

Subjectivity Within the Pre-Referral Intervention Process: The Difference Between
Academic and Behavioral Interventions in an Urban Elementary School

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to the loving memory of my Mom, Helene Turnbull. Mom dedicated her entire life to education by supporting and improving the lives of those around her. During her long-standing career as a high school social worker and playwright and author in her retirement, Mom was a tireless advocate for knowledge, truth, and justice and she was a firm believer in public and higher education. A proud graduate of the University of Minnesota, she instilled in me the importance of higher education. The values, which she long ago imparted to me, continue to guide my life today and are deeply rooted in this study.

Mom believed every student and child deserved a quality education and that education was a mechanism to improve lives and communities. She was very excited for me to begin this scholarly journey and it saddens me that she will not be here physically to see its commencement. But it's comforting to know that she will forever be here in memory and spirit. This study is rooted in the belief that she instilled in me that all children deserve access to a quality public education.

Abstract

This study concerns the factors influencing special education referral and identification rates including the phenomena surrounding disproportionate representation of students of color in special education, employing a single-site case study to investigate the pre-referral intervention process.

This study found the pre-referral intervention process to be a complex framework of supports including Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in coordination with the work of the intervention team members and stakeholders. Results suggested the team's ability to implement pre-referral interventions was influenced by school conditions, teacher leaders, and the building principal. Results indicated a difference between academic and behavioral interventions, noting that academic interventions were interpreted as more objective, easier to identify, and more readily informed by student data. Behavioral interventions were based on subjective interpretation by staff members and required multiple steps. Behavioral interventions were influenced by non-school related factors including trauma, parents, and resources and school-related factors including school culture, structure, and the skillsets of staff, notably the ability to confront, interpret, and make sense of possible cultural and racial differences and biases.

Implications of the study results concern the complexity and challenges of implementing pre-referral interventions and supporting student behavior through the pre-referral intervention process. Results illuminated the interconnectedness of school

support systems and factors influencing the process such as organizational conditions, teacher leadership, and the role of the principal. The impact of partnerships with families and the ways in which educators confront possible bias in the work of identifying and addressing student behavior was notable. Recommendations are offered on organizational management and theory, school leadership, student behavior, interventions and support and continued research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004) defines special education as specifically designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. Special education broadly identifies the academic, physical, cognitive and social-emotional instruction offered to children who are faced with one or more disabilities. To qualify and be placed in special education, students need to be formally evaluated. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004) is the federal special education law and provides the legal framework for conducting evaluations to determine whether a student has a disability and is eligible for special education.

The primary purpose of assessment/evaluation is to determine: a) who should receive special education services, b) what instructional services and monitoring a student will need to confer meaningful education benefit, and c) where the student's special education services can be most effective (Drasgow and Yell, 2002).

The goal of all evaluations, whether district initiated or an independent educational evaluation, is to aid the parties to develop an appropriate program to meet the child's needs. To develop an appropriate program, an assessment collects information for the purpose of making decisions about students (Salivia, Ysseldyke, & Bolt, 2006).

Information may include test data, work samples, observations, interviews, and screenings (Yell, 2012). Assessment in special education involves decisions in several areas including pre-referral classroom strategies, entitlement, programming, and

accountability/outcomes (Salvia, Ysseldyke, & Bolt, 2006). In Minnesota, statute defines the role of the general education teacher.

Before a pupil is referred for a special education evaluation, the district must conduct and document at least two instructional strategies, alternatives, or interventions using a system of scientific, research-based instruction and intervention in academics or behavior, based on the pupil's needs, while the pupil is in the regular classroom. The pupil's teacher must document the results. A special education evaluation team may waive this requirement when it determines the pupil's need for the evaluation is urgent. This section may not be used to deny a pupil's right to a special education evaluation (Minnesota, Statute 125a.56 Subdivision. 1(a)).

The implementation of pre-referral interventions in public schools is a critical step in the placement of students in special education. Since the mid-1980s, the pre-referral intervention process has been implemented in public schools in the United States to more effectively meet the diverse needs of students who experience academic and behavioral problems in the general education setting (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989). Pre-referral interventions are employed in the general education classroom [by educators] to ameliorate the problem prior to referral to special education (Yell, 2012). In most situations, general education teachers are the first to initiate the pre-referral intervention process (Yell, 2012) and in Minnesota they are responsible for its implementation and efficacy. Historically, there has been a link between pre-referral interventions and special education assessments, and special education qualifications. Referral for assessment or

intervention has been cited as one of the most important predictors of future special education eligibility (Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1983). To better understand the importance of pre-referral interventions, it's critical to understand the role of general education teachers in this process.

Since the implementation of the requirement to document pre-referral strategies within the general education classroom, many scholars have held long-standing suspicions that many students are inappropriately identified for special education as a result of teacher bias or inadequate pre-referral procedures (see: chapter 2). The decision to begin the pre-referral intervention process yields the potential for the inadvertent placement of students in special education and it is associated with a number of concerns. One potential issue, which is well documented in the literature, is the cultural phenomena surrounding the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education, which Reschly (1997) suggested might be called the quintessential special education dilemma. Scholars have defined and used different terminology to examine and explore this phenomena, using phrases to describe the overrepresentation of students of color in special education as “over-representation” “disproportionality” “disproportionate representation” “disproportionate overrepresentation” or “overrepresentation of students of color in special education.” This study adopted the belief that these terms are synonymous and can be used interchangeably and the general belief of all terms is grounded in the percentage of students labeled in a specific disability category. Lawson et al. (2002) summarized this by defining overrepresentation in special education as

occurring when a group's membership in the program is larger than the percentage of that group in the educational system or within a given disability category.

Seminal scholars on pre-referral interventions have questioned the relationship between interventions, special education referrals, and special education eligibility and placements. Over thirty years ago, Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell (1982) recommended it was time to recognize the social-political context within which the referral-to-placement process operates. Disproportionate representation is a problem if students are invalidly placed in such programs due to poor-quality instruction or if the special education program blocks progress and reduces the likelihood of returning to the regular classroom (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982).

Under IDEA, there are thirteen categories under which a student is eligible to receive the protections and services promised by this law (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004). Using the disability category emotional disturbance (IDEA defined), as one example, highlights the potential impact of referring, or over-referring, students for special education and the prevalence of Black/African-American students identified and placed in the disability emotional disturbance category. Some states and scholars refer to ED as EBD, or emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) instead of emotional disturbance. Minnesota uses EBD designation, which will be adopted for this study and analysis.

For more than four decades, the overrepresentation of African American students in special education classes has been evident (Blanchett; 2009; Gardner & Miranda, 2001). The number of Black students identified as EBD is significantly higher than any other racial or ethnic group. According to the National Association of School

Psychologists (2013) Black students were 2.86 times more likely to receive services for emotional disturbance than same-age students of all other racial/ethnic groups combined (NASP, 2013). Hosp & Reschly (2003) noted the Office of Civil Rights [U.S. Government] has documented, and collected data on this cultural phenomena since 1968. In Minnesota, the rate of disproportionately of black students identified as EBD is alarming and concerning. The Minneapolis Star Tribune (2013) reported that nationally, the percent of black students who are labeled EBD is 1.3%, yet in Minnesota, 4.3% of black students are labeled EBD, and offered the following illustration, demonstrating that Minnesota has the largest percentage gap between black and white students labeled EBD of any state:

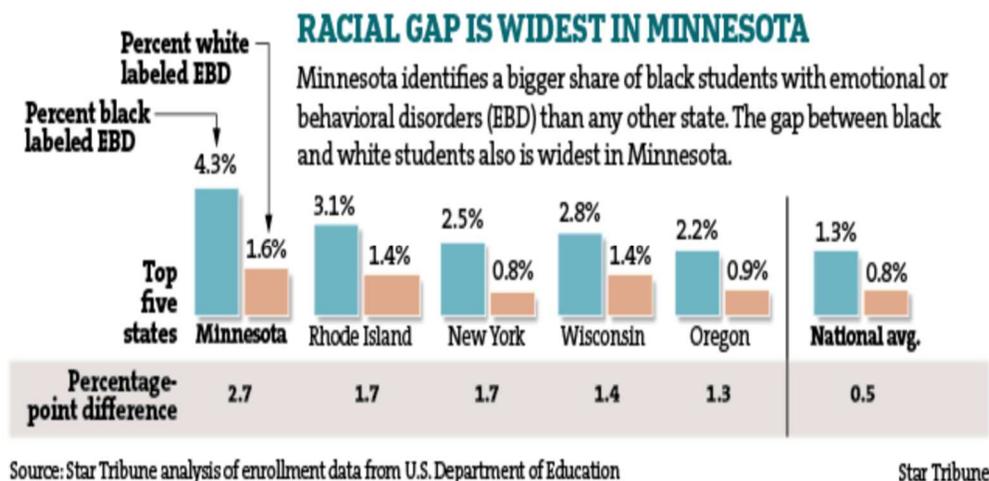


Figure 1. Racial Gap is Widest in Minnesota. Reprinted from: In Minnesota, race drives school labels, discipline, Meitrodt, Jeff. December 13, 2013, Retrieved from: <http://www.startribune.com/in-minnesota-race-drives-school-labels-discipline-for-students/235894231/>

This disproportionality is very clear, for example, in two of the state's largest, urban districts: Minneapolis and St. Paul.

BLACK STUDENTS DOMINATE EBD PROGRAMS

African-American students with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD) are over represented in Minnesota's 10 largest school districts.

Source: Star Tribune analysis of enrollment data from Minnesota Education Department

Star Tribune

District	EBD students who are black	Students in district who are black	Black students labeled EBD
Minneapolis	69.8%	36.1%	7.0%
St. Paul	65.0%	29.6%	7.9%
Osseo	64.4%	24.5%	4.5%
Robbinsdale	62.0%	28.7%	4.9%
Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan	30.4%	11.1%	3.9%
Rochester	28.7%	13.2%	5.4%
Anoka-Hennepin	22.8%	10.4%	4.3%
South Washington	16.2%	8.8%	1.8%
Lakeville	9.9%	4.3%	3.9%
Elk River	5.1%	2.7%	4.1%

Figure 2: Black Students Dominate EBD Programs. Reprinted from: In Minnesota, race drives school labels, discipline, Meitrodt, Jeff. December 13, 2013, Retrieved from: <http://www.startribune.com/in-minnesota-race-drives-school-labels-discipline-for-students/235894231/>

Statement of Purpose

The two graphics offered demonstrate that the phenomena of disproportionality in special education is relevant and applicable to Minnesota public schools, particularly in the state's largest districts. Prior to special education evaluation and placement, state statute requires schools to support the student and address the concerns by implementing an educational support and strategy called a pre-referral intervention and the role of the general education teacher is important. Pre-referral interventions are supports and strategies that operate within a large framework of imbedded school systems and this entire process can be called the pre-referral intervention process.

Scholars have examined and demonstrated concerns over the relationship between special education referral and special education eligibility. Concerns over this relationship have been identified when scholars have examined the phenomena surrounding different racial/ethnic demographics in different disability categories. Using the disability category EBD as one example and reviewing both historical and present-day data, it is demonstrated that Black/African-American students have a long-standing history of being disproportionately represented in this disability category.

This study was developed to better understand the role of the general education teacher in the pre-referral intervention process. It also strives to illuminate the following: a school's established pre-referral intervention process, the important role of the school principal, and how educators perceive pre-referral interventions. There will be a particular focus on how educators perceived, viewed, and understood behavioral interventions and supports. Study significance, research questions, and limitations are offered.

Significance of Study

The relationship between eligibility and referral suggests a better understanding of disproportionate representation in special education categorization requires investigation of factors affecting referral rates and processes (Hosp and Reschly, 2003). This study investigated the role of the elementary general education teacher in the pre-referral intervention process. This study focused on how public elementary school educators perceived and experienced the pre-referral intervention process, their perceptions of pre-

referral interventions, and experiences working with internal and external stakeholders and the school principal.

This study was also designed to further develop and expand the literature on a school-wide approach to an intervention framework and the successful implementation of a pre-referral intervention process. More importantly, this study was designed to examine factors that Hosp and Reschly (2003) suspected would warrant further investigation on disproportionality as it relates to factors affecting referral rates. This study investigated how teachers viewed and defined interventions, how they attempted to implement interventions, and how they defined, viewed, and made sense of student behavior and behavioral supports.

This study informs research, policy, practices and procedures on intervention frameworks and the pre-referral intervention process. This study highlights the need for professional learning for teachers, the critical role of the principal in the pre-referral intervention process, and the complex roles and experiences of elementary general education teachers. Lastly, this study informs further investigation into data collection procedures, data-driven practices and factors influencing student behavior, implementation of behavioral interventions, and factors influencing efficacy rates of behavioral interventions.

Research Questions

My experience as a special education teacher, combined with my investigation of the pre-referral intervention process through the review of literature, guided the formulation of the following primary, and secondary research questions:

- 1: How do teachers navigate the pre-referral intervention process?*
- 2: How is the pre-referral intervention process implemented at the site of this study?*
- 3: What role do teachers' preconceptions, prior experiences, and perceptions play in the pre-referral intervention process?*
- 4: What role does perceived support from administration play in the pre-referral intervention process?*
- 5: How do educators interpret and support student behavior?*

Introduction: Grounded Theory and Study

The upcoming chapters offer study findings, an analysis of the findings, and the identification of the key distinction found in this study -- the difference between academic and behavioral interventions. A grounded theory will be presented highlighting that, despite the implementation and advancement of pre-referral intervention processes to include intervention frameworks and systems of supports, educators identify, describe, and interpret student behavior differently. Further, the grounded theory will demonstrate that behavior supports and interventions are largely based off educators' subjective interpretations of student behavior.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction to this study. The following chapters will provide an in-depth exploration and analysis of factors that influence pre-referral interventions, a description of the pre-referral intervention process, and examples of student behavior and prescribed behavioral interventions. Chapter Two will provide a review of the literature and background information related to the pre-

referral intervention process. Chapter Three will provide detailed information regarding the conceptual framework, study design, limitations, and present terms found and utilized throughout this study. Chapter Three will also detail the case study that was designed, using a constructivist-grounded theory approach to inquiry. Chapter Four will outline how the study site defined and implemented the pre-referral intervention process and demonstrate the critical role of the principal. Chapters Five and Six will explain the difference between the types of interventions: academic and behavioral. Additionally, Chapter Five focuses on academic interventions, and Chapter Six will elaborate on the complexities surrounding student behavioral interventions and behavioral support. Lastly, Chapter Seven will provide implications for practice and recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview of the Law and Regulations

Federal regulation has constructed the legal framework that establishes the role of the pre-referral intervention process. The primary purpose of the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was to ensure that all children with disabilities receive a free, appropriate public education, including special education and related services that are "designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living ..." (Wright and Wright, 2007). IDEA, specifically 34 CFR § 300.111, mandates a child-find system which requires states to have policies and procedures to identify, locate and evaluate all children with disabilities, regardless of the severity of their disabilities (Wright and Wright, 2007). The law also requires a child-find system in states and schools that identifies, locates, and evaluates students who are suspected of having a disability under §300.8 and in need of special education, despite advancing from grade to grade (IDEA, 2004). Congress re-authorized the IDEA in 2004 and most recently amended the IDEA through Public Law 114-95, the Every Student Succeeds Act, in December 2015 (About, IDEA, n.d.).

As defined by Drasgow and Yell (2002), the primary purpose of assessment or evaluation is to determine a) who should receive special education services, b) what instructional services and monitoring a student will need for meaningful educational benefit, and c) where the student's special education services can be most effective. The goal of all evaluations, whether district initiated or independent is to aid in developing an appropriate program to meet the child's needs. To develop an appropriate program, an

assessment collects information for the purpose of making decisions about students (Salivia, Ysseldyke, & Bolt, 2006). The authors (2006) described the assessment process as involving many decisions, including: pre-referral classroom decisions, entitlement decisions, programming decisions, and accountability/outcome decisions. Assessments gather information from many sources, including: test data, work samples and the results of observations, interviews, and screenings (Yell, 2012). The federal regulation on referrals requires that schools must promptly seek parental consent to evaluate a child for special education, under regular timeframes, if the child has not made adequate progress when provided with appropriate instruction and whenever the child is referred for an evaluation (see IDEA 2004, 34 C.F.R. § 300.309(c)) (Martin, n.d.).

Legal and Civil Rights Considerations of Disproportionality

Most literature on the overrepresentation of students of color cites Dunn (1968) and Deno (1970) as the founding researchers on this issue. Dunn (1968) is considered a seminal piece as the first researcher to question why segregated special education classes were predominately minority and/or low income/low status backgrounds in the post-Brown v. Board of Education Era. He questioned the equity and ethics of the situation and introduced the idea of overrepresentation being a civil rights concern and unconstitutional. Deno (1970) another seminal researcher, first described the model designed to create different systems for more individualized instruction. The systems and model led to the fundamental concept framing the field of modern special education. The model highlights the varying levels of support in schools for students in special education ranging from the least restrictive (such as a more fully integrated general education

classroom) to the least integrated (such as a more restrictive self-contained classroom, fully segregated school, or residential institution).

Coutinho & Oswald (2000) suggested that most stakeholders who view overrepresentation in special education/EBD as a problem reflect a general belief that the proportion of children who have a disability should be about the same across all race/ethnicity groups. Furthermore, they argued that if the proportion for one race/ethnicity group is substantially different from the proportion for another group, then the system for identifying children with disabilities is not working the same way across groups. They also suggested that if identification confers some benefit, or imposes some stigma, then the system is not only working differently, but it is discriminatory. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Heller, Holtzman, and Messick (1982) suggested that disproportionality is a problem if students are invalidly placed in such programs due to poor-quality instruction or if the special education program blocks progress and reduces the likelihood of returning to the regular classroom.

The notion of improper educational placement and equity is grounded in much of the current literature and research on disproportionality. For example, Blanchett, Mumford and Beachum (2005), similar to Dunn (1968), grounded their argument in constitutional rights, arguing that African-American students were not receiving an equitable education. The problem is also expanded upon in the literature concerning the long-term ramifications and implications for students labeled and placed in the disability category EBD. The National High School Center (2007) reviewed data from the Department of Education and in 2001-2002 and 61.2% of students with EBD, ages 14

and older dropped out of high school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007 p.1). Fifty-eight percent of students with EBD were arrested within three to five years of leaving school; this figure rose to 73% for students who dropped out (Wagner, 1995).

As noted in Chapter One, Hosp and Reschly (2003) assert that the relationship between eligibility and referral suggests that a better understanding of disproportionate representation in special education categorization requires investigation of factors affecting referral rates and processes. Sullivan and Bal (2013) noted that scholars (e.g. Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Skiba et al., 2008) have acknowledged that disproportionality is a complex, multiply determined problem shaped by a variety of interpersonal, social, environmental, cultural, and institutional forces and they have attempted to investigate many variables related to racial disparities in identification. This was one of the primary objectives of this study. Hosp and Reschly (2003) suggested that scholars have focused on special education eligibility, and limited research exists on special education referrals because most studies comparing eligibility rates of various groups use large national databases, noting referral data (disaggregated by racial group or gender) are not collected for such large databases as OCR's Compliance Report or the U.S. Department of Education's Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA. Herein lies one of the many challenges in attempting to investigate referral, eligibility, and disproportionality. Most studies of disproportionality have relied on school- or district-level datasets to explore variables related to group-level risk (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). The study of pre-referral interventions is challenging at the state level, with limited data sets in Minnesota. The Minnesota Department of Education doesn't require

local education agencies to track and submit data on pre-referral interventions or referrals for evaluations to the state for data-tracking purposes.

Overview of Pre-referral Interventions

During the late 1970s and early 1980s there was growing dissatisfaction and concern about the number of students being inappropriately identified and referred for special education, which led to efforts to expand and improve the instruction and support for struggling students in the general education setting, as an alternative to a special education referral (Nellis, 2012). According to Chalfant and Psch (1989) since the mid-1980s, the prereferral intervention process has been implemented in schools to more effectively meet the diverse needs of students who experience academic and behavior problems in the general education setting.

Historical research on pre-referral interventions has demonstrated its benefits and long-standing practice in public schools for the past thirty years. According to Nelson, Smith, Taylor, Dodd and Reavis, (1991) pre-referral interventions have been shown to reduce the need for special education services by providing assistance to students in the general education classroom a) (Graden, Casey, & Christenson, 1985), b) decrease the overidentification of students having handicaps (Graden, Casey, & Christenson, 1985), and c) facilitate the intervention of students with handicaps into the general education environment (Evan, 1990). The literature describes pre-referral interventions as systematic collaborative efforts to assist the general education teacher (Pugach & Johnson, 1989). While pre-referral interventions were originally designed to support struggling students, the practice of implementing pre-referral intervention strategies and

supports has been criticized by scholars and could even be considered flawed when turned into practice. This has prompted scholars to begin examining factors influencing the efficacy of pre-referral interventions. Harry and Klinger (2006) suggested this occurs when little attention is dedicated to pre-referral strategies or modifying the classroom environment and instruction to meet the students' needs and it, instead, focuses on child deficits that warrant special education testing.

Seminal scholars on pre-referral interventions raised critical concerns and questioned the referral-to placement process, in which Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1982) described current assessment practices in the early 1980s as teacher-driven and as operating on a deficit mindset, that the purpose of assessment is to find out what is wrong with students. In an Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services sponsored study, Algozzine et al., (1982) recommend it is time to recognize the social-political context within which the referral to placement process operates and to work rapidly to develop a defensible system for making service delivery and resource allocation decisions. Other scholars too, have held suspicions that many students are inappropriately identified for special education as a result of teacher bias or inadequate pre-referral procedures (Galvin, 1985; Koval, 1983; Oliff, 1984; Potter, Ysseldyke, Regan & Algozzine, 1983; Pugach, 1985; Speece & Cooper, 1990; Thurlow, Christenson, & Ysseldyke, 1983; White & Calhoun, 1987; Ysseldyke, Christenson, Pianta, & Algozzine, 1983).

Scholars have demonstrated the importance of the general education teacher implementing pre-referral interventions, (e.g. White & Calhoun, 1987) and have

highlighted different approaches used to disaggregate referral data. Some scholars have examined referrals by age. Lloyd, Kauffman, Landrum, and Roe (1991) studied referral records in two school systems and found regular classroom teachers initiated 74% of the referrals. Drame (2002) noted that the preponderance of initial referrals for special education occur during the first four years of elementary school. The largest group of children with disabilities receiving services is in the age range of 6 to 11 years (NCES, 1996). This is consistent with Lloyd et al. (1991), who found over 66% of students were referred in grades K-3. Both Eidle, Trsucott, Meyers, and Boyd. (1998) and Briesch, Ferguson, Volpe, and Briesch (2012) also found higher levels of referrals at the elementary level.

Historically, scholars have examined the outcomes of referrals and the rate at which a referral becomes a special education placement. Some have noted it to be about 90% (Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, Wishner, & Yoshida, 1990) where others found it to be around 75% (Algozzine, Christenson, & Ysseldyke 1982; Clarizio, 1992). It has also been reported as low as 47%-53% (Clarizio, 1992). Other scholars have attempted to examine referral rates by race but have found results inconclusive. Tobias, Cole, Zibrin, and Bodlakova (1982) found that the referral decisions of African American, White, and Hispanic teachers were influenced by the ethnicity of the students in a particular profile, highlighting that teachers were less likely to refer students of the same cultural background. They also found that White teachers overall tended to recommend special education services more often than African American or Hispanic teachers. Gottlieb, Gottlieb, and Trongone (1991) found that teachers referred minority children more often

than non-minority children and tended to refer minority students for behavioral rather than academic issues. In a meta-analysis of ten studies examining referrals to special education between 1975 and 2000, Hosp and Reschly (2003) found that both African American and Latino students were referred more often to special education than White students. Bahr, Fuchs, D., Stecker, and Fuchs, L. (1991) also noted that African American and White teachers were both likely to refer African-American students more often than students from other cultural backgrounds. Conversely, Tobias, Zibrin, and Menell (1983) found that there was no causal relationship between teacher and student ethnicity. Bahr et al., (1991) noted that there was no significant effect of teacher ethnicity on teacher ratings of difficult-to-teach students who were especially at risk for special education referral. Drame (2002), as well, did not find a significant effect for teacher ethnicity on teacher perceptions of classroom behavior or referral decisions.

Hosp and Reschly (2003) suggested challenges exist in the research of bias in referrals based on race. The authors (2003) noted early research on referral bias was often analogue, using reactions to vignettes in order to control for the variables of race (Zucker & Prieto, 1977), gender (Gregory, 1977), or SES (Lanier, 1975), while keeping other variables such as achievement consistent. Although vignettes and simulated cases have been instrumental in adding to the knowledge base, the generalization of the results of studies employing them has been questioned (Bahr et. al., 1991; Shinn, Tindal, & Spira, 1987).

Scholars have used different approaches to understand the reasoning behind teachers' decisions to refer students for pre-referral interventions. In a seminal study of

pre-referral intervention process, Ysseldyke, Pianta, Christenson, Wang, & Algozzine (1983) studied the association between the type of pre-referral interventions general education teachers used and the reasons for their referrals for formal assessment (evaluation). The researchers also asked teachers to indicate any educators and stakeholders with whom they conferred prior to making a formal referral for assessment. This study of elementary classroom teachers showed that most interventions appeared to be teacher-directed actions and only some interventions involved consultation with other staff members. Most interventions were implemented for an unspecified time period and very few interventions were related to the reason for referral.

In a follow up study, Sevick and Ysseldyke (1986) investigated the proposed and actual pre-referral interventions of general education teachers and the reason for their referrals for formal assessment. The authors found that most often students who were referred for behavioral problems needed interventions including behavioral strategies (e.g., reinforcement), conferences with the student or parents, and the modification of instructional methods (e.g., interventions used to teach an academic lesson or influence behavior).

While Ysseldyke et al., (1983) offered four broader categories for referrals (i.e. instructional methods, behavioral strategies, structural changes, and personalized help) referrals can be generalized simply as designed to support either academic or behavioral needs. Historically, academic or learning related interventions served as the primary source of referrals (Ysseldyke, Christenson, Pianta, & Algozzine, 1983; Lloyd et al., (1991).

During the 1980s, the phrase “at risk” emerged from the argot of actuaries and epidemiologists and entered the vernacular of educators (Kaufmann, Wong, Lloyd, Hung, & Pullen, 1990). The term “at risk” in an educational context, was presumed if failure was likely either in school or life (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989). The definition and perception of “at risk” in an educational context could be influenced by conditions in students’ lives both in and out of school. The relationship between teachers’ expectations and demands for classroom behavior, their judgments, and how teachers perceive students behavior as “at-risk” likely influences a teacher’s decision to recommend a formalized behavioral pre-referral intervention and is an example of what Hosp and Reschly (2003) described as factors affecting referral rates and processes. This was a focal point of this study.

Tillery, Varjas, Meyers, and Collins (2010) offered a simplistic interpretation of student behavior, suggested teachers defined behavior simply as “how a child acts” and considered that behavior was a reaction or response to environmental stimuli and situations (e.g. “The way a child reacts to certain situations”). Staff interpretation of students and student behavior is particularly noteworthy for studies relating to disability categories that Losen and Orfield (2002) described as more subjective in nature (i.e., rely on school professionals’ judgment over medical or physiological indicators, specific learning disability, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, speech language impairment, and other health impairment).

To develop a better understanding of the role of teachers in referring students for behavioral interventions and implementing behavioral interventions, researchers have

examined how teachers perceive problematic, at-risk, or negative behavior (Kokkinos, Panayiotou, & Davazoglou, 2005; Little, 2005). Understanding teachers' perspectives about behaviorism is an essential element of implementing prevention focused initiatives because their perspectives likely influence their choice of behavior management strategies (Tillery et al., 2010). These studies have constructed a better understanding of how individual teachers select students for interventions, seek assistance for support, implement interventions, and determine efficacy of behavioral interventions.

Prior research in this area utilized surveys (Nungesser & Watkins, 2005), vignettes (Wilson, Gutkin, Hagen, & Oats, 1998), or rating scales (Skinner & Hales, 1992) to obtain teacher perceptions. In the assessment of teacher standards and expectations (e.g. Hersh & Walker, 1983; Kaufmann et al., 1991), researchers found a strong consensus regarding the unacceptability of maladaptive behavior that threatens the teacher's classroom control.

Drame (2002) examined teacher perception of behavior and its relationship to their decision to refer, and found that teachers who believe that behaviors such as poor task orientation, aggression, and impulsiveness constituted a learning disability were more likely to refer when confronted with those behaviors. The author (2002) also found that teachers at schools without a clearly defined pre-referral model reported that they would be more likely to refer students with negative academic or interpersonal behaviors than did teachers at schools that implemented either a multidisciplinary or consultative referral program, which is consistent with Safron and Safron's (1996) findings. Drame (2002) also noted teachers might be more influenced by negative, nonacademic behaviors

than by academic behaviors when making a referral for a special education evaluation because they demonstrated less tolerance for such behaviors. Similarly, Briesch et al., (2012) studied teacher perceptions of social-emotional and behavior referral concerns and found general education teachers had three times more referrals for externalized behaviors.

While at-risk behaviors were noted, attention related problems were the source, according Lloyd et al., (1991) of nearly 25% of referrals. While some have studied the appropriateness of attention interventions (Klein, 1979; Snider, 1987), studies have shown that teachers consider attentiveness a behavior that warrants an intervention (Hersh & Walker, 1983; Kauffman, Wong, Lloyd, Hung, & Pullen, 1991). Within a sociocultural framework, Kauffman, et al. (1991), in an expansion of their own study (1989) found teachers highly valued behaviors related to good academic performance, good work habits, compliance, and motivation. The teachers were unaccepting of highly aggressive and noncompliant behaviors, as well as behaviors that disturbed classroom routines.

Lloyd et al. (1991) found that boys were referred more than girls, and girls were referred more often for internalizing behavior. Several of the early scholars on referrals examined factors influencing referrals including teacher and student demographics, and probability of referrals leading to special education eligibility (Bryan, Bay, Shelden, & Simon, 1990; Giesbrecht & Routh, 1979; Lloyd, Kauffman, & Gansneder, 1987; McIntyre, 1988; Potter et al., 1983; Pugach, 1985; Riffle, 1985; Speece & Cooper, 1990;

Tobias, Cole, Zibrin, & Bodlakova, 1982; Tobias, Zibrin, & Mennell, 1983; White & Calhoun, 1987; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1980).

Limited scholarship exists on teacher perceptions of implementing interventions (e.g. Rubinson, 2002). Scholarship does exist on how teachers perceive the pre-referral intervention process, but it primarily focuses on pre-referral interventions and their function within the structure and supports of a school, including Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Response to Intervention (RTI), and intervention teams. A brief overview of literature in these areas demonstrates the evolution of pre-referral interventions into complex intervention frameworks, interconnectedness of school support systems, and a more all-encompassing definition of supporting students who may be “at-risk” in the pre-referral intervention process.

The General Education Teacher

Limited scholarship exists in recent publications on teachers’ perceptions of the pre-referral intervention process. Some seminal pieces on the pre-referral intervention process called for the investigation of the teachers’ perspectives and highlighted the need for further research in this area, which served as a basis for this research project.

Mamlin and Harris (1998) studied the perception of three general education teachers in the pre-referral intervention process. They found that while teachers were generally positive about the process, concerns emerged about the process length, documentation requirements, and the need to convince the team, specifically the psychologist, that the student needed special education services.

Slonski-Fowler and Truscott (2004) investigated the perceptions of general education teachers using a different approach. Mamlin and Harris (1998) focused on three teachers at a small elementary school, Slonski-Fowler and Truscott (2004) conducted an ethnographic study examining the perceptions of twelve teachers, grades K-4 in two elementary schools, with the specific goals of: a) understanding the teachers' perceptions of the pre-referral intervention team, (PIT) process, meetings, and recommendations and b) elucidating how those perceptions may have affected the teachers' participation. Using data from observations and interviews, the authors found teachers' perspectives focused on three areas of concern: 1) teachers' input was devalued or ignored by the intervention team, 2) intervention strategies suggested by the team were limited and lacked clarity, or 3) the intervention team demonstrated little accountability for implementation and outcomes.

Scholarship on teachers' perceptions of intervention teams informs the investigation of the teacher's roles in the pre-referral intervention process. Studies have found teachers have high levels of satisfaction of intervention teams (Costas, Rosenfield, & Gravois, 2003; Rankin & Aksamit, 1994). McDougal, Clonan, and Martens (2000) found teachers were comfortable with participation on the teams and the intervention process. While many studies of teacher perception have been associated with positive experiences, barriers and concerns have been noted. For example, Chalfant & Pysch (1989) found 88% of teachers found the pre-referral process positive, yet 12%, viewed it as negative due to concerns with the functioning of the team, including time constraints

of meetings, interference with special educational assessments, issues with initiation, and limited impact on student performance.

Scholars have investigated why teachers may have perceived components of the pre-referral process as negative. Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) suggested teachers may have felt that interventions generated by the consultation teams lacked sufficient magnitude to produce the desired change, or they may have lacked enough confidence to implement the interventions in the context of the general education setting. In some studies (e.g. Traylor, 1982), general education teachers believed they had less influence than parents and special education teachers at these meetings and served passive roles. Lane, Pierson, Robertson, and Little (2004) found only 61.84% of interventions created target important goals, while only 47.34% of teachers rated the outcomes as highly desired.

Wilson, Gutkin, Hagen, and Oats (1998) used semi-structured interviews from twenty general education teachers to examine their knowledge and usage of classroom interventions and problem-solving processes. The study used a referral case and a student with special needs from each teacher's class. Using a standardized vignette, teachers described problems, goals, interventions, data collection, and consultation practices across the entire pre-referral intervention process (referral, pre-referral intervention, implementation, and post-referral). The study found that many teachers did not perceive the pre-referral intervention team as a useful intervention resource, but as another step prior to securing special education evaluation. These teachers referred the students to the intervention team with the mindset that little more could be done except complete

necessary paperwork and go through the motions of a referral for evaluation. Equally noteworthy, the authors (1998) found teachers tended to confuse the pre-referral intervention team with the building multidisciplinary team or their meetings with their teaching team, and were uncertain as to whether or not they had actually had an official pre-referral intervention team meeting prior to recommending the child for special education evaluation.

Furthermore, the authors (1998) found that 71% of teachers were unable to specifically describe the interventions that were recommended by the pre-referral intervention team. The authors concluded that the inability to describe interventions was associated with an inability to implement them. Additionally, the authors found the perceptions and mindset of teachers to be concerning. The authors indicated 80% of teachers entered the pre-referral process with the intention to refer the child for a special education evaluation prior to holding the first meeting.

Similarly, using qualitative data, Meyers, Valentino, Meyers, Boretti, and Brent (1996) found teachers held mixed beliefs regarding the goals of the intervention team. Some teachers believed that the team's function was to address problems or prevent special education referrals and placement, while others found the process delayed what the child really needed--a placement in special education.

Scholars have investigated the attitudes, mindsets, and perceptions of teachers by examining the role of general education teachers on intervention or child study teams. If a teacher needs to implement a pre-referral intervention, it's likely done with, or through

the support of the intervention, or child study team, which many states either recommend or require (Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Snaborn, & Frank, 2005).

Lane, Mahdavi, and Borthwick-Duffy (2003) explored teacher expectations of the pre-referral intervention team processes and examined general education elementary teachers' perceptions of the need for direct support in implementing the proposed interventions. The authors (2003) asked eighty teachers to complete a 15-item survey on the pre-referral intervention process. The authors' results indicated that the majority of the teachers expected to acquire classroom interventions, obtain professional support, and, to a lesser extent, inform parents of a concern. They also found that more than half the teachers wanted support and were in favor of in-class demonstrations of interventions. They also investigated the desire of teachers wanting implementation support, finding when teachers perceived students as having more severe problems; they were less inclined to favor implementation support. The authors offered several possible explanations, suggesting teachers may have felt that individual differences were too great for the student to be successfully taught in the general education setting (e.g. O'Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2003) or that teachers may have felt that interventions generated by the support teams lacked sufficient magnitude (e.g. Walker et al., 1995) to produce the desired change.

The results of Lane, Mahdavi, and Borthwick-Duffy (2003) illuminated the perception of general education teachers and their roles within intervention teams. "Results from this study suggest that teachers believe one such mechanism for improving the outcomes of pre-referral interventions may be in the adoption of some of the key

features of direct behavioral consultation, specifically, in-class demonstrations and follow-up assistance” (Lane, Mahdavi, & Borthwick-Duffy, 2003, p. 155). This study established the importance of supporting teachers when implementing pre-referral interventions, but doesn’t investigate if supports, such as a behavioral consultation, impacted the implementation, or efficacy of pre-referral interventions. Lane, Mahdavi, and Borthwick-Duffy acknowledged their limitations, highlighting the small sample size, the methods of selecting participants based on convenience, and the omissions of student outcomes in their study.

In a follow-up study, Lane, Pierson, Robertson, and Little (2004) addressed these concerns and limitations by expanding their study to 354 teachers at sixteen elementary schools in two school districts. Participating teachers completed a brief, anonymous questionnaire on the interventions generated by their respective pre-referral intervention teams and the role of direct assistance in implementation of these interventions. The authors noted the majority of the teachers indicated that the interventions targeted important goals (61.84%), contained acceptable procedures (58.16%), and were implemented with a high degree of fidelity (55.47%). They found it concerning that, “only 47.34% of the teachers rated the outcomes as highly desirable” (Lane, Pierson, Robertson, & Little, 2004, p. 436). The authors (2004) noted teachers who received follow-up support rated it very positively. An alarming concern regarding student outcomes, while not the focus of this study, was that 63% of students who received interventions from the pre-referral intervention team remained in general education, but

still were experiencing some difficulties. The remaining 37% were referred or placed in special education.

Support Frameworks

The literature on support systems informs the investigation of teachers' roles in the pre-referral intervention process. With the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), an increase in prevention and early intervention efforts received greater attention in general education settings (National Assessment of IDEA Overview, 2011). Some schools call this framework RTI.

RTI has been around since the 1980s (Fuchs, D. & Fuchs, L., 2006) and originated as a method for changing the identification process for students suspected of having a learning disability. RTI stemmed from a critique of the previous identification process, which was founded on an IQ discrepancy approach and that many (Fuchs, D., Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003) called a "wait to fail model." The RTI movement enabled public education in the United States to evolve from a reactive model in which students had to seriously deteriorate before being moved on to special education programs, to one that emphasizes early and high-quality research-based interventions in regular programs that generate useful data with which to make key decisions for each struggling student (Martin, n.d.).

RTI is a framework that many schools have adopted to help students who are struggling academically and is typically associated with three levels of intervention. The RTI eligibility determination model, in addition to IDEA, shifts from the previous evaluation focus of looking for within-child deficits as evidence of disability to a broader

and more contextual analysis of day-to-day interactions and institutional infrastructures that impact student achievement and behavior (Harris-Murri, King, & Rosenberg, 2006). RTI refers to the practice of providing high-quality, multi-tiered instruction and interventions matched to students' needs, monitoring student progress frequently, and evaluating data on student progress to determine the need for special education support (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L., 2006). Depending on the model and implementation, the RTI-based intervention model typically has three to four levels and general education teachers are likely have a role in each tiered level of support. This illustration serves as an example of how a multi-tiered intervention model may look within a public school using RTI:

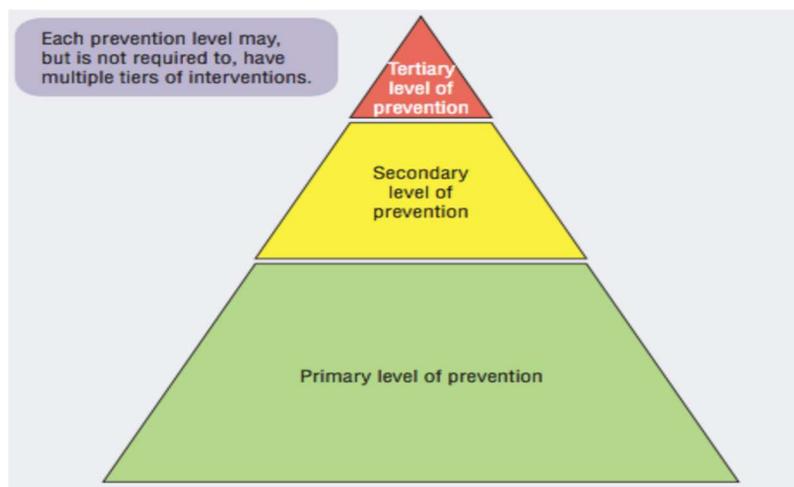


Figure 3: RTI: Multi-Tiered Intervention Model. Edcite Schools: RTI for the 21st Century. Levels of Preventions. Edcite. Retrieved from: <https://www.edcite.com/response-to-intervention>

Depending upon implementation at the specific state or district, teachers often hold primary responsibility for instruction at Tiers 1 and 2 (Rinaldi, Averill, & Stuart, 2011; Sullivan and Long, 2010). When students do not adequately respond to the higher

tiered intervention, they either qualify for special education or for an evaluation for possible placement in special education (Fuchs, D., Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003).

Klinger and Edwards (2006) shared that Tier 3 interventions utilize the support of a child study team to develop an intervention and that a fourth tier addresses the need for assessment through an evaluation.

Within the past decade, intervention models have developed and expanded into a more comprehensive model often referred to as Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS). MTSS may include RTI, but in addition to academics, it may cover social, emotional, or behavioral supports. Prasse et al. (2012) referred to it as MTSS/RTI, while others (e.g. Reschly, 2014) may simply refer to the merging of RTI and school-wide positive behavior supports at MTSS. Essentially, MTSS is the integration of several tiered implementation models into one coherent, combined system meant to address the layered domains of education including literacy and social competence (Lane, Menzies, Ennis, & Bezdek, 2013).

MTSS is more than just a process of providing interventions to a small group of students; rather, it is a school reform model, and with it comes a new way of thinking and doing business in education (Harlacher, Sakelaris, & Kattelman, 2014). Within an MTSS framework, schools are addressing students' social and emotional needs through school-wide positive behavior support. Similar to RTI, School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) uses three prevention tiers to organize effective social skills instruction and behavioral interventions along a continuum of increasing intensity (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Since 1997 SWPBS has been implemented in thousands of schools across the

United States (Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009). The implementation tiers for both RTI and SWPBS include universal screening and supports for all students, tier two strategies for early intervention when students are not responding to tier one, and intensive and individualized planning processes at tier three for students who are experiencing academic or behavioral challenges (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). Universal screening measures consist of brief assessments focused on target skills (e.g., phonological awareness) that are highly predictive of future outcomes (Jenkins, 2003).

SWPBS is not a specific curriculum, intervention, or practice, but a decision-making framework that guides selection, integration, and implementation of scientifically based academic and behavioral practices for improving academic and behavior outcome for all students (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Additionally, the authors (2009) shared that a central feature of SWPBS is implementation of behavioral practices throughout the entire school and is a practice that all students experience in all parts of the school at all times of the day.

Scholars have outlined tiered-levels of support that schools have used to implement SWPBS. The first level of supports (Tier I) is the establishment of a universal or core social behavior curriculum that applies to all students and staff across all settings (Lewis, Jones, Horner, & Sugai, 2010). The second level of supports-small group or Tier II-is focused on students who are not responding to universal supports, but are not displaying intense and chronic behavior problems (Horner & Sugai, 2005). Tier III supports are more individualized, frequent, and intensive (Gersten et al., 2008).

SWPBS is also referred to as positive behavioral intervention and supports

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS). PBIS can be used interchangeably with SWPBS (Sugai, 2016). The following graphic illustrates the overlap between PBIS and RTI within MTSS:

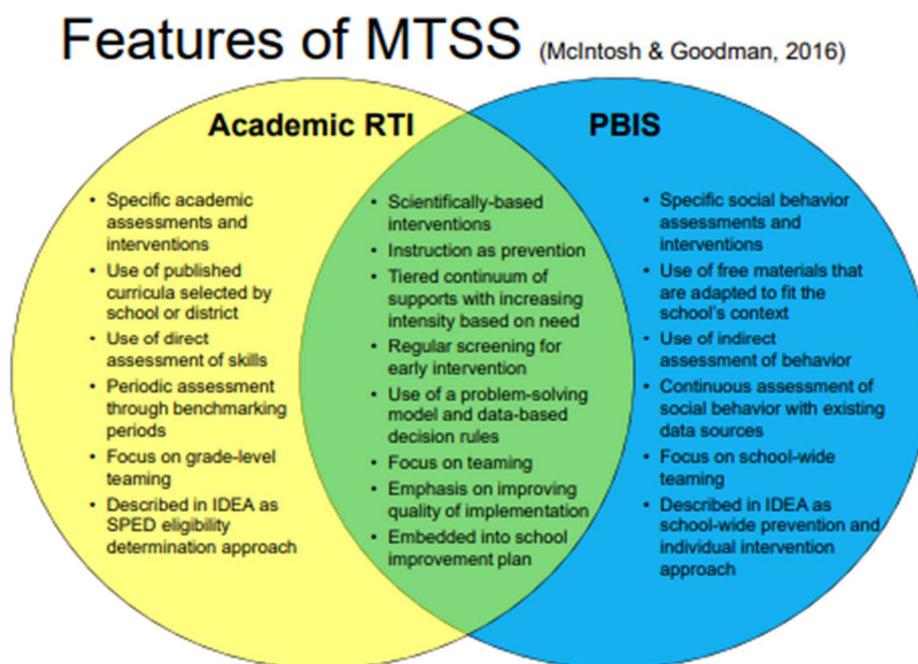


Figure 4: Features of MTSS: RTI & PBIS, McIntosh K., Goodman S. (2016). *Integrated multi-tiered systems of support: Blending RTI and PBIS*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

MTSS has emerged as the new way to think about both disability identification and early intervention assistance for children in need, which many (e.g. Fuchs and Deshler, 2007) describe as the most vulnerable, academically unresponsive children. The following illustration summarizes how RTI and MTSS may look when implemented:

Designing Schoolwide Systems for Student Success

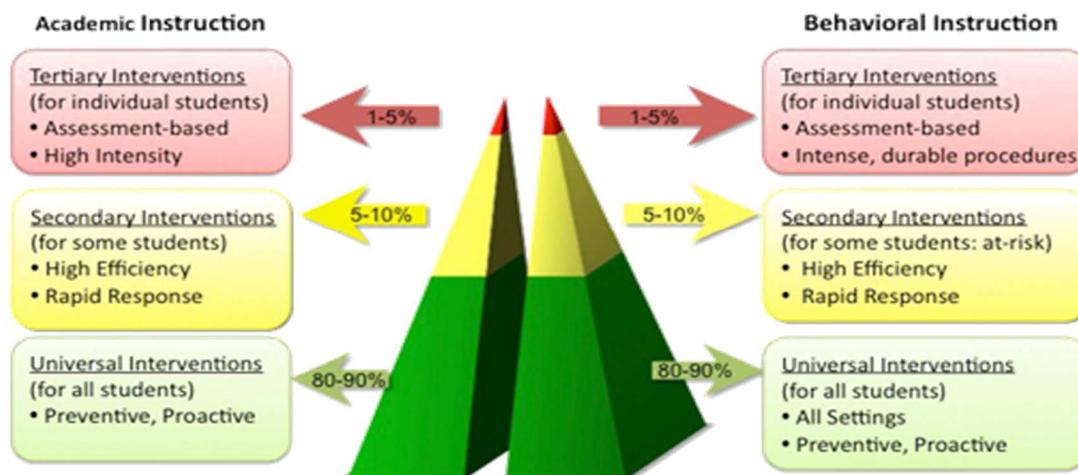


Figure 5: MTSS/RTI & PBIS Triangle. Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS & PBIS). What is Multi-tiered System of Support? Retrieved from: <https://www.pbis.org/school/mtss>

This graphic illustrates RTI and SWPBS/PBIS working in conjunction. Similar to the RTI triangle previously presented, the graphic is shown with three tiers. Each tier corresponds with the percentages of students recommended at each respective tier. The RTI Action Network, a program of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, suggested,

One guideline for MTSS implementation is having approximately 80% of the students reach the benchmark criteria established by the screening tool. If the percentage is significantly lower than 80%, buildings should intensify their focus on improving Tier 1 instruction for two reasons: 1) buildings do not have the

resources to intervene with a large percentage of students and 2) you cannot

‘intervene’ your way out of core instruction that is not effective (Metcalf, n.d.).

Wright (2012) suggested in a typical school, 10-15% of students may require Tier 2 interventions and about 1-5% of students may require intensive Tier 3 interventions.

Fuchs, D. and Fuchs, L. (2006) noted 10-15% of students at the Tier 2 level and 3-5% of students at Tier 3. In the illustration provided, this MTSS model recommended 5-10% of students receive Tier 2 and 1-5% receive Tier 3. The difference in percentages of students referred to receive Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions has been noted in the literature.

Harlacher, Sanford, and Walker (2014) stated that understanding the differences between tiers, particularly Tier 2 and Tier 3, may be difficult for several reasons related to the varying descriptions of Tier 2 and Tier 3 in the literature. Scholars have varied on the frequency of students receiving services, varying from Tier 2 occurring a handful of times a week (e.g. Brown-Chidsey, Bronaugh, & McGraw, 2009) to daily (e.g. Chard & Harn, 2008; Denton, Fletcher, Simos, Papanicolaou, & Anthony, 2007). Scholars have also described different formats of implementation, ranging from small groups of four to eight students for Tier 2 and one to three students for Tier 3 (Chard & Harn, 2008), or groups of one to three students (Algozzine et al., 2008; Denton et al., 2007).

Researchers have examined teacher perceptions of MTSS and/or RTI, but this review acknowledges limited research on teacher perceptions of MTSS, as it is still relatively new, though widely practiced approach, adopted in public education. The majority of research on teacher perceptions of intervention frameworks has been focused on RTI. Proponents of RTI have argued that the approach is unique in that it creates a

preventative model for the instruction of at-risk students and reduces inappropriate referrals to special education (Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L., 2006; Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Scholars have investigated whether teachers understand RTI by researching their perceptions, experiences, and roles. Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, and Cardarelli (2010) studied whether teachers viewed the introduction of RTI into a school as a means to support and benefit students. Using a qualitative analysis of interview samples of teachers and ancillary staff at a single elementary school, the authors (2010) found teachers supported the addition of an RTI intervention framework. The majority of teachers associated the following positive outcomes with the first year of reform: using data to inform instructional planning, using progress monitoring to measure the effectiveness of the instruction, and better knowing when to refer English language learners for special education services.

Ashton and Webb (1986) defined teacher efficacy as the belief that teachers develop relative to their influence upon student learning and behavioral outcomes. Nunn, Lantz, and Butikofer (2009) examined teacher efficacy beliefs and RTI outcomes. Using data from 429 school personnel trained in RTI in a single district, the authors (2009) revealed significant relationships between teacher belief in their efficacy of RTI implementation and outcomes. The study revealed that teachers held positive beliefs in the positive student outcomes of RTI. In another study, Tillery, Varjas, Meyers and Collins (2010) studied general education teacher perceptions of behavior management and intervention strategies. Using in-depth interviews, the authors found teachers were unfamiliar with RTI and PBIS, despite staff development and training occurring during

the timeframe of the study. The authors' findings suggested that additional training was needed for teachers to understand the framework designed to support students.

Professional Learning Communities

The pre-referral intervention process has evolved into a complex, collaborative process that may involve a series of systems and sub-systems within a school. A process and collaborative framework that's emerged in the 21st century in public schools has been the adoption of professional learning communities (PLC). The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The essential role of any professional learning community (PLC) is to provide a collaborative context in which teachers can reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between their practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and enhance learning for the students they teach (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). A successful PLC team collaborates both formally and informally (Hallam, Smith, Hite, J., Hite, S., Wilcox, 2015). Both the informal and formal interactions between staff members contribute to the functioning of a school.

When teachers encounter problems with their practice, they first look to solