accountability movement. Specifically, with the passing of federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA, 2015), accountability for student achievement shifted to educators and school leadership. Not only have schools been expected to use assessments to monitor student achievement and to improve student outcomes, but ESSA (2015) also provides access for funding that can promote MTSS implementation (e.g., monies for professional development).

The impetus for the inclusion of MTSS in federal legislation focused on accountability involves the effectiveness of the model for improving student outcomes within the literature. MTSS has been noted as an effective mechanism for a variety of student outcomes when implemented with fidelity (Burns et al., 2005; Hattie, 2015; Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Vanderhayden & Witt, 2005). Despite the intersection between changes in federal legislation, the age of accountability movement and the widespread adoption of MTSS, concerns exist regarding the framework. Schools are continuously struggling to conceptualize, implement and maintain MTSS implementation fidelity, while navigating limited resources and/or professional capacity (Alonzo et al., 2008; Bamabara et al., 2012; Bohanon & Wu, 2014; Lohrmann et al., 2012; Scott et al., 2019). Additionally, questions remain involving the effectiveness of MTSS with some researchers claiming that (a) the framework may be unreliable and unrealistic, and (b) that it continued a deficit model approach to education instead of its intended purpose of providing equitable educational service delivery for all students (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Kavale as cited in Batsche et al., 2006; Sabnis et al., 2020).

Despite the criticisms of MTSS and the need for additional research; educators continue to adopt MTSS as a service delivery framework within educational settings. One major area of MTSS implementation that requires specific questioning is the influence of distributed leadership and educators' use of the practices that comprise the model. Many responsibilities fall unto educational leaders due to their critical influence on the implementation of new practices and maintaining of system functioning (e.g., developing a mission and vision, acquiring professional development opportunities, monitoring school wide progress; Eagle et al., 2015; Mellard et al., 2012; Sharatt & Fullan, 2009; Spiegel, 2009). Additionally, leadership remains one of the key catalysts for MTSS fidelity and implementation (Eagle et al., 2015; Forman et al., 2013;

Leithwood et al., 2007; Stacey et al., 2000). However, due to the complexity of MTSS, literature and practice around MTSS has moved away from one sole leader responsible for MTSS implementation to leadership teams for MTSS (e.g., data collection, policy alignment, resource allocation; Choi et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2017; March et al., 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). Currently, there is not a robust literature base on the intersection of leadership teams and distributed leadership for MTSS. Therefore, I will start with the literature on distributed leadership before describing how the approach relates to MTSS implementation.

Distributed Leadership and MTSS

Distributed leadership is generally defined as members of an organization moving away from central, formal leadership to more organization wide decision making, accessing multiple individuals for daily functioning, and leveraging relationships for capacity building (Elmore, 2000; Hartley, 2007; Lashway, 2006; Tian et al., 2016; Spillane, 2006). There are three main models for distributed leadership, which come from Spillane (2006), Gronn (2008), and Leithwood et al. (2007). For example, Spillane discusses that distributed leadership has four patterns which are collaborative (e.g., two or more leaders working together) coordinated (e.g., following a specific pathway of leadership for a task), collective (e.g., multiple leaders working separate but unified actions towards a goal) and parallel (e.g., multiple leaders performing the same action in different contexts). In fact, Spillane's (2006) patterns of distributed leadership most directly connects to the work of teachers. Teacher leaders creating a mission and vision (e.g., collaborative), teachers providing screening results to a reading coach (e.g., coordinated), multiple leaders collecting fidelity observation data (e.g., collective) and multiple teacher leaders running separate professional learning communities (e.g., parallel) are all examples of Spillane's types of distributed leadership. Regardless of the specific model, distributed leadership models

have been associated with noted improvements in staff capacity, student outcomes, and school improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Harris, 2009; Hulpia et al., 2009; Seashore et al., 2010; Sherer, 2004; Silins & Mulford, 2002; Tian et al., 2016).

However, research on distributed leadership has limitations that can hinder its utility in general and specific to MTSS implementation. For example, the term "distributed leadership" is often synonymous to similar sounding, but conceptually different terms such as "shared leadership", "teacher leadership" or "democratic leadership" (Harris, 2008). This can create confusion regarding the purpose, intent, and enactment of distributed leadership in applied settings. Second, there is a lack of research that provides the real-life functions and experiences of those within a distributed leadership model (Ritchie & Woods, 2007; Tian et al., 2016). This lack of clarity can potentially limit implementation and interpretation as it relates to promoting organization functioning. Last, even though there are many theoretical connections between distributed leadership models and leadership teams for MTSS, there is little research that brings those topics together.

To address the gap in research on MTSS implementation and distributed leadership, my Ed.S. Thesis focused on the conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS implementation (i.e., Latimer, 2020). I conducted a case study with a school leadership team implementing MTSS through their distributed leadership model. I found four themes focused on conceptualization and four themes that described enactment. The participating school leadership conceptualized their distributed leadership model for MTSS as comprising of collective responsibility, multiple types of leading qualities, ample communication, and a student focused culture. Furthermore, the school leadership enacted their distributed leadership model for MTSS through a consistent data culture, a focus on staff's strengths, coherence with procedures, and

developing staff by a variety of means (Latimer, 2020). Although my Ed.S. Thesis provided empirical information that illustrated how one school conceptualized and enacted distributed leadership for MTSS, key gaps remain in the literature. One theme found in the research on distributed leadership (e.g., Seashore et al., 2010) and in my Ed.S. Thesis is that formal leadership (i.e., the principal) impacts distributed leadership for MTSS. Additionally, there are factors that can be enablers of or hinderances to MTSS implementation within a distributed leadership model. Based on the findings of Latimer (2020) as well as the overall literature base, my intention was to further examine the interaction between MTSS implementation and distributed leadership. Specifically, I sought to examine the role of the principal as well as narrow my focus to the factors that specifically influence distributed leadership models for MTSS implementation. The following sections review the basis for the current study as they will touch on the current literature of a principal's role in distributed leadership and MTSS as well as factors that impact implementation.

Principal's Role

The research base focused on the role of formal leadership in distributed leadership is well conceptualized. For instance, authors note that principals are the most influential contributors for promoting adoption of distributed leadership because of the steadfast hierarchical structure of the school environment (Leithwood et al., 2007; Seashore et al., 2010). Principals also have many noted responsibilities and actions within a distributed leadership model such as communication of goals, resources allocation, hiring, and leveraging relationships to promote system change (Eagle et al., 2015; Mellard et al., 2012; Spiegel, 2009). Additionally, principals are often relied upon in a distributed leadership model to supervise its implementation, balance personal and professional relationships, and bridge the shared decision making between

staff and administration (Hulpia et al., 2009; Latimer, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2007; Tian et al., 2016). Equally important is the role of the principal in any implementation effort for MTSS. However, the current literature does not have any empirical studies that can provide causal linkages between leadership styles and MTSS implementation. Similar to the literature on the role of formal leadership within a distributed leadership model, many authors have only conceptualized what leadership can do to help facilitate the implementation of MTSS. For instance, principals can adapt roles within an organization, recruit and distribute key resources, and access human capital for professional development (Eagle et al., 2015). Additionally, principals can establish communication streams, align policies, and mold an environment that would support MTSS implementation (Mellard et al., 2012; Spiegel, 2009).

Despite the lack of empirical literature on formal leadership within distributed leadership and MTSS models, distributed leadership for MTSS implementation requires a focus on building the capacities of all stakeholders (Castillo et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2016). Additionally, any effort for distributed leadership and MTSS implementation is embedded into a larger system (i.e., the school system). Formal leadership provides key actions for the facilitation of any system change across schools. For instance, the system change model of implementation science coined by Fixsen et al. (2010) outlines how formal leadership drives change. Specifically, principals can leverage implementation drivers (i.e., organizational materials, professional competency, leadership) in supporting the professional development activities, establishing a conducive environment for practices, and/or being the lead professional learning for a particular initiative.

Considering the perceived role of the formal leadership in distributed leadership, MTSS and system change efforts, it is not surprising that federal legislation has also provided a larger focal point on a principal's influence. Specifically, ESSA (2015) has reinforced the development

and retainment of effective school leadership by allowing funding to go towards building the capacities of school leaders (Espinoza & Cardichon, 2017; Haller et al., 2016). ESSA (2015) noted the developing research-base on principal effectiveness (Clotfelter et al., 2007; Seashore et al., 2010) and the importance of strategic plans for promoting long term teacher effectiveness and positive student outcomes revolving around principal development. However, factors within a principal's environment can also influence their ability to carry out distributed leadership, MTSS or any system change efforts. Thus, looking at what the literature says about factors that enable or hinder distributed leadership models for MTSS implementation or other systems changes can further clarify how principals or any school leadership team can effectively promote their distributed efforts.

Factors that Facilitate or Hinder Distributed Leadership

The literature base for factors that enable or hinder distributed leadership for MTSS is mostly based on theory. For instance, dynamic relationships between staff and leadership, having established goals, administrators allowing for the spread of power, collaboration among staff, and having specific planning procedures articulated have all been theorized to promote distributed leadership (Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Liljenberg, 2015; Lumby, 2013; Spillane, 2006). However, there is little to no research that provides specific narratives of how these factors contribute to distributed leadership implementation. Moreover, no research exists demonstrating causal linkages between these factors and effective distributed leadership. The lack of empirical information in the literature also is an issue regarding what hinders distributed leadership. For example, distributed leadership implementation can potentially be impeded by a number of factors such as why it is being implemented (e.g., mandated vs. valued), the power dynamics within an organization, the task and load management, the reaction of the staff within

the model, and professional and interpersonal conflicts (Barth et al., 1999; Harris, 2003b; Holloway et al., 2018; Lumby, 2013; Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006; Murphy et al., 2009; Spillane, 2006; Storey, 2004; Vail & Redick, 1993; Wasley, 1991; Youngs, 2009, 2014). However, little to no research exists that illustrates or empirically links these factors to distributed leadership use.

Similar to the literature on distributed leadership, much of what is known about factors that impact MTSS implementation is also somewhat theoretical in nature. In some cases, research around factors such as coaching, technical assistance and professional development have provided evidence of positive relations with MTSS implementation (Erchul, 2015; Forman & Crystal, 2015; March et al., 2016). However, researchers of MTSS implementation note that established planning, data-based problem solving, and professional development procedures can support the implementation of MTSS (Eagle et al., 2015; Forman et al., 2013; Gresham, 2007; Sugai & Horner, 2009; Torgeson, 2009). Yet, these factors are often hypothesized by researchers who logically expect schools' MTSS implementation efforts will be influenced by them. For example, issues such as a lack of communication across stakeholders, limited fidelity of MTSS implementation, neglect of environmental fit or stakeholder's perspectives, lack of ongoing resources and lack of capacity building have been theorized as barriers to implementation (Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fullan, 2010; Gresham, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2011; McIntosh et al., 2010).

Additionally, the factors that facilitate or hinder MTSS implementation are also conceptualized in the system change literature. Multiple researchers (Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011; Jimerson et al., 2015; McIntosh et al., 2010) provide different, yet conceptually similar notions of what enables and hinders system

change. For example, factors such as consistent and clear communication, involvement of key stakeholders, a common understanding of the way of work, and effective leadership can all support any system change effort (Castillo & Curtis, 2014). On the other hand, a lack of resources or commitment to resources, limited professional development, staff mindsets, and poor communication are commonly noted as barriers to system change efforts such as MTSS (Jimerson et al., 2015; McIntosh et al., 2010). However, these factors often are based on theoretical assumptions rather than empirical data.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

There is limited research on the intersection of leadership teams for MTSS and distributed leadership, particularly on the influence of formal leaders (i.e., principals) on distributed leadership models facilitating MTSS implementation as well as on the facilitators of and barriers to distributed leadership models for MTSS. Additionally, many of the concepts involving the influence of formal leaders (i.e., principals) and factors that influence distributed leadership facilitating MTSS implementation lack real world examinations. Although I began to address these gaps within the literature with my Ed.S. Thesis, I conceptualized this study to further examine the intersection of MTSS implementation and distributed leadership. Specifically, this study will examine how formal leadership influences distributed leadership for MTSS as well as the factors that enable and impede distributed leadership for MTSS. For the current study, I utilized the previously collected dataset from the Latimer (2020) qualitative embedded single case study. The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What factors facilitate distributed leadership models for MTSS implementation?
2. What barriers hinder distributed leadership models for MTSS implementation?

3. What is the influence of formal leadership (i.e., principal) on distributed leadership models facilitating MTSS implementation?

Significance

Educators are subject to an accountability movement in education that requires the utilization of MTSS frameworks to provide all students with academic, behavioral, and social emotional supports to succeed (ESSA, 2015; IDEIA, 2004). Additionally, support for MTSS as a key mechanism for student outcomes continues to grow (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2015; Hattie, 2015). Yet, problems and issues with the conceptualization and implementation of MTSS have followed (e.g., Alonzo et al., 2008; Artiles et al., 2010; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), which has warranted a collective effort for implementation (i.e., distributed leadership approaches; Choi et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2017; Seashore et al., 2010). Although the intersection of MTSS and distributed leadership has come to fruition due to the reality of education, literature that provides practitioners and educational leaders with a concrete example of distributed leadership for MTSS can be beneficial. For example, principals may be able to use the information from this study to plan or support their efforts in establishing an effective distributed leadership model for MTSS implementation. The information can also potentially support the creation and improvement of school-based leadership team functioning for MTSS implementation. For example, it can provide information about facilitators and barriers to consider for distributed leadership among teams facilitating MTSS. This study can also provide a detailed narrative that fills the current gaps within the literature. For example, it can bridge the topics of distributed leadership and leadership teaming for MTSS and bring a concrete example of the application of these concepts to the literature. The study can potentially advance, modify or contrast the current theories around leadership teaming for MTSS and distributed leadership. As a result, it might bring

additional considerations regarding best practices for distributed leadership for MTSS. Specifically, the qualitative nature of this study can provide a more relatable and comprehensive examination of distributed leadership functioning for MTSS implementation.

Last, this study may have an impact on policy at the state, district, and school level. Specifically, this study can provide information to district leaders, statewide partners (e.g., state level projects, consultations), departments of education, and school based leaders to think about best practices in supporting leadership teaming for MTSS. Information accessed with this current study can be help leaders across states and departments conceptualize what formal leadership can do for MTSS within a distributed leadership models and consider facilitators of and barriers to distributed leadership for MTSS.

Key Terms

Distributed Leadership

A group activity that is dependent on relationships across an organization as opposed to individual action for system functioning. Specifically, distributed leadership focuses on (a) a network of interacting individuals, (b) a widened boundary of leadership across an organization and (c) a focus on expertise instead of formal titles (Bennett et al., 2003)**.**

Multi-tiered Systems of Support

A service delivery model that was derived from a public health framework that encompasses multiple tiers (i.e., Universal, Supplemental, and Intensive) of instructional and intervention services for students based on their response to evidence based practices and data based decisions (Batsche et al., 2005; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Jimerson et al., 2015; Tilly, 2008). In the recent years, multi-tiered systems of support have integrated the multi-tiered systems of Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support

(PBIS) into one all-encompassing framework for supporting all students' needs (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

School Leadership Team

A group of educators that encompass various individuals within a school (e.g., principals, teachers, support staff) that are responsible for leading, monitoring, modifying, and improving school wide initiatives to promote optimal school functioning (Learning Forward, 2011). Similar to Latimer (2020), I will be focusing on the school leadership team's actions towards facilitating MTSS implementation.

Implementation

"The process of putting a practice or program in place in the functioning of an organization, such as a school" (Forman et al., 2013, p. 78)

Principal

An individual who oversees non-administrative positions (e.g., teachers, support staff) at a single school within a school district. Typically, principals provide a variety of services such as hiring, budgeting, allocating resources, accessing professional development, and making system wide decisions (Latimer, 2020).

System Change

Any actions committed by those within an organization (e.g., reallocating funding, providing training, changing procedures, problem solving, mentoring) to better support certain practices for desired outcomes and/or address any issues initialized by an intentional change (Fixsen et al., 2013).

CHAPTER II:

LITERATURE REVIEW

The previous chapter gave a brief depiction of the current state of inclusive, and accountability based legislation, MTSS implementation, the role of distributed leadership in organizational functioning, formal leadership's impact, and facilitators of and barriers to enacting distributed leadership. The overall purpose of this chapter is to provide a more in-depth description and illustrate the interconnectedness of each of those key topics. Given that this dissertation is an extension of my Ed.S. Thesis (i.e., Latimer, 2020), I will refer to Latimer (2020) for more in-depth examinations of some topics. Yet, I will also provide a more in-depth discussion of the topics specific to this dissertation proposal within this chapter. Due to the direct connection to my thesis project, I follow a similar format throughout the other chapters within this paper.

First, I will start this chapter with an acknowledgement of the key pieces of legislation that set the stage for MTSS implementation in schools. Following that, I will briefly outline MTSS, its related research and noted critiques. I will then transition into a separate yet interconnected discussion of distributed leadership models, the people involved, and factors that impact its functioning. Next, I will provide a brief review of system change literature focusing on implementation science and factors that influence the system change process. Finally, I will

conclude the chapter by making connections among the literature on each of the previously outlined topics (e.g., distributed leadership, MTSS implementation, system change, formal leadership, and facilitators and barriers) and identifying the gaps within the literature.

Educational Legislation Related To MTSS

Over the last three decades, educators have been influenced by various pieces of federal legislation that has put inclusive practices at the forefront of education (Public Law 94-142; IDEIA, 2004). One of the results of the legislation was the establishment of MTSS implementation. At the same time, other pieces of federal legislation (e.g., No Child Left Behind, 2002; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015) have been pushing for more accountability in education focused on ensuring the success of all students (e.g., age of accountability). In fact, in ESSA (2015), provisions allowed federal funding to be dedicated to professional learning for MTSS. Throughout this section, in addition to describing these federal education laws, I will also discuss critical insights regarding how the intent of those pieces of federal legislation might also be providing negative unintended consequences for educators. Finally, I conclude with a converged summary on how the multiple pieces of federal legislation support current implementation of MTSS.

Before the 1970's, hundreds of thousands of individuals with physical or cognitive disabilities were placed in restrictive and under resourced state facilities that provided little to no educational services (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2007). However, during this time period, there was growing momentum for both civil and educational rights in the United States. Specifically, during the 1950's and 1960's, the U.S. Supreme Court decided to end racial segregation within schools in the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka case and the U.S. Congress passed of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Similarity, during the 1950-1970's, there were

multiple court cases (e.g., Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children [PARC] v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia) that found individuals with disabilities have the right to be placed in publicly funded school settings (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2007). Those multiple court cases, federal support, and advocacy from family organizations pushed the federal government to the carry out the congressional intervention of 1972. The result of that intervention determined that there were roughly eight million school aged children with disabilities, with more than half of them not receiving a standardized education or attending school (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2007). Ultimately, this finding led to the landmark decision to pass the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142, 1977).

Public Law 94-142 (1977) mandated that school districts identify and serve school aged children with disabilities. Primarily, Public Law 94-142 (1977) ensured that all students received a "free and appropriate public education", along with other safeguards for students with disabilities. Despite the intention of the legislation, there were some issues that warranted further exploration and changes. For instance, one disability classification that challenged the U.S. Department of Education and ultimately amplified the need for MTSS was students who were identified with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). For instance, a student with a SLD can potentially have "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language" (e.g., dyslexia, and developmental aphasia; IDEIA, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education initially determined that for a student to be found eligible for an SLD and subsequently special education services, they must have a significant discrepancy between their measured Intelligence Quotient (I.Q.) and their measured achievement (i.e., the discrepancy model). This provision became known as the "wait-to-fail model" because students

identified in need of support often would not demonstrate a large enough discrepancy for multiple years before becoming eligible. Even more so, scholars discredited the model due to its inability (a) to connect to increases in student achievement (Batsche et al., 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007), (b) to be proactive in providing services to students, (c) to differentiate services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Vanderhayden & Witt , 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003), and (d) to go beyond diagnosis to facilitate specific intervention or treatment (Jimerson et al., 2015; Vanderhayden & Witt, 2005).

Decades after these problems continued to challenge the educational system, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (PCESE) was established. The PCESE was tasked to examine the current state of special education and determine specific recommendations for advancing special education. The PCESE provided sweeping recommendations that revolved around the need for the education system to focus more on the progress of a student as opposed to the process surrounding the student. Additionally, the PCESE requested a better special education identification system that would center around improving instruction for all students regardless of being identified as having a disability (e.g., U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2002). Congress responded to the PCESE recommendations and decided to revamp Public Law 94-142 with the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). One of the relevant changes that came with IDEIA (2004) was allowing LEAs to use a student's response to scientifically based instruction and intervention as a tool to determine eligibility for SLD, thus establishing the response to intervention (RTI) model framework. The concept of RTI quickly moved passed just an identification procedure for determining special education eligibility to a multi-tiered model of educational services designed to serve all students

regardless of need in a continuum based model of service (i.e., multi-tiered systems of support; MTSS; see Latimer, 2020 for further detail). MTSS typically is conceptualized as a three-tier model of service delivery that encompasses Tier I (e.g., universal intervention), Tier II (e.g., supplemental services in conjunction with universal intervention) and Tier III (e.g., intensive services in conjunction with Tier I and Tier II intervention; Jimerson et al., 2015). Students are provided supports based on their responsiveness to the services provided in each tier and their progress is monitored by continuous data-based decision making (Batsche et al., 2005).

MTSS emerged from two separate multi-tiered models. In the late 1990's, federal funding went towards establishing a national center for supporting students with behavioral and social emotional challenges, which lead to the creation of the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). Shortly after, the notion of MTSS transitioned to the academic realm with the Response to Intervention Framework (e.g., RtI; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). More recently, scholars have argued for integration of both models as one comprehensive notion of MTSS. For example, Gamm et al. (2012) as cited in Eagle et al. (2015) defines MTSS as ''an evidence-based model of education that employs data-based problem-solving techniques to integrate academic and behavioral instruction and intervention'' (p. 4). Overall, this definition as well as others (Batsche et al., 2006, Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Jimerson et al., 2015), focus on the comprehensive nature of supporting all students regardless of domain (e.g., academic, behavioral). Consistent with my Ed.S. Thesis (i.e., Latimer, 2020), I will "refer to MTSS as any multi-tiered, comprehensive model of services designed to serve all students regardless of need in a continuum based model of service" (p. 22).

While MTSS evolved from special education policy to a universal model for all supporting students, concerns of global competitiveness in student achievement led to the

accountability movement in education. Specifically the concerns lead to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. One overarching goal of NCLB (2002) was to continuously increase academic performance for specific groups of students who typically have lower levels of achievement than the general student population (e.g., students with disabilities, students from racial minority backgrounds, students who speak English as their second language). States were required to administer assessments to monitor student growth and to provide increasing levels of accountability based on student performance. These underlying tenants of NCLB (2002) remained in the reauthorization of the legislation (i.e., Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; ESSA). However, ESSA (2015) further reinforced the use of MTSS as a framework for ensuring that all students are provided necessary supports. In fact, ESSA (2015) included provisions allowing LEAs to spend monies for professional development for their MTSS.

ESSA (2015) and IDEIA (2004) both included language that facilitated the widespread adoption of MTSS across the nation. When implemented with fidelity, MTSS models have been noted to positively contribute to students' academic and behavioral outcomes as well as systemic student outcomes (e.g., special education referral rates; Bradshaw et al., 2015; Burns et al., 2005; Hattie, 2015; Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Jimerson et al., 2015; Marston et al., 2003; Mellard et al., 2012; Torgeson, 2009; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). Despite the evidence for the effectiveness of MTSS, questions remain regarding educators' capacity to implement MTSS and its effectiveness. For instance, there is a lack of random control trial studies, comparison studies, reliable and validated measures, and concrete links between the implementation of MTSS and student outcomes (Balu et al., 2015; Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Marson et al., 2003; Sugai & Horner, 2009). With this lack of methodological rigor in its research, one can question the efficacy of MTSS as a model for increasing overall student achievement (e.g., Balu et al., 2015;

Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Additionally, others raised concerns of the context dependent nature of MTSS (Marson et al., 2003). Regardless of the empirical evidence for MTSS, schools are still constricted by their professional capacity or resources. For instance, even if schools are able to apply tenants of MTSS, they must engage in effective and continuous professional learning to sustain high levels of effectiveness and fidelity overtime (Castillo et al., 2018; Kratochwill et al., 2007).

Furthermore, scholars also have raised concerns regarding the disconnect from the key components of MTSS and its real-life implementation. For instance, authors questioned if the major shift to MTSS was actually more harmful than helpful with the potential abandonment of a more reliable method for identification of SLD (e.g., standardized assessments; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Kavale as cited in Batsche et al., 2006). However, others have argued that the focus of MTSS is treatment validity (e.g., connecting results to beneficial treatment) and not construct validity (e.g., extent to which an assessment reliably measures a construct; Jimerson et al., 2015), which also better aligns with the accountability standards of federal legislation. Additionally, some argue that MTSS actually might have inherent flaws that do not match the reality of the education system such as arbitrary and untested cut off scores for normality (Kavale as cited in Batsche et al., 2006), unrealistic expectations for teachers (Artiles, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), and outcomes that do not clearly differentiate it from previous of models of special education (e.g., similar identification rates, disproportionate identification of students of color; Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Kauffman et al., 2008; Kavale cited in Batsche et al., 2006; Kavale et al., 2008; Sabnis et al., 2020).

Even with the concerns regarding MTSS, it has been widely adopted as a model for service delivery. It also has received attention in current federal education legislation (i.e., ESSA,

2015) as a comprehensive framework that schools and districts can utilize to improve the outcomes of students. This has left educators with the challenge of figuring out how to facilitate effective practices for MTSS. Distributed leadership models hold promise as a way to approach facilitating implementation of MTSS. The following section will provide an overview of distributed leadership models, practical applications and research on distributed leadership, and implications of distributed leadership for MTSS.

Distributed Leadership

As the age of accountability has continued since the start of the 2000's, the policy heavy world of education has increasingly noted the importance of school-based leadership (NCLB, 2002; ESSA, 2015). However, the traditional idea of leadership (e.g., one principal leading a school) is being challenged by the newer notion of distributed leadership (Flessa, 2009). Distributed leadership has a diverse conceptualization within the literature (Bennett et al., 2003; Tian et al., 2016). However, at its core, distributed leadership is a strategy an organization can utilize to extend leadership practices through relationships of organizational members for collective action to attain an outcome that is larger than the sum of the individual parts (Bennett et al., 2003; Elmore, 2000; Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2009; Hartley, 2007; Lashway, 2006; Spillane, 2006).

Recently, distributed leadership practices have gained popularity due to (a) a growing body of literature (Flessa, 2009), (b) flexibility and compatibility with established notions of administration (e.g., democratic leadership, shared leadership; Spillane et al., 2007) and (c) its focus on increasing opportunities and capacities of a range of individuals for an organization's benefit (Leithwood et al., 2007). Distributed leadership practices are also guided by three main models of distributed leadership, which are from the research conducted by Gronn (2008),

Leithwood et al. (2007), and Spillane (2006). Despite the fact that all three major models have distinct differences, all contribute to conceptualizing distributed leadership. For example, each model provides a comprehensive picture of how distributed leadership is conceptualized and potentially enacted within practice (Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). Additionally, all the models share some similarities such as (a) the direct influence of on an organization's environment, (b) the need for continuous communication (e.g., interactions, common understanding) and (c) the importance of formal leadership coexisting with other informal leaders (Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). See Latimer (2020) for further detail regarding each model.

Distributed Leadership Impact

With each major model of distributed leadership there is the assumption that a spread of organizational power promotes an effective collective effort for organizational functioning. In addition, distributed leadership is intended to impact key outcomes (e.g., student improvement, staff capacity) that are specifically important within this age of accountability. However, the research behind distributed leadership is currently in its early stages, with limited empirical evidence for links to student achievement (Bennett et al., 2003; Day et al., 2009; Flessa, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2009; Spillane et al., 2007). What is available does indicate some relations between distributed leadership and student outcomes.

Distributed leadership has been found to have some impact on students' educational outcomes. Some schools have enacted distributed leadership practices (e.g., spreading leadership) when they are attempting to improve student achievement in literacy (Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Sherer, 2004). Additionally, educators have noted that distributed leadership practices were more impactful than individual leadership for improving student achievement as

well as increasing their teaching self-efficacy and collaboration (Seashore et al., 2010). Educators, specifically formal and informal leaders, have reported that distributed leadership practices are key in establishing teacher leadership, promoting school-wide consensus for areas of improvement, accessing more time and professional capacity, and increasing shared decision-making (Copland, 2003). Last, Latimer (2020) suggested that the conceptualization of distributed leadership for one school facilitating distributed leadership for MTSS was directly connected to how students were progressing. Specifically, Latimer noted that having a "student focused culture" was most conducive to the effectiveness of the model (Latimer, 2020; p.110).

Even though student outcomes are the focal point of the current age of accountability, those facilitating instruction and supports for students must still be considered. The intent of distributed leadership is maximizing the humanistic resources and leveraging relationships to increase overall organizational functioning. Distributed leadership does impact an organization's system and the functioning of individuals within a system. For example, distributed leadership can impact a school's overall data culture; thus, creating a bidirectional relationship between formal and informal leadership where expertise aligns within data instead of professional titles (Latimer, 2020; Tian et al., 2016). Distributed leadership practices can also algin with a consistent and widely shared mission that can increase overall clarity of daily functioning (i.e., "Every Tiger Every Day"; Latimer, 2020; p. 142). Additionally, distributed leadership can create active forms of engagement between informal leaders and formal leaders for school wide decision making (Leithwood et al., 2007). Other researchers found staff's (a) ability to increase overall school improvement (e.g., developing effective curriculum structures and process, classroom practices), (b) participation in school wide decision making, (c) commitment to and

satisfaction with their job, and (d) establishment of a climate of trust was paired with the presence of distributed leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Hulpia et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2012).

All noted studies did not utilize research methodologies that allow for causal inferences (e.g., Randomized Controlled Trials). However, this section provided examples of research that showed the influence of distributed leadership on student and systemic outcomes. Examining distributed leadership in a holistic manner (e.g., for students and staff members) provided the best lens for future investigations of the model. In fact, one common theme of some studies and all major models of distributed leadership was the influence of formal leadership (Gronn, 2008; Hulpia et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2007; Seashore et al., 2010; Spillane, 2006; Tian et al., 2016). Within the next section, I will highlight how formal leadership influences distributed leadership.

Formal Leadership and Distributed Leadership

Although distributed leadership is conceptualized as a leadership style where leadership practice is spread out to organizational members for collective action, formal leaders remain a significant contributing factor for the model's effectiveness for student and systemic outcomes (Bennett et al., 2003; Elmore, 2000; Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2009; Hartley, 2007; Lashway, 2006; Spillane, 2006). For instance, Seashore et al. (2009) noted that regardless of the level of distribution of leadership, teachers still held on to the hierarchical structure of a school (i.e., principal leading teachers). In fact, Hulpia et al. (2009) findings suggested that the most important contributor to distributed leadership is the school principal. Specifically, principals are often responsible for supervision of distributed leadership, yet other members of the school typically take lead in supporting distributed leadership (Hulpia et al., 2009). Relatedly, Latimer (2020) found that a principal can take specific actions that support the implementation of

distributed leadership. Latimer (2020) noted that the distributed leadership can be enabled by the varying qualities of leadership (i.e., “Personal and Logistical”; p. 90). In that study, Latimer (2020) indicated that the principal consistently displayed these leadership qualities, which enabled distributed leadership. In addition, the relationship, support, and engagement facilitated between the formal leadership and staff can also influence school wide decision making (Leithwood et al., 2007; Tian et al., 2016). Thus within a distributed leadership model, the hierarchical structure of a school is challenged but not abandoned. A principal’s authoritative power (i.e., ability to access/allocate funds, convey mission/vision) can co-exist within a distributed leadership model to enact or support necessary actions.

Relatedly, literature on distributed leadership also agrees that for effective functioning of an organization, there must be some sort of decentralization of leadership (Flessa, 2009; Gronn, 2008; Harris, 2003a; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). This idea results in principals having to rethink their idea of leadership, releasing certain powers, and focusing more on collaboration (Harris, 2012). The role of the principal has shifted from being the all-encompassing expert and manager of school related activities to being an instructional leader who focuses on building others’ capacity (Elmore, 2004; Gronn, 2000; Hoerr, 2007; Mayrowetz et al., 2007). Thus, one of the main roles a principal has in a distributed leadership model is to empower others through strategic teaming, capacity building and distribution of leadership (Lambert, 2002; Sherer, 2004; Shivers-Blackwell, 2006; Timperley, 2005). In a recent study of distributed leadership functioning, Latimer (2020) found that the principal was instrumental in ensuring that intervention-based teams were running effectively, staff were receiving professional development opportunities, and that there was focus on strengths to empower those within the school.

The principal also facilitates other key activities that relate to the overall capacity building of formal and informal leaders within an organization. For instance, principals must be the catalyst for interactions between the members of the organization and a specific task (Spillane, 2009). Additionally, principals should utilize those interactions to create more leadership distribution among informal leaders by directing the conversation towards a main goal and monitoring the actions of appointed leadership (Spillane, 2009). Latimer (2020) found a similar example in which a principal facilitating a distributed leadership model was the start of an embedded chain of communication between informal leaders and grade levels teams. Thus, in some instances the use of a principal's authoritative power can particularly advance distributed leadership practices.

Finally, the role of the principal has been noted as complex within distributed leadership models. Considering the flexibility and localized nature of distributed leadership, principals may be tasked to lead instructional programs, foster a mission and vision for distributed leadership, design school improvement goals, distribute appropriate resources, and hire effective staff (Herman, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2007). However, little information is available that provides narratives of the principal's role within distributed leadership as well as their interaction with MTSS (Harris, 2007; Latimer, 2020). For instance, findings from my Ed.S. Thesis indicate the participating school leadership team members consistently noted the principal as the catalyst for parts of their conceptualization (e.g., Balanced Leading Qualities) and enactment (e.g., Strength based culture) of distributed leadership for MTSS. However, I found that further inquiry is needed to provide a more in-depth examination of the influence of formal leadership on distributed leadership for MTSS.

Facilitators of and Barriers to Distributed Leadership

Although it is clear that a principal plays an influential role in facilitating distributed leadership, other factors likely promote or hinder the effectiveness of distributed leadership. For this section, I will begin by discussing facilitators that help the implementation of distributed leadership. Then, I will give a brief review of the barriers to distributed leadership that have been noted within the literature.

There are many commonalities voiced by scholars regarding what factors are enablers of distributed leadership. Facilitators include communication and interactions between formal and informal leaders (Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Tian et al., 2016), effective and committed formal leadership (i.e., principal; Gronn, 2008; Hulpia et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2007; Seashore et al., 2010; Spillane, 2006; Tian et al., 2016), consistent and clearly articulated data collection procedures for organizational progress (Latimer, 2020; Tian et al., 2016), a clear mission focused on student progression (Latimer, 2020), and trust among organizational members (Lee et al., 2012; Tian et al., 2016). Additionally, in the most recent large-scale review of distributed leadership literature, Tian et al. (2016) noted that strategic staff policy was a key contributor to distributed leadership. Specifically, having a strategic staff policy focused on providing flexibility in normal organizational structures allows for freedom from a stagnant leadership hierarchy and empowers informal leadership to lead specific initiatives (Tian et al., 2016). However, it is important to note there no studies that provide a causal and direct relationship between these facilitators and distributed leadership effectiveness. Researchers also note hinderances and unconsidered factors that can impede distributed leadership (Seashore, 2009; Sturdy et al., 2004). First, distributed leadership models may be intended to foster collective responsibility across an organization, but it actually can be disguised as modified

"Top-Down" leadership (Lumby, 2013; Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006; Youngs, 2014). For example, a formal leader might be overwhelmed with the responsibility that comes with the age of accountability and enforce a distributed leadership model to keep up with necessary tasks. Forced adoption from administration is viewed as a key barrier in distributed leadership's effectiveness and sustainability (Holloway et al., 2018; Lumby, 2013; Youngs, 2009).

Even in times when an organization is conducting distributed leadership practices, the organizational members' responses to the model might impede effectiveness. For instance, individuals within the model might be facing increasing or unfairly distributed workloads due to their productive behaviors and their refusal to cooperate might be deemed as against the collective responsibility (e.g., "we are all doing our part") notions of distributed leadership (Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006; Murphy et al., 2009; Lumby, 2013; Storey, 2004). Conversely, individuals within the model could potentially create a too widespread collective effort to intentionally weaken the established power of the formal leadership or a specific member of the organization (Murphy et al., 2009; Storey, 2004).

Additionally, schools are social structures and distributed leadership relies on an organization's leaders, followers, and situation for its effectiveness (Spillane, 2006). Starting with the leaders, distributed leadership requires that those who are typically in charge (e.g., principals) relinquish power to other organizational members in varying capacities (Harris, 2003a). Depending on the personality and willingness of the principal in an organization, this transition might be challenging or not welcome. Additionally, the withdrawal of role modification and continuous support from formal leadership (e.g., both moral and materialistic; Wasley, 1991) can provide a slew of challenges for distributed leadership. Regarding organizational members (i.e., followers; Spillane, 2006), they must be open minded and

reflective of their organization's demographics. For instance, if organizational members ignore the potential bias and unfair power dynamics that come with a diverse staff (e.g., gender, sexual identity, race), distributed leadership might become a vessel for further systemic discrimination (Holloway et al., 2018; Lumby, 2013; Martin & Collinson, 2002).

Finally, there are many practical factors (i.e., the situation; Spillane, 2006) that may negatively affect distributed leadership. For instance, Liljenberg (2015) explained that an effective adoption of any distributed leadership model must be paired with multiple pre-established components (e.g., distinct problem solving procedures, school wide targeted goals, an active and flexible relationship between formal leadership and staff members). Additionally, specific financial barriers such as allocating money for organizational change across multiple informal leadership positions can become too overbearing for organizations (Harris, 2003b).

However, distributed leadership models are always embedded within a system. Thus, focusing on a system perspective could potentially be beneficial in its implementation, especially when it comes to using distributed leadership for a large-scale system change (i.e., MTSS). Within the following section, I provide a brief review of literature on implementation science and system change to provide more contextual knowledge to what change might look like within an organization. This information may help to elucidate additional facilitators of and/or barriers to the use of distributed leadership.

Systems Change

Because system change models are focused on a guideline for supporting those who are leading a large-scale change within their organization (e.g., MTSS implementation), various scholars have provided their own perspectives on how change occurs (Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011). Many systems change models provide

differing points of view of the system change process and/or key components that can influence system change within an organization. For example, Hall and Hord (2011) noted the multiple factors that must be in place during an organizational change (e.g., system change) such as leadership that is committed to the entire implementation process, involvement of key stakeholders in the organizational change, the creation of a task force, "unfreezing" current structures to adopt change, allocating necessary resources, creating vertical and horizontal integration and ongoing support. Fullan (2010) also outlined multiple elements (e.g., guiding coalition at the top of an organization, using data as a strategic piece of improvement, building capacity both collectively and individually) that are somewhat comparable to Hall and Hord (2011). However, I will focus on the Fixsen et al. (2010) model of implementation science for this current study due to its close alignment to MTSS implementation.

The Fixsen et al. (2010) model of system change provides information on the stages of change and drivers of change within an organization. In Table 1, I briefly outline each of the four stages of implementation explained by Fixsen et al. (2010). Latimer (2020) provides a more extensive review of the Fixsen et al. (2010) model.

Table 1

Fixsen et al. (2010) Stages of Implementation Summary

Stages of Implementation	Key Characteristics
Exploration and adoption	• Focuses on gathering a collective agreement on the specific needs of the organization, a beneficial program change that targets specific needs of an organization • Actions revolve around brainstorming, exploring competing options, and determining feasibility and practicality • Main Goals ○ Establish a common understanding of purpose of the system change

Table 1 (Continued)

	• Outline specific necessary resources • Consider how the specific change will influence current practices • Gather insight from all key stakeholders
Program installation	• Focuses on distributing, allocating, and planning for resources to promote implementation of the selected program or practice. • Actions revolve around organizing opportunities for professional development, creating ways to communicate the change or future practice, or examining policies and procedures • Main Goal ○ Setting implementation drivers in motion
Initial implementation	• Focuses on the organization's first attempt to implement the selected program. • This stage is often characterized by uneven implementation and barriers to implementation such as disinterest in change, staff questioning the change, setbacks on implementation (e.g., time commitments, school bureaucracy) and a return to old habits (e.g., falling back on previous behaviors). • Actions revolve around combatting variables that inhibit change by engaging in actions such as providing embedded forms of professional development (e.g., job-embedded coaching) or accessing technical support
Full implementation	• Focuses on transitioning the selected practice into standardized practice with high levels of fidelity • Many organizations struggle with getting to this stage due to the conflicts noted in the previous stage. • Actions revolve around scaffolding supports and establishing accountability for local capacity building for sustainability.

Note. Adapted from Latimer (2020)

Fixsen et al. (2010) indicated that organizations should strive for sustainability of their system change by following key steps in their implementation stages. Specifically, the goal of sustainability is the ability of an organization to weather the educational pendulum (Stahl, 1999) and protect the determined changes for optimal functioning (Fixsen et al., 2005). Scholars provide multiple factors (e.g., sensemaking, environmental fit, data based practices, planning

funding and staff hiring) that leaders of system change efforts should consider when striving for sustainability (Fixsen et al., 2010; McIntosh et al., 2010; Weick, 1995).

Fixsen et al. (2010) noted that there are specific enablers related to the actions of individuals that can contribute to an organization's system change implementation and sustainability. For example, during the Program Installation stage of the model, individuals leading individual changes should organize implementation drivers to jumpstart the system change efforts. Implementation drivers have various roles (See Table 2) that provide various types of supports in the system change process (Fixsen et al., 2005). Table 2 outlines each implementation driver and their contribution to the system change process.

Table 2

Fixsen et al. (2005) Implementation Drivers Summary

Type of Implementation Driver	Contribution to the System Change Process
Competency Drivers	Available means (e.g., individuals, established systems, materials) within an organization that are guiding, facilitating, and supporting professional development activities that directly relate to the newly adopted program
Organization Drivers	Available means (e.g., individuals, influence, resources) within the organization's administration that create a conducive environment for research based practices that directly relate to the newly adopted program
Leadership Drivers	Elements (e.g., support, perceived value) within an organization that are conducive for individuals who are the main facilitator(s) of the system change or newly adopted program

Overall, there are multiple factors noted as enablers and potential barriers within the Fixsen et al. (2010) model. Although the Fixsen et al. (2010) model will be the primary system change model for this study, I will expand on the theorized enablers and barriers that might be associated with any sort of system change (e.g., Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fullan, 2010; Hall &

Hord, 2011, Klein & Sorra, 1996). I find that expanding my vantage point of potential enablers and barriers beyond Fixsen et al. (2010) can potentially enrich my analysis of data collected. In the following section I will outline the common themes of enablers and barriers that are across multiple researchers of system change.

Facilitators Of System Change

At the core of facilitating system changes, those leading system change efforts have to consider the diverse people, beliefs, values, and capacities within an organization to align and provide coherence (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010; Castillo & Curtis, 2014). Specifically, that takes form in a shared mission and vision. A clear, public, and widely shared mission and vision can potentially band together all individuals within an organization to make sense of and effectively implement a system change. Yet, regardless of the mission and vision or the source of a system change (e.g., classroom level, school level, district level), schools encompass and interconnect multiple professionals. A change within a school social system often affects not only those who were targeted in the system change, but often more people than anticipated (Castillo & Curtis, 2014). Considering this notion, those facilitating system change within an organization must include involvement of all key stakeholders (Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Hall & Hord, 2011; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010). Ensuring that the intended system change acknowledges all key stakeholders can support any system change effort (Hall & Hord, 2011).

Additionally, those leading change efforts must continuously empower all those within the organization. Continuously building capacity as well as providing resources for capacity building is necessary for system change (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011). Capacity building can be conceptualized as providing various professional development opportunities (e.g., trainings, job embedded coaching, book studies), but capacity building must

also allow for collective capacity (Castillo & Curtis, 2014, Fullan, 2010). Specifically, within school systems, teachers should be one of the main focuses of capacity building, as it can lead to more effective system changes (Castillo & Curtis, 2014, Fullan, 2010). As for necessary resources, system changes might call for providing money for stakeholders, necessary implementation materials, devoting time for skill development, or data management (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011).

Another key factor to consider is the systems that are in place before and during any large-scale system change. For instance, organizations that are going through some sort of system change or implementation process need to understand the relationship between the new change and the desired outcomes. The use of data to identify issues and monitor progress towards a desired outcome is a key piece in enabling system changes (Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011). For example, Hall and Hord (2011) believe that any change effort can be lost when those who are leading the effort do not routinely progress monitor. In addition, Fullan (2010) noted the importance of data as a tool for improvement and a guide to problem solving during the change process.

Fullan (2010) and Hall and Hord (2011) both also noted that leaders of system change must expect barriers and not shy away from times of difficulty. In those cases, having skills in problem solving procedures (e.g., problem identification, problem analysis, plan intervention, evaluate intervention) can be an effective tool in the facilitating and sustaining of the change efforts (Castillo & Curtis, 2014). Fullan (2010) and Castillo and Curtis (2014) both explain that system change efforts must have a small number of key priorities such as problem solving skills to become a successful organization.

Finally, a factor that encompassed all noted facilitators (e.g., problem solving, capacity building) is being strategically knowledgeable about systemic practices. System change facilitators must realize that system change is not an isolated event, but deeply interconnected. (Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011). Hall and Hord (2011) wrote that effective system changes are led by leaders who know both the overall system they are a part of, as well as how different aspects and individuals within the system are interconnected. Castillo and Curtis (2014) expanded from Hall and Hord (2011) and noted understanding all individuals, groups and departments across an organization can provide a more effective atmosphere for system change.

Barriers

On the other hand, the educational system is continuously evaluated and guided in varying directions (e.g., educational pendulum; Stahl, 1999) by state and federal leadership, and has continuously been subject to budget and resource limitations (Leachman & Figueroa, 2017). This complicated combination can easily impede any system change effort (Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Hall & Hord, 2011). For example, Hall and Hord (2011) explained that resources such as time are frequently noted barriers in the change process. Castillo and Curtis (2014) agreed with Hall and Hord (2011) by stating that time is the top barrier for educators and system change efforts (e.g., meeting, planning). Beyond time, other resources such as lack of materials (e.g., manuals, intervention materials), lack of training opportunities and lack of feedback can negatively impede a system change process (Batsche et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010; Jimerson et al., 2015).

Formal leadership are often looked at as the ones who provide administrative support such as access to resources or necessary staff (Eagle et al., 2015; Mellard et al., 2012; Spiegel,

2009). However, leadership that lacks commitment, supportive actions, a vision, or communication can immediately halt system change efforts (Forman et al., 2013; Fullan, 2003, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011; Jimerson et al., 2015). Paired with the actions of formal leadership, often communication of a system change is driven by the leadership within a school district. Hall and Hord (2006) outlined that schools' typical "Top-down" approach can create conflict with the change process. For example, the size of the "gap" (e.g., connectedness, familiarity) between the "Top" (e.g., principals, district leaders) and the "Bottom" (e.g., teachers) can negatively influence the effectiveness of system change. Similarity, initiatives that are mandated even from state or federal legislation can be unsuccessful if there is not a clear understanding, lack of justification, or limited commitment by those carrying out the change (Fullan, 1997).

Finally, the mindset of educators can be a potential barrier for system change. Specifically, a system change must be rationalized, practically supported and coherent with the values and mission of the stakeholders involved (Forman et al., 2013; Hall & Hord, 2011). For instance, desired change must be seen as an important and interconnected part of the major tenets of an organization (Kim & Senge, 1994; McIntosh et al., 2010). Additionally, the emotional response to a specific change in one's environment can either be a hindrance or enabler to the entire process (Weick, 1995).

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Implementation Teams and Distributed Leadership

The implementation of MTSS, a multi-level prevention framework focused on the improvement of all students' academic, behavioral, and social emotional needs can become a complex and taxing process (Ruffini et al., 2016). Specially, MTSS encompasses multiple components that are all equally complex and importantly interconnected (e.g., multiple levels of instruction and intervention, data based decision making, professional development; Fuchs &

Vaughn, 2012; Ruffini et al., 2016). In addition many schools face multiple challenges such as inconsistent funding methods or external support, shifting district priorities, lack of planning, and unsteady communication and collaboration (Freeman et al., 2015; George & Kincaid, 2008). However, leadership (e.g., principal's role) within any system change or MTSS implementation can be directly impactful to the outcomes of a system (Fixsen et al., 2005; Leithwood et al., 2009; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). For instance, principals leading MTSS efforts are often seen as the point person for various tasks that benefit MTSS implementation (e.g., modifying professional roles, allocating resources and funding, streamlining communication, aligning polices; Eagle et al., 2015; Mellard et al., 2012; Spiegel, 2009). Even more so, the current age of accountability that MTSS is nested within positions principals as the focal point for developing effective teachers, navigating school functioning, and completing necessary data practices for accountability (ESSA, 2015; Pollitt & Leichty, 2017; Rice, 2010). In many cases, school leaders use distributed leadership practices such as school leadership teams to meet the needs of MTSS implementation efforts as well as to impact student outcomes (Freeman et al., 2017; March et al., 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003).

There are many similarities (e.g., collective responsibility for organizational functioning, multiple individual works towards a common goal) between the notions of school leadership teams for MTSS (Choi et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2017; March et al., 2016) and the conceptualization and intent of distributed leadership models (Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al;. 2007; Spillane, 2006). Additionally, principals (e.g., the theoretical sole leader of a school) have shifted to utilizing distributed leadership practice to meet the demands of the age of accountability (Spillane et al., 2011). Considering the connection between the two concepts, the established literature that intersects distributed leadership and MTSS is mainly about what school

leadership teams specifically do for MTSS implementation. Typically, school leadership teams are in charge of collecting school wide data, reviewing and strategic planning based on progress monitoring data, facilitating problem solving at all levels, organizing professional development structures, and developing polices that can improve MTSS implementation (Choi et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2017; March et al., 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). There is also a smaller literature base that provides empirical evidence of the specific supports and variables provided to school based leadership teams that can potentially increase MTSS implementation fidelity (e.g., Albritton & Truscott, 2014; Castillo et al., 2016). School leadership teams are also accepted in practice as the catalyst for system change and MTSS implementation (e.g., Freeman et al., 2017; March et al., 2016). Yet, the majority of the cited studies are theoretical in nature and do not provide a narrative on how school leadership teams navigate distributed leadership for MTSS.

Latimer (2020), however, provided a narrative of the intersection of distributed leadership and MTSS implementation for a school leadership team. The findings suggested the need for further inquiry (i.e., enablers and barriers, influence of formal leadership) to enrich the literature on how schools can apply distributed leadership for MTSS implementation. For example, I found multiple themes from a school leadership team's conceptualization and enactment of their distributed leadership model for MTSS. Yet, I only briefly mentioned what supported or hindered the school leadership team's distributed leadership model for MTSS as well as the impact of formal leadership on distributed leadership and MTSS implementation.

In conclusion, I highlighted research that showcased the benefits of utilizing distributed leadership practices (e.g., school leadership teams) when attempting to implement MTSS with fidelity. However, that same literature has not fully converged the topics of distributed leadership, MTSS, system change, the impact of formal leadership, and influencing factors for

school wide functioning. Even with the recent study of distributed leadership for MTSS (i.e., Latimer, 2020), there are still avenues to investigate through real life examples of school leadership teams facilitating MTSS implementation. It is my belief that extending my Ed.S. Thesis can provide more connections between the distributed leadership, MTSS and system change literature bases as well as promote the application of distributed leadership for MTSS implementation through leadership teams.

CHAPTER III:

METHODS

I previously investigated the perspectives of a school leadership team facilitating MTSS by examining how they conceptualized and enacted distributed leadership for implementing MTSS (Latimer, 2020). Although participants were asked about their experiences and feelings regarding the conceptualization and enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS at their school, they were also asked about topics such as perceived barriers and enablers of MTSS implementation faced by their leadership team and the role of the principal within the leadership team. Questions about the role of the principal and facilitators of and barriers to their distributed leadership approach were asked with this current study in mind. Specifically, the current study utilized the data collected on the perceived barriers and enablers of MTSS implementation faced by a school leadership team and the role of the principal within distributed leadership. Thus, I used a previously collected dataset, but the dataset was intended to be utilized for the research questions for the current study. Additionally, many of the same methods, participants, and procedures mirrored my previous investigation of distributed leadership for MTSS.

Study Design

For the current study, I used a single embedded case study design. Specifically, the case study guidelines from Yin (2003). Yin's (2003)' definition of a case study is "a contemporary

phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context" (Cited in Latimer, 2020; p. 13). The overall design involved an examination of a contemporary phenomenon (i.e., distributed leadership practices for MTSS implementation) within a real life context (i.e., an elementary school) where I could not clearly compartmentalize or control the functioning of the school leadership team or their distributed leadership approach for MTSS implementation. Additionally, the three main criteria for a case study outlined by Yin (2003; e.g., , (a) addressing questions like "how" or "why", (b) limited ability to manipulate context in a real-life environment) also applied to this current study.

Specific to the current study, it was guided by questions that are asking "how" or "why." I also could not manipulate the specific real life context (i.e., studied school setting) where I conducted the research. Yin (2003) also noted that a case study must encompass various pieces of data to inform its findings. The embedded case study format for the current study lent itself to multiple sources of data (e.g., interviews, field notes, document review) from a single context (e.g., studied school; Yin, 2003). Finally, I used an exploratory approach by focusing on a phenomenon (e.g., utilization of distributed leadership for MTSS implementation) that has no clear set of outcomes (Yin, 2003).

Relationship with Research

Epistemological Orientation

Qualitative research that focuses on the human experience of a certain phenomenon has subjectivity embedded throughout its inquiry. For instance, a qualitative researcher and their conducted research is thought to be subjective due to the variability in studying humans within a real-life context. Researchers should navigate both their internal biases, values, and opinions as

well as those of their participants. I believe the reality that a participant conveys to a researcher is unique and socially constructed through personal experiences and their current environment. Due to the variability and subjectivity that comes with qualitative inquiries, researchers should focus on providing a multifaceted and detailed description of a phenomenon, as opposed to a reliance on objectivity for confirmation. Qualitative research should also be conducted within the environment of the phenomenon, given the social construction of reality. The unique experiences, knowledge and values of multiple individuals interacting with an environment inherently develops a specific reality that qualitative researchers should strive to capture through a detailed description. Researchers should also be explicit about their perspectives to provide an even more holistic description of an environment as well as note the reciprocal nature of studying the reality of multiple individuals. Despite my perspectives regarding qualitative research, I am still influenced by previously reinforced perspectives of objectivity in research with any inquiry (*See The Researcher*). Thus, I explored my own perspectives of objectivity throughout the current qualitative study.

Given my perspectives, I utilized Interpretivism as my orientation for the current study (Mertens, 2019). The interpretivist paradigm stresses the importance of fully understanding a context through multiple data sources (e.g., interpretations) and through an in-depth analysis to outline the unique complexities of a phenomenon (Hammersley, 2013; Willis et al., 2007). I used multiple data sources and a detailed analysis procedure to outline facilitators of and barriers to distributed leadership and the role of formal leadership in distributed leadership for MTSS. In conjunction with the data sources, I also took into account my personal reflections, professional interests, and background knowledge during my interpretation of the socially constructed reality that is distributed leadership for MTSS (Creswell et al., 2007). Even though the participants of

this study are all a part of the same leadership team, each had a unique and variable reality that has been constructed by the environment they are within. For this study, I sought to focus on each participants' individual reality was well as my own reality through multiple sources of data to provide a detailed description of the phenomenon of distributed leadership for MTSS.

The interpretivist paradigm stresses the importance of embracing the subjectivity that comes with the voices and experiences of participants from a social constructed reality (Creswell et al., 2007; Willis et al., 2007). MTSS varies in implementation and effectiveness (Burns et al., 2005; Hughes & Dexter, 2011, Scott et al., 2019) and there are multiple models and conceptualization of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). Considering the amount of variability, I relied on the voices and experiences of those within a specific environment to provide a detailed description of distributed leadership for MTSS. I did not strive to provide a generalizable truth behind what enables or impedes distributed leadership for MTSS, or the role of formal leadership in distributed leadership for MTSS within this particular setting. Rather, I strived to illustrate the socially constructed reality evident from my interactions with participants, all other forms of collected data and my prior knowledge and experiences. Yet, I continuously balanced my previously held expectations of objectivity with my interpretivist paradigm in the conceptualization and completion of this research study.

The Researcher

Examining and outlining reflexivity is a key piece in qualitative research. Macbeth (2001), and Pyett (2003) noted that researchers should provide consumers of qualitative research information regarding their reflexivity because (a) qualitative research is an inherently deconstructive process, (b) it showcases the transactional relationship between the researcher and

the environment and (c) it provides a clear context of the researcher. First, I am a doctoral candidate who has been a part of a school psychology program that has exposed me to many research, practical and theoretical opportunities that relate to MTSS, leadership teams, and system level changes. All those experiences have played a role in how I examined the data and how I conceptualized the findings. For example, the school psychology program I have been a part of has greatly emphasized the effectiveness of MTSS. Thus, my fondness of MTSS informs my judgement and analysis of MTSS implementation within the studied setting. My consistent exposure to and beliefs about the positive effects of MTSS on student and systematic outcomes informs my viewpoint when considering alternative outcomes as a result of MTSS implementation (i.e., negative student and systematic outcomes). Additionally, the graduate program I am apart of emphasizes post-positivist research. This has further influenced my process of data collection and analysis due to the shift in mindset and purpose of my inquiry (i.e., descriptive vs. confirming). For instance, I often found myself struggling with wanting to confirm hypotheses I had about MTSS implementation when trying to interpret the perspectives and experiences of the leadership team members. In short, both of those factors (i.e., fondness of MTSS and emphasis of post-positivist research) affected me as a researcher and lead to different challenges confronting what could be contradictions in the data regarding distributed leadership for MTSS.

Second, I completed similar research in the past involving distributed leadership and MTSS implementation and those skills may have inadvertently transferred and impacted my procedures and data collection. For example, in times of uncertainty I often fell back on what was previously successful (i.e., in my previous examination of distributed leadership for MTSS), yet potentially not beneficial for the current research study. In conjunction with my previously

noted post-positivist tendencies, I also felt discomfort in results that did not confirm or match the themes that were found in my Ed.S. Thesis. However, throughout the study I had specific procedures in place to recognize and combat these discomforts, which are described in the last paragraph of this section (e.g., journaling, constant comparison).

Third, in my previously conducted qualitative study, I noted in my reflective journaling that I often had feelings of "imposter syndrome" (Latimer, 2020; p. 182). In particular, I noted that my novice qualitative researcher status limited my understanding or dissemination of the findings. Although I have gained some experience in qualitative research, I still questioned my self-efficacy as a qualitative researcher or falsely develop inflated confidence in my qualitative research skills during the completion of this current study. In both instances, the findings from the study were influenced by my self-efficacy.

Fourth, I ascribe to a fluid definition of leadership within educational settings. In my past experiences of working with leadership teams and as a part of school based teams, I found that leadership can be both a perceived power (e.g., content expert, informal leader) and/or a professional title (e.g., principal, teacher leader). For example, I have worked within support staff or teacher led school teams that were responsible for school wide practices and did not involve any formal leaders (e.g., principals). Thus leadership within schools can diverge from the typical hierarchical structure (e.g., principal leading teachers) to allow for necessary actions to promote system functioning. Due to this flexible definition of leadership, my description of the leadership within the participating school minimized the impact of the typical hierarchical school structure. For example, in some instances I found myself downplaying the principal's hierarchical power in key school improvement actions (i.e., budgeting, vision creation) due to my fluid belief of leadership and the study's primary focus of distributed leadership practices.

On a personal note, I also have other factors within my life that shaped the current study. First, I was born within a family of two lifelong educators (e.g., retired teacher, elementary school principal) as parents. My parents were and continue to be the people who promote my self-stability in life and academia. Since I was a young boy, I have been motivated by my parents to take on responsibilities, which ultimately taught me the purpose and pleasure of honest and hard work. This translated into my ability to deviate from the normal post-positivist pathway that is reinforced within my current graduate program, and to accept the challenge of qualitative research. Because I am taking on the responsibility of learning a new method of inquiry, I came across times of frustration or uncertainty. However, I countered those times with consistent journaling to clearly articulate my challenges. Similarity, during my years of growing up, my parents instilled problem solving skills for times of frustration (e.g., my preconceived notions are not aligning with data collection or analyzation). These problem-solving skills also aided my paradigm transition and embracing of subjectivity.

My parents also put education as a top priority within my household. With that emphasis, came a lifelong admiration to those who dedicate life to education. From my perspective, many individuals who work within the education system are selfless, hardworking, caring individuals who often see more obstacles than recognition. One of the key reasons why I chose an occupation in the field of education is because I wanted to work with individuals who shared that mindset of challenging but heartfelt work. However, that notion of educators lent me to have a favorable bias toward those I interacted with during the study. Similar to my fondness of MTSS , I often attributed facilitators of distributed leadership for MTSS to the hard work of the educators. I also often attributed barriers of distributed leadership for MTSS to external factors (e.g., the political climate, school district leadership).

To recognize these issues, I had specific procedures embedded into the study design. For example, I reflectively journaled each week of the study to outline my challenges, biases and assumptions and incorporate the data within the study. In addition, I used a constant comparison technique throughout the study, which allowed me to continuously examine the data and to reflect on what I am seeing from the data. I used triangulation procedures (Patton, 1998; Tracy, 2010) to provide a multi-informational view that may have limited my biases by focusing more on explanation than verification. Overall, my ability to be reflexive in how my personal insights and experiences converged with my selected paradigm presented the transactional relationship that informed the current study.

Participants and Sampling

I studied a school leadership team that was identified through a purposive sampling technique based on specific criteria (See Table 3). Recruiting a school leadership team that fit these criteria allowed for a more in-depth investigation of the phenomenon of distributed leadership for MTSS implementation. McKeever's (2003) conceptualization of distributed leadership teams was also used to help identify a team using distributed leadership for MTSS.

Table 3

Criteria for School Leadership Team from Latimer (2020)

	Established Criteria
A School Leadership Team that:	1. Allowed me to develop knowledge in distributed leadership and MTSS implementation 2. Kept the majority of team members consistent for 3-5 years 3. Has been implementing MTSS for 3-5 years 4. Contained individuals that have expertise in MTSS implementation.

In order to find the school leadership team that fit the established criteria and the notions of McKeever (2003), I relied on the members of my Thesis Committee. Within qualitative case

study research, often researchers rely on professional networks (e.g., thesis committee members) to make connections to potential participants that match established criteria (Lichtman, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2015). Specifically, I spoke with my committee regarding a district level staff member I could speak with to determine any schools that would be interested in the study. My committee directed me to the MTSS district coach of the consenting district, in which they informed me of multiple schools that would be potentially interested in participating. From there, I met with each recommended school's principal and assistant principal to discuss the study and gage interest in participation of the study. Ultimately, I partnered with an elementary school in the consenting district based on both their ability to meet the specific criteria (See Table 3) and overall level of interest in the study. I used pseudonyms to describe both the school district (i.e., Middlebrook School District) and the school (i.e., Willow Elementary) in the following sections.

The Middlebrook School District (MBSD) is located in a Southeastern state and had roughly two decades of exposure to and practice of MTSS implementation. At the time of the study, the Southeastern state had rules and regulations as well as state funded agencies focused on MTSS implementation. The state-wide MTSS infrastructure remains the same to this day. For instance, school districts within this state were and currently are required to follow specific policies and procedures related to MTSS implementation (e.g., develop plans for reading services within an MTSS framework). Additionally, districts in this state still are required to follow state rules that mandated problem-solving techniques and RTI frameworks to be utilized for special education eligibility determination.

As for MBSD, it was considered a moderately large school district by the state. Latimer (2020) noted the district had majority white students enrolled, less than one-fourth required special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (e.g., IEP), and roughly half

of the student population was eligible for free or reduced-price meals. MBSD had been heavily involved with MTSS efforts since the state began focusing on MTSS in the early 2000's. For instance, they previously collaborated with multiple statewide projects to support their district's ability to implement MTSS. At the time of the study, MBSD had various online accessible resources, websites, and infographics for parents to explain how MTSS is being implemented within their district. Currently, MBSD has continued the focus and infrastructure on MTSS by including critical components (e.g., data-based decisions making, problem solving, systems of support) in their most recent district wide success plan (see Latimer, 2020 for further details).

Willow Elementary

At the time of the study, Willow Elementary recently opened (e.g., within the last three years) as an elementary school in MBSD. Willow elementary was located in a developing suburb outside a metropolitan city, which was purposeful because of the rapidly growing surrounding neighborhood. Willow's enrollment was roughly 900 students, and it closely mirrored the demographics of the district. Willow was outperforming many MBSD schools with their overall student achievement in state mandated testing. Finally, Willow Elementary had a focus on MTSS implementation. Since Willow Elementary was only in its third year of operations at the time of data collection, they fell under the purview of the MBSD's and state's MTSS efforts. Products such as school goals aligned with MTSS implementation, established Professional learning communities and the school's strive to become a recognized school for PBIS by the state level project all provided evidence of the school's MTSS efforts.

Study Participants

Study participants from Willow were members of their school leadership team and they were interviewed and observed as part of the overall study (Latimer, 2020). As noted previously,

I met with Willow's principal and assistant principal and they self-identified the members of their leadership team. Specifically, they noted that Willow's leadership team consistent of one teacher leader from each grade level, two teacher leaders from third grade (due to increased enrollment) and any full-time employees of the student services department (i.e., speech language pathologist, learning design coach). Because the leadership team was already established and the team met my specific criteria, I decided to construct the study around the established team. The school's leadership team was responsible for facilitating the implementation of practices that comprise MTSS at the school. Table 4 outlines the members of Willow's school leadership team who consented to the study, as well as other key pieces of information that illustrates their years of expertise and membership within the leadership team. Overall, the members of the leadership team who consented to the study comprised of two administrators, seven teachers, and two support staff with varying roles and years of experience. It is important to note that two members of Willow's leadership team did not consent to the study.

Table 4

Members of the Participating School Leadership Team

Position	Age	Years of Experience in Current Role	Years of Experience on Willow Leadership Team
Principal	52	17	3
Assistant Principal	40	6	3
Learning Design Coach	39	5	3
Kindergarten Teacher	50	2	2
1st Grade Teacher	53	17	3
2nd Grade Teacher	33	10	2
3rd Grade Teacher	35	10	3
3rd Grade Teacher	31	9	3

Table 4 (Continued)

4th Grade Teacher/Gifted Endorsement	45	10	< 1
5th Grade Teacher	39	9	3
Speech and Language Pathologist	59	3	3

Procedures

In terms of data collection procedures, I was able to follow each of the principles noted by Yin (2003; i.e., multiple sources of information, establishing a data base for all pieces of data and maintaining a chain of evidence). I conducted interviews, observed leadership team meetings, and reviewed documents within a 15-week timeframe. Below, I provide an overview of how the data being utilized for the current study were collected. I also outlined my use of journal entries in the study as an ongoing data source.

Interviews

I completed 11 semi-structured interviews with the consenting leadership team members. Each interview was completed outside instructional time, yet during the normal school hours. They took place in a private area during a time selected by the leadership team member. I minimized distractions, which contributed to interviews that lasted approximately an hour. Each interview followed the same format, which involved (1) the interviewee completing a demographic questionnaire (See Appendix A), followed by (2) the interviewee responding to multiple neutral questions (e.g., *How's the school year going?)* that were intended to develop a common and comfortable ground between interviewer and interviewee, and finally (3) responding to questions that directly related to the aims of the study (See Appendix B). Relative to the current study I asked about leadership team members' perspectives on the role of the principal on the leadership team (e.g., *What role does the principal have within the leadership*

team?). I also asked each interviewee questions related to their beliefs and insights on barriers to and facilitators of MTSS implementation faced by their leadership team (e.g., *Please briefly explain me to the successes and/or struggles of this leadership team's implementation of MTSS during this current school year*). Each interview was recorded with a recording device for an eventual transcription by a professional company. The verbatim transcription was used for coding and ultimately theming. I also took field notes throughout each interview that will be utilized to organize key ideas, problems or consistent comments noted by the participants. I used both the verbatim transcripts and the field notes to code and theme the interview data.

Observations

I collected observational data from multiple leadership team meetings. The observations were naturalistic observations of each leadership team meeting that were conducted on a monthly basis. I took an observer as participant role (Gold, 1958), during which I was within the environment of the phenomenon studied (e.g., the leadership team meeting), but did not actively engage. The purpose of the leadership team meetings was to outline school wide data collection procedures, address MTSS implementation, progress monitor the school success plan, and focus on overall school functioning. I collected these data to gather more information around the context of distributed leadership for MTSS implementation and to support convergence of the information from the case study. I took field notes during each observation per the guidelines noted by Banister et al. (1997). For example, I focused the field notes on the studied context, who was a part of the meeting, what was happening during the meeting and my personal feelings as the observer (Banister et al., 1997). Additionally, I focused on instances during the meeting that aligned with the research questions (e.g., enablers of and barriers to MTSS, the actions of the principal). I utilized the field notes collected to look for evidence of convergence or divergence

with the interviews and document analyses. I reviewed each of the observational field notes and created analytic memos to organize my notions of the data as they related to the study's overall aims.

Document Analysis

Finally, I collected and reviewed multiple documents that related to Willow's demographic information, school wide academic achievement, MTSS implementation and leadership team functioning. I specifically collected de-identified documents through an initial meeting with the assistant principal. The assistant principal also provided other documents throughout the 15-week case study. I collected these pieces of data to further contextualize how the leadership team was utilizing distributed leadership for MTSS implementation as well as another data source for triangulation. Table 5 outlines the documents that were collected and that will be utilized in this study. For the study, I reviewed each document and created analytic memos to outline my perspectives on the data as it related to the study's aims. I then compared these data with the other outlined sources of data to provide a multifaceted explanation of Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS as it related to facilitators of and barriers to their approach and the principal's role.

Table 5

Documents Collected

Document Collected	Examples
Willow's demographic Information	• *Percent of students identified as English language learners* • *Percent of students with disabilities* • *Percent of students who received free or reduced-price lunch*
Willow's Academic Achievement Data	• *Percentage of student who passed the statewide benchmark assessment* • *State Issued School grade*

Table 5 (Continued)

Willow's Behavioral and Social Emotional Data	• *Results from a class wide Behavioral and Social Emotional Screening*
MTSS Related Documents	• *MTSS related white papers, infographics, guidelines, resources, professional developments* • *MTSS Fidelity Assessment Results* • *Any communications regarding MTSS*
Previous Leadership Team Notes	• *Three leadership team meetings were conducted prior to the start of the study*
Leadership Team Meeting Notes	• *All leadership team meeting notes that occurred during the 15 week timeframe*

Journaling

In addition to the previously collected data, I completed weekly reflective journaling that were later organized into analytic memos. Reflective journaling is a common technique within qualitative studies and can provide a key piece of data that outlines researchers' specific values (Etherington, 2004). I completed weekly journaling that was intended to document my reflections, challenges, biases, and assumptions during my Ed.S. Thesis. I continued this practice during this study to provide consumers of this research my perspectives as the researcher. I reviewed and utilized the previous journal entries in conjunction with the ongoing entries until this study was completed. Providing ample opportunities to be reflexive showcased the internally deconstructive process of performing qualitative research and the transactional relationship between me and the environment I am studying (Macbeth, 2001; Pyett, 2003).

Specifically, I used the reflective journaling as both a self-monitoring mechanism and a self-organization of interpretation of the data. For instance, my consistent journaling throughout the study, allowed me to monitor the navigation of my reflections, challenges, and biases with my selected paradigm. I was able to note instances where I had more feelings of post-positivism

or contradictions when analyzing the data, which forced me to revisit my understanding of the data. On the other hand, the journal entries allowed me to look back on previous interpretations of collected data to better understand the words and actions of the participating leadership team. Because this study was a continuation of my thesis project, I was using data collected previously. The weekly journal entries allowed me to look back on initial reflections and interpretation of data to better inform my analyzation and writing. The entries allowed me to be more organized and translate key information across the two studies to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the collected data.

Data Utilized

Figure 1 provides a brief overview of the pieces of data for this study as well as what sources were collected previously and what data were being actively collected. I created a database to house all pieces of data that I used for this study. Specifically, I noted each piece of data's collection date, content, and any other necessary information within a password protected online storage platform (e.g., BOX™). The BOX™ account was only accessible to myself and my major professor.

Figure 1

Data Sources Outline

Previously Collected Data (Latimer, 2020)	**Active Data** (Current Study)
• ***Individual Interviews*** ●Leadership Team • ***Observations*** ●Leadership Team Meetings • ***Document Review*** ●Leadership Team Notes ●Demographic Data ●MTSS Related Documents	• ***Reflective Journaling*** ●Weekly Reflective Journaling

Data Analysis

To analyze the data associated with the study, I used an inductive and deductive coding process with all interviews in conjunction with a constant comparison approach with all other sources of data (observations, document review, journaling; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For deductive coding, I used a set of pre-established codes from theoretical frameworks to note connections to established literature. The deductive codes encompassed key ideas from literature that relate to MTSS implementation (i.e., Critical Domains of MTSS of the Self-Assessment of MTSS (SAM); Stockslager et al., 2016), distributed leadership theory (i.e., Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007, Spillane 2006) and system change models (i.e., Fixsen et al., 2010). See Appendix C for all deductive codes. For inductive coding, I read through each interview transcript, noting specific codes to be later used to derive themes. The combination of inductive and deductive coding within qualitative inquiry can promote both the natural emergence of real world information and direct connection to established theories (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In relation to the current study, the dual coding approach allowed for real world application of the findings due to both the alignment with an interpretivist paradigm (e.g., focus on voices of participants) as well as direct connections to relevant theories (e.g., deductive coding). At the same time, I reviewed all other sources of data (i.e., documents, journal entries, observations) and provided analytic memos for any relevant insights that related to the inductive or deductive codes. Analytic memos were used to document relevant insights from various source of information to better organize and converge with codes from the qualitative interviews.

To perform the constant comparison technique, I generated an all-encompassing codebook that organized all pieces of data. I used that code book to examine the similarities and differences between data sources. As various sources of data (e.g., inductive codes, deductive

codes, analytic memos) emerged, I either paired similar codes together as one major category or created new major categories for differing codes. With this specific technique, I was able to create and build upon axial codes to clearly outline all codes that were present as well as view codes across data sources. I constantly revised (e.g., on a biweekly schedule) and modified codes and themes based on the collected data. For instance, I inductively and deductively coded three interviews as well as used analytic memos from all other data sources during that time. I consistently visited the code book and organized the separate pieces of information into similar categories. Each time something different appeared, I created a new category. However, after those three interviews were coded, I re-reviewed all inductive and deductive codes and categories to condense as needed. I repeated that process until all coding was complete. Finally, I completed one final constant comparison procedure where I reviewed, organized, and condensed all codes and analytic memos. Once the final constant comparison was completed, I transitioned into a thematic analysis stage and followed the guidelines of Rowley (2002; e.g., gather and consider all relevant data, examine each rival interpretation, only report significant findings, and rely on your expert knowledge). Specifically, I focused on providing a rich, multi-source and comprehensive data base that guided my interpretation of the studied phenomenon. This process also aligned with Yin's (2003) recommendations of an established data base for organizing data and creating a chain of evidence.

Triangulation of Data

Finally, I used triangulation to converge the multiple sources of data within the study. Specifically, I used triangulation as a framework to converge all pieces of data into a comprehensive picture as opposed to a method of confirming findings (Patton, 2002; Tracy, 2010). Using triangulation as a framework allowed me to examine the words, actions and

perspectives of the participants and myself in a cohesive, but not confirmatory manner. I found this technique connected with my interpretivist paradigm due to the focus on multi-source, in-depth and reflective interpretation of the data sources (Hammersley, 2013; Willis et al., 2007). For instance, I continuously reviewed all data sources and allowed the words, actions and perspectives of the participants and myself to guide the specific findings of the study as opposed to coming to a conclusion for a specific theme and searching for other source of information that confirmed my thoughts. Throughout the study, I kept notes regarding each piece of information's origin and clearly articulated them within the findings. This process promoted transparency to the consumers of this research and supported my use of triangulation as a framework. I also clearly articulated when data converges together for an established finding as well as diverges into competing conclusions.

Institutional Review Board Approval and Ethical Considerations

Because I am using the data set collected previously, I fell under the purview of all the approved research for that specific study (See Appendix D). I was able to gain permission to conduct the study from both my enrolled University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and MBSD's Office of Research and Accountability. I also previously gained permission from the formal leadership and school leadership team of Willow Elementary with gathering a letter of support. Overall, participation in the previous study was voluntary and each individual who was asked to participate was provided a copy of a consent form (Appendix E). The consent form provided all relevant information participants needed (e.g., research's purpose, procedures, risks) and each individual who was asked to participate was given at least 24 hours to consider consenting to the study.

As for data safety, I collected all physical signed consent forms and had them stored in a locked filing cabinet in my faculty advisor's office. The filing cabinet was only accessible to my faculty advisor and myself. I also collected all physical sources of data, de-identified and stored them within the same locked filing cabinet. I scanned all de-identified pieces of physical data and stored them in my BOX™ account that was only accessible to my faculty advisor. BOX™ is account password protected online storage application that was provided to me by my enrolled university. In addition, all other sources of physical (e.g., documents from document review) and non-physical data (e.g., audio recordings from interviews, transcripts of interviews, field notes both written and typed, journal entries) were stored in my BOX™ account. It is also important to note that I did not collect any data specifically on those who did not consent to participate.

Despite following the aforementioned processes and procedures, I was still subject to potential relational influences during data collection. First, there was no way of eliminating all undue pressures to participate in the study. Even though I put precautions in place (e.g., proving ample time for consideration, a clear outline of the commitment and purpose of the study, hiding participants' identities), a school leadership team member still might have felt obligated to be a part of the study. The feelings of obligation could have potentially created an interview environment in which the interviewee might have been focused on social desirability rather than speaking truthfully about their experiences. On the other hand, some individuals might have thought of the consent form as a binding contract. This notion may have created an unequal power dynamic in which I was viewed as the interviewer who has authority to gather any information as they so choose.

In addition, I asked multiple questions regarding the barriers and shortcomings of the leadership team during my previous study. Considering the participants were aware that the

findings of the study were going to be widely accessible, they might have avoided any disparaging insights or conflicts related to the leadership team. Even with the description of confidentiality and the information on the consent form, members of the leadership team might have not trusted a potential outside source examining the functioning of their leadership team. In some cases, participants might not have wanted to share their personal weaknesses or conflicts in fear of job security. Similarly, I also asked about the influence of the principal. Again, participants might have worried about potential consequences of speaking negatively of the principal. Additionally, the potential "outsider" presence of myself might have created an unequal power dynamic where the interviewee develops a "us against you" mentality relative to the interviewer. The last two considerations might have been present within each observation as well.

Finally, there might have been an unrecognized power imbalance brought on by differing race, gender, sexual identity, or educational status. For example, I am a white male in pursuit of an advanced degree who was interviewing a variety of teachers and administrators. There was a chance that the interviewee or I might have felt a power imbalance based on an individual's race, gender, sexual identity, or educational status. These imbalances informed my responses, questions, or actions of both the participants and I. Overall, I attempted to mitigate these potential ethical conflicts; however, I recognize and consider them in my data analysis for the current study.

CHAPTER IV:

FINDINGS

Before providing in-depth description of this study's findings it is important to review the findings of Latimer (2020) due to the direct connections it has with the findings of the current study. In Latimer (2020), Willow's leadership team conceptualized their distributed leadership model for MTSS as one that encompassed collective responsibility, multi-faceted leadership qualities, vast communication, and a student focused culture. Willow's leadership team enacted their distributed leadership model for MTSS through an effective data culture, a focus on staff's strengths, aligned and consistent procedures, and empowering individuals through diverse means. This study's findings focused on the facilitators of and barriers to their enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS (i.e., Reseach Questions 1 and 2) as well as the role their principal plays within their model (i.e., Reseach Question 3).

Research Question 1

The first research question focused on factors that facilitated MTSS implementation for Willow's distributed leadership model. Participants were asked a variety of questions regarding what they found positively impacted their leadership team's efforts for MTSS implementation. In conjunction with interviews, other data sources (e.g., observations, reviewed documents, journal entries) were considered. Four major themes and various sub-themes emerged (See Table 6). To see all deductive and inductive codes utilized in the process, see Appendix C.

Table 6

Research Question 1 Summary

Research Question	Theme	Sub-Theme
What factors facilitate distributed leadership models for MTSS implementation?	Leading Takes Leaders	
	Focusing on the Destination, not the Journey	*Professional Flexibility* *Climate of Trust*
	The 3 C's	*Communication* *Collaboration* *Consistency*
	Utilization of Data	*Benefiting Students* *Data for System Change* *Engine and the Gas*

Leading Takes Leaders

The literature has made it clear that having effective leadership is a prerequisite for MTSS implementation (Eagle et al., 2015; Forman et al., 2013). Additionally, system change can benefit from both informal and formal leadership having a systemic mindset for effective adoption of any innovation (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011). With the first examination of this leadership team, Latimer (2020) found that Willow enacted their distributed

leadership model by accessing formal (e.g., Gallup® survey results) and informal strengths (e.g., previous experience, content expertise) of its members. One facilitator that allowed Willow's leadership team to enact their strength-based approach was that many individuals had specific experiences related to leadership for MTSS implementation. Those experiences directly translated to more systemic notions of MTSS implementation and system change, beneficial insight for policy to practice connections for MTSS and more familiarity with the administration's way of work for MTSS. Ultimately, the leadership experiences across the leadership team specifically facilitated Willow's MTSS implementation efforts through their distributed leadership.

For instance, I noticed that many participants spoke of how their positions of leadership changed from the school to district level as well as shifted back to the school level. For example, the third grade teacher leader spoke about their experiences as a classroom teacher, math coach and math curriculum specialist.

"I was with the district, as a K-12 math curriculum specialist…..Math coach at [Johnson] Elementary School for two years. And then I was a classroom teacher, spent five years at [Sunshine] Elementary School as a third-grade STEM teacher." He further explained that their experiences as a K-12 math curriculum specialist contributed to his ability to lead Willow school improvement goals regarding planning for and implementing an evidence based math curriculum. Additionally, the first grade teacher leader also had a similar route of classroom teacher to teacher leader, then district curriculum specialist. Eventually working with the third grade teacher with a new district curriculum roll out.

> "I was a curriculum trainer for the district and grouping strategies trainer …. I worked with them [the third grade teacher leader] because I used to write the district's math curriculum for 15 years in assessments."

The first grade teacher leader found that their familiarity with large scale curriculum implementation and previous work with the third grade teacher contributed to effective implementation of a new math curriculum. Specifically, she noted that her previous experience allowed her to take a more systematic viewpoint to build staff capacity to integrate this new change into the MTSS framework.

> "One of the things that we worked on the first year was implementing [A New Math Curriculum]. That was new to our district. Couple of schools piloted it the year before, but as a new school that was something new for almost all the teachers. So a lot of people were concerned 'Oh, they don't have that. We need to do interventions right away.' … We were very lucky the third grade teacher leader, one of our team leaders, and they worked at the district office on... So we all looked at that together and said, 'We need to look at that tier one first.' We all have to have that basic understanding."

Willow was also fortunate enough to have other leadership team members who worked in district and administrative positions prior to joining the leadership team. For example, the Speech Language Pathologist spoke about how their previous job as an assistant principal and working with several schools who originally piloted district wide MTSS implementation granted her a more leadership viewpoint when implementing MTSS.

> "I've been in the district for many, many, many years. I took a break from being a speech pathologist and I was an assistant principal for seven years. I do have a leadership

viewpoint on some things a little bit different than your typical speech pathologist. I've worked at several schools who piloted MTSS."

Finally, some leadership team members such as the fourth grade gifted certified teacher leader, the kindergarten teacher leader and the other third grade teacher leader mentioned that at their previous schools they held positions of teacher mentors, assistant principals, and professional learning community facilitators to advance the implementation of MTSS. Based on my reflections of observing and interacting with Willow's leadership team, I reflected that this was not a typical leadership team. Specifically, I found Willow fortunate to have multiple individuals who had previous MTSS-related experience leading other individuals (e.g., being an administrator) or initiatives (e.g., district curriculum roll-out) prior to leading the charge of MTSS at the school. I found this particularly advantageous due to the potential capacity to take a systemic viewpoint when facilitating MTSS implementation. However, formal professional titles only touch on the surface of the capacities of Willow's leadership team. The professional roles that I outlined in the previous quotes were also accompanied by beneficial skills for MTSS implementation.

Specifically, these leadership roles seemed to build leadership team members' capacity in understanding what was effective for supporting educators. One telling example was the third grade teacher leader's thoughts of working with teachers as a district support yet keeping their "teacher roots" in determining what is effective for MTSS.

"I've seen a lot, especially in my prior role, because I was involved with a lot of principals and their leadership teams…So it's neat seeing what I consider sometimes the district's role and the support role. Sometimes as a classroom you think of them as the people here who are telling me to tell you what to do. And I've always viewed the district

> support, they're not going to show up in my classroom and teach a lesson or work with kids. Their goal, I think, is to present the ideal. 'Here's what research says, here's our goal.' And then from presenting the ideal, teachers present the reality. And then together, they should be working together not to immediately reach that ideal, but just to push the needle up a little bit more."

Additionally, Willow's leadership team members having specific experiences with leadership also mirrored their ability to focus on a systemic viewpoint in facilitating large scale system change. For example, the Speech Language Pathologist spoke previously on how their involvement in supporting schools who piloted MTSS implementation led to "a leadership viewpoint on some things a little bit different than your typical speech pathologist." Another example was the first grade teacher leader's ability to showcase their knowledge of establishing system change with opening a previous elementary school prior to coming to Willow.

> "I opened a previous elementary school. You have everyone coming together with a common vision and common mission, common expectations, and it's exciting to open a new school. And you're starting from the ground up so the leadership team is helping form everything for this school that will be continually revised and added onto throughout the years."

One final aspect of this theme that contributed to its facilitating nature for MTSS implementation was that many of the leadership team members were familiar with the formal leadership (e.g., principal, assistant principal) at Willow prior to joining the leadership team. In fact, many leadership team members followed the principal from a previous elementary school. For instance, the first, and second grade teacher leaders noted that they willingly joined the principal when they were tasked with opening up Willow elementary. In addition one of the third

grade teacher leaders noted they worked with the assistant principal at another school's leadership team.

> "I taught with the assistant principal at my previous school. At [the previous school], they were the AP there. I had been previously on the leadership team at that school, but I was taking a year off from the leadership team, and when presented with the opportunity to move to Willow, they said, 'We want you on the leadership team.'"

Others noted that they were familiar with the leadership style of the principal and that it was what attracted them to the leadership team at Willow. The second grade teacher leader noted what the transition was like coming from another school but already knowing the leadership.

> "So when they [the principal] came over I knew okay, at least half of the admin team, I already knew the structure there. But the two of them [principal and assistant principal] have such a good ying-yang type of relationship and as far as their strengths they really make a well-rounded team"

The other third grade teacher leader went as far as crediting the leading style of the principal at Willow to their journey back into the classroom.

> "I worked with the principal in their prior school, and I worked with them and helped develop, it was one of my priority schools. So spent a lot of time there and enjoyed them, and their leadership style, and knew it would be a great fit. And it reinvigorated me to come back to the classroom."

I believe that this last aspect of this theme ties the previous experiences and positions of the leadership team members together for effective implementation of MTSS. For instance, not only was the leadership team at Willow well skilled and experienced in leading others and system change, but there was also widespread confidence and trust in the formal leadership.

However, I recognize that the make-up of Willow's leadership team is unique and may not be feasible for all schools. For instance, school leadership teams may not have formal leadership that can recruit or have access to educators with district/administration level experiences and/or a well-established rapport. I specifically chose this school due to their ability to meet my established criteria (See Table 3), which would lend itself to a potentially more experienced leadership team. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that this particular facilitator of distributed leadership for MTSS may be specific to the studied leadership team at Willow. However, the combination of those factors (i.e., experiences and familiarity) aligns with the specific notions of leadership for MTSS and key principles for system change (e.g., ongoing commitment, shared vision or mission, system perspective; Castillo & Curtis, 2014).

Focusing On The Destination, Not The Journey

At Willow, I discovered that the trusting and flexible environment further advanced the capacity of the leadership team for MTSS implementation. The professional trust and creative environment embedded within the distributed leadership model at Willow was another enabler of MTSS implementation. Typically, any school environment aligns with the many key tenets of social systems (e.g., Buckley, 1967; Luhmann, 1995; Rogers, 1962). Specifically, school environments are interconnected amongst several individuals (i.e., distributed leadership models) who attempt to cohesively produce a directed product (e.g., positive student outcomes). However, the types of professionals or leaders within a school environment can potentially be useless if there is a lack of trust and professional flexibility. For instance Tian et al. (2016) noted that within a distributed leadership model, a key underlying factor for effectiveness is a climate of trust. Tian et al. (2016) cautioned that a lack of trust within an organization can create dissatisfaction between staff and ultimately impede positive outcomes. Additionally, a climate of

trust can be paired with increased flexibility for all those within an organization (Tian et al., 2016).

Willow's distributed leadership model consistently focused on the main goal (i.e., effective MTSS implementation) and allowed for professional flexibility based on a climate of trust while striving for that particular goal. Specifically, Willow's leadership team had a consistent mindset of focusing on the destination (e.g., goal) as opposed to the journey (e.g., means of achieving goal). I believe that Willow's leadership team realized the inherent context dependent nature of MTSS as well as distributed leadership and allowed for flexibility in implementation of both frameworks. In the following sections, I will outline specific examples that showcased (a) professional flexibility and (b) a climate of trust that was apparent at Willow and how it was a key enabler for MTSS through their distributed leadership model.

Professional Flexibility. The world of education is often known for bureaucratic examinations of professional practices, outcome driven legislation (i.e., ESSA, 2015), protocols of practice, and consistent change. Yet teachers are often the ones expected to navigate the bureaucratic procedures within their classroom with little say in what works. Conversely, MTSS and distributed leadership models go against the rigid norms of education and allows for the local context to dictate procedures. In many cases, schools must balance between the rigid state and local requirements but facilitate flexible models. Willow's professional flexibility within its distributed leadership model was an effective factor for the implementation of MTSS. For instance, the principal at Willow often allowed for flexibility in self-solving of problems or self-development of procedures to facilitate the key tenets of MTSS. The third grade teacher leader noted the flipped approach of the principal when they were problem solving issues among their grade level team.

> “I would say the principal is really big on that instead of ... If we have issues on our team, what I've seen in the past is ‘Okay, well, how do you think you could solve that?’ That’s kind of been their response a few times, instead of ‘Well, this is what we're going to do to solve it, and this is how it's going to happen.’ they kind of gives us the creativity and flexibility to try and come up with ways to solve it and ways to figure it out”

I found this flipped approach as a progressive way to allow for teachers to take ownership of the problems they have facilitating MTSS, instead of creating a standardized way of problem solving. Others noted that the professional flexibility was a key piece in why MTSS was working within their context, especially since they knew the expectations for facilitating MTSS. For instance, the first grade teacher leader noted that the professional flexibility at Willow was still bounded by a clear expectation for what was needed for MTSS.

> “ they’re [the principal] more flexible, more open to ideas, wants to do what's best for our students and it's not a one-size-fits-all … And that we're not just doing something for some reason, this is the why, this is how it integrates in everything. It's not something added. It's something that you do probably anyhow, it's just doing it in a different way … Everyone knows what's expected and they know the why we're doing it. We may do things a little bit differently in the different grade levels, but we're all doing this same thing.”

One concrete example that was provided by multiple teacher leaders was the way Willow conducted their instructional planning day (i.e., PLC). Instructional planning days were specific meetings that grade level teams conducted on a monthly basis to organize, plan, and discuss the progress of students. Multiple leadership team members noted that Willow’s principal allowed for a large amount of flexibility in completing the instructional planning days to ensure the most

effective model for each grade level team. The first grade and the other third grade teacher leaders speak about the flexibility given with instruction planning days.

> "… most schools they will say 'You do it during your specials, once a week.' The principal gives you options, which each team had discussed together what the best option was. So first grade, kindergarten, a couple other grades said we would like a whole day PLC. Well that's unheard of, but at our school that was an option. So that's a great option for first grade because we all get together. I have two teachers in another building, I have two teachers down another hallway, and the four of us right here. So, it's great because when we have the whole day, we can analyze data more, talk more about our intervention groups, how they're going. We can analyze and plan a lot more together those prioritized standards and talk more about common formative assessments… Some teams pick another way, where they would come in at 8:30 and they would meet till 10:30 and they'd have specials first in the morning … What is best for your team, I'm not going to tell you, you have to do it this way, but what works best to meet the needs of the students on your team. In those full-day PLC days we just had one last week are the most beneficial things. We start nine o'clock till 4:15 or later and that gives us so much more time to talk all about the curriculum, the standards, answer questions for all of our new teachers, plan more together, go more in depth into some module studies in Eureka Math for the higher level concepts that are more difficult. But I think that what's really helped us move forward is the PLC. So that's something that they does that I know not all principals do."

> "… we're given flexibility, our planning days have always been structured at other schools. They're [the principal] like, 'You're going to get stuff done anyway, so if you want to work off site, work off site. Have a plan with your team, figure out what you

guys need' … I've never seen that before, but that level of professional respect, of, 'Well, how does your team want to do your PLCs?' First year we were like, 'What do you mean? What's our time? What do you want?'"

Additionally, the amount of flexibility within grade level teams stems past just the structures of the instructional planning day. The leadership team at Willow spoke of the avoidance of a "one-size-fits-all" method of instruction and intervention. The following quotes from the second and first grade teacher leaders showcase how the principal's reliance on individualized and not standardized procedures was a key piece in the effective facilitation of MTSS at their respective grade levels.

"They [the principal] allows us individualization. So there are sometimes that we're doing our thing and I touch base with them and it's all going well. So they're like great, they allow us to keep going or if we bring forth data or they see something that maybe might be concerning they're very good at asking us in a reflective way, rather than 'hey this data isn't good or what's going on here.' It's more of like what are some pieces that your team could strengthen."

"It's not a one-size-fits-all. And that's one thing at Willow. The principal gives you that leeway. You don't have to exactly say it this way, implement it the best way on your team. And I think that everybody on my team really appreciates that …It really trickles down to going back and sharing this with your team, the action plans and all those different things, that are set that trickle down that they showed the example of the form that you could create and then go back to your team, create your own. It doesn't have to be just like that. That's individualized for your team and your students."

Finally, I wanted to note that the flexibility provided by the principal also trickles down to the classroom setting. Moving beyond how teachers get to choose their meeting structures and how they facilitate pieces of MTSS, teacher leaders at Willow noted their ability to be creative within their instruction. For example, the third grade teacher leader noted ways they have been able to be creative within their instruction to support students within an MTSS framework.

> "We've been given flexibility with whatever I've wanted to try with different classroom structures, to how we organize the day. We've started using Minecraft in the classroom for the kids, the kids love it. And I'm learning it along with them, so it's been really neat to have that support to go through and just see what works … So creating different structures, such as using the first two components of the math curriculum, doing that more whole group, using a program called Zearn®, which is a curriculum online component, to split my kids in half, so that I could deliver the whole group lesson to a smaller group of kids."

Even in times where instruction was causing problems or issues, the third grade teacher leader noted the creative ways the administration was able to be flexible in supporting them as teachers. For instance, they discussed that their grade level team was struggling with the level of need present across their grade level. In seeking their help, the administration avoided simply providing a step-by-step solution (i.e., "Here's what you need to do"), but instead started with "Okay, what do you need?" As a result the administration was able to collaboratively plan out a scenario where the third grade teachers had access to non-instructional staff (i.e., office secretary) to implement necessary interventions. Based on my reflection, I found this action by Willow's administration interesting due to its result of (a) the third grade teacher leaders

fostering ownership over their solution and (b) creating an environment where the teachers were able to be flexible in problem solving.

However, I do want to note that one major pre-cursor to this amount of flexibility at Willow was their climate of trust. For instance, the example outlined previously (e.g., choosing an instructional planning day, modifying resources, gaining extra support) would not be possible without trust between administration, leadership team members, and other staff. Both factors (i.e., flexibility with planning day structures and trust in staff members completing work) coexisted for effective implementation of MTSS. The following section will provide more comments regarding Willow's climate of trust and how it contributed to their MTSS efforts.

Climate of Trust. One of the major criticisms of implementing MTSS is its cumbersome nature and dependence of the local context (e.g., Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Kauffman et al., 2008; Kavale et al., 2008). Having one individual in charge of its implementation fidelity is an unrealistic expectation. Thus, building trust among school staff is thought to be a facilitator of implementing the practices that comprise MTSS with sufficient fidelity. Willow's distributed leadership model greatly embraced a climate of trust that seemed to be a major facilitator in allowing staff to complete necessary tasks for MTSS efforts. Within this section, I will outline the key pieces of information that showcased Willow's ability to create trust throughout the distributed leadership model, which included avoiding micromanagement. However, as I outline the specific pieces of information that relate to Willow's climate of trust within the leadership team, I must note that the administration (e.g., principal, assistant principal) was commonly noted as a key piece in this subtheme. Although there will be another research question that outlines the influence of the formal leadership of Willow's implementation of MTSS through a distributed leadership model, I believe this theme warranted discussion here. Based on the voices

of Willow's leadership team, Willow's administration modeled these notions of trust, which trickled down to the mindsets of the leadership team.

Starting with the administration, it was clear that the principal at Willow wanted to instill a trusting environment to allow for teacher leaders to independently make decisions regarding implementing MTSS. For instance, they commented about their recent decision to allow for grade level teams to decide on their meeting structure for instructional planning. The simple yet innovative decision to allow for remote or individualized meeting structures for important instructional decisions showcases the principal commitment to trusting their leadership team members or as they put it "treating teachers like professionals."

> **"**An example would be a planning day, in the past on a planning day, teachers report to the school, and it still goes on throughout Middlebrook County. Not like it's not happening anymore because they would come here and write report cards or whatever. Well one of the things that the data's showing us is that millennials want a flexibility of work environment. I can't offer that. There are kids here, but on a planning day, why can't you meet off campus? Everything's online now. You can do all your data disaggregation; you can talk about your groups. So, that was so refreshing to them and cost me nothing, but I had to trust them."

Other leadership team members noted a similar idea that trust within Willow's distributed leadership often meant completing tasks without much oversight. For example, the kindergarten teacher leader noted the "hands-off" approach to leadership in which trust is the guiding force in building teacher capacity.

"… they [the principal] know how to do that hands-off leadership, where they put their trust in you and they brings out the best in you. I think that makes for good teachers. So you do your job, and this isn't going to sound right, but they leave you alone …"

In some cases, the "hands-off" leadership style allowed for other individuals to step up and carry out the necessary tasks for MTSS implementation. For example, the second grade teacher leader discussed how the leadership team is trusted by the administration to carry out the in-house professional development. Specifically, administration admitting to not having specific expertise, and trusting others to inform staff regarding key topics for professional learning.

"Their role [the principal's] is really developing us more as leaders. They give lots of opportunities for us to step out or step up into different opportunities. I didn't have that at my previous location. So, I appreciate that with them. The professional development piece for example they have a very small role in that, and I think that's neat because they say, 'Why would I do that it's not my expert area?'"

Additionally, many leadership team members noted that trust is spread throughout the leadership team in a variety of ways. For instance, the Speech Language Pathologist provided an all-encompassing statement of how the actions of trust from the administration have been present in the openness and collaborative nature throughout the entire leadership team at Willow.

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

Trust was also shown in how specific grade levels were implementing interventions within an MTSS framework. The Speech Language Pathologist provided a recent situation where the administration, leadership team and grade level teams had to trust each other to gain buy in for intervention implementation. For instance, instead of forcing grade level teams to implement certain interventions within a MTSS framework, the leadership team wanted to build trust and create an honest dialogue amongst grade level teams to ensure that necessary supports were in place to foster ownership of intervention implementation within a MTSS framework.

> "…I think they're [the administration] doing a great job of trying to bring some of their teammates on board that may not have all the buy-in that they need to. We've [the leadership team] been helping coach grade levels … For example, last year and this year, fourth grade has had, almost every teacher is new to our school … Naturally we would have a lot of new staff on board, and some were digging their heels in with providing interventions. Just coaching and helping, having that dialogue and that's where the trust piece goes back in school leadership. Having that trust piece to be able to offer suggestions and have them take those suggestions back to their teammates so that you have more buy-in."

Regardless of how trust has manifested within Willow's leadership team, the administration modeled a trusting environment for MTSS through a distributed leadership model. In this quote below, the principal provided their reflection of how they showcased their trust in teachers and purposefully ask them to take ownership of their decisions.

> "We pulled teachers from lots of different schools. I was showing one group around the environment, and someone said, 'How many shelves can we use?' And I said, 'Excuse me.' So the previous principal had said 'you could have one shelf for personal items, one

> shelf for curriculum items.' And I said, 'I trust you to figure this out and if you need me to be the tie breaker, I'm here.' So you have to constantly show them that they have the power of decision making. And you know that when they come to you, they've reached an impasse. It's not like they have to come to you every day and ask, 'Can I breathe out now? Can I breathe in now?' They come to you when it's too much. It's causing conflict from them."

I enjoyed the quote above because it gives a concrete example of how the principal is able to embody the "hands-off" approach, yet still being someone who can support in times of challenge. In fact, participants talked a lot about the avoidance of micromanagement. As noted earlier, MTSS can lend itself to many different procedures and protocols with data collection, intervention implementation, and professional development. Additionally, the current age of accountability can potentially increase stress and concern around the management of a school's progress. However, Willow's leadership team consistently noted that micromanagement was actually counterproductive for MTSS efforts. For example, the second grade teacher leaders described the difference between previous locations where they were subjected to micromanagement when implementing MTSS. Additionally the Speech Language Pathologist noted that the facilitative nature (as opposed to authoritarian) of the principal allowed them to feel more confident when implementing MTSS.

> "I have seen a very micromanaged type of environment at my previous location and here (Willow) there's a lot more autonomy as far as decision making, individualization and for me I feel like I've been able to flourish and do what I do best because I have that freedom with conversations and my opinion. The principal is very good about letting me make the decision as the expert of second grade and the team leader here."

> "I think their [the principal] facilitative nature helps us feel more confident in implementing MTSS. That they let us be leaders on their campus or allowing us to implement MTSS and show student achievement and show growth … "

The comments of the leadership team members also matched the words of the principal. Specifically, the principal spoke of how they first set the expectations for MTSS but shortly after released responsibility to the teachers. Thus, the principal avoided micromanaging for not only their personal wellness but for showcasing a sense of trust with the teachers at Willow.

> "Well, my first piece was I set the expectation for MTSS … it was my responsibility to show them this is how we're going to do things here, and here's how we're going to monitor that it's getting done and here's how I can be a support of you … After that was established, what my role with the school leadership team became was to make them even better leaders …No, micromanage, I can't micromanage. I just don't have that kind of stamina. But if something happens, they are usually harder on themselves than I am on anybody … if I have a problem with something, we discuss it. But I do have a great deal of trust. I've always, I trust people. I think teachers, especially 99% of them want to do what's right."

In sum, one of the major facilitators of MTSS within Willow's distributed leadership model was the established professional flexibility and trust. I found that Willow's distributed leadership model displayed flexibility and trust in their efforts to implement MTSS. Specifically, leadership allowed flexibility in planning, intervention implementation and professional development as well as trusting teachers' decisions and actions in implementing key tenets of MTSS.

Three C's. Willow's leadership team members noted other factors that can be complimented by an environment of flexibility and trust to better implement MTSS through a distributed leadership model. In this section I will outline the three major "C's" (i.e., Collaboration, Communication, Consistency) that were key enablers to the MTSS efforts of Willow's distributed leadership model. Authors of MTSS, system change, and distributed leadership have noted the positive contributions that come with educators collaborating, communicating, and remaining consistent in their efforts (e.g., Forman et al., 2013; Freeman et al., 2015; Jimerson et al., 2015; Spillane, 2006). This matched well with the notions and actions of the leadership team members at Willow. For instance, the leadership team members at Willow noted their collaborative efforts for increasing student success within an MTSS framework, through balancing multiple roles and accessing various support staff. Additionally, communication at Willow was transparent and seemed to trickle down from the leadership team and expand throughout the grade level teams who were implementing MTSS. Finally, Willow's leadership team expressed that throughout the school year, they prided themselves as retaining not only staff, but a common mission for student success through an MTSS framework. Below I describe how the three "C's" (i.e., Collaboration, Communication, and Consistency) both separately and jointly impacted Willow's leadership team's implementation of MTSS.

Collaboration. The main idea around this specific study as well as many other past pieces of literature (e.g., Hartley, 2007; Tian et al., 2016; Spillane, 2006) is to echo the importance of working together to facilitate system change. However, there must be opportunities to collaborate embedded into a system for an organization to see the benefits of working together. The voices and actions of Willow's leadership team members strongly showcased and provided a concrete example of this notion. Specifically, leadership team

members at Willow credited their ability to collaborate with each other as a major contributor to the implementation of MTSS. However, implementing a complex and dynamic framework such as MTSS during a major time of accountability within education can bring stresses across a school staff (e.g., Alonzo et al., 2008; Bamabara et al., 2012; Bohanon & Wu, 2014; Lohrmann et al., 2012; Scott et al., 2019). For example, Willow's principal provided a metaphor for how in times of challenge often educators are quick to blame each other for struggles.

> **"**we're the only people [people in education] who circle the wagons and shoot in. Everybody else circles the wagon and shoots out. We shoot at each other. It's like, 'Well it's your fault, it's your fault.' It's like, no, no, no, no, no. Let's all work together in here and we'll work on keeping the environment as good as we can."

I found this quote interesting because the principal not only reflected on the educational environment as a whole during these intense times of accountability but advocated for another technique in times of challenge. Specifically, working together to solve problems as opposed to delegating blame. That same mindset was present across multiple leadership team members as they provided examples around how collaborating was most effective when striving for increased student achievement within an MTSS. For example, the first grade teacher leader discussed how Willow separates itself from other schools due to the positive collaboration that takes place in the leadership team.

> "So that's not at all schools that all the leadership team, everybody on that team is trying to help each other, whether you're in kindergarten, first, second, whether you're in PE, whether you're the behavior specialist, speech person because we have a variety on our leadership team. I would say everybody working together and everybody wants to help

each other. When we look at the data, it isn't, ‘Oh your data was lower than mine.’ It's ‘Let's see how we can collectively work together to help each other.’"

Even though I was skeptical if that same willingness and supportive nature stemmed outside the leadership team, I found that it seemed to be present in practice. For example, the kindergarten teacher noted that Willow’s staff often worked together regardless of level of need to ensure intervention delivery.

> “When you only have a couple people… our special education teacher, they’re taken kids that they don’t even need to. They’re amazing. They’re taken kids that aren't on their roster, so to speak. They don't qualify [for special education services], but they know what we need and they [the special education teacher] have a heart for kindergarten, so that's another collaborative piece, we got blessed with them … We have a learning and design coach that is crazy knowledgeable, and crazy good at what they do. I had to rely on them.”

The second grade teacher leader provided similar insights regarding the collaboration across their grade level team and other grade level teams.

> “Are we all implementing the same structures? We're talking with each other saying, ‘What worked well with your class? Your class scored so much higher. What did you do differently that I didn't do that I can implement?’ And we've been using that at some of our leadership meetings last year too about what are you seeing in the progression from kindergarten through fifth and we're sharing. K-1 we saw this. Well, how does that progress in second grade? So the standard progresses throughout. What were the strategies? …. And when we look at that data, maybe there is one class that scored much higher. We all talk together and say, ‘What did you do differently? Could you model with

that with my class or could I come and watch you?' Which that doesn't happen at all schools. So I think that is a benefit on my team because I've had teachers come observe me, we've had other teachers on our team go observe other teachers and then we also spend more time, like I said on that tier one, making sure we have that core instruction."

I was also surprised with the collaboration of Willow's administration to facilitate key components of MTSS. Specifically, not only were Willow's teachers relying on other teachers to implement various components of MTSS, but the administration was also counted upon. The third grade teacher leader provided a concrete example of how Willow's administration advanced past "have you tried this?" to "what do you need?"

"I've been on teams at the other schools or seen it with other schools, where you get wonderful ideas from people, 'Have you tried this and this and this and this and this?' I'm like, 'No, why don't you come show me?' We've still got six hours and I'm one person and there's 20 kids and I need help. Sometimes when we get lost in the process… We even got to the point to where, even just this year, we have a lot of high needs. And we went to our administration with concerns with that, and the principal has provided, 'Okay, what do you need?'"

Moving past individual needs or tasks for MTSS implementation, Willow's leadership team also noted their extensive teaming for MTSS implementation. In Latimer (2020), I noted the impactful presence of the student intervention team (SIT). The SIT was intended as a grade level and support staff team to facilitate data based decisions around intervention and instructional monitoring. I believe this as well as other major teams within Willow were perfect examples of the extent of collaboration at Willow. For example, the third grade teacher leader

highlights the SIT team and how the collaboration across grade levels and support staff enable MTSS implementation.

> **"**Everybody's there, school psychologist, school nurse, we have the whole team. We present what we've discovered, where we're at with progress, and then they give suggestions, feedback, and then we continue with individual concerns that we may have as well for specific students."

The assistant principal also provided another example of another specific teaming structure present at Willow that further advanced the collaborative nature for MTSS implementation. They explain how they were able to collaborate with the behavioral specialist to implement PBIS. In addition they noted that they and the behavioral specialist consistently teamed up with various teachers, support staff and non-instructional staff to ensure PBIS components are being implemented.

> "Through PBIS, we have a PBIS team. So, how we work that is the PBIS leadership team [the assistant principal and behavioral specialist] works together … and there's a member from each team [grade level team] and their role is to go back and communicate to the rest of their team …And when I say each team, we have the instructional assistants, we have sometimes some of our cafeteria staff will come … We… each teacher from each team and they go, not only gather feedback and communication from their team to bring to us for problem solving, but then going back and doing the opposite as well, going back and communicating procedures and decisions as well as communicating data across the school….That's where the collective responsibility across the entire school where we have our front end secretary and our guidance secretary and various roles that will support. Tiers of support both for standards based MTSS and PBIS. There are many

check-in checkout people that varied roles that will support and someone who helps with behavior as well as academics and that collective responsibility that it doesn't matter what your role is, we're here for the kids and we'll do whatever it takes to meet needs."

Moving beyond the teaming taking place at Willow, I noticed that the collaborative nature was spread across both instructional and support staff. Willow's leadership team members continuously mentioned the importance of working with support staff (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, Speech Language Pathologists) in facilitating effective instruction and intervention within an MTSS framework. This started with the administration making it a priority for the leadership team to invite and collaborate with Willow's support staff. The first grade teacher leader discussed how the principal often involves support staff into the conversation when supporting students.

"So the principal has them [the school psychologist] involved and I don't know if that happens at all the other schools either. I've really never had that many psychologists coming into working with all the different pools, groups, intervention groups for behavior. So something that the principal does too involves our guidance counselor with social emotional groups for that behavior piece."

The second grade teacher leader also provided an example of how they collaborate with support staff to determine levels of supports across the tiers of their instruction and intervention within an MTSS framework.

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

Finally, I wanted to note the comments from the Speech Language Pathologist who spoke about how they work with all types of teachers and other support staff to ensure that students are the focus of the problems solving process and participate in intervention.

> "I co-facilitate our MTSS meetings every Thursday with our school psychologist … Then we have our monthly school improvement team meetings that are by grade level, and we do have a support staff member that attends those meetings. We can hear what the grade level teachers are discussing and problem solving. Then we can come up with what the tiers of support need to look like and who is the best person to be providing those tiers of intervention. We try to have those meetings and those procedures in place prior to inviting the parent to come in and have the full blown meeting where we might be looking at asking for consent for an initial evaluation … then we have four special education support facilitation teachers who are the instructional staff that work out in basic ed and support students on IEPs that need academic and/or behavior support. I oversee that, and so I go to the leadership team, I come back, we meet, we facilitate. We sit, we discuss students, we brainstorm students, we attend meetings together with basic ed so that we can problem solve and make sure that IEP goals are being implemented and tiers of intervention for students that are struggling."

In sum, Willow's leadership team praised the positive influence of collaboration in their efforts to facilitate MTSS implementing within their distributed leadership model. Specifically, the leadership team member spoke of the overall sense of collaboration from the administration through the teaching staff, the intentional teaming with embedded collaboration and working with support staff as the key tenets of Willow's MTSS efforts. Additionally, Willow's leadership team spoke highly of the level of communication across the building. Much like the collaborative

nature, communication was not only vast but highly effective when facilitating MTSS through a distributed leadership model. The following section will provide more information regarding Willow's communication as it pertains to MTSS implementation.

Communication. In Latimer (2020), Willow's leadership team conceptualized their variety of communication strategies as a key part of their distributed leadership approach to MTSS implementation. However, it became apparent that the type of communication they described as part of their distributed leadership team approach was not possible without communication structures that facilitated their communication. For instance, the notion of having an administration with an open-door policy, general transparency with information and having communication structures in place (i.e., PLCs) all facilitated their distributed leadership model for MTSS. Thus, within this study, I dive deeper into how specific aspects of communication positively contributed to Willow's leadership team MTSS implementation efforts. For instance, I discuss how communication techniques stemming from formal leadership and reaching all staff enabled problem solving through PLCs and the leadership team to better inform the MTSS implementation across Willow. I also discuss how the direction and delivery of communication supported Willow's facilitation of multiple aspects of MTSS implementation (e.g., professional development, intervention implementation).

To begin, one of the recurring processes that comprised the effective communication for MTSS at Willow was the idea of "trickle down communication." For example, in communicating necessary information it often starts with the principal or assistant principal, which then gets passed to the leadership team, then to their respective teacher teams, and finally then back to the leadership team if a decision needs to be made or some more input needs to be taken. However, the main catalysts for this process are the teacher leaders as they are seen as the

bridge of communication between the leadership team and the staff. The principal and assistant principal describe the role of the leadership and specifically the teacher leaders to convey effective communication for MTSS implementation.

> "So if there are decisions made, conversations around data, updates around the school, there is a leadership trickle down so to speak … So they're communicators, and they're PLC facilitators, but they're also leaders and that they're going to assign tasks as well."
>
> "Everybody is responsible for communicating the information to their team and the goals and to gather feedback from their team to bring to the leadership team to continue problem solving."

On the other end of the spectrum, multiple leadership team members outlined the same process as noted before and explained the importance of their role in spreading communication throughout Willow. For example, the fifth grade teacher provided an example of the administration assigning various tasks (i.e., "Homework") to facilitate communication within grade level teams and how that communication piece supports school wide MTSS implementation.

> "And then sometimes they [the principal] give us homework to go back to our teams and do those activities within our actual grade level teams … So, coming back and talking to each other and problem solving, coming back and talking to my team and problem solving and sharing information. A lot of the times the team people here will have resources that I can then take back to the leadership team and say, 'Hey, somebody's tried this before and this has worked with their success. So we can look at that as a possible resource.' … I think without those conversations there was a lot of grade levels that would have been at a loss."

The second grade teacher leader also spoke of their role within the leadership for effectively communicating to their grade level team as well as how the communication at Willow supported the implementation of MTSS.

> "A lot of times just looking at the conversation and then trickling it back down to my team as far as what we need to work on or what we need to move forward with. Communicating data or new structures that are in place and bringing that back to my team. Also, bringing forth some information as far as school wide having that overall vision of maybe what strength pieces we need to do better as far as building that into professional development or do we see holes in the data? … I think just making those structures in place and making sure that they're solid. What we don't want to do is have students stuck in that MTSS model. We don't want them to get to the end and never get the help they receive. So constantly refining those pieces, making sure that what we have aligns from grade level to grade level. So as students transition we have that communication piece."

Aligning with MTSS implementation, other leadership team members spoke specifically about how the horizontal (i.e., amongst grade levels) and vertical (i.e., across grade levels) communication at Willow was necessary for ensuring students are being supported with intervention and instruction. Starting with the third grade teacher leader, they described an example of a school wide survey that was distributed and spread (both horizontally and vertically) through grade levels to ensure effective professional development for MTSS implementation.

> "An example could be, last year we sent out a survey to the team about looking about our professional development plan for this year. And one of the big things that came up was

vertical articulation between the grade levels. So, as we were talking about it, that was brought to administration, administration met with our reading team, our curriculum planning team, and from there we developed some ideas and thoughts. We brought that then, one of the big areas we had feedback around was the writing and writing process and consistency of writing across grade levels. So, we came up with some ideas about how we could do that, brought that to the leadership team, leadership team then brought that back to the PLC. Leadership brought it back to us, we then planned around that, and we're bringing it back to the leadership now. And we presented a plan over the next semester of how we're going to make that happen."

Other leadership team members commented on the importance of vertical communication for intervention and instruction implementation for students who may need continued support as they progress through grade levels. The kindergarten and first grade teacher leaders expressed their responsibilities to vertically communicate with other teachers to ensure that students are being provided with effective services to meet grade level standards.

"Teachers do reach out to each other, for sure. I've always thought it's a responsibility to work with the grade under you and the grade above you, you know? To understand what the needs are on both ends, and so you can have an open communication … If it's a grade below you, say, 'Hey, look, our kids are coming up and none of them are knowing the science standard. We've got this resource that we think might be good for you.' So, I think it's best to go prepared with a solution for them and not just dump it on them, and the same thing, you got to be willing to take a punch in the gut and say, 'Okay, what did we not do well this year?'"

> “So, that vertical conversation's going to be happening, K, one, two, three, four, five and then part way through then it's going to be, second and third grade talking together. So we can see the progression, what we need to do to move our students forward. And we've also done that at team leader meetings and within some teams. And we did this the end of last year where we actually talked to kindergarten and second grade and said, ‘We saw the students coming in this way in reading in math and writing.’ Then we talked to second grade, ‘What do we need to do to make sure they're all ready for you,’ and talked about the standards. So, that vertical articulation I think is very helpful and we're continuing that this year.”

Moving beyond the communication channels and processes within Willow, another key enabler of MTSS was the transparent nature of the communication. Willow’s leadership team members repeatedly spoke about how student needs, updates and necessary feedback was straightforward. Simply, the leadership team was forthcoming in key pieces of information that directly related to how staff were able to function and implement MTSS. Thus, transparent communication resulted in the leadership team members feeling more included and aware of information that could impact their MTSS efforts within their grade levels. Similar to other themes, the transparency of communication starts with the principal. The leadership team members endorsed their transparent communication regarding important updates and information. For example, the third grade teacher leader expressed their opinions on how the principal is honest with them even with uncontrollable factors.

> “Or even district mandate, stuff like that, to where we don't have control over ... So, it seems like the important stuff that we are involved with comes to all of us, even down to the point to where, like you sent an email yesterday about the new building and wanting

our team's thoughts on where people should go. And they said, ‘Some things will be open, some things may not be, depending on logistics, but I'd love to hear your opinions.’" So, just even small things like that. I think it makes everyone feel included.”

In conclusion, the leadership team at Willow credited the widespread and transparent communication as a key piece in their distributed leadership model’s efforts to implement MTSS. Specifically, having “trickle down communication”, vertical and horizontal communication as well as an honest and forthcoming atmosphere can enable educators to implement key pieces of MTSS.

Consistency. Similar to the previous “C” (i.e., communication), the final “C” of consistency relates to another finding from Latimer (2020). Willow enacted their distributed leadership model by focusing on coherence with a consistent mission and vision, an integrated framework of support and fidelity monitoring (Latimer, 2020; *Systemic Coherence*). Thus, Willow’s distributed leadership model for MTSS was enacted by being “on the same page” in a systemic manner. However, systemic coherence (e.g., concrete mission and vision) that directly contributed to MTSS implementation takes consistency. Accordingly, within this subtheme I outline what specific factors of consistency the leadership team found beneficial for systemic coherence of their MTSS implementation efforts.

The widespread mission and vision at Willow was the simple yet impactful motto of “Every Tiger Every Day.” Not only did this motto align with their school mascot, but it also represented their vision for MTSS. Specifically, all staff members at Willow strived to support and improve the achievement of every student, every day (i.e., “Every Tiger Every Day”). However, often times a mission or vision can be artificial in nature and lose its spot in the forefront of educators’ minds during a school year. It is important to note the pursuit of the

principal to do their part in making sure that staff members are living up to the vision and mission set by the leadership team for MTSS. Specifically, the principal noted the importance of maintaining a consistent mission for staff and what they find to be their role in keeping it at the forefront.

> "… the challenge is how do you maintain that consistency of vision, that consistency of culture so that you ensure that all children are receiving the same quality education as the children who started? … We [the assistant principal and I] are also responsible for calling people out just like everyone else is when they're not meeting our standard. My favorite line is how are your words and actions contributing to the successful implementation of our mission? If you talked badly to a child, if you insulted a coworker, you're off base. So as nice as I want the environment to be, you also have to be willing to call people on their b******* to be frankly, sorry. Because if you don't, you lose the respect of the people who always do the right thing and you're taken advantage of by the people who aren't doing the right thing. So, I think part of MTSS, and part of that collective responsibility piece is making sure that you value it enough to have the hard conversations and to let people know you're willing to have those hard conversations."

The assistant principal echoed the passion of the principal by discussing the importance of not straying away from the established mission and vision. They even credited the principal's focus on gaining a deeper understanding of MTSS to connect the staff's knowledge and practices to the mission and vision.

> "… we always make sure everything is in line with our school improvement plan because we don't want to find that new and shiny piece and get us off track. So, we want to make sure that even new ideas are in line with what we decided our goals are so that we don't

> get off course ….They [the principal] are really involved as part of the leadership team and facilitating and ensuring that we remain strategic …So, being sure that we're being strategic and focused on our school improvement plan. And guiding everybody to have that deeper understanding of MTSS and follow it throughout the school."

Based on the comments from the leadership team, the administration's ability to both establish and maintain a consistent mission and vision was deemed as a key enabler for the MTSS efforts at Willow. Willow is unique in the sense that it was only in its their third year of operations at the time of the study, and I was able to get a sense of the groundwork that was completed prior to the school opening. For instance, both the second and first grade teacher leaders noted the early (e.g., year one trainings) and often (e.g., yearly reminders) communication from the leadership and administration focused on keeping a consistent mission and vision for MTSS implementation.

> "So, here, we started year one [with mission and vision creation]. We went to the foundational trainings of what we want Willow to be like, our motto, our core beliefs and we've been able to follow that through all three years and go deeper. So, here the administration have a very strong handle of these leaders were chosen because they show these exemplar things that they're teachable, they can help their team. Whereas other locations I did not see that. So, it affected a lot of the school morale as far as the logistics of what different programs we have and how they run. It was falling through the cracks. Systems were not strong enough, whereas here I do feel like there's a coherence I guess."

> "We had a whole week training [with mission and vision creation] the first year we started for all the faculty, and we said we need to continue something like that for the second year, third year, fourth year as we continue. So, what's nice is they'll have a

couple day training where it's just those teachers, district people come about MTSS. We learn about the commitments to our school. So, I think that's helped all the new teachers, what the expectations are and what Willow is because not all schools are the same."

The Speech Language Pathologist at Willow also echoed the statements made by the first and second grade teacher leaders. For instance, they spoke about how they believed Willow's mission and vision has kept constant even with changes within the environment.

"… as we've grown, we've added allocations, so that just naturally brings on new staff members. I think as that happens, we have continued to send our message loud and clear about our statement, our mission statement and our need to be every tiger every day."

Moving past the theoretical mission and vision at Willow, another key enabler was the consistency in retaining staff. One of the noted facilitators of any system change such as MTSS implementation is hiring and retaining well trained staff (e.g., Hall & Hord 2011). This was similar in the conversations I had with the leadership team members at Willow. To begin, the leadership team at Willow has been able to stay consistent in regard to personnel in the first three years of operations. Many leadership team members credit consistent personnel as having a positive impact on MTSS implementation. For instance, the second teacher leader discussed the impact on MTSS that resulted from having the same leadership team over the first couple of years.

" … I think our leadership team we have a very strong team as far as it's been consistent. The leaders have been the same. So there's not a lot of flow in and out which I have seen at previous locations and that could be problematic."

The third grade teacher leader also provided similar information but noted the difficult reality of getting teachers within grade level teams to understand and build their capacity in the expectations at Willow.

> " … our team has been lucky to where we haven't had much change. So, we know each other, we've got our flow down. And one of the difficult parts is, we did get a new team member who's also a new teacher. So, it's a process of trying to bring them up without them getting lost."

However, through other leadership team members' conversations, the overarching theme was that grade level teams had a strong retainment of teachers to keep a consistent effort for MTSS implementation, which balances the challenges of newly added teachers. For instance, as Willow grew, there was difficulties with building capacities of new teachers but the consistent staff in place helped to support the onboarding process. Both the first grade and third grade teacher leader provided comments aligned with this finding.

> "But one thing that's great on my team, I have so many that are the same teachers that we all talk together at the meetings and we make them whatever the new teachers have questions on, we focus on that, this is why it's implemented. They always need the why because they don't know coming into a new school or a new grade level that that was the critical piece. So, I'm fortunate to have so many experienced teachers on my team that those discussions with either MTSS or any the types of things with our school improvement plan, then we can all talk together."

> "…We've had an addition but no one has changed grade levels. We all opened the school together, so it's more of we have a relationship with each other. We've built that foundation."

Overall, consistency was the final "C" that rounded off the three "C's" that were key enablers of MTSS for Willow's distributed leadership model. Specifically, Willow's leadership team found that a consistent mission and vision for MTSS and consistent staff were both key pieces to their efforts of MTSS implementation. However, the three "C's" is not the final theme of key enablers for MTSS for distributed leadership at Willow.

Utilization of Data

The collection, analyzation and utilization of data is a key enabler in implementation efforts for system change, MTSS, and distributed leadership (e.g., Eagle et al., 2015; Forman et al., 2013; Freeman et al., 2017 Torgeson, 2009; Tian et al., 2016). In some cases, scholars note that the presence of data can facilitate a spread of expertise and leadership power to enable multiple informal leaders to carry out key initiatives (Tian et al., 2016). Latimer (2020) found that Willow enacted their distributed leadership for MTSS through data processes, meeting structures and a common understanding of the outcomes associated with data. However, Willow's specific utilization of data that was present within their distributed leadership model greatly supported their implementation efforts for MTSS. Specifically, how Willow's use of data to (a) positively impact students' education experience, (b) promote actions for systemic changes, and (c) gain momentum for further school wide improvement all positively influenced their distributed leadership model for MTSS implementation.

Benefiting Students. Aligning with the original intent of MTSS (Batsche et al., 2005), Willow's leadership team members discussed the positive impact of utilizing data had on supporting students within an MTSS framework. Latimer (2020) discussed the specific meetings structures (i.e., Student Intervention Team; SIT) that enacted distributed leadership for supporting students receiving intervention within an MTSS framework. However, this study

focused on a fuller breath of the MTSS framework within the classroom for Willow's leadership team. For instance, Willow's leadership team members utilized data to strategically plan and support for all students based on their response to an intervention or assessment within a MTSS framework. This was the first positive by-product of the data rich environment of Willow's MTSS efforts. For example, multiple teacher leaders (i.e., second and first grade teacher leaders) spoke of using data to "kickstart" their planning for multiple tiered systems of support.

> "So first and foremost is identifying students within my classroom. Knowing the standards and the CFA [Common formative Assessment]'s and … so we actually have our own data meetings weekly where we're looking at our different CFA's that we've given … So we actually have developed a spreadsheet where all students have their pretest what growth they've made and identifying students who are not meeting the expectations."

> "… we look at our students, where they are with the universal screeners. Then we look at our standards, prioritize the standards, have common formative assessments. That's when we're looking also at sharing teaching strategies at the students that are getting it, what do we need to do? We're not going to wait until the end of the unit we need to get some interventions in place, whether it's tier one or additional tier two or tier three groups. Then after that we're monitoring the progress, revising our intervention groups and then it goes into end of module assessments. Looking at that, analyzing that, what are we going to do next for the students that have it and don't have it."

Connecting to using data to "kickstart" the tiers of support at Willow, teacher leaders also expressed the critical nature of using data to shape supports for students. Moving past just identifying students for supports, but modifying supports based on student progress. As the fifth

grade teacher leader explained, data allowed informal leaders to take charge in their grade level teams and/or classroom to make decisions in supporting all students within an MTSS framework.

> “Tier one doesn't work. Then we also look at, like if there's a whole bunch of kids at tier two, then we'll go back to our tier one and say, ‘What did we do wrong?’ Because there should not be that many kids that are in tier two level. If there's too many kids at a tier two level, if it's more than 20% of our kids, 15 to 20% of our kids are at a tier two level, then we have to go back and look at our tier one and say, ‘What could we do better to reach more kids from the start?’ So we don't have such a huge group in the end."

Additionally, the data within Willow’s distributed leadership model empowered informal leadership to efficiently triage supports among students who may be responding positively to universal curriculum. For example, the first grade teacher leader explained they were able to act upon grade level data to established intervention groups within the MTSS framework.

> “We saw that we had lots and lots of students this year on a yellow level. So that's middle of kindergarten. So reading was the first thing. We all sat down together and said, ‘What are we going to do?’ We have probably 30 or more students working below grade level. We can't wait too long. Let's get that universal screener done, get that information, and then we started interventions right away. So by the end of the second week of school we'd already had interventions in place, what we were going to do to get them moved and how we're going to track it.”

The data embedded within Willow’s MTSS model was found to be beneficial for supporting students across multiple informal leaders. However, another facilitating influence of Willow’s utilization of data was the leadership team’s ability to facilitate system change. The following section outlines the second positive by-product of Willow’s utilization.

Data for System Change. Across any MTSS framework, data are embedded throughout methods of support (e.g., school wide screening data, curriculum based measures) and decisions made (e.g., fidelity assessments; progress monitoring data; Eagle et al., 2015; Jimerson et al., 2015; Torgeson, 2009). Similarity, data practices are critical in the adopting, maintaining, and sustaining of an organizational system change (e.g., Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011). These notions were mirrored by the comments of Willow's leadership team members. Specifically, Willow's leadership team saw data as a key piece in enabling school wide or system change efforts. To begin, the principal provided a telling explanation of Willow's distributed leadership model's purpose for using data to guide instruction and make meaningful decisions within an MTSS framework.

> " … I think you have to understand how to use data to drive instruction. A lot of schools look at data and they look at it and they go, 'Well, look at that.' And then it goes on a shelf. You have to understand, and teachers sometimes get frustrated. They'll say, 'I had one class in measurement and you're expecting me to create assessments and do all this work that people get PhDs in.' And that's tough, but you have to be able to know if it's the fish or the water, if it's the question, if it what you need to do about that question. So you have to really be able to use data to drive your decision making to be successful."

The leadership team matched the principal's expectation for data practices by making it a focus of the leadership team's actions for school and grade level decisions. Throughout multiple observations, I noticed that each leadership team meeting provided a time slot to discuss some sort of school or grade wide data. In those cases, the principal would provide specific data and ask the leadership team to think about some important insights and/or potential solutions to a problem. For instance, comments made by the fifth grade teacher leader and the fourth grade

gifted certified teacher broadly showcases how data guides the systemic MTSS-related tasks completed by the leadership team.

> "We all look at that data together and share our insights into that data and inferences into that data. And then we will all work together to problem solve around things if there are any problems … So we'll pick one or two of the things that we kind of noticed throughout and then start problem solving around it, making inferences as to why we think this might be happening, and what are some things that we might be able to do as a school to improve some of those problem areas. So I think it's a really good process for data discussion to really get into that data."

> "Oh, so like a lot of it is looking at like the school data and discussing, okay, what are some trends we see? … Like if there is for example when you're talking about the multi tiers of support, what are some of the barriers, what are we going to do to solve that? And it's a brainstorming session then as well."

However, the specificity of data was most impactful for making system changes at the grade and school-wide level. Specifically, Willow's leadership team found that data were a key contributor for making decisions at the grade level for building capacity for instruction, determining differentiated support and planning for professional development. The assistant principal expressed how data enables the distributed leadership model at Willow and guides the leadership team to support MTSS efforts of multiple grade levels.

> "One of the tasks would be to look at the data of the school and talk about the needs of the school to differentiate that based on grade level needs. So, what fifth grade needs is very different than what kindergarten needs … So we looked at the data of our district walkthroughs and we discussed that data with our leadership team and talked about each

> grade level and compare that also to IRLA [Independent Reading Level Assessment] and other data points as well to then decide an action plan of what we need to do to move forward for our What we need to know Wednesdays committee to carry out professional developments."

Similar to the comment made by the assistant principal "what fifth grade needs is very different than what kindergarten needs", other members of the leadership team found that Willow's data can support identifying school-wide trends and decisions. For example, the fifth grade teacher leader mentioned that the leadership team may take a step back to problem solve at the school level to better implement MTSS.

> "So you can look at your own grade level and see what are some things that are going on, but when you start looking at trends across the school, then you can really see like what are some things overall that we're all just missing and that maybe that might be the thing that might help kids succeed because we're just all... every grade level, they've kind of been missing that thing. So really looking at the data trends and seeing not only the frustrations, but also the strengths that we have as a school. Sometimes you can use those strengths to help build up those things that aren't so great as well. So I think that that's really helpful too."

The leadership team also found that school wide data can provide better information for creating change for systems of support. For instance in the previously discussed Communication subtheme (*see Three C's Theme*), Willow's leadership team gave an example of how a school wide survey found the need for more vertical articulation across grade levels. The information from that survey was shared horizontally (i.e., amongst grade levels) and vertically (i.e., across grade levels) to facilitate necessary professional development for increasing instructional

capacity. Additionally, one of the third grade teacher leaders explained how school wide data helped facilitate capacity in behavioral systems implementation.

> "We also use that to look at our data of discipline data and discuss situations such as like cafeteria, incentives and different school wide incentives, different lessons for our expectations. And currently we're also working on the goal of becoming a PBIS model school. So our most recent work has been looking at model school walkthrough applications and really thinking about what it is we do well. We broke up into teams and walked around the school, completing that ourselves to come back and discuss the data of these are the areas where we still need to move forward."

Engine and the Gas. Based on the earlier subthemes (i.e., supporting students, enacting system change), the Willow's status quo of data seemed to be the theoretical engine to their distributed leadership model for MTSS. However, the gas to that theoretical engine also seemed to be the showcasing and information gathered from data. In many instances, data was used as the driving force for change and improvement, yet the presentation of data also boosted morale across the leadership team. For instance one of the third grade teacher leaders spoke on the leadership team's ability to use data to monitor, improve and celebrate student growth.

> "I would say some of our biggest successes have been being able to ... Just recently … there was a big increase from quarter one to quarter two in our data, so across the board, there's been improvements in our teaching strategies, whether that have been your teachers just got better in the year or facilitators just got better at bringing it back to their teams of what was expected, and you were able to plan better, maybe with an end goal in mind, but whatever it was, the data increased …"

The principal made similar comments, specifically how the data practices and the subsequent strategic planning across the leadership team impacted the success of students within their MTSS model.

> "I think the greatest success would probably be the growth we've shown from year one to year two with our quarterly data and our statewide data and that we did improve in learning gains for our lowest 25% we did improve in proficiency … So in the district we had the second highest gain in statewide achievement points. And so we went from a B to an A and we had 77 points, which is a huge gain. That showed me the success of our MTSS model. If we didn't focus strategically, if we hadn't planned for those groups, I don't think you would have seen that success. The struggle goes back to what I said earlier in that it's very difficult for people to understand sometimes that this is just the model of education. This isn't a means to an end. This is just what it is."

In sum, Willow's utilization of data was critical in how the distributed leadership model at Willow facilitated MTSS implementation. Specifically, Willow's leadership team modeled data-driven practices that supported students across all tiers of support within an MTSS and aided large scale decisions for MTSS.

Research Question 2

The second research question focused on barriers to MTSS implementation for Willow's distributed leadership model. Participants were asked questions regarding perceived barriers to MTSS efforts made by the leadership team. Interviews, observations, reviewed documents, and journal entries were all reviewed to outline three major themes and various sub-themes (See Table 7). To see all deductive and inductive codes utilized in the process, see Appendix C.

Table 7

Research Question 2 Summary

Research Question	Theme	Sub-Theme
What barriers hinder distributed leadership models for MTSS implementation?	Shift to MTSS	*Mindsets*
		All Means All
	Necessary Resources	*Time*
		Materials for Evidence Based Practices
	Working Pains	*Staffing for MTSS*
		Fatigue and Relationships

Shift to MTSS

The first barrier that was widely expressed by Willow's leadership team was the challenges that came with the shift to MTSS. Specifically, the barriers of staff mindsets and providing a continuum of services. Within this section, I describe the comments from leadership team members regarding how shifting towards an MTSS was a barrier to their distributed leadership.

Mindsets. The shift from the traditional models of support for students who were suspected of needing supportive services (i.e., "Wait-to-fail model"; Batsche et al., 2005) to the MTSS framework has been one of the biggest changes for modern day educators. With any large system change, individuals' beliefs or perceptions are a critical piece in the change's effectiveness (Rogers, 1962; Weick, 1995). For instance, the Fixsen et al., (2010) model outlined that once an organization initially implements a system change, stakeholders might be resistant to the change due to comfort with the status quo or challenges that come with a new practice. The mindsets across Willow's staff regarding MTSS were a well noted barrier impeding Willow's distributed leadership model to promote implementation efforts. Setting the stage for

this theme was the words of the kindergarten teacher leader, who spoke about the impediments of having differing mindsets across staff members. She compared the leadership team's efforts to implement MTSS to a Jenga® tower where each Jenga® piece is an individual within the distributed leadership model by stating:

> "… People in their own beliefs, and sometimes there's nothing you can do … Your little Jenga® pile starts to fall apart when you can't get everybody on board with something"

The words from the kindergarten teacher leader mirrors the comments from other leadership team members. First, the biggest shift in mindsets related to why MTSS began many decades ago. Multiple leadership team members spoke about how their MTSS efforts were hindered due to confusion around the purpose of MTSS. Some staff members saw the model as a modified version of referring a student for special education services. For instance, the Speech Language Pathologist spoke on the barrier of incorrectly thinking MTSS is mechanism for accessing an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or a different classroom placement.

> "I think there are some barriers with the leadership team having staff that just want the child tested and put on IEP or moved out of their classroom. That's not a systemic problem, I think that is few and far between, but I hear enough about it that I think that it's a barrier. Trying to educate that just having... We have no magic fairy dust here once a child's on an IEP. Sometimes when they're in MTSS, they're receiving more supports than when they do get up ending on an IEP. It's sad to say, but sometimes that happens, that's just the reality … Right, and just not understanding what the process needs to be and that it's not about the end result doesn't always have to be an evaluation. The end result would be putting interventions in place that are going to be positively received by the student so the gap is being closed."

The principal matched that same level of concern with their comments about how they struggle with getting staff to focus on how MTSS is intended to provide supports and not identify students for an IEP.

> "I do MTSS because I'm trying to get enough data to prove that this child can't learn when in reality you're supposed to do MTSS so the child can learn. And that's a tough dynamic to break sometimes. Not because teachers are evil, but because we have a long held belief that there's someone somewhere that has a magic, something that will help the child…. that may be something that occurs, but this is about how do we get that child to achieve? So I think that's probably the biggest struggle is the need to feel like you get more help if a child is labeled, then the tiers of support offer when in reality the tiers of support are actually the most support they get … And I've also found that sometimes at other schools, once students are labeled, they actually get less support because they don't have the three tiers anymore for some reason, because now they have an IEP when in fact it should be three tiers then the IEP."

The second major shift in mindsets that hindered MTSS implementation within Willow's distributed leadership model was having patience with student progression. Similar to the first subtheme, Willow's leadership team expressed that in some cases students are not provided enough exposure to tiers of support before making a decision to evaluate a student for special education. For example, the Speech Language Pathologist outlined the differences in grade level teams in regard to exposing students to different tiers of support long enough to make an informed decision for special education services.

> "Some of our teams are stronger than others. Some of our teams are quicker to move to the evaluation process. In my opinion, haven't really tried the interventions for a long

enough period of time. Or they're too quick to request to have a student moved out of their classroom before they have tried interventions … So sometimes that can be a challenge getting that process done quickly … Sometimes it can be very lengthy getting the kids what they need."

However, another key point to this subtheme was the negative impact disruptive behaviors have on the MTSS efforts at Willow. In some cases, staff at Willow were noted as being less patient in providing tiered behavioral supports, which weakened the presence of MTSS for students who would benefit from additional behavioral supports. The Speech Language Pathologist and principal both provided their perspective of how the intent/purpose of MTSS is impeded when staff within Willow's distributed leadership model do not showcase patience with students who have disruptive behaviors.

"Well and lack of training, just not understanding the antecedent and setting a behavior plan in place that's really appropriate for the student. Too quick to have them be removed from the classroom, rather than try to work through some things."

" … that tends to be a struggle with MTSS is when it has to do with the behavior piece instead of the academic piece. We are very patient with implementing tiers of support if it's a reading problem, if you're throwing a chair, we tend not to be as patient with you. So, I think sometimes the behavioral aspects really push the limits of our system."

The final mindset shift that impeded the MTSS efforts at Willow was the challenge of recognizing MTSS as a process intended to promote student success as opposed to simply compliance. Documenting the critical pieces of MTSS (e.g., progress monitoring data, intervention fidelity) is often both (a) necessary for student progress and (b) a school or district mandate. In some cases, educators could get bogged down with the bureaucratic tasks of

compliance and lose focus of the purpose of MTSS. This seemed to be the case for Willow's distributed leadership model. Specifically, the uphill battle of maintaining compliance that revolves around MTSS, while keeping what is best for students in mind. For example, the second grade teacher leader explains their frustrations with balancing their students' needs and the paperwork mandates from the school district.

> "I do think as far as things that could be improved upon is the process of staffing students, getting them an IEP plan that they need and that comes more from a district issue as far as staffing and compliance because I feel we're not all on the same page as far as expectations and what needs to be done, how to get a student the help that they need … I have two particular students that I'm trying to bring up and things just keep falling through the cracks. It gets kicked back. As far as staffing compliance it's not what they need, so I have to revise it or change it. Some of it's very hairline simple little things that I felt like if I had known the expectation I'm going to meet that expectation."

The support staff within Willow's distributed leadership model also noted the barriers that come with ensuring compliance for MTSS. The Speech Language Pathologist discussed the hurdles that teachers and special educators (e.g., ESE support facilitator) encounter when determining student response to intervention.

> "I don't know that it's a struggle, it can become a challenge, the time it takes for the teacher and the ESE support facilitator to meet and graph everything. Just from a compliance standpoint, just getting all the pieces in place to make sure that you're doing everything that you need to do. Trying to not let the compliance piece take away from what needs to be happening with the students."

In sum, the mindsets of those within Willow's distributed leadership model functioned as a barrier to the implementation of MTSS. Specifically, challenges of (a) shifting to a progressive service delivery model, (b) maintaining patience with student progression, and (c) balancing the purpose and compliance aspects of MTSS emerged. However, there is a second area of impediment regarding the mindsets of Willow's distributed leadership model, which was the embracing of supporting all students.

All Means All. The purpose of MTSS is providing supports to all students based on their level of need regardless of special education eligibility (Jimerson et al., 2015). Even with the positive intention of MTSS, schools are often limited in resources and professional capacity to meet this expectation (e.g., Alonzo et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2019). Specifically, they are striving to meet the needs of all students yet may fall short in their efforts. Willow's leadership team echoed this barrier to implementing MTSS, noting that reaching all students is a challenging goal for their distributed leadership model. To begin, Willow's leadership team members discussed that the tiers of support took the coordination of multiple educators. However, as the assistant principal described, the development of tiers of support can be impeded by difficulty in expertise availability and overall conceptualization.

> "So finding enough manpower, finding enough experts to deliver tiers of support in the amount of time that we have, meeting the varied needs across the board for all students … So although you can have, okay, this person's doing a comprehension group, there's many different facets to that."

Furthermore, the fifth grade and kindergarten teacher leaders spoke on the struggles they have with implementing MTSS within their grade levels. Based on the comments, Willow's

leadership team found meeting the needs of student who need supplemental (i.e., Tier II) and intensive (i.e., Tier III) services was an ongoing challenge.

> "We're constantly battling how to provide tier two and tier three instruction to students that need tier three, so that's a conversation that we have at leadership often of when you have these kids that are missing previous grade level skills and they need that tier three instruction, but they're also missing grade level skills obviously, they need tier two instruction … We do tend to have some of the same kids keep falling into that tier two and tier three realm over and over again, it's supposed to be a fluid and flexible grouping, but you definitely see some kids that kind of hang out there."
>
> "Meeting the needs, the additional, you know? Tier IIs and Tiers IIIs are ... Getting Tier I is easy, getting Tier II is easier, you can pull groups whenever, but to get to Tier III, and the ones that just need constant ... That's really tough."

Directly related to meeting the needs of students with supplemental or intensive services was the comments from Willow's leadership team regarding the "Lowest 25% or 35%." This was referring to students identified as in the lowest 35% of student scores on statewide exams. Willow's MTSS efforts were challenged in providing effective services for the "Lowest 25% or 35%." Specifically, teacher leaders (i.e., third and fifth) spoke about how Willow's MTSS efforts are challenged by balancing supporting students who are far behind standards and providing a full continuum of services.

> "It's just mainly continuing our work, continuing to impact our lowest 35%, hopefully continue to move all students forward and still be relevant and engaging. So it's breaking the norm of a traditional classroom and connecting with the kids on different levels …. And then just in general, how do we even, students are multiple years behind, so it's not

changing. So we are moving the kids forward, but how do we, one, even identify how far we've moved the kids and hit that catch-up growth, as opposed to just yearly growth?"

"I think our biggest problem that we still come across is, students that consistently do not perform at level, so what the principal would usually refer to as our lowest 25%. Those kids that are consistently getting [failing scores] on the State Assessment. Those are the ones that it's hard to help them grow. A lot of them are coming to us with a lot of missed learning, they have a lot of gaps in their learning, so they're trying to meet, for instance, the fifth grade standards, but they're missing things from second grade or first grade or third grade. And we don't have a lot of time in our curriculum to reteach what they should have learned years ago as well as teach what we have to do right now. So I think the hardest thing is to try to have those kids actually meet standards."

Finally, meeting the needs of all students can also bring problems of specificity for interventions. For instance, reading and literacy proficiency is a focus of many state and federal plans for overall student achievement (e.g., ESSA, 2015). However, within a MTSS, educators are ideally equipped to provide support in multiple academic subjects. Willow's distributed leadership model was limited in the resources they could provide to support students in a variety of academic subjects. One of the third grade and kindergarten teacher leaders explained how the limited resources can actually impede the leadership team's ability to facilitate implementation of MTSS for all students.

"And it feels sometimes that we don't have that on a curriculum side, at least in our main areas of reading and math. But especially if you break down into science, social studies, and writing, there is nothing. So our social studies, we sometimes get tongue in cheek, "I teach it." But our resources are a page of, 'Here's the standard and here's some thoughts

of things you could do. Here's a massive project, you just implement it.' It's a paragraph. Well, no, what am I supposed ... I don't know. "

"We do have some math interventions, but we didn't have very many at all, and it's just a handful of kids that didn't have number recognition, they couldn't do the one-to-one correspondence. They're, generally, the same kids that are struggling in reading because they're not matching a word to what they're reading."

In conclusion, this theme started with the consequences of the mindsets of those with an MTSS and transitioned to the barriers educators face when carrying out the "all means all" intention of MTSS. The next theme more closely examines the hindrance of accessing necessary resources to implement MTSS.

Necessary Resources

Throughout the literature bases on distributed leadership, MTSS, and system change, the availability of resources can directly influence the functioning of an organization (e.g., Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010; McIntosh et al., 2010). For example, the multiple features of MTSS (i.e., intervention, progress monitoring, instruction) require educators to have access to necessary resources (i.e., curriculum, databases, materials). Additionally, resources (both humanistic and materialistic) directly influence the ability on an organization to facilitate new practices (Fixsen et al., 2010). This theme describes Willow's leadership team's perspectives of how resources such as time and materials for evidence based practices were barriers to their efforts to implement MTSS.

Time. The first resource that was discussed as a barrier to the implementation of MTSS within Willow's distributed leadership model was time. Time is consistently noted as limited and constraining to system change efforts (Hall & Hord, 2011). Based on the conversations and

observations at Willow, time seemed to be a valued resource. For instance, during one observation, leadership team members were given the choice to either get a guided tour of the new addition to Willow's campus (in preparation of the following school year's increased enrollment) or gain an additional 20 minutes to complete any necessary tasks before the school day started. Before allowing the leadership team members to choose, the principal told the whole group that although the guided tour will be important for future discussions for planning, they would understand if team members chose the additional time. I found this interesting because 20 minutes did not seem like a lot of additional time to me. However, upon further reflection, 20 minutes for a teacher whose day might be separated by small chunks of times (e.g., reading blocks, lunch periods) and interrupted continually might have greatly benefited from the extra 20 minutes. Nevertheless, Willow's leadership team members went beyond a dichotomous description of time's impact (e.g., *We have no time to implement MTSS)* and detailed how a lack of time impeded certain aspects of MTSS implementation.

Since its initial conceptualization, MTSS was intended to provide educators with a service delivery framework to address the needs of all students (Batsche et al., 2005). However, the transition from the notions of MTSS to implementation in schools has come with difficulty and some have argued that it is impractical (e.g., Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Kavale as cited in Batsche et al., 2006). In the previously discussed sub-theme of *All Means All*, Willow's leadership team members noted that despite their positive intention to implement MTSS, they often fell short in providing a continuum of services. With further conversation, it was evident that one barrier to their distributed approach to meeting the needs of all students was time. For instance, one of the third grade teacher leaders and the fifth grade teacher leader noted that there is not enough time to support all students.

> “Sometimes, it's hard to ... We have this huge group of students who need help. I know third grade has brought to the leadership team that we have a low group of third graders this year, probably the lowest I've ever seen, and so we brought a big chunk of kids and we said, ‘We just don't have enough teachers on our team, time on our hands, to meet the needs of all of these students. Is there someone else in the school, maybe a specials teacher, who has an extra 20 minutes on their hands that can come down and do an intervention group for us, because we need an extra tier group going on?’"
>
> “I think time is always a struggle, but I mean overall I think we do a really nice job of getting to those kids. I wish always, I think our teachers will always say that they wish they had more time because a lot of the time kids just need more practice with something to get better …”

Through the discussion with the assistant principal as well as other leadership team members, it was apparent that Willow’s distributed leadership model was not constricted by time spent building basic capacity to implement MTSS (i.e., understanding MTSS), but meeting the needs of students within the framework.

> “I think it's the time where people are available to meet all the varied needs that occur with students … Now I feel like we really have built a deep understanding of MTSS ... Now I more just think it is the varied needs that we have to truly differentiate the support for students with the number of adults we have and the amount of time we have to do so.”

Based on this information, I reflected upon my experiences within a graduate school program that strongly supports the use of MTSS within schools. I thought the criticisms of MTSS (as it related to its time-consuming nature) was a product of inefficient procedures and/or policies, not because of the inherent comprehensiveness of the framework. This reflection

resulted in a personal crossroad where I confronted the idea that (a) the notion of MTSS might be impractical and (b) my assumption of accountability measures (e.g., school grade, tests scores) equate to fidelity of MTSS implementation. For instance, the data collected in the study through record reviews (i.e., student test achievement scores, school grade, model school PBIS application) would suggest there might have been proficient and effective procedures for students. Additionally, there were many facilitators present at Willow (e.g., previous leadership experiences among staff, strong data presence) that would theoretically lead to more efficient practices within an MTSS framework. However, leadership team members provided several examples of how time remained a barrier for the leadership team's MTSS efforts.

For instance, the kindergarten and fifth grade teacher leaders were key examples of how those implementing MTSS are too time constricted to provide the token purpose of MTSS (i.e., meeting the needs of all students).

> "Most of us have, especially kindergarten, have a goal to meet with and conference with every single kid at least once a week. Then you've got your tiers, and you want to meet with them two or three times a week, individually. That's time constraining."
>
> "Yeah, you want to try to do everything you can but you also have to keep going with the curriculum that you have to teach and make sure they've learned everything they need to by the end of the year. So it can be hard for sure … With the time that we have in our day, how do you make sure that you provide both of those while also not neglecting all the other students in the tier one instruction that you're doing? ... So we're able to talk about all these great ideas, but then the actual implementation of it, the time with students, is so limited that that's what the struggle and the frustration is."

Other leadership team members spoke about the implementation of MTSS and how it can lead to a shallow dive into actionable items for student progress. For instance, the Speech Language Pathologist described that time restricts staff's ability to make data based decisions, limiting their scope of problem solving.

> "It's just it's the time that it takes to analyze the data and figure out what the student truly needs. Then if you have a child who is so significantly below benchmark, trying to narrow down and figure out what's the most pressing need that that child has because they have so many. Trying to help through that dialogue with staff, to help decide what is it that they truly need, because they have so many needs … and it takes time to graph, it takes time when you sit with somebody with the information and do that."

Materials For Evidence Based Practices. In conjunction with the barrier of time, Willow's leadership team often lacked materials to implement evidence-based practices within an MTSS framework. Specifically, Willow's leadership team noted that specificity and utilization of the resources available was a barrier to implementing evidence-based practices within an MTSS framework. Materialistic resources are critical for educators to carry out MTSS functions or any system change effort (Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010). Additionally, system change theorists discuss the importance of compounding resources, in which resources within an organization align together to facilitate necessary system change (e.g., protocols and ongoing professional development; Fullan, 2010). In Latimer (2020), Willow's leadership team spoke about how their vast amount of humanistic and materialistic resources supported their enactment of distributed leadership for MTSS. However, a barrier to implementing evidence-based practices within an MTSS framework was the specificity and utilization of the resources available.

To begin, multiple teacher leaders at Willow expressed frustration around the specificity of materials to implement evidence based practices. Through conservations and reviewing of documents at Willow, I reflected that materials for evidence-based practices in reading instruction and intervention were the primary focus of their internal resource networks. Yet, other subject areas (e.g., math, writing, science) often lack critical resources to provide tiered instruction and intervention within an MTSS. Based on my practicum experiences across multiple schools and districts, I would agree that often instructional and intervention resources focus on supporting reading concerns more often than other subjects. Those same frustrations were present within Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS implementation. For instance, one of the third grade teacher leaders spoke about how they have trouble finding specific resources for their instructional focus (i.e., math).

> "…. And then just, and the same thing with materials. There are none. Even looking at our math resources online, if I need an intervention group, I have a link on resources to prior year standards. Okay, but what?"

Additionally, the rise of MTSS and the age of accountability has reinforced the use of evidence based practices in instruction and intervention for supporting students (e.g., ESSA, 2015). However, Willow's leadership team members discussed that even in times they access resources, they question if the sources are evidence based. The third grade teacher leader from the previous quote continued and spoke about how their ability to implement MTSS is limited by the specificity of available evidence-based resources. Additionally, the fifth grade teacher spoke of their concerns to gather specific resources that provide information on evidence-based practices outside of reading content.

> “But our resources are a page of, ‘Here's the standard and here's some thoughts of things you could do. Here's a massive project, you just implement it.’ It's a paragraph. Well, no, what am I supposed ... I don't know. So that's where … So not only just access to any resources, but evidence-based or research-based resources as well … What's a good program that I can utilize to help make that difference? … there needs to be a better way to where I'm not Googling or developing stuff on my own that could be impactful or not. I sometimes get concerned, one of the questions is, ‘Is the student receiving research-based curriculum and instruction?’ And we always say yes, and I'm sitting there going, ‘Well, those word problems I developed, I sure hope.’”
>
> “… So finding ... what do they call it? Databased, you know, data driven resources. The research based resources that have proven to have effectiveness. Not so much in reading, reading is very easy to find resources. There's tons of research out there. It's more in the math area and science area.”

I found this theme interesting because from my experience, some schools implementing MTSS may note that they have no or limited resources regardless of the academic subject. Yet, Willow’s leadership team noted that specificity of resources as opposed to availability was impeding their MTSS efforts. Even though the ability to read is critical in all academic subjects, Willow’s lack of evidence-based resources in other academic subjects impeded their ability to compound resources for MTSS implementation.

Similarly, the final subtheme involves how Willow’s distributed leadership team struggled with the strategic usage of resources for MTSS implementation (i.e., Fullan, 2010). Moving past concerns of specificity, Willow’s leadership team spoke about how they often struggled with making resources applicable and/or useful within an MTSS framework. First, I

wanted to shed light on the principal's perspective of how MTSS implementation at Willow gets impeded by not acting upon resources available. In the specific quote, they note that actions after using resources tends to follow the same trend regardless of the data associated with the materials. Thus, the principal communicated a sense of repetitiveness of staff "going through the motions" when utilizing resources for instruction and intervention.

> "…this is a drum I've been beating a lot lately, effective research-based resources because we have a lot of conversations, but in the end it's almost like Groundhog Day sometimes, nobody knows what to do and there has to be an actionable step at the end. So, if we're looking at the data and the data shows us this and then we do this and it doesn't work, there have to be options after that."

Yet, interestingly enough, one of the third grade teacher leaders took a different stance on how the execution of specific actions associated with resources is sometimes forgotten. They spoke about how resources at the district level are simply provided, yet the "how" behind those resources was vague. The third grade teacher leader expressed a positive viewpoint toward implementing MTSS (e.g., "I'm on board, you got me. I'll adopt, let's do it"), yet felt constricted by the lack of clear direction provided for utilizing resources for MTSS.

> "It'd be nice if we had a little bit more specific resources on what to do, because then we're not spinning our wheels trying to ... So, I look at it almost as, I wish our MTSS process from a district level provided better support as we think about our curriculum … And we have resources, and we have tools to go to, and the only time we need to veer from that is when students are not responding to it … And it feels sometimes with MTSS on a larger scale, we don't have that, to where I'm individually developing my intervention groups. And, so is the teacher over there, and so is the teacher down the road

> at another school, and we're all doing separate things … At MTSS trainings I've been to in the past, they've been great with, 'Here's what you should be doing,' and it's all great, and, "'Here's what's working in certain schools. But so what do I do? And it's like we spend so much time on mindset, and they say it's not what you teach. No, what I teach is very important. It's the expectation here. But I get it, I'm on board, you got me. I'll adopt, let's do it."

In summation, there were multiple necessary resources (i.e., time, materials for evidence based practices) that hindered the MTSS efforts of Willow's distributed leadership model. Yet, there are still factors that relate to staff actions and interpersonal relationships (e.g., fatigue, conflict) that may influence the implementation of a system change effort. The following theme will describe barriers related to staff functioning that impacted Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS.

Working Pains

At the core of any distributed leadership model, MTSS implementation or system change effort are individuals who influence, implement, and maintain functioning. Furthermore, the interactions and relationships among individuals within a social system can directly relate to the overall functioning of an organization (e.g., Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). Willow's MTSS efforts through their distributed leadership model were impacted by multiple staff related variables. Specifically, the amount and capacity of staff members, overall fatigue and related conflicts were discussed.

Staffing for MTSS. The field of education is noted as a system that is subject to staff shortages, staff turnover, budget constraints and fluid allocation (Bamabara et al., 2012; Bohanon & Wu, 2014; Lohrmann et al., 2012; Scott et al., 2019). Even with this constant struggle, the

decision-makers adopted MTSS, an all-encompassing framework that provides a continuum of service for all students. Naturally, this can create some conflict with ensuring that schools have enough staff and capacity to implement the complex framework. Willow's leadership team members expressed the frustrations and shortcomings that come with having staff shortages during MTSS implementation. For instance, I described previously that the assistant principal discussed that a key barrier to MTSS implementation is having enough "manpower" to match the diverse needs of all students within Willow's distributed leadership model. In the same sense, the fourth grade gifted certified teacher leader explained that providing intensive supports can be hindered by a lack of Exceptional Student Education (ESE) personnel.

> "…so something that does pop into mind is maybe having enough, and this is not a school thing, I think it is an allocation thing, a resource of having enough ESE personnel. We have one ESE instructor for 30 some odd students and that's split between fourth and second and I don't know how you reasonably can expect that person to be really in there and helping with that many students in the distance because second grade is over there, fourth grade is over here. And so I love it when they can be in here. But I will say you can't rely on a lot of help."

Furthermore, the kindergarten teacher leaders also noted that having shortages in staff members (i.e., instructional assistants; IA) that support more intensive academic interventions and/or social emotional interventions (i.e., guidance counselors) can create gaps in an MTSS.

> "The support staff. Yes. We have one kindergarten IA, and they're pulled quite a bit for other ... Whether they have to sub, or other roles that they has to do. It's hard when you use them as part of your tier instructional groups and they're not there …It happens a lot because we have a shortage of subs … like our guidance and things like that. They're

pulled so much too, and some of them only work in, they might only be here one or two days a week."

Willow was also subject to teacher turnover within its first three years of operations. This resulted in Willow's teacher leaders having adapt to a somewhat revolving door of staff members as they were facilitating MTSS implementation. Additionally, Willow's student population also grew within the first three years and that led to an increased allocation from the district to hire more teachers. For instance, the first grade teacher leaders noted that their grade level team went from five teachers when the school opened to eight at the time of the study.

Even with an appropriate amount of staff, Willow's distributed leadership team still found that the capacity of staff can impede their MTSS efforts. Ironically, having staff support within the classroom that does not have the capacity to support instructional or intervention implementation with MTSS can actually impede the teacher. For instance, the second and kindergarten teacher leaders discussed how having instructional assistants (IAs) that didn't have background knowledge actually added to their burden implementing interventions as the teacher.

"I would say the level of expertise for those that come to us as far as IA's. So the level of background that they have on those students and the curriculum piece. We've tried really hard to do a lot of training with them."

"There are IAs that just, they're not trained to do it. You do what you can to support them, but you're also in here trying to run a classroom too."

Similarly, the second grade teacher leader further noted that having more teachers within their grade level team is appreciated but can cause hinderance to a consistent MTSS effort. Specifically, the coordination, consistency and providing a continuum of services can get lost in the logistical planning and theoretical understanding of MTSS implementation.

> "So, our team is a team of seven, so making sure seven teachers are on the same page and then expand it even our… we have quite a few leaders on our leadership team. So, it's a large crowd and while we have a lot of expertise sometimes it's just interpretation, misconceptions or beliefs of how we should move forward, can be a hard piece to bring us all together sometimes. Also the amount of students. So the student piece we're identifying a lot of students with struggles and getting them all the support that they need in the tiers. Sometimes we are trying to outsource to the IA's. So, again that ties back to the lack of experience and knowledge. But we have so many kids that we're trying to move forward and through that process so it's hard sometimes to get that group to be small enough or to implement it consistently throughout the day and give them that amount of time that they need."

Fatigue And Relationships. The profession of teaching is consistently noted as a high stress job (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Additionally, the age of accountability has layered on more potential stress and responsibilities for educators to (a) provide a continuum of services through MTSS and (b) ensure all students are meeting necessary achievement standards. Willow's leadership team noted that they both felt and witnessed fatigue in supporting all students through an MTSS framework. For example, the principal discussed how the assistant principal and themselves have noted that in some cases, staff had "compassion fatigue" when addressing the needs of all students.

> "I would say if you asked every one of them [leadership team members] today, they would say they're tired, there's a fatigue. The assistant principal has a great term for it that they read. It's called 'compassion fatigue.' We work so hard and we care so much that it's

exhausting. So, sometimes always doing what's right for kids can really drain the grownups."

One of the third grade teacher leaders echoed the comments from the principal, by describing how the demands of MTSS can sometimes create exhaustion and guilt.

"You feel fatigued and drained because you're putting so much and trying to help a student that's struggling, and they're not making the gains they need to. And then you start to feel bad, and they're going on to the next grade or not. At their grade they could be retained because of that. And that's where I think the fatigue comes in, to where I'm doing everything I know, I'm doing everything I've been asked, I'm doing everything that's been suggested, and they're not learning, and I feel that struggle."

Based on the comments of multiple leadership team members, the fatigue experienced by many also led to other relational conflicts for supporting students. For instance, the continuous strive to support all students through an MTSS framework resulted in specific problems solving techniques. The problem solving model is a common component of many MTSS implementation efforts (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007), in which the first step in problem solving is identifying the problem at hand. However, the combination of "compassion fatigue" and the urgency of student progress resulted in common conflicts between grade levels. As the principal noted, this can create a culture that is not conducive to MTSS.

"…so if you teach kindergarten and I teach first grade and I get a group of children that don't have foundational skills, I don't blame the kids, I blame you. So sometimes- …. fifth grade sent a snarky email to fourth grade about the writing. Now the overall goal is good. We want vertical communication, but we don't want fourth grade to feel like they did something wrong or that they're being accused of not being proficient teachers. So, I

think sometimes that it's not team interaction, but across teams that can be problematic … right. Well you can't expect me to do miracles if this child was already here. And there is some realism to that. You can only make so much growth in so much time …"

The kindergarten teacher leader experienced this type of relational conflict when interacting with other teachers to meet the needs of students who were missing certain foundation skills.

"Kindergarten doesn't have that luxury to have somebody below us, it's a baseline … Yeah, because you're the foundation. Yeah, you're the foundation grade, you know? You get kids in second grade that don't have phonics, that comes back on us … that's just natural … I never think it's an intentional attack or anything, but it's like 'Oh, kindergarten's responsible for phonics.'"

I also was able to observe this relational conflict during an observation of a leadership team meeting. One of the main discussions of the meeting was a growing concern of staff members blaming previous grades in their attempt to identify the root cause of students' inability to meet expectations ("*playing the blame game"*; Latimer, 2020). In response, the principal guided the conversation around the mission and vision of Willow as well as focusing on character strengths and more concrete problem solving techniques (e.g., less finger pointing). Based on my reflection, these relational conflicts stemmed from staff members wanting to determine a blameworthy factor that could justify their fatigue and consistent effort for raising student achievement. The combination of the pressures of the age of accountability and the utilization of data at Willow led me to this belief. For example, Willow's utilization of data supported ample data-based problem solving within their MTSS. However, the pressure from the age of accountability to continuously increase student achievement can create a sense of urgency

that could have been a negative influence on Willow's leadership team. Thus, creating an overwhelming stress for teachers to find quick causes (i.e., simply blaming the previous grade level), as opposed to complex or unclear data-based evidence to inform instruction and intervention (i.e., spending time data collecting, data analyzing and problem solving).

Research Question 3

The second aim of this study was to investigate the role of formal leadership within a distributed leadership model for MTSS. Investigation of the formal leadership at Willow was mostly focused on the actions of the principal. Leadership team members were asked questions regarding the perceived role of the principal within Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS implementation. Interviews, observations, documents, and journal entries were all reviewed to outline three major themes and various sub-themes (See Table 8). To see all deductive and inductive codes utilized in the process, see Appendix C.

Table 8

Research Question 3 Summary

Research Question	Theme	Sub-Theme
What is the influence of formal leadership (i.e., principal) on distributed leadership models facilitating MTSS implementation?	Engaged Leadership	*Part of The Culture* *Leading and Supporting*
	Facilitator of Learning	*Guide on the Side* *Professional Treatment*
	Sum of All Parts	*Collective Capacity* *Power in Numbers*

Engaged Leadership

Through the system change and distributed leadership literature bases, leaders are noted as more impactful when committed and involved with a specific change (e.g., Eagle et al., 2015; Hulpia et al., 2009; Seashore et al., 2010; Tian et al., 2016). This first theme directly relates to

Willow's principal being engaged with the systems and people who encompass Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS. Specifically, this theme will outline the direct actions of the principal (a) building, planning, and embracing a culture conducive for MTSS implementation, and (b) consistently balancing leading and supporting MTSS implementation. Although Latimer (2020) noted how Willow's principal showcased multiple leading qualities (i.e., Personal, Logistical) that were conceptualized as critical for distributed leadership, this study provided a more in-depth analysis of the role of the principal in the school's distributed leadership approach for MTSS implementation.

Part of The Culture. The principal at Willow was a critical piece in developing the culture that was the foundation for Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS. Simply put, the third grade teacher leader noted that "I think everything that they [the principal] did has made Willow what it is." Willow's principal led the opening of Willow three years prior to the start of the study. At that point, the principal was already attempting to develop a culture that would work for all the informal leaders within Willow. For example, the principal held an intimate meeting (prior to the opening of the school) with the leadership team members to envision the type of culture they would find beneficial at Willow. The third grade teacher leader provided a description of what that process looked like and how the leadership team could be constructed for MTSS.

> "So, I think it starts going back to year one, they had a lot of deep conversations as far as who the leaders were even going to be. They asked us if that was even a role that we wanted to take. They invited us to their house, which being at a different location for seven, eight years I never went to my principal's house … So, they built a very solid foundation of communication and a relationship with us first and foremost. They got a lot

> of feedback from us as far as what we envisioned the school to be and what we think the leadership team should function as. We collectively came up with the norms and how we want that [regular leadership team] meeting[s] to look like, how we want that leadership team discussion to be. How are we going to share information and things like that."

I reflected on the actions of the principal and found that their collective approach in building a culture for Willow's leadership team differed from my previous experiences with school based leadership teams. In my previous experience working with school based leadership teams, formal leaders often dictate the culture, norms and functioning of the leadership team due to the hierarchical nature of school. For instance, because a principal is the formal leader of a school and responsible for the outcomes of their school, they must enforce a culture that works for them. However, Willow's principal seemed to ascribe to a more distributed leadership approach and attempted to flatten the hierarchical structure in the development of Willow's culture. For instance, the intimate meeting described previously gave all teacher leaders a chance to collectively create a culture for MTSS implementation at Willow with the administration. Even though the principal did not fully ascribe to a democratic approach (i.e., decisions determined by the majority) in this example, she attempted to mitigate the hierarchical pressure by fostering communication and insight from key stakeholders. The result of that action was leadership team members' feelings of connection and that it fostered responsibility with formal leadership as Willow was beginning. For instance, the fourth grade teacher leader explained that through the first years of Willow the principal continued to "promote that type of environment" (i.e., collectively building the culture) and often "shows respect … to their team leaders."

To continuously build on this culture at Willow, the principal also fostered engagement through consistently planning with informal leadership and staff in mind. Willow's principal was

noted as having great skills for being knowledgeable and strategic with information to plan effective actions for engaging staff within the established culture. The kindergarten teacher leader perceived the principal as being a very intelligent person who innately built a conducive culture for MTSS implementation through distributed leadership.

> " they're very good at what they do …. they're calming. their knowledge base is unbelievable. They have been in every kind of school, and every kind of role, and multiple grade levels, so they know everything. They're got information about it all…..Very successfully. I think they're built a culture here that very few people can achieve and I'm dreading the day they leave us."

More specifically, the assistant principal and fourth grade gifted certified teacher leader discussed the impact of the principal's strategic planning, and ability to connect with stakeholders through strength based conversation to further gain momentum for MTSS implementation (i.e., school success plan, gathering stakeholder input).

> "… I would say hands down the strategic piece of focusing on the school success plan and coming up with problem solving to help move forward with that as well as keeping it a strengths based approach. They are a Gallup® Strengths coach now they were certified. So, using that knowledge to help keep it a positive strengths-based approach of moving us forward. To keep everybody engaged and excited about what it is that we've done and what we have done well. And then keep moving forward and keep that momentum going."

> "… making sure they are getting input from all what you would call stakeholders. They're checking in with how are the students feeling with that success, how are the teachers feeling with implementing these things."

Finally, the principal was credited with embracing and leading a key piece of the culture at Willow, which was the Strength-based Gallup® survey. Willow's leadership team utilized the information on staff's measured strengths from the Strength-based Gallup® survey to better facilitate MTSS implementation. The principal was known throughout Willow as the key catalyst for connecting the information from the survey to better enhancing the culture and ultimately the work of staff. As the Speech Language Pathologist noted, "[the principal] is a pro at the gallop strengths and understanding how that can be embedded in us as we do our day to day work." Specifically, in embracing Willow's culture, the principal often used the information from the strengths survey as a way to support informal leaders problem solving within an MTSS framework with their grade level teams. Both the first and third grade teacher leaders explain how the culture within the leadership team and their grade level teams were enhanced with the principal's embracing of the strength survey data.

> "…that Gallup® survey gives us information of what we need to continue working on what are the positives, what are the celebrations and Gallup® survey, that was something new when I came here too, I didn't hear too much of that before. So, we definitely analyze those results. We also looked at our strengths."
>
> "… [the principal] then gave me the Gallup® strengths, the top strength for the teammates who I was having the issue with, and so then, I looked at them, and we read them, and I was like 'Oh, well, that's the reason: because this is how they sees it, not that they're being non-compliant. This is their way of thinking. This is their mindset. This is their top strength.' So, they're taking their strength and they're using it to what they sees as a benefit, but what others might see as non-beneficial. So, then, we looked at it, we problem-solved together, and I've had no issues."

Also to compliment the strength based work, the principal embraced an overall positive environment for staff members. For example, in one observation of a leadership team the principal started the meeting responding to the overall fatigue of the school year by saying "52 days left to make a difference." The leadership team responded with a lightened mood and laughter, kickstarting conversation about the final tasks for the school year. In all observations of leadership teams, I also felt the atmosphere was friendly, collaborative, and balanced professional and personal discussions seamlessly. Similarly, the first grade teacher leader explained the principal promotes positivity throughout staff and that contributes to the high level of job satisfaction within the building (as compared to other schools in the district).

> "Our data definitely shown that because we wouldn't be number one in the district if they weren't doing all those things. Something they do differently that I didn't have in a lot of my schools, they has different theme days, different jean days, they will leave little positive notes in your mailbox, then they will have, this was last year, it was for the 50s or something, they had little records out of paper and then you wrote something positive to someone in the school or they will have different little things like at Halloween they had different little things where you could write something positive to someone."

In summation, the principal was critical in collaboratively building, strategically planning and effectively embracing Willow' current culture of distributed leadership for MTSS. The principal was deeply embedded into one of the key pieces of Willow's culture (e.g., Strength-Based Approach). However, the principal was also able to balance between being the catalyst and promoter of both the Strength-Based Approach and other aspects of Willow's culture. For instance, Willow's principal was consistently credited for being able to effectively switch from leader and supporter of various systems within Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS.

Leading and Supporting. In the hierarchical system of education, staff that are within classrooms (e.g., teachers, teacher leaders) are often subject to a "top-down" approach to change (Hall and Hord, 2006). For example, schools might have specific initiatives that are derived from the state, district and school leaders that are not planned thoroughly and do not consider those who are carrying out the initiative (i.e., teachers). In Willow's case, the principal was able to effectively transition between leading and supporting various system changes within their distributed leadership model for MTSS. It is my belief that there is not a clear dichotomy between leading and supporting a system change. For instance, a leader does not have to choose between either leading (e.g., primary person for decisions, enforcement of implementation) or supporting (e.g., letting content experts lead, support capacity building, having responsibilities for implementation) a system change. I believe that leaders, specifically within distributed leadership models, must effectively balance leading and supporting a system change to access the collective capacity of staff. For instance, formal leaders within distributed leadership models must navigate having the formal responsibilities and district expectations (i.e., being the leader of a certain school), yet know when to let content experts (i.e., teacher leaders) lead a system change. System change scholars also have noted that leaders of an organization must accept a more de-centralized form of leadership and must navigate both "top-down" and "bottom-up" (i.e., initiative started by those most directly related to the process) initiatives (Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011). The findings of this study highlighted the ability of Willow's principal to balance between leading and supporting system change for MTSS within their distributed leadership.

First, Willow's principal was seen as the major leader for distributed leadership and MTSS implementation. For instance, both third grade teacher leaders separately perceived

Willow's principal role as "ultimately responsible" for the implementation of MTSS through distributed leadership.

> "I think [the principal] feels ultimately responsible because, I mean, at the end of the day, if district were to ask them a question, this is their school. Yes, it's our school, but they built this school. They are ultimately responsible for this school, at the end of the day, so I think that they feel the highest need for responsibility… so even though they might not be the one who's implementing those exact things, but if they're responsible at the end of the day for all of them, however it has to get done, then you make sure that you make things happen within the leadership team … "
>
> "Ultimately responsible. They manage all of our perspectives from our individual classroom needs to the higher MTSS team, from our school psychologist to parents to the students. They're, I think, just the guider. They're ultimately, I believe, responsible for making sure that we're making that difference for all our students."

The second grade teacher leader agreed with third grade teacher leaders on how the principal is seen as the primary leader for MTSS due to their ability to broaden the scope of problem solving at the grade level and look at the bigger picture (i.e., school wide needs) to best serve all students at Willow

> "I mean their role is you know like the ultimate decision, but even with that they will take into consideration everybody's opinion and collectively see what's the majority. Their role is really just to have the bigger picture of where we're moving forward as a school. But they see across grade level whereas we don't. So things that I might bring forth, they're done a very good job of saying, okay so that's a need for second grade, but do you

think that's a need school wide. So, they really are always broadening our vision if you will and growing us to have a bigger picture."

The third grade teacher leader further discussed how even though the principal is seen as the leader of MTSS implementation through their distributed leadership model, they still support the overall direction of the school. The teacher leader gave a simple analogy of how the principal is "almost like a taxi driver", who is driving the car but is still "side by side" with everyone in the theoretical car.

"… they're getting the input of the person in the car of where to go, but they're ultimately in charge of the direction. So, yeah I mean it's very much their working with us side by side of what can we do. How can we constantly move forward and what can we do next."

This analogy provides a perfect picture on how Willow's principal was able to transition past simply being the leader of MTSS implementation to supporting implementation of MTSS. Multiple leadership team members explained that the principal's role consistently switched between being the "ultimate decision maker" to being "side by side" for implementation. For instance, one of the third grade teacher leaders discussed how the principal balances those two roles by being a contributing member of the team and theoretically "paying the mortgage."

"They're [the principal] a member, I think, is how they always presents themself. Just as a contributing member of the team. We know the buck stops with them. It's their job. I joke around, we've got all these core actions, I believe in core action zero, which is, mortgage comes first."

The fifth grade teacher also provided a specific example of the principal showing the balancing act between leading and supporting the leadership team's MTSS efforts. Specifically,

this example showcases how the principal led conversation for system change within a leadership team meeting but remained focused on collective decision making.

> "They are the one that facilitates the meetings, so they're the one that gets the ball rolling, gets us talking, gets us conversing with each other and sharing ideas. They let us do most of the talking, they're not really one to stick their own opinion into a lot of it, they really do want to hear what we have to say. So, they just kind of start the ball rolling and then lets us do the talking and the sharing, and then keeps it going if it starts getting stagnant, we're getting off in the tangent or in the wrong direction or something, she'll pull us back in."

The principal is also known at Willow for supporting implementation of MTSS directly through their participation within the SIT meetings. Moving past the facilitation of a specific agenda, the principal also supports MTSS implementation through data coaching, problem solving and student level intervention implementation through regularly visited SIT Meetings. For example, the principal was noted as taking a data coaching role with the support staff when it came to supporting the implementation of supplemental interventions (i.e., "Tier Two")

> "…they're very knowledgeable of the data. They will often ask questions and pose questions that are thought provoking so that they want us to be aware that these are students that need interventions. "How is this happening? What's happening with tier two? What's happening with tier three? Then what do you need [the assistant principal] and I to do to help support you in implementing these things?"

The principal was also credited with supporting the implementation of specific interventions for individual students. The following examples from the third, fifth and fourth grade gifted certified teacher leaders showcased the influence the principal has on supporting the

implementation of MTSS through a distributed leadership model. One of the third grade teacher leaders detailed an example of how the principal let “the machine” (e.g., teachers implementing intervention) run but also helped “the machine” run.

> “They came to a SIT meeting once and we were trying to problem solve. They said, "Well, I can't do this, but I have ideas for how we can make it happen." So, even though they weren't going to be the one in the trenches or doing it, they still came to the table with other ideas. So, it's not only letting that machine run a little bit, but helping the machine run …”

The fifth grade teacher leader also spoke on behalf of the principal’s role as a supporter of the SIT meetings and ultimately the implementation of various interventions for students.

> “They sit in on our SIT meetings, they’re there, and they’re contributing and they’re trying to understand, okay, I hear you're talking about this kid. Here's what I hear. What do you think? How can we help you? And then they’re that person that's behind making sure that those things are happening. So, if I bring up a kid and so and so says, oh yeah, I'll get, they will check in every once in a while and say, hey, did so and so ever get back to you? Just want to make sure that we're meeting that kid's needs.”

Finally, the principal was often perceived as a team member as opposed to an administrative figure within the school’s effort for MTSS implementation. Thus, further breaking down a “top-down” approach to system changes within an organization. For example, one of the third grade teachers spoke about the principal treating leadership team members as part of a team and challenging the stereotypical disconnected administrator image. The fifth grade teacher leader also discussed how the principal portrays themselves as “another person in the room.”

> “They [the principal] treats us as a member of the team. It's not just mandates that are sent out, or we have to do this, or we have to do it that way. So, it's like everything is on the table and it's discussed and inspected, respected, and we move it forward. So, that's probably been one of the most impactful things. If we have a concern, we can bring it up and it's listened to.”
>
> “They don't seem like they’re our boss, they’re pretty equal with us. Like they make us feel comfortable and confident and not afraid to say what we want to say and share what we want to share. They’re just another person in the room and you don't often ... most of the time you don't feel like, ‘Oh, admin's here, we got to watch ourselves.’ You know what I mean?”

The kindergarten teacher leader also discussed how the principal seems to blend as a team member into typical problem solving meetings.

> “They’re an active part in when we are actually meeting. A lot of times our structure of those problem solving sessions is, we mix it up, we bump around to different teams and sit down and have different conversations with other people to share what we might not have thought about, and they’re a part of that.”

In conclusion, Willow’s principal positively influenced their distributed leadership model for MTSS by (a) building, planning, and embracing specific aspects of the school’s culture and (b) both leading and supporting efforts as a perceived team member with staff. However, implementing MTSS through distributed leadership is not solely based on the actions of those within the model. Environmental factors (e.g., emotional atmosphere, confidence in staff) also influenced Willow’s MTSS efforts through their distributed leadership model. Specifically, the

principal's ability to be a facilitator of learning across the leadership team was another impactful role for MTSS implementation within Willow's distributed leadership model.

Facilitator of Independence

The actions of formal leadership remain critical to system change efforts as well as the implementation of distributed leadership (Eagle et al., 2015; Leithwood et al., 2007; Mellard et al., 2012; Seashore et al., 2010; Spiegel, 2009). However, the atmosphere that results from interactions between formal leadership and others within an organization can also impact how change happens within an organization. For instance, Spillane (2006) discussed how the situation within an organization (e.g., culture, task complexity, policy environment) is intertwined with the organization's leaders and followers, which all have an interconnecting relationship that can impact efforts to utilize distributed leadership. At Willow, the principal was considered an integral piece in supporting an environment that facilitated group and individual independence for implementation of MTSS. Specifically, the role of the principal was noted as (a) guiding, as opposed to directing, the learning of leadership team members and (b) promoting professional independence when implementing MTSS.

Guide on The Side. The implementation of MTSS and the utilization of distributed leadership can vary across and within organizations. Although both concepts have been around for multiple decades, there is not a discrete and step-wise guide for utilization. Thus, leaders of both MTSS and distributed leadership are often in charge of leading an unstandardized effort. Willow's principal seemed to embrace this unstandardized process and intentionally focus on guiding leadership team members through MTSS implementation as opposed to directing them. Multiple leadership team members spoke about how the principal often guides leadership members through problem solving within MTSS to facilitate their independence of MTSS

implementation. Specifically, conversations with school-, grade- and student-level data often lends itself to the principal reinforcing intentional reflection and ownership of problem solving across the leadership team. The fifth grade teacher provided an example of how the principal guides the leadership team through conversations involving data and how that facilitates independent problem solving for MTSS.

> "[The principal] will often give us whatever data they want us to look at that time, whatever is the most current data available to us, and then we sit down in small groups usually to start with and we just look at that data and we just write down, what are some insights, what are some things we're noticing? And we don't really try to infer or anything at that point, we just write down things we notice. They always have us look at both strengths and things that need to be worked on, things that need to be improved, and then after we've had that small group conversation and we've noticed those things, then we pull out and we look at a bigger group. So, everybody shares the things that they noticed. And then once we have finished sharing what we've noticed, we will start talking about and honing in on specific things and maybe starting to problem solve … And then they will ask us more leading questions like, 'Have you guys seen any trends? What are some successes? What are some struggles? And what are some ways that we might be able to problem solve around that?' So I guess a lot of what they does is just asking us guiding questions to get us talking and thinking and working together."

Other leadership team members also described the same situation as the fifth grade teacher (i.e., the first, and second grade teacher leaders). However, they further explained how the principal's role as the guide within leadership team members directly impacted the

collaborative work and ultimately desired student outcomes within Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS.

> "[The principal] really doesn't say, 'Well, look at this, this and this.' They will say,' Here's the data pieces. Work in collaborative groups to analyze the data,' and then we share. So it's what they want, but we're working collaboratively. We're taking ownership of that data. So, I think taking ownership of our students at our school and their data is a key piece. And I think that's what's been the success of Willow because everybody knows they're our students, not just one teacher's…"
>
> "So, they're like great, they allow us to keep going or if we bring forth data or they sees something that maybe might be concerning they're very good at asking us in a reflective way, rather than hey this data isn't good or what's going on here. It's more of like what are some pieces that your team could strengthen. It's just their approach is very much a team approach. They work beside me, they're not always telling me what to do as a leader or admin, but rather helping me along the way with whatever we need to do."

However, once the initial reflections and conversations around problems within Willow's MTSS were completed, the principal often took the next step in action planning that involved key staff members to address staff identified problems. Instead of shouldering all problems that come with the implementation of MTSS, the principal effectively facilitated necessary teaming. The fifth grade teacher leader provided an example of the actions of the principal when the leadership team had collectively determined a problem that needs to be addressed.

> "[The principal] is very reflective, so I don't think we ever leave a leadership team meeting with a decision made. I think what more likely happens is that we leave with a bunch of possible options and then they go back and think about those possible options

> and what might happen, and then she'll take those ideas to a smaller group. They and the assistant principal will discuss it. They will discuss it with our learning design coach. They will discuss it with the key people that would be involved … So, we kind of pull out like what are some possible options? And then she'll go back and think and reflect on it and then go out to the key members that might be able to help that situation. So, there's no real, I can't remember really thinking of a time where there was this like, 'This is it,' at the end of the leadership team, 'This is what we're going to do.' It's more of, 'Thank you for all of your input. Let me think more about this a little bit and then we'll come back to it again later with some ideas of what we're going to do about it based on your feedback.'

This was a prime example of how Willow's principal was able to maintain a distributed leadership approach for MTSS by (a) fostering ownership of specific problems within Willow, (b) avoiding directing or solely addressing a specific initiative for MTSS and (c) distributing necessary tasks based on staff's level of expertise. I also observed these actions by the principal in each of the leadership team members. During each observation I noticed the same behavior as being described by the leadership team members. For example, the principal often gathered all necessary input both during and after each meeting (e.g., "World Café", data discussions, online message boards). Additionally, I noticed that during data conversations, the principal would rarely speak or direct the leadership team members to specific conclusions. Rather, they would ask guiding questions to allow all leadership team members to contribute to the action steps and determine the leadership team's collective viewpoint (e.g., "What is something that concerns you?", "What is something that you question?"). The observations showcase further the principal's guiding nature of MTSS implementation through Willow's distributed leadership model. Additionally, the principal demonstrated other actions that contributed to staff

independence and confidence of MTSS implementation. For example, the principal was admired for their ability to "treat teachers like professionals."

Professional Treatment. Some of the previously noted facilitators of MTSS implementation within Willow's distributed leadership model were both (a) having professional flexibility and (b) having a climate of trust. In those previous sections, the principal was noted as the main catalyst for establishing and maintaining both of those factors. This subtheme overlaps with those findings, due to the overwhelming amount of discussion regarding the trust the principal had in Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS. As a starting point, the principal discussed their beliefs regarding the importance of trusting those within a distributed leadership model to make a positive impact for students.

> "… I do have a great deal of trust. I've always, I trust people. I think teachers, especially 99% of them want to do what's right. I don't think anyone wakes up and says, 'Oh, let me go screw with some kids today. I'm getting a lot of money for it, but really something I hate.' So I think they do function independently. And that's the feedback that assistant principal and I get that's so surprising to me when we asked them, why do you like working here? … Consistently they say it's because you treat us like we're professionals…"

Matching the comments provided by the principal, leadership team members spoke about how they feel trusted as professionals. Specifically, one of the third grade teacher leaders and the fifth grade teacher leader noted how the principal's treatment of them makes them feel appreciated and empowered them as professionals.

> "… I want to stick around because, really, [the principal] treats us as professionals. They give flexibilities and understandings, but still holds us accountable. They're an amazing

> boss. They're somebody that I would follow, a great leader … They are like, '…Have a plan with your team, figure out what you guys need. I trust you as professionals. Don't break that trust.' And that's almost something I try to build with the kids, is, 'I trust you. Just don't break it. And when you do, then we'll have accountability pieces.'"
>
> "[The administration] are amazing leaders because they give us the opportunity to do our job. They don't micromanage us, which is really nice, they trust us, and it's allowed us to grow and do things in ways that I think are really helpful for the kids, which is what it's all about …Which makes us feel as teachers, very appreciated and trusted, and in some environments you don't get that. You're told how to do things and makes you feel like you're not trusted like you don't know what you're doing."

The result of the professional treatment often manifested in the principal allowing leadership team members to individualize their way of work for MTSS implementation. For instance, one of the third grade teachers provided an analogy (i.e., taking whatever car you want) of how the principal doesn't focus on each members' process of MTSS implementation as long as they are achieving the common goal of Willow.

> "Take whatever vehicle gets you there. You might take a bus, you might take a limo, but you're all going to get there at some point. I think it even boils down to you might need someone else to help you get there, but you're still going to get there."

Other members gave more specific examples of how the principal gives autonomy for their grade level's process of implementing MTSS (e.g., PLCs), which ultimately increased their confidence in MTSS implementation efforts and skills as a professional. First, the fifth grade teacher leader provided an example of how the principal makes clear the necessary goals of

grade level PLCs, yet does not interfere regardless of the direction or process chosen by the grade levels.

> "They tell us what the end goal is, but how we get to that end goal is up to what fits for our team. So every team has the same job, we all have to have our kids meet their essential standards, we all have to have intervention plans in place, we all have to have our common formative assessments in place, but the way that we go about getting there and how we take that journey is completely up to us. And as long as we reach our goals, they don't step in and bother us about it. They just let us go. If for some reason we weren't meeting the goals, then they would step in and talk to us about it and try to problem solve with us onto what might be happening, but as long as we're doing what we need to, then they just kind of let us go."

Additionally, one of the third grade teacher leaders discussed how the principal's treatment of the leadership team members as professionals differs from previous school sites they have worked at. Specifically, they enjoyed the amount of trust given to them to independently work through problems that arise with MTSS implementation within their grade level.

> "We have the flexibility to be able to differentiate without being tied to ... Even though we have standards, [the principal] does a really good job of letting us use our own teacher pedagogy to do what's best for our own students …. At a previous site, there were administrators in our PLC meetings weekly. Our admin currently, because when your data's strong, why poke the bear when they're already doing what they're supposed to be doing? So, because we have such strong data on our team, they pop in occasionally and they're there for our walkthroughs and they will visit our classrooms, but as far as

> monitoring our PLC or being helicopter over that, they kind of give us the freedom and the reign to do what we feel is best because we are the ones on the front line every day … Making sure that, basically, if there's a third grade issue and data's not looking strong, [the principal] comes to me and says 'Hey, … what's happening in third grade? Why is there this gap here? How can we close it?' Or 'You guys are doing really awesome. Whatever you're doing, keep it up. We'll leave you alone.' … Not being micromanaged, having the freedom to prove your responsibility."

In summation, another critical role of Willow's principal within their distributed leadership model for MTSS is supporting an environment that facilitates group and individual independence and confidence for implementation of MTSS. For instance, Willow's principal was noted as being more facilitative in nature and treating teachers like professionals when navigating distributed leadership for MTSS. Related to this theme is the final theme, which is the principal's role as a builder of knowledge. Paired with the trust provided by the principal was a focus on building collective capacity to strengthen Willow's distributed leadership approach for MTSS implementation.

Sum Of All Parts

The methods and interactions conducted by a principal often directly relate to the actions of many and can increase collective capacity during the implementation of a system change effort such as MTSS (Eagle et al., 2015; Mellard et al., 2012; Spiegel, 2009). Additionally, distributed leadership literature recognizes the importance of the techniques used by the principal to influence all those within a distributed leadership framework (Leithwood et al., 2007; Seashore et al., 2010). One of the main roles of Willow's principal within their distributed leadership model for MTSS was a builder of collective capacity. Similar to the idiom "the whole

is greater than the sum of its parts", Willow principal facilitated interactions and necessary tasks in an attempt to build the collective capacity of all staff to implement MTSS. Based on my reflections both the principal and the leadership team believed that increasing collective capacity was potentially more effective than having siloed expertise for MTSS. Specifically, the principal focused on (a) building collective capacity and (b) utilizing the collective strength of informing key stakeholders regarding necessary tasks.

Collective Capacity. The initiation of this "sum of all parts" mindset that Willow's principal embraced started with work that was considered "behind the scenes." Based on the conversations with leadership team members, it became clear that the principal spent time completing not easily recognized but valued work to build collective capacity. For instance, one of the most widely noted actions of the principal was the teams attendance at a MTSS-related training. Even though professional development is often required, the principal completed "background" planning and problem solving to ensure that leadership team members could build their collective capacity in MTSS. The fifth grade teacher leader recognized the importance of the "background" planning completed by the principal and how that supported their distributed leadership model for MTSS.

> "Well, [the principal] was the one that got us all to that training, which was highly beneficial to all of us. They were the one that made sure that we ... They picked key people from the leadership team to go, they were one that made sure we had the funding, the time off, the subs, all of those things so that we could go to that training and be together and have those conversations, which really helped I think hone in as a new school with teachers coming from all different backgrounds and having all different

experiences, that helped to make us be what Willow is going to do with MTSS. So, I think that was really huge."

The principal's collaboration with the district's MTSS experts was also noted as critical for informing the leadership team's MTSS efforts. For instance, the fifth grade teacher leader discussed how the principal focuses on the "behind the scenes" work such as discussing the system implementation at Willow with the district MTSS expert. They then take the insight for the district expert and shape an ideal end goal for grade level teams to strive towards. Thus, building a common understanding and collective capacity for each grade level to strive for high MTSS fidelity. The first grade teacher leader also spoke about how the principal set the stage for building the collective capacity of not only the leadership team but each grade level. Specifically, Willow's administration supported school wide MTSS implementation by setting up various trainings and discussions.

"MTSS starts with the administration having the different trainings and discussions with us about MTSS. They've had PowerPoints on that for us, they've had handouts, we've had district trainers, and it's always brought back to data. And that's in our school improvement plan. So, that's where that starts. Then, from team leaders, that goes into meeting with your [grade level] teams."

The principal also gave insight to their ability to proactively determine ways to build collective capacity of informal leaders through MTSS implementation. In this example, they discuss their mindset and actions to ensure that informal leaders have the tools to be effective within Willow's distributed leadership model. The principal went beyond solely building content knowledge of MTSS, to focusing on skills that will potentially increase their overall leadership capacity.

> " … when we were training people, it was my responsibility to show them this is how we're going to do things here, and here's how we're going to monitor that it's getting done and here's how I can be a support of you … we would get feedback on what their challenges were as far as managing their teams, facilitating the conversations. After that was established, what my role with the school leadership team became was to make them even better leaders. It wasn't about the content necessarily of MTSS, it was about as a leader, what do you do if someone's slower than the rest of the team? … So there was the initial, this is what MTSS is and this is the expectation. Then, my role now is monitoring and ensuring that they have the skills to maintain the conversations around MTSS."

Moving beyond the "behind the scenes" work completed by the principal, one of their primary methods for building collective capacity was focusing on improving all teacher's instructional capacity. Specifically, the principal was heavily involved in the collection, analysis, and action planning around instructional walkthrough data. At Willow, the principal led the effort of the leadership team to collect data around instructional practices to better improve implementation of MTSS. The Speech Language Pathologist described what the instructional walk through looked like and how it built collective capacity for MTSS.

> "We do walkthroughs where we have a tool that we use, and things that we need to look for. With specific things that are going on, we have interview questions when we go in the classroom that we ask. Then, we come back and we tally that data, and then that kind of drives where we might need to have more professional development. Surveys are given, things like that and then we come back together. We survey our team, each leader comes back and surveys the team, what kinds of things do you need as far as support? Then, our walkthrough data definitely tells us what we see in the classroom, what's best

practice, what's best teaching practice, what do we see in classrooms and what are some things that might be lacking?"

The first grade teacher leader also discussed how they had the responsibility of completing the instructional walkthroughs to better inform how Willow could improve their instructional capacity for MTSS. They also noted that the principal put this responsibility on the leadership team as well as provided them with adequate training to complete the task. I found this interesting due to the principal's ability to not only monitor, and subsequently improve, Willow's instructional capacity school wide but also allow the leadership team members to embrace the process for school improvement.

> "We still have those walkthroughs and what [the principal] has made one of the responsibilities is we're the ones doing the walkthroughs. So, I might be going to a couple of different grade levels. I might be doing my grade level and it's our choice which grade level … So, I'm doing a walkthrough in January for reading. So that's something we're going to look at. We had all the training at the beginning of the school year, we had a district walkthrough and I think it was September, and then what progress have we made, what do we need to continue working on? And then that would be shared with all the team leaders and again, they can say this was the data we got from the walkthroughs, let's look and see what our next step should be, how can we get those next steps implemented?"

A final piece to this subtheme is the principal's willingness to meet with and coach any staff member who needed additional support in implementing MTSS. Instead of taking a school wide approach to gathering and action planning around data (i.e., walkthroughs), the principal was also known for having an "open door policy" for those wanting additional support. As

previously noted, the principal embraced the "sum of all parts" mindset by being committed to expanding capacity building to all staff. For example, the first grade teacher leader discussed how the principal was more than willing to help build the capacity of grade level teams (e.g., PLC meetings).

> **"**If you think you need support, I [speaking as the principal] will be there to support you. But if you think you can do it independently with your team and I [speaking as the principal] just sent them ours so they're going to be looking in at that. So, if they have questions or thing then she'll meet with our team. But one thing, they're open, anytime you have a PLC meeting, you can invite them [the administration] to come and they will come assist in any type of question, whether it's student behavior, whether it's data analysis or if there's any problems going on, on the team. So, I think that's helpful too, that we know they're there whenever we need them. So, that open door policy and if they're in a meeting or something and can't attend, that the assistant principal is right there."

The Speech Language Pathologist echoed the same actions of the principal with an example of an interaction with them regarding the principal's willingness to be a coach, problem solver and/or a professional colleague listening non-judgmentally. The specific example stems from a first quarter "admin chat" described in Latimer (2020) where the principal had individual conversations with all staff regarding any questions or suggestions they had for administration.

> **"**Like I know the one that we had first quarter, 'Do you want this to be a coaching chat or do you need this to be a strategies chat?' In other words, are you needing help with something that you need us to help coach you through? Or is this you just need to have time to talk to us about what's going on and how your role is? They gave us that

autonomy to be able to do that, and I find that, that's a leadership quality of someone that I want to work with and be a part of."

Finally, the assistant principal also observed the principal's innate desire to want to deepen their own knowledge for MTSS implementation, which directly impacts Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS.

> "I would say a key piece that they do is use their learner's strength to deepen their knowledge and keep it most up to date to be able to be a coach and to be able to offer professional development and that expertise for MTSS for moving us forward. So, they deepen their own knowledge and then communicates that knowledge with the leadership team as well as facilitates the conversation for everyone to share and deepen their knowledge to move forward with MTSS."

Even though they strive for continuous personal development, the principal was more than willing to take a step back and allow another expert within Willow's distributed leadership model to lead when their expertise was not sufficient. As told by the assistant principal, the principal has pulled expertise from other teacher leaders to improve MTSS efforts in the past.

> "So, being able to go to them [third grade teacher leader] and pull from their expertise to share as a school as well. And really having that relationship building piece as well as strategic and learner, working together to be an expert and find experts as well to continue to move forward."

Similarly, during one of the leadership team meetings that I observed, the principal was off campus due to a district task they were assigned. I reflected that in some schools, a leadership team meeting subject to a missing principal might be disorganized or cancelled entirely. However, at this specific leadership team meeting, the assistant principal and learning design

coach collaboratively and seamlessly lead the meeting around collecting qualitative data regarding instruction. This was another example of the principal leaning on the collective capacity of Willow's staff to facilitate school functioning.

Power in Numbers. The previous quote that ended the last theme also begins to illustrate how the principal strived to access and inform a collective group of staff members for tasks related to MTSS implementation. The principal was consistently recognized for establishing a sense of ownership in tasks and/or content knowledge across multiple informal leaders. For example, the principal discussed how they ascribed to a distributed leadership mindset to access collective strengths and focus on how everyone can be a leader within an organization.

> "But the distributive leadership model is that I can attach myself to, because I've always believed that I didn't want to be a leader. We are all leaders. If I'm a really smart leader, I surround myself by people who know a lot more than I do and are way better than I am at whatever task we're approaching. … I know it's the idea that we are all leaders and we're all good at certain things and everybody's not good at everything. So, we need to be stronger as a collective group than as one individual."

Leadership team members also spoke on the principal's ability to stray away from the siloed leader or content expert approach. Specifically, the principal owned the "we are all leaders" mantra and was willing to take constructive feedback to support collective leadership development at Willow. The second grade and kindergarten teacher leaders both provided examples of the principal striving to access multiple leaders in a collaborative fashion.

> " They're established that relationship and, so, they actually hear what we have to say, even if it's negative against them … I've seen them grow as a leader already since year one to now and it's just I mean it's really a cohesive collaborative type of relationship …

they’re constantly reflecting on our goals as a school and what we as leaders can do to push everybody forward towards that.”

“They’re willing to say somebody else may have a better idea than they do. They’re willing to say, ‘What this group is doing is awesome, we need to do this,’ you know? ‘I had this idea, but yours is better.’"

Based on the conversations from the leadership team, the main vessel for accessing collective strengths across multiple leaders was having consistent communication. The principal’s ability to proactively communicate necessary information with the leadership team facilitated the “we are all leaders” mindset by creating more informed and prepared leaders to support all staff’s ability to implement MTSS. For instance, each observation of Willow’s leadership meetings included a previously distributed agenda that was created by the principal, documented thorough notes regarding school wide practices for MTSS, and was quickly disseminated to team leaders after the meeting. The third grade teacher leader discussed how the communication strategies provided them with the necessary information to feel confidently prepared to discuss data with the leadership team.

“So, I think they have a goal in mind as to where we're going. They've mapped out each meeting and what the focus should be. They usually have an agenda, they've sent it ahead of time and they each time want feedback from us. So, they will outline that very clearly in their email to come with ideas, to come with data, to come with suggestions … So, a lot of times they will have an idea of what topics need to be spoken about and they will create an outline but like I said, they do a great job of emailing ahead of time the agenda. Making sure that we know what we're going to be talking about so we can come adequately prepared to share.”

In that example, the principal led the structured agenda efforts to ensure that all leadership team members could be informed to enact distributed leadership for MTSS implementation. However, in some instances the principal had to enact a less structured approach and just simply inform the leadership team of important news that may influence their actions as a leader. During those times, the leadership team members appreciated the proactive nature of the information and often thought it was conducive for their informal leadership roles. For instance, the Speech Language Pathologist and one of the third grade teacher leaders noted how the principal's communication of information supported their leadership efforts.

> "They are very quick to update us on anything that's coming from district regarding building of our additional allocations as we grow. Any updates with changes with staff. They want us to know before we hear about it in the paper kind of thing. They're very proactive with informing us of things because they want to keep us in the loop. They value us as professionals so they wants to keep us in the loop."
>
> "... If they hear something from higher up, they shares things with us that may not necessarily wind up being shared with the whole staff, but at least we're knowledgeable of it in case something comes up and we need to speak to it, we can, if someone asks, but it might not be a conversation school-wide, kind of thing."

In conclusion, the final theme focused on their ability to be a facilitator of collective strength in building collective capacity, leaning on, and informing informal leaders at Willow. The principal relied on specific collaboration strategies and collective strength to facilitate effective MTSS implementation across Willow's distributed leadership model.

Mixed Findings

To conclude this chapter, I wanted to revisit research questions one and two (i.e., perceived facilitators and perceived barriers). In reflecting on the findings from these questions, I examined how the two constructs converged. In an ideal situation these different constructs would provide separate and parallel influences for an overall phenomenon (e.g., implementation of MTSS through distributed leadership). However, due to the interconnected nature of social systems and human nature, there may be instances where differing constructs overlap. For instance, a teacher leader within a leadership team might find that the management style of a principal is a key facilitator for implementing MTSS. Yet, another teacher leader might disagree and find the principal's management style to be a major barrier to their grade level team's ability to facilitate necessary MTSS-related procedures. Consistent with the paradigm I chose for this study, I relied on the voices and experiences of all leadership team members that provided their perspective of their socially constructed reality (Creswell et al., 2007; Willis et al., 2007). That reliance led to instances where there was overlap and confusion regarding some of the factors the leadership team members at Willow discussed as influential. This section will cover two main topics that I found to be contradictive or confusing such as (a) barriers and facilitators that did not seem to match and (b) perspectives that I questioned as a researcher. It is important to note that this section is not meant to be confirmatory in nature. Due to my reliance on the words and actions of participants, these instances were based mostly out of reflection and overall summation of the study's findings.

Clashing Barriers and Facilitators

The first topic will describe instances where the findings regarding what helped and hindered Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS did not complement each other. For

instance, I will discuss how certain perceived facilitators contradicted the themes of perceived barriers.

Reality of the Three C's. One perceived facilitator of distributed leadership for MTSS was the Three "C's" (i.e., Collaboration, Communication, and Consistency). Willow's leadership team members expressed their ability to collaborate, communicate and be consistent when describing how these things enabled the implementation of MTSS through their distributed leadership model. For instance, Willow's leadership team members boasted about how distributed leadership separates itself from other schools because of the ongoing and coordinated collaboration efforts for MTSS implementation. This collaboration also stemmed from the administration, such that the third grade teacher leader commended Willow's administration's focus on "what do you need?" rather than "have you tried this?" Additionally, discussion of vertical (i.e., PBIS implementation) and horizontal (e.g., SIT team) collaboration was consistently referenced as a key contributor to MTSS implementation. However, staff members noted that many experienced "compassion fatigue" and a sense of unfair urgency for student progression (i.e., *Working Pains*). Even more so, the kindergarten teacher leader experienced relational conflict and I observed multiple teacher leaders discussing school wide conflict that was non-collaborative (i.e., *Blame Game*).

Based on these diverging themes, I found myself skeptical of Willow's collaborative atmosphere. Although there is collaboration, teacher leaders are still feeling "compassion fatigue" and a sense of urgency with student progress. I would expect that professionals that are aware and proud of the collaboration within their professional environment would be compelled to utilize collaboration in times of distress. This divergence made me reflect that Willow's collaborative environment may be (a) more surface level than presented (e.g., meetings are held,

yet lack of follow through or support), (b) accountability policy overwhelms Willow's distributed leadership efforts (i.e., consistent discussion of student progress) or (c) teachers at Willow have a sense of individual responsibility when it comes to their students but collective responsibility for schoolwide issues. Additionally, I wondered if a byproduct of Willow's collaborative environment actually lends itself to stress and conflict. On one hand, it may be that Willow's collaborative environment is stretching individuals too thin (e.g., attending meetings, supporting school wide efforts) that time is taken from individual class, individual student responsibilities. On the other hand, Willow's collaborative environment might be almost too collaborative. Such that the environment results in distress due to having an unnecessary amount of feedback and input (i.e., "too many cooks in the kitchen"). However, these are merely reflections based on my experiences as the researcher of the current study.

I also found that another "C" (i.e., consistency) did not seem to compliment the perspectives regarding barriers encountered by Willow's leadership team. Willow's leadership team members spoke of beneficial consistency regarding the (a) reliance on the mission and vision for MTSS and (b) the retaining of key staff members for MTSS implementation. Specifically, the mission and vision for MTSS (i.e., "Every Tiger Every Day") was strongly reinforced by the principal and established prior to the school opening. However, even with a well-established mission and vision, Willow was still subject to certain staff mindsets that (a) saw MTSS as a referral mechanism, (b) tended to rush through the MTSS process and (c) could not move past the compliance aspects of MTSS. Additionally, despite noting effective hiring and retainment strategies, Willow's leadership team was subject to teacher turnover and an increased number of new teachers to combat the growing student population. Based on these mismatches, I reflected on (a) how the distributed leadership model within Willow might have only worked for

those who bought in and (b) how the application of Willow's mission and vision may actually create a divide between those within the distributed leadership model and those outside of it. For instance, Willow's leadership team developed their mission and vision as well as other procedures they described during this study before the school even opened. Although it was a proactive and potentially effective method, it may have unintentionally created a divide between the leadership team members and the rest of Willow's staff; thus, potentially leading to staff members disagreeing with the MTSS focus on Willow or rejecting their responsibilities (i.e., leaving their position). However, due to the study format (i.e., solely interviewed leadership team members), I can only reflect on potential inconsistencies between the noted barriers and facilitators of MTSS implementation at Willow.

Tons of Data? Yet no Resources? The other mismatch that I highlighted is the discussion of Willow's data culture and the lack of evidence-based resources. Through conversations with and observations of Willow's leadership team members, it was evident they used many data-based practices that supported the implementation of MTSS. Specifically, it supported students' educational services, systemic changes, and created momentum for school wide improvement. At the same time, Willow's leadership team members explained that implementing MTSS is often restricted by available evidence-based resources in non-core subjects (e.g., science) as well as a limited ability to act upon data collected. For instance, the Speech Language Pathologist discussed that staff may not have enough time to graph or discuss data to have data-based decision making. Also, the principal noted that staff tend to go "through the motions" when utilizing resources for instruction and intervention and are not actively utilizing resources to the best of their ability.

Based on the perceived inconsistency, I first wondered if there was a simplistic view of "data" across the leadership team. From my experiences as a member of school based leadership teams, oftentimes "data" are considered as data collected around reading and math (e.g., meeting standards, formative, and summative assessments) and student behavior (e.g., Office Discipline Referrals), which then result in a narrowed focus on the distribution of evidence-based resources that match the "data" collected. Thus, other academic (i.e., science) and student behavioral (i.e., internalizing) domains often get overlooked for resources due to the lack of "data" representation. Based on my reflections and the overall findings from the study, I wondered if Willow was subject to the same situation. For instance, I reflected on my conversations with and observations of Willow's leadership team members, they did have a substantial amount of school wide data (e.g., fidelity assessments, school wide needs assessments, Gallup Survey). However, I wonder if the leadership team innately created a versatile and applicable school wide database with accompanying resources that matched their "data" systems. However, they may have overlooked specific individualized resources and procedures for other student or academic subject situations.

Questioned

I also questioned specific examples from this study. First, Willow's leadership team members often discussed certain uncontrollable factors as barriers. A common example of a discussed uncontrollable barrier was the increased student population at Willow. Willow was built three years prior to the study, around a suburban community that was also growing at the time. As the principal describes below, Willow saw an increase in their student population that matched the increased growth of the neighborhood. In this quote they noted an "addition" which was intended to house incoming students the year after the study.

> "When we opened three years ago, we had 567 children. Now we have almost 900. We had 57 staff members now we have 103 and they're building that addition. So, I know we'll probably be at about 1000 next year."

Although an increase in enrollment is often challenging for newly opened schools, I found that consistency of this answer across Willow's leadership team to be potentially surface-level in nature. Throughout the study, I often thought that there was a possibility that some participants were avoiding being critical of their own leadership team of MTSS implementation within Willow and resorting to a well-known barrier in education. It is well documented that the world of education has long battled with teacher shortages paired with increased classroom sizes (e.g., Bamabara et al., 2012). Yet, the promptness as well as broad nature of this noted barrier (i.e., increased enrollment) across Willow's leadership team made me reflect on the depth of the answer. For example, a leadership team member might believe my questions regarding barriers were too personal and could have been restored to a simple barrier that I can not necessarily disagree with (i.e., more students are coming to Willow) but satisfies my question. Even though I addressed this potential issue with asking more clarifying questions within interviews (i.e., *"One of the issues that you brought up earlier about that the amount of new students, how do you think that ties into some of the struggles…"*), that initial starting point could have restrained more critical conversations about the inner workings of Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS.

In the same sense, some participants claimed that Willow had no pressing issues or struggles with their school's functioning or MTSS implementation. For instance, when asked "What are some pressing issues or struggles the leadership team is facing this year?", multiple leadership team members commented with a surprised reaction stating that nothing seemed to

come to mind. Based on my experiences of working with and within school leadership teams facilitating MTSS, barriers and frustrations are typically expected. Additionally, system change scholars note that barriers are expected when completing various reform efforts (e.g., Fixsen et al., 2010). Similar to the previously questioned topic, I did present other questions and bridged conversation that revisited various comments regarding barriers. However, I feel as if the initial answer of having no struggles or frustrations may highlight another instance of avoiding critical conversations about the functioning of Willow's distributed leadership model.

CHAPTER V:

DISCUSSION

Findings Summary

The overall purpose of the current study was to address the current gaps within the literature regarding the intersection of leadership teams for MTSS and distributed leadership. Specifically, this study was intended to examine the facilitators of and barriers to distributed leadership models for MTSS and the influence of formal leaders (i.e., principals) on distributed leadership facilitating MTSS implementation. I conducted a qualitative embedded single case study with an elementary school leadership team in a southeastern state (i.e., Willow Elementary). Through interviews, observations, document analysis and reflective journaling, I was able to determine factors that influenced Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS and the role the principal played within their distributed leadership model. The main themes and subthemes for each research question are summarized below. After I summarized the main themes and subthemes for each research question, I then connected the findings of this study to current MTSS, distributed leadership and system change literature bases.

Research Question 1

There were four major themes that encompassed what Willow spoke of as facilitators of MTSS implementation within their distributed leadership model. Willow's leadership team was

composed of many individuals who had previous leadership positions and/or experiences. For instance, teacher leaders spoke of previously holding district level positions, school-based administrative positions, and leadership team positions. In many of these positions, they spent time supporting and building capacity for school- or district-level MTSS implementation. Additionally, many of the leadership team members came from the principal's previous school where they were also a part of that school's leadership team supporting MTSS implementation. Thus, Willow's leadership had collective experiences, understanding and capacity for MTSS implementation even before the opening of Willow, which benefited Willow's MTSS implementation efforts. However, the environment in which Willow's leadership team worked within was critical in promoting the implementation of MTSS through distributed leadership. Specifically, Willow's focus on the destination (e.g., goal) as opposed to the journey (e.g., means of achieving goal) was a key enabler of implementing MTSS. Those within Willow's distributed leadership model converged towards a common goal for MTSS implementation yet diverged in the process of reaching that goal. Willow's leadership team credited the professional flexibility (e.g., allowing for professional autonomy, avoidance of a "one-size-fits-all") and the climate of trust (e.g., limiting micromanaging, having a variety of leaders) within the distributed leadership model as a key piece in individually striving for the common goal of MTSS implementation.

Furthermore, there were other specific structures in place that complimented the professional capacity and environment, as well as facilitated the implementation of MTSS within Willow's distributed leadership model. First, the most comprehensive facilitator for Willow's distributed leadership model was the three "C's" (i.e., Collaboration, Communication, and Consistency). Each of the three "C's" interacted to impact Willow's ability to implement MTSS. For instance, Willow's leadership team members consistently noted that positive collaboration

across and within grade levels, effective teaming strategies and work with support staff directly impacted their ability to implement key aspects of MTSS (i.e., intervention and instruction). The leadership team members also relied on both horizontal and vertical communication (e.g., "trickle down communication") and student focused communication to facilitate necessary data practices and intervention implementation with an MTSS framework. Finally, Willow's leadership team found that consistency in the school's mission and vision and among staff members greatly contributed to their distributed leadership model for MTSS. Similar to the three "C's", Willow's leadership also found the utilization of data within their distributed leadership model as a critical enabler of MTSS implementation. Specifically, Willow's leadership team narrowed in the impact of data to improve student experiences, identify, and monitor necessary school wide changes, and build momentum for future system change. Each of these results contributed to improved MTSS efforts within Willow's distributed leadership model.

Research Question 2

For the second research question, there were three major themes that encompassed what Willow spoke of as barriers to MTSS implementation within their distributed leadership model. The first barrier that was discussed involved the mindsets of those within Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS. There were comments made about how some individuals within Willow misunderstood and misused MTSS. For instance, confusion regarding the overall purpose of MTSS, impatience with the process and navigating compliance requirements of MTSS were all noted as key mindsets that impeded MTSS progress at Willow. Additionally, the implementation of the main mission of MTSS (i.e., reaching all students with a continuum of services) was also a barrier. Willow's leadership team discussed that when establishing and implementing the tiers of MTSS, they have faced challenges such as (a) accessing expertise, (b)

providing supplemental and intensive services, (c) consistently meeting the needs of students who need the most intensive services (i.e., “Lowest 35%”) and (d) limited specificity of resources to provide tiers of services.

However, Willow’s leadership team also noted that there are specific materialistic barriers that impacted their ability to implement MTSS through a distributed leadership approach. Willow’s leadership team recognized the importance of both time and evidence-based resources as tenets of their MTSS efforts. However, both resources were limited in ways that continuously impeded their MTSS implementation efforts. Regarding time, Willow’s leadership team discussed that time to (a) support all students with a range of supports and (b) plan and problem solve around students were often limited and restricted their MTSS efforts. Additionally, the specificity and utilization of the resources available within Willow’s distributed leadership model also impeded MTSS implementation. For example, even though multiple participants discussed the vast number of resources at Willow, resources that were specific to non-core subjects (e.g., science) and that were evidence-based (i.e., supported by research) were limited.

In conjunction with both mental and physical barriers, Willow’s leadership team also discussed how hiring and working within their educational setting seemed to disrupt their distributed leadership model for MTSS. First, maintaining the continuity of their distributed leadership model for MTSS was challenged with specific staff shortages. Specifically, Willow’s leadership team was not able to consistently hire and retain individuals to match the diverse needs of all students within Willow. In some cases, teacher turnover caused confusion and limited the coherence of Willow’s mission and vision. Second, those working within Willow had feelings of fatigue, exhaustion and guilt when providing services through an MTSS framework.

In some cases, interactions between staff regarding the most beneficial services for students were subject to conflict.

Research Question 3

For the third research question, there were three major themes that focused on the influence of formal leadership on MTSS implementation through Willow's distributed leadership models. It was evident throughout this study that Willow's principal was a key enabler of their distributed leadership model for MTSS implementation. Their ability to engage, facilitate and collaborate with those within Willow's distributed leadership model positively impacted the implementation of MTSS. First, the principal was credited as an engaged leader by building, planning, and embracing a distributed leadership for MTSS. Specifically, Willow's MTSS efforts benefited from their work in creating a targeted mission and vision, collaborating with key stakeholders, and focusing on staff strengths to communicate and problem solve. Additionally, the principal could appropriately navigate leading and support MTSS efforts with the staff in Willow's distributed leadership model. For instance, although they were considered as the face of Willow's MTSS efforts (i.e., "ultimately responsible"), the principal was heavily involved as being "one of the team members" by problem solving and supporting specific student intervention.

Similar to balancing leadership and support, the principal was also mentioned as critical in promoting independence of those within the distributed leadership model for MTSS by facilitating learning and treating individuals as professionals. For example, the principal focused on guiding (e.g., being reflective, fostering ownership) as opposed to directing (e.g., giving them a direct answer) leadership members through problem solving within MTSS to facilitate their independence of MTSS implementation. This ultimately built collective capacity across grade

level teams due to leadership team members feeling more ownership and capacity to collaborate with their grade level teams to implement MTSS. Additionally, Willow's principal maintained a distributed leadership approach by treating their staff members as professionals (i.e., trusting their capacity), which often led to leadership team members feeling more appreciated and empowered as educators. This also matched the principal's impact in building collective capacity and accessing the collective strength of staff within Willow's distributed leadership model for MTSS. In their efforts to build collective capacity for MTSS implementation, the principal facilitated "behind the scenes" work (i.e., planning, accessing materials or resources), accessed district resources, conducted various data practices, and coached staff members. However, those actions were positively impacted by the principal's ability to focus on ways to collectively access the expertise and knowledge of multiple informal leaders. For instance, the principal was consistently noted as someone who felt comfortable letting others lead initiatives in which they did not have expertise.

Connections to Literature

Facilitators. The first research question focused on the factors that positively influenced Willow's implementation of MTSS through their distributed leadership model. Many of the factors directly connected to Fixsen's (2010) implementation drivers. For instance, Willow's leadership team consisted of many individuals who had experiences with and the capacity to activate *Leadership Drivers*. Specifically, multiple leadership team members were prime facilitators of system change at Willow due to their (a) previous leadership experience, (b) knowledge of effective systemic practices, and (c) familiarity with the administration's way of work. Their experiences also may have given them the adaptive leadership characteristics needed to promote systems change.

Those same leaders leveraged collaborative procedures such as the "Three C's" and effective data practices that created a conducive environment and helped to facilitate professional development activities for their system change efforts (i.e., *Organization Drivers, Competency Drivers*). Additionally, many of the critical components that are addressed with the Self-Assessment of MTSS (Stockslager et al., 2016) directly connected to the comments of Willow leadership team. For instance, Willow's leadership team discussed that their leadership capacity, data practices, communication and collaboration were all factors that supported the implementation of MTSS.

Additionally, Willow's leadership team's prior experiences as leaders at the school and district level contributed to their ability to understand how to facilitate necessary systems change such as MTSS. Effective system changes efforts can be positively influenced if led by those who have knowledge of systemic procedures and strategies (e.g., Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011). System change, specifically MTSS implementation, can also be positively impacted by an organization's ability to effectively communicate and involve key stakeholders (e.g., Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Freeman et al., 2015; Forman et al., 2013; Jimerson et al., 2015; Stockslager et al., 2016). Distributed leadership models are also influenced by communication and involve key stakeholders in its intended purpose of a collective form of action (e.g., Gronn, 2008; Harris, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). Willow's leadership team ability to leverage communication, collaboration, and consistency in procedures (i.e., "Three C's") all greatly contributed to their MTSS implementation within their distributed leadership approach.

Effective data practices are another key factor that the literature bases of distributed leadership, MTSS and system change credit for positive outcomes for organizations (e.g., Fixsen

et al., 2010; Fullan, 2010; McIntosh et al., 2010; Stockslager et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2016). For instance, Gronn (2008) finds practices involving shared approaches in data based problem solving (e.g., intuitive working relations) a critical facilitator of distributed leadership models within organizations. Tian et al., (2016) also found that data within distributed leadership creates a more bi-directional atmosphere that promotes expertise that is guided by data. Additionally, data practices can promote problem solving, communication and action planning for system changes like MTSS implementation (e.g., Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fullan, 2010; Stockslager et al., 2016). Finally, the professional environment that is embedded within an organization can influence its ability to function appropriately (e.g., Forman et al., 2013; Spillane, 2006; McIntosh et al., 2010). For instance, professionals within an organization that feel a sense of trust, autonomy and/or understanding regarding a system change might be more willing to accept change (Lee et al., 2012 Tian et al., 2016; Weick, 1995). Willow's leadership team members appreciated the overall sense of professional flexibility and trust embedded with their distributed leadership model for MTSS. That professional environment enabled Willow's leadership team members to foster ownership around their individualized procedures for implementing MTSS. Additionally, Willow's individualized yet unified system of professional flexibility and trust in MTSS implementation mirror the patterns of collaboration across distributed leadership models (e.g., collective distribution, Spillane, 2006; spontaneous collaboration, Gronn, 2008)

Barriers. Any organization is subject to the mindsets of those who work within it, and negative or skeptical mindsets can be a deterrent to system change or MTSS implementation (e.g., Fixsen et al., 2010; McIntosh et al., 2010; Weick, 1995). If individuals with an organization do not align with or understand the goals of the organization, their emotional response can impede an intended adoption of a system change (Weick, 1995). For instance, MTSS was a

major shift in the mindsets of educators who worked through its transition from the "traditional model" of special education services (Batsche et al., 2005). Similarly, distributed leadership theorists discuss that the atmosphere or environment of an organization and the integration of distributed leadership within that atmosphere or environment can potentially impede its adoption (e.g., Holloway et al., 2018; Lumby, 2013; Spillane, 2006; Youngs, 2009). Willow's leadership team was subject to similar problems with staff who were misunderstanding and even resisting the intent of MTSS implementation.

Willow was also subject to barriers regarding how leadership team members worked within its distributed leadership model. First, Willow's leadership team members noted that they were challenged with providing a spectrum of services within an MTSS framework. Additionally, staffing issues and emotional fatigue seemed to slow the leadership team's progress towards MTSS implementation efforts. In regard to Willow struggles in providing a continuum of services in conjunction with staffing for MTSS implementation, both distributed leadership and MTSS researchers have noted the importance of hiring and maintain effective staff for implementation (e.g., Herman, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2019). On the other hand, the emotional fatigue discussed at Willow mirrors the concerns of distributed leadership being a vessel for unfair workloads for those most committed to the framework (e.g., Lumby, 2013; Storey, 2004)**.** Finally, Willow's leadership team spoke about how limited time and resources impeded their ability to facilitate MTSS across all students. Tangible resources (e.g., time, evidence based materials) at an organization's disposal are deeply embedded into multiple relevant theories. Such that resources can affect (a) how those leading or following within a distributed leadership model can support system change (Spillane, 2006), (b) the creation of professional development opportunities or a conducive environment for system

change (e.g., organizational drivers; Fixsen et al., 2010) and/or (c) the infrastructure for MTSS implementation (Stockslager et al., 2016). Additionally, across many systems change theories and MTSS research, time and material resources are consistently noted as impeding in nature if limited (e.g., Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Eagle et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 2015) or if not used effectively and in a strategic, compounding manner (Fullan, 2010).

Role of the Principal. Formal leadership is paramount for the facilitation of system change, MTSS and distributed leadership (Eagle et al., 2015; Harris, 2009; Hartley, 2007; Seashore et al., 2010; Stockslager et al., 2016). The final research question amplified the impactful role that Willow's principal had on their distributed leadership model for MTSS as well as mirrored the perceived importance of formal leadership. For instance, each theme showcased how the principal was able to effectively lead and embed themselves within Willow's distributed leadership for MTSS implementation. Connections to previously established scholarly work was evident, thus advancing the current conceptualization of how formal leadership works within distributed leadership. For instance, the hierarchical nature of school structures can be a barrier to implementing distributed leadership for systems (e.g., Lumby, 2013). Yet it is critical that formal leadership coexist with those in an organization to facilitate system change (e.g., Fixsen et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2007; Tian et al., 2016). Although Willow's principal was considered to be "ultimately responsible" for the success of the school, many leadership members credited the principal's ability to be engaged such that the principal could effectively balance leading and supporting (i.e., letting others lead) the distributed leadership culture as Willow attempted to navigate MTSS implementation. Additionally, the principal was committed to a mission and vision of distributed leadership for MTSS that further embedded them as a part of the school culture. Thus, mirroring the importance of committed and

visionary leadership to create a culture of system change and distributed leadership (e.g., Castillo & Curtis, 2014; Fixsen et al., 2010; Seashore et al., 2010; Spillane, 2006; Tian et al., 2016).

In the facilitation of distributed leadership and/or system change, organizations may experience situations where roles, responsibilities or structures begin to shift regardless of the professional titles (e.g., Hall & Hord, 2011; Wasley, 1991). During those times, those in formal leadership positions must be comfortable with releasing powers and letting others take charge within an organization (Harris, 2003a). Specifically, the actions of a leader can directly influence how work is spread and completed within an organization (e.g., Fixsen et al., 2010; Stockslager et al., 2016, Spillane, 2006). The principal's willingness to guide rather than direct staff members through MTSS implementation provides an example of how leaders can operate in a shifting organizational environment. For instance, Willow's principal tackled the typically unstandardized process of MTSS implementation by focusing on building ownership across leadership team members on what is best for each grade level. This relinquishing of power (i.e., avoiding a step-by-step procedure for MTSS implementation) was important for building independence across the distributed leadership model. Additionally, the principal was credited in cultivating a climate of trust through treating staff members as professionals. This finding also connects to scholars that promote the importance of trust in establishing a distributed leadership model (Lee et al., 2012; Tian et al., 2016).

Finally, the essence of distributed leadership is a de-centralization of leadership and reliance on collective action for change (e.g., Flessa, 2009; Gronn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). For instance, distributed leadership models within the literature all highlight forms or patterns of distributed leadership characterized by how multiple individual collaborate for change (e.g., *Spontaneous Collaboration* Gronn, 2008; *Planful Alignment*, Leithwood et al.,

2007; *Collective Distribution* Spillane, 2006). System changes and MTSS implementation also benefit from the work of many (e.g., building collective capacity, collaboration) to carry out complex tasks (e.g., Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2011; Stockslager et al., 2016). Willow's principal was noted as working "behind the scenes" (e.g., accessing professional development, planning) to build collective capacity to ensure that the distributed leadership model was able to support implementation of MTSS. They also focused on accessing the collective strength of staff within Willow by relying on the expertise and knowledge of multiple informal leaders across the distributed leadership model for MTSS. This finding provided another connection between Willow's principal and how formal leadership is portrayed in literature outlining system change and distributed leadership.

Quality Criteria

I used the key tenets of Tracy (2010) to evaluate the quality of the study. Tracy (2010) provides multiple components of excellence to consider when developing a qualitative study. First, this study focused on a *worthy topic* and will make potential *contributions* to the literature. Specifically, this study provided another concrete example of what works for and what hinders facilitation of MTSS by a leadership team. Also, it provided necessary information on how a formal leader can potentially co-exist within a distributed leadership approach to promote MTSS implementation. Schools are still within the age of accountability and are often rely on the humanistic resources they have to ensure MTSS is carried out with sufficient fidelity to improve student outcomes. The findings from this study provides both timely and beneficial information for leadership teams that are currently navigating distributed leadership for MTSS implementation.

Second, I have provided an honest and transparent evaluation of myself as a researcher, my biases that will influence the study, my utilization of a previously collected data set, and my data analyzation procedures. All of that information provides evidence for my attempt to be *sincere*. Even though I am using a previously collected data set, I am still bringing a different lens into the examination and interpretation of the data collected. I believe being honest about my involvement with the dataset can provide consumers of this research a clearer picture of the reciprocal relationship with the data collected.

Finally, this study also had multiple examples of having both *rich rigor* and *meaningful coherence*. First, this study involved a thick description by accessing information from a multi-source database consisting of interviews with the majority of Willow's leadership team, multiple observations, consistent document analysis and reflective journaling. The data analysis process also included triangulation methods intended to further describe the studied context, and intentional connections to the multiple theoretical constructs (e.g., distributed leadership theories, system change theory) through deductive coding. Second, this study demonstrated meaningful coherence by (a) having interview questions directly relating to the research questions and purpose of the study (See Appendix B), (b) having alignment between the paradigm of interpretivism (e.g., understanding a context through multiple means of information) I chose and the selected single embedded case study methodology (e.g., using multiple means of information to describe a current phenomenon) and (c) making explicit connections to and across multiple literature bases.

Limitations

Multiple limitations should be considered when evaluating the current study. Due to the continuation of a previous study, it faced the same limitations described by Latimer (2020) (e.g.,

technical difficulties, confidentiality limits, feelings of "imposter syndrome") as well as other unique limitations. For instance, a previously collected data set was used and there was a limited ability to gain further insight regarding the collected data. Although all questions and observations were part of the overall design (i.e., to be considered for the thesis and dissertation), there was an inability to revisit certain topics in follow-up interviews or communications. Additionally, as my paradigm states, I had to embrace the subjectivity of this research and realize that there are biases among myself and the participants that cannot be controlled. For instance, coming from a post-positivist school psychology program that reinforces the positive light of MTSS might have influenced how I understand and interpret data from the study. However, my active data collection of reflective journals provided essential data that can bring light to my biases and enhanced my data analysis and interpretation.

Another limitation involved that there likely were instances of social desirability that influenced this study. As a novice researcher and a graduate school student studying a leadership team and principal that had recognized success with MTSS, I found myself inadvertently feeling obligated to positively decorate Willow's MTSS efforts. For instance, the questions there we developed for this study may have been overly positive in nature (Appendix B). Based on some instances of the responses from participants, I may have inadvertently developed more questions to allow for Willow's leadership team to be seen in a positive light in regards to their MTSS efforts. I also found myself often not being critical or analytical enough during interviews to probe for further struggles or conflicts within Willow's leadership team. These actions may have provided less light to the areas of struggle and concern. Additionally, when I reviewed the data, my positive light of MTSS reinforced my doctoral program may have further inflated my social

desirability. Specifically, I may have wanted to further promote the use of MTSS and the factors that can support it, instead of focusing on areas that limited the framework's utility.

There are also specific limitations to the case study design that was chosen for this research. First, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) discussed that any case study design results are at the mercy of the researcher, and they report what they dictate as significant. Regardless, my outlined transparency through the study was intended to provide consumers' with information for them to evaluate my findings and conclusions. Second, Yin (2003) discussed that any case study is bounded by the professional interest of the researcher, meaning the many aspects of a case study (e.g., questions asked, data collected) are driven by what the researcher chooses to emphasize. This is particularly relevant for this study based on my potentially positive viewpoint of MTSS implementation within schools. However, I clearly noted my professional interest and personal biases, as well as the multifaceted data collection procedures, which consumers can consider as they interpret my findings. Finally, David and Sutton (2011) discussed that qualitative case studies are often exploratory in nature and often do not get accepted within a confirmation heavy environment (e.g., my quantitative-focused, post-positivist field of study). However, this study addressed important gaps within the literature. I cannot control the socio-political environment in which this research will be considered.

Implications for Research and Practice

The implications from the current study can provide benefits to both current educators, researchers, and policy makers. For instance, this study extends past solely quantitative representation of the intersection between MTSS and distributed leadership. It provides educators with a concrete example of what other educators experienced facilitating distributed

leadership for MTSS. Current educators facilitating MTSS implementation through distributed leadership can utilize the findings from this study to compare and contrast their experiences.

Regarding the first two research questions, teacher leaders can examine the specific facilitators (e.g., Focusing on the Destination, not the Journey; The 3 C's; Presence and Utilization of Data), and barriers (e.g., Working Pains; Shift to MTSS) outlined in this study and create conversations regarding the extent to which these issues may be present in their schools. Conversations regarding facilitators of and barriers to distributed leadership approaches to implementing MTSS may provide leadership team members with ideas regarding how to enhance their distributed efforts to facilitate MTSS implementation. They also may provide ideas regarding other factors to consider that may facilitate or hinder their efforts.

Although findings from the current study provide information on facilitators of and barriers to enacting distributed leadership for MTSS implementation, the case study focused on one school for a 15-week period. More in-depth examinations of factors impacting MTSS implementation within a distributed leadership model (e.g., longer case studies) as well as studies of other schools in other contexts would provide additional information that illustrates what helps and hinders the systems change leadership teams facilitate. For instance, current educators will always have to navigate the factors within their school system to facilitate necessary system change. Findings from the current study illustrated the notion that educational settings (regardless of professional capacity) are subject to finite resources (i.e., time, materials). However, the common denominator across all educational settings are the people within the setting facilitating systems change. Thus, further inquiries of this topic should continually revisit the practices that build capacity for people (i.e., distributed leadership practices) to facilitate systems change regardless of resources available. Additionally, future studies could also identify

other facilitators and barriers to distributed leadership for MTSS and illustrate how they act in context to influence the efforts of teams implementing MTSS. For instance, this study discussed the positive impact of professional flexibility when it came to grade level teams implementing aspects of MTSS, yet assumed the fidelity of implementation (i.e., purposive sample, established criteria). Future scholarly conversations should highlight the potential tensions that can come with allowing for professional flexibility, yet navigating fidelity. Specifically, how do distributed leadership teams facilitating MTSS carry out the initial focus of distributed leadership (e.g., shared responsibility, professional flexibility) but remain consistent with notions of sufficient fidelity of implementation to promote outcomes for students?

Principals also may benefit from the findings of this study. The findings provide concrete examples of how Willow's principal influenced their distributed leadership model for MTSS. Current principals can use this information to (a) compare and contrast their personal leading styles for improvement (b) identify potential ways they can be a facilitator of distributed leadership for MTSS and (c) identify potential ways they can support others within their distributed leadership model as they implement MTSS. Distributed leadership approaches to implementing complex frameworks such as MTSS occur in dynamic contexts. Leaders who consider and evaluate ways in which they support distributed leadership approaches may be better positioned to support the other leaders in their schools (Harris, 2012).

Based on this study, there are two key areas that principals should consider focusing on when evaluating ways in which they can support distributed leadership. First, the creation and maintenance of a strong data infrastructure could be conducive to a distributed leadership model for MTSS. Specifically, this study showed that data was utilized to benefit students, system change and informal leadership. A strong data infrastructure can (a) impower informal leadership

to take ownership of change and (b) monitor accountability requirements. Second, focusing on informing staff through consistent communication can potentially increase overall expertise. This study has shown that distributed leadership practices and MTSS implementation relied heavily on the humanistic aspect of organization change. Thus, focusing on communication that revolves around the people within the system can further provide beneficial influence to a principal navigating distributed leadership for MTSS. Additionally, this study highlighted the importance of focusing on both the people (i.e., engaged leadership) and procedures (i.e., building collective capacity) in supporting distributed leadership for MTSS. Similar to the notions of Fixen et al. (2010), this study shows the importance of balancing adaptive and technical leadership when support individuals through system change. Considering the amount of localized dependence that comes with both distributed leadership and MTSS practices, principals should consider the focus of both the people and procedures within a system to be a key piece in effective leadership.

Although this study's findings illustrates one principal's role in facilitating distributed leadership for MTSS, additional research is needed. More in-depth examination of how the principal operates within a distributed leadership approach may showcase more explicitly the potential impact of formal leadership on distributed leadership for MTSS. Observations focused specifically on the principal's actions and more in-depth interviews focused on the principal may further articulate ways in which principals contribute to distributed leadership.

Overall, it is critical that researchers continue to qualitatively examine the intersection between MTSS and distributed leadership. Every school is a unique social system that has distinctive characteristics, demographics, and relationships. Research can benefit from more examples of (a) the unique factors that impact distributed leadership models for MTSS as well as (b) formal leaderships' roles within distributed leadership models for MTSS. Even though this

study provides an example of distributed leadership for MTSS, it is not the only example. For instance, the MTSS framework is continuing to expand into a more integrated framework (Gamm et al., 2012 as cited in Eagle et al., 2015; Lane et al., 2010) to address academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of students. Future research could investigate the intersection between the expansion of MTSS, formal leaderships' role within the system change and the factors that are supporting and hindering system change.

Second, the findings from this study bridges three major literature bases (i.e., MTSS, distributed leadership, system change) through its examination of how certain factors and individuals (i.e., principal) relate to system change within the school system (i.e., distributed leadership for MTSS). Before this study, there was limited scholarly work that examined the intersection of distributed leadership and MTSS. There was even less work that related the intersection of distributed leadership and MTSS to the theories of system change. Each of the three major literature bases had conceptual overlap regarding their noted concepts. For example, the notion of communication across major stakeholders as a positive factor was evident through each of the three major literature bases (e.g., Fixen et al., 2010; Jimerson et al., 2015; Spillane, 2006). Yet, research did not often converge into a comprehensive real-world example. This study provided application of the multiple conceptualized concepts (e.g., stakeholder involvement, communication, data practices) across each major literature base to create a narrative that outlines theory to practice.

Future research may consider focusing on one key practice within the distributed leadership, MTSS and system change literature bases (e.g., data-based practices) to provide a narrower examination of influencing factors or individuals. This information might further bridge and expand the concepts provided across literature bases. For instance, future researchers

could narrow their focus on the presence and utilization of resources (e.g., what materials are common, how is time provided) and how it directly influences educators' ability to be change agents within their school. The results from that study could more directly connect to theories of system change (i.e., Fixsen et al., 2010; Fullan, 2010), distributed leadership models (e.g., Gronn, 2008) and potentially a multi-faceted vantage point of elements or individuals (i.e., principal) that influence MTSS implementation.

Finally, the findings from this study can potentially influence educational policy and larger scale studies for school teams examining factors and individuals who support implementation of MTSS. First, the information from this study provides educational leaders at the school, district, and state levels with potential factors and roles of leadership that can influence MTSS. For instance, a district leader can utilize this information (e.g., influencing factors, principal's role within distributed leadership) to create conversations and policy with school leaders to reflect on factors and professional roles of formal leadership within a distributed leadership model for MTSS. Additionally, state level leaders or educational consultants can utilize this information to share examples for consideration while supporting schools or districts navigating distributed leadership for MTSS.

Second, this study provides information that may inform larger scale studies of distributed leadership for MTSS. The current study provided an initial conversation of factors and individuals (i.e., principal) that impact distributed leadership for MTSS. However, educational leaders and researchers at the school, district, and state levels could benefit from larger examinations of the factors and professional roles of formal leadership within distributed leadership for MTSS to relate the information more closely to their educational settings. For example, larger scale studies can stretch the methodology from this study to provide more

school-wide (i.e., including all those within a school, not just the school leadership team), district-wide (i.e., including multiple schools with varying levels of need or expanding to middle and high school levels) or state-wide (i.e., including urban, rural and suburban regions) perspectives of the factors and professional roles of formal leadership that influence distributed leadership models for MTSS implementation.

Third, policy makers, and educational leaders at the school-, district- and state-level can utilize this information to determine ways to build a sustainable culture of distributed leadership for MTSS that is not dependent on one leader. MTSS and distributed leadership practices are shaped by their local context and often are variable in their implementation by educators. Additionally, as MTSS practice expand to meet the unique needs of students each year, the teams that facilitate its key aspects needs to expand. Thus, future conversations regarding key practices to sustain distributed leadership practices for MTSS at a larger scale are warranted. Based on the findings of this study, two areas that should be further investigated as a potential contributor to sustainability would be (a) increasing data infrastructure and literacy with educators and (b) using communication to inform and empower educations. Based on this study, both of those factors empowered Willow's leadership team members to more independently facilitate the necessary aspects of MTSS implementation within their grade levels. Although this study is a case study example, those factors could contribute to a sustainable culture of distributed leadership for MTSS. Specifically, policymakers and leaders can consider the ways in which these distributed leadership practices result in the professionalization and empowerment of people in ways that promotes the implementation of MTSS and improved outcomes for students.

Conclusions

As the world of education is continuously subject to increasing accountability-focused policy and procedures, the need for providing a continuum of services for the success of all students becomes even more relevant. Specifically, educators have and will continue to facilitate the implementation of an MTSS to address the needs of all students. Yet, the implementation MTSS often warrants a distributed leadership approach to ensure that all major components are being carried out with fidelity. Although the decentralized approach to facilitating major system changes like MTSS can theoretically utilize the collective capacity of many within an organization to support an effective change effort, gaps remain in what is known about what supports or hinders distributed leadership for MTSS. Additionally, there is limited information regarding how formal leadership co-exists with a decentralized approach within system change.

This current study used a qualitative embedded single case study to examine; (a) factors that support distributed leadership models facilitating MTSS implementation, (b) factors that impede distributed leadership and (c) the influence of formal leadership (i.e., principal) on distributed leadership. The study utilized a multi-informant and multi-source database that included interviews, observations, document reviews, and reflective journaling. The findings from this study provided specific factors that helped (i.e., Leading Takes Leaders; Focusing on the Destination, not the Journey; The 3 C's; Utilization of Data) and hindered (i.e., Shift to MTSS, Necessary Resources, Working Pains) a distributed leadership model for MTSS. It also provided a concrete representation of the role of a principal (i.e., Engaged Leadership, Facilitator of Learning, Sum of All Parts) within a distributed leadership model for MTSS.

Overall, this study's findings provide multiple implications for the future work of educators, educational leaders, and researchers. First, the study provided a concrete, real world

example of factors and individuals (i.e., principal) that influence distributed leadership for MTSS that can be used to further contextualize the effort of leadership team members and principals navigating MTSS within their schools. Second, this study bridges concepts and theories across the distributed leadership, MTSS and system change literature bases, resulting in an even more detailed vantage points of elements that influence MTSS implementation through a distributed leadership approach. Third, the study's findings can potentially influence educational policy and larger scale studies for school teams implementing MTSS. However, future research must continue to focus on providing insight to the intersection of distributed leadership models, formal leadership and MTSS implementation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Demographic Sheet

Figure 1A

Participant Demographic Sheet

Age (Please Fill in)

_____

Main Position Held Currently (Please Write in)

_____

Years of Experience at Current Position (Please Fill in)

_____

Years of Experience on Current Leadership Team (Please Check one)

Less than one year _____

More than one year _____

If more than one year, fill in years of experience on the current leadership team _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions Guide

Figure 2A

Interview Questions Guide

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

Opening Topic(s) (Neutral Initial questions):

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

Prompt:

- ***"Thank you for sharing. Now we are going to into taking about distributed leadership model such as the leadership team that you are a part of."***

Specific Questions

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

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

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

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

iii. **How would you describe the current distribution of leadership within your school?**

1. ***How are tasks distributed throughout the leadership team?***
2. ***What types of tasks are shared? How are they shared?***

Prompt:

- ***"Thank you for sharing your perspectives of how you believe the tasks are distributed throughout your leadership team within your school. Now we are going to shift the discussion to talk about how the leadership team functions on a daily basis. Specifically, we will be looking at the actions related to the implementation of MTSS."***

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

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

1. ***What responsibilities do other team members have?***
2. ***Who is the leader? Who chooses who is responsible for each task?***

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

1. ***What else do you do?***

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

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

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

2. ***What are the roles and responsibilities of your team for facilitating implementation of MTSS?***
3. ***How is MTSS enacted by multiple people in the school?***

Prompt:

- ***"Thank you for sharing your perspectives of the distributed leadership model within your school. Now for the second part of this interview, we will be focusing on the factors that influence the implementation of MTSS."***

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

Opening Topic(s) (Neutral Initial questions):

- **Please briefly explain me to the successes and/or struggles of this leadership team's implementation of MTSS during this current school year.**

Specific Questions

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

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

3. ***How is the team contributing to those things?***

Prompt:

- ***"Once again, thank you so much for sharing your perspectives. For the last section of the interview, were going to focus on the influence of the principal on the distributed leadership model and implementation of MTSS."***

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

i. **How does the principal involve herself with the leadership team?**

1. ***What does the principal say?***
2. ***What does the principal do?***
3. ***What role does the principal have within the leadership team?***

ii. **How does the principal influence the distributed leadership approach?**

1. ***How does the principal work within the leadership team?***
2. ***What does the principal do that works well within the leadership team?***

iii. **How does the principal contribute to the implementation of MTSS?**

1. ***What does the principal do that contributes to the leadership team's ability to implement MTSS?***
2. ***What is the principal's role in the implementation of MTSS?***
3. ***What is the principal's influence on the implementation of MTSS?***

Appendix C: Inductive and Deductive Codes

Table 1A

Inductive Codes

Inductive Codes	
Code	**Definition**
Administrative support	*Any mention of the principal using their role to support staff (i.e., budget, parent meeting support, tough conversations)*
Agenda setting	*Any mention of the principal setting the agenda and/or conversation of the leadership team meetings*
Aligning with mission and vision	*Any mention of aligning the work at the school with either the mission, vision, school success plan or overall goal of the school*
Being reliable	*Any mention of following throughout with tasks and commitments for staff*
Big picture mindset	*Any mention of having a mindset focused on building on small changes to amount to a larger system change or goal*
Celebrations	*Any mention of the principal presenting and/or facilitating conversation around celebrations from staff*
Coherence	*Any mention of having either low or high coherence between staff for system implementation*
Collaboration for MTSS	*Any mention of working with another individual to implement components of MTSS*
Collective responsibility	*Any mention of the term collective responsibility or providing information that all staff are responsible for student achievement and/or school improvement*
Communication	*Any mention of having those within the leadership team spread information from the leadership team meetings to other staff*
Communication of student needs	*Any mention of keeping communication consistent for struggling students*
Compliance issue	*Any mention of difficulties with following compliance for special education processes*
Connectedness to staff	*Any mention of the principal understanding what the current situation with staff*
Consistent message through staff turnover	*Any mention of attempting to keep the school's mission or vision consistent with staff onboarding*
Consistent staff	*Any mention of having a consistent set of staff returning to a team or school*
Creation of positive work culture	*Any mention of building positive relationships across staff or developing an environment of positivity*
Data reviewing/strategic planning	*Any mention of reviewing and/or monitoring data to track progress or make a decision that relates to the functioning of the school staff*
Developing system structure	*Any mention of developing different roles or responsibilities to ensure a system is running effectively*

Table 1A (Continued)

Empowerment of others	*Any mention of providing professional development opportunities and/or mentoring to staff members*
Enrichment	*Any mention of meeting students' needs that have already mastered grade level standards*
Evaluation of staff	*Any mention of using various methods to evaluate the performance of staff*
Facilitator	*Any mention of a person who guides or directs conversation with staff members*
Fatigue	*Any mention of teacher's exhaustion towards their job*
Feedback	*Any mention of attempting to get feedback from staff members or students*
Few support staff	*Any mention of limited, specific support staff (e.g., school psychologist, behavioral specialist) provided to teachers*
FSA data	*Any mention of the test results that come from the florida state assessment*
Grade level differences	*Any mention of having differing levels of expertise across grade levels*
Growing student/teacher population	*Any mention that the school's growing student population*
Helpless mindset	*Any mention of staff discussing uncontrollable factors that are impeding student success (i.e., family life, absenteeism)*
Input seeking	*Any mention of the principal seeking input from staff*
Integrated frameworks	*Any mention of attempting to integrate systems of supports (either academic, behavioral, or social-emotional) for students*
Itinerate staff	*Any mention of staff not employed and/or assigned to the school full time*
Lack collaboration for MTSS	*Any mention of having a lack of working with another individual to implement a MTSS*
Lack of district support	*Any mention of the school district not systematically supporting the implementation of MTSS*
Lack of evidence based materials	*Any mention of staff having a lack of evidence or research based resources*
Lowest students	*Any mention to the students who are performing at the bottom 25% or 35% based on standardized assessment*
Matching interventions	*Any mention of matching interventions with student needs*
Meeting structures	*Any mention of having specific structures for meetings that support staff effectiveness*
MTSS is an "means to an end"	*Any mention of a staff's mindset to use the MTSS process solely for special education evaluation*
Multiple groups focused on different levels	*Any mention of different teams within the school leading various initiatives (e.g., SIT team, bookies)*
Narrow focus on support	*Any mention of only focusing supports on reading, but not any other subject (i.e., science, social studies)*

Table 1A (Continued)

No struggles	*Any mention of having no barriers or struggles in the implementation of MTSS*
Ongoing support	*Any mention of leadership continually revising or revisit different initiatives or supports for staff*
Open and honest environment	*Any mention of an environment of open conversation regarding strengths and weaknesses of daily practice*
Parent request for evaluation	*Any mention of working with parents during a special education evaluation process*
Personality	*Any mention of the principal's personality that influences staff morale*
Previous leadership experience	*Any mention of previous experiences as an administrator/district or school level leader from a non-administrative staff member*
Prioritizing goal or actions	*Any mention of prioritizing the actions of oneself or others based on the school mission or the most pressing issues*
Progress monitoring	*Any mention of documenting intervention progress*
Provides purpose for MTSS	*Any mention of going beyond the compliance requirements of MTSS and making the process purposeful for staff*
Reflectiveness	*Any mention of the leadership either prompting a reflective question or reflecting on the alignment of a certain process and the goals of the school*
Resources	*Any mention of resources that are utilized to support staff*
Retained students	*Any mention of students who were previously retained due to their score on a statewide assessment*
Returning to old habits	*Any mention of staff using ineffective or outdated strategies to support students*
Setting the groundwork for MTSS before the school opened	*Any mention of establishing the vision or mission for MTSS before the school opened*
Staff capacity	*Any mention of the knowledge and/or skills of the staff*
Staff responsiveness to student needs	*Any mention of staff being efficient with supporting student needs*
Staff turnover	*Any mention of having several/multiple new staff in the first three years of the school's opening*
Strength based culture	*Any mention of the utilization of the Gallup strength based survey*
Strong math focus	*Any mention of having multiple teachers focused on providing math instruction and supports*
Student focused culture	*Any mention of focusing on providing students with the necessary academic or behavioral supports to be successful*
Student motivation	*Any mention of students having a lack of motivation in engaging with lesson materials*
Students making significant progress	*Any mention of having students move through the tiers or support within an MTSS framework to meet grade level expectations*
System already in place	*Any mention of having a system already in place to support students*

Table 1A (Continued)

Tier I focus	*Any mention of focusing on school wide practices for student achievement*
Time	*Any mention of the concept of time as a positive or negative factor*
Trust and flexibility	*Any mention of providing staff with autonomy with their daily tasks and commitments*
Ultimate decision maker	*Any mention of using administrative powers to come to a decision after considering all input*
Uncontrollable factors	*Any mention of factors that can't be changed by staff but are perceived as impacting the effectiveness of MTSS*
Varying mindsets	*Any mention of having various beliefs and/or mindset across individuals that can impede collaboration*
Vertical conflict	*Any mention of conflict between grade level teachers involving a teacher's inability to prepare students for the future grade level standards*
Visibility	*Any mention of the principal's ability to be present or be visible at meetings and/or throughout the school*
Worked with leadership previously	*Any mention of working with the current administration at a previous school*

Table 1B

Deductive Codes

Deductive Codes		
Theory/ Framework	***Code***	***Definition***
Critical Domains of MTSS *Based on* Stockslager, K., Castillo, J., Brundage, A., Childs, K., & Romer, N. (2016). Self-Assessment of MTSS (SAM) Technical Assistance Manual. *Tampa, FL: Florida's Problem Solving/Response to Intervention Project and Florida's Positive Behavior Intervention and Support Project, University of South Florida.*	Leadership	*Any example of leadership (e.g., professional title, perceived leadership) being critical to the implementation of MTSS, data-based problem solving and/or overall school improvement.*
	Building the Capacity/ Infrastructure for Implementation	*Any example of human(s) or material resources supporting the development or improvement of school-wide capacity (e.g., professional development) and/or infrastructure (e.g., multi-tiered instruction and intervention) for implementation and sustainability of MTSS.*
	Communication and Collaboration	*Any example of ongoing communication and collaboration with key stakeholders that contribute to the implementation of MTSS.*

Table 1B (Continued)

	Data-Based Problem Solving	*Any example of data-based problem solving procedures (e.g., problem solving process, student progress monitoring) to make educational decisions within an MTSS framework.*
	Three-Tiered Instructional/ Intervention Model	*Any example of the planning for and/or implementation of a three-tiered instructional/intervention model to provide a spectrum of services to meet the academic, behavior, and social-emotional needs of students.*
	Data-Evaluation	*Any example of staff members accessing and utilizing a variety of data sources that align with the purposes of assessment (e.g., student data, fidelity measures, needs assessments).*
Spillane's Practice Centered Model ***Based on*** **Spillane (2006)**	Leaders	*Any examples of individual(s), regardless of professional title, completing tasks that aligned with the core work of a school to influence overall school improvement.*
	Followers	*Any example of types of support (e.g., knowledge, materials, time) that non-leaders (e.g., teachers support staff) contribute to practices of leaders.*

Table 1B (Continued)

	Situation	*Any example of the influence of a school or district's atmosphere or environment on leaders' daily efforts.*
Spillane's Aspects of Practice Centered Model	Leader-Plus Aspect	*Any examples of multiple, differing individuals acting as leaders.*
	Practice Aspect	*Any example of leadership actions being embedded and amplified by interactions between staff members.*
Spillane's Patterns of Distributed Leadership ***Based on*** **Spillane (2006)**	Collaborative Distribution	*Any example of multiple leaders performing a task together to achieve the same goal.*
	Collective Distribution	*Any example of multiple leaders working on separate but unified tasks connected to one goal.*
	Coordinated Distribution	*Any example of a specific sequence guided by the actions of multiple leaders to achieve the same goal.*
	Parallel Distribution	*Any example of multiple leaders performing the same task in different settings.*
Gronn Model: Actions of Distributed Leadership ***Based on*** **Gronn (2008)**	Spontaneous Collaboration	*Any example of staff members interacting to complete a shared task or goal.*
	Intuitive Working Relations	*Any examples of shared approaches or uniformity in problem solving methods that result in interconnectedness across staff members.*

Table 1B (Continued)

	Institutionalized Practices	*Any example of organizational structures for daily functioning (e.g., intervention teams)*
Leithwood et al Model of Distributed Leadership Alignment ***Based on*** **Leithwood et al. (2007)**	Planful Alignment	*Any example of leaders (e.g., professional title, perceived leadership) having prior and thoughtful consideration for delegating tasks based on an agreed upon process that considers the position and capacity of staff members.*
	Spontaneous Alignment	*Any example of leaders (e.g., professional title, perceived leadership) delegating tasks with little to no planning, based on an assumption that certain staff members are solely responsible for certain tasks.*
	Spontaneous Misalignment	*Any example of leaders (e.g., professional title, perceived leadership) delegating tasks with little no on planning and a lack of clarity with the outcome or intention of the task.*
	Anarchic Misalignment	*Any example of active rejection by leaders (e.g., professional title, perceived leadership), negatively influencing and increasing disconnect to other staff and teams within a school.*

Table 1B (Continued)

Implementation Science ***Based on*** **Fixsen et al. (2010)**	Exploration and Adoption	*Any example of leaders (e.g., professional title, perceived leadership) researching or planning around an identified need, exploring new practices, considering the influence of a new practice to the local context, and deciding to adopt a new practice.*
	Installation	*Any example of leaders (e.g., professional title, perceived leadership) allocating and organizing resources to support future implementation and professional development to adopt a newly chosen practice.*
	Initial Implementation	*Any example of leaders' (e.g., professional title, perceived leadership) first attempt to implement adopt a newly chosen practice.*
	Full Implementation	*Any example of a newly adopted practice transitioning into standard practice and staff members show high levels of implementation fidelity.*
	Competency Drivers	*Any example of human(s) or material resource that contribute to the purposefully and aligned professional development processes to implement key practices of a system change.*

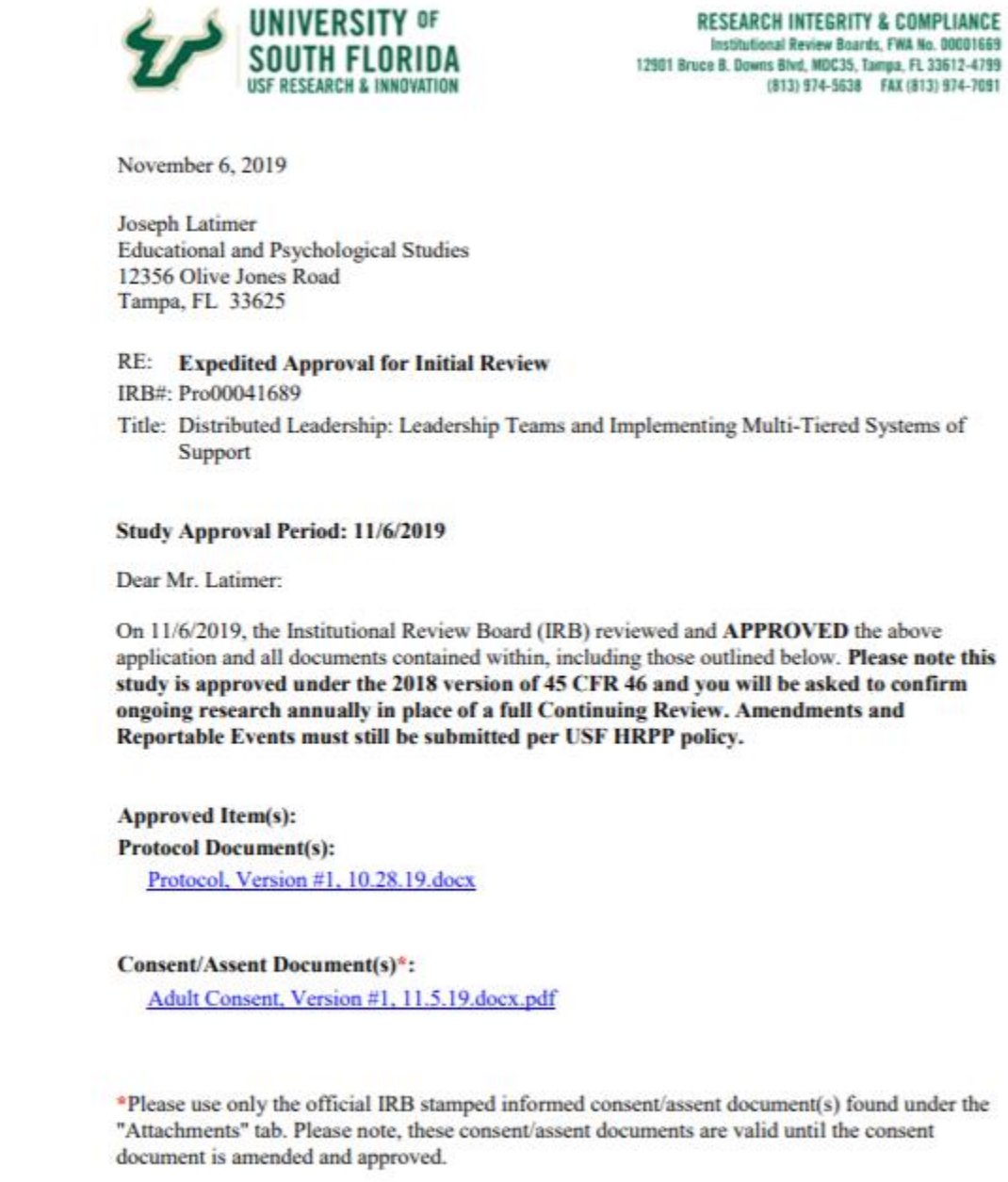
Table 1B (Continued)

	Organization Drivers	*Any example of human(s) or material resources that create an environment that allows for implementation of new practices.*
	Leadership Drivers	*Any example of elements (e.g., support, perceived value) that contribute to the practices (both technical and adaptive) of those who are leading a system change.*

Appendix D: University Institutional Review Boards Approval Letter

Figure 3A

University Institutional Review Boards Approval Letter



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA
USF RESEARCH & INNOVATION

RESEARCH INTEGRITY & COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd, MDC35, Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 FAX (813) 974-7091

November 6, 2019

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

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

Study Approval Period: 11/6/2019

Dear Mr. Latimer:

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

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

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

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent documents are valid until the consent document is amended and approved.

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that: (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

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

Appendix E: Consent Form

Figure 4A

Consent Form

Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study
Title: Distributed Leadership: Leadership Teams and Implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Pro # 00041689

Overview: You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this document should help you to decide if you would like to participate. The sections in this Overview provide the basic information about the study. More detailed information is provided in the remainder of the document.
Study Staff: This study is being led by Joseph Latimer who is a doctoral school psychology graduate student at the University of South Florida. This person is called the Principal Investigator. The Principal Investigator is also being supervised by faculty advisor Dr. Jose Castillo.
Study Details: This study is being conducted at XXXX Elementary in XXXX School District and is supported/sponsored by Principal XXXX, the University of South Florida and XXXX School District. The purpose of the project is to study the daily functioning of a school leadership team and their efforts to implement school wide systems (e.g., multi-tiered systems of support; MTSS). The Principal Investigator will use interviews, observations, and existing documents (e.g., school data, meeting notes) to explore the leadership team's functioning over a 15 week period.
Participants: You are being asked to take part because you are a part of a school based leadership team that will allow the Principal Investigator to develop knowledge in leadership teams and MTSS implementation. Also, the leadership team that you are a part of has consistent membership in the last three years and is within a school district that requires the implementation of MTSS.
Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits or opportunities

if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your job status, employment record, employee evaluations, or advancement opportunities. Since you are a part of the XXXX Elementary School Leadership Team, the Principal Investigator will be observing multiple leadership team meetings over the course of the study regardless of your participation in the research study. If you choose to not participate in this research study, the observation notes taken by the Principal Investigator will not contain any specific information on you or your functioning within the XXXX Elementary School Leadership Team Meeting. The Principal Investigator will be sure not to record any comments from individuals who choose not to participate. The Principal Investigator will not be audio- or video-recording the sessions so there would be no information directly involving individuals who choose not to participate.

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

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

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

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

Why are you being asked to take part?

For the purpose of the study, the Principal Investigator purposefully recruited the school leadership team that you apart of because it will allow him to develop knowledge in distributed

leadership and MTSS implementation, has kept the majority of team members consistent for 3-5 years and has been implementing MTSS for 3-5 years and contains individuals that have expertise in MTSS implementation. Also, the Principal Investigator recruited a school that is within a school district that requires the implementation of MTSS.

Study Procedures:

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

- **Pre-15 Week Timeframe**
    - *Listen to the outline of the study provided by the Principal Investigator*
    - *Schedule a time with the Principal Investigator to provide consent in a 10 to 15 minute meeting before or after normal school hours and in a private setting within the school*
    - *Schedule a time with the Principal Investigator to conduct 30 to 60 minute interview before or after normal school hours and in a private setting within the school.*
- **15 Week Timeframe**
    - **Interview (30-60 minutes)**
        - *Fill out the Participant Demographic Sheet*
        - *Informed and provided with an option of agreeing to be recorded.*
        - *Answer questions that will be asked during the interview session.*
    - **Observations**
        - *Participate within each leadership team meeting as usual*.
    - **Document Analysis**
        - **Schedule a 60-90 meeting with the Principal Investigator to examine school related documents*
            - **Note: This will only apply if your principal appoints you as the designated school leadership team member who will work with the Principal Investigator*
- **Post-15 Week Timeframe**
    - **Schedule a 30 to 60 minute interview with the Principal Investigator*

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

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

Total Number of Participants

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

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

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

Consent to Take Part in Research

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

_____ _____

Signature of Person Taking Part in Study Date

_____

Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization

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

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent Date

_____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent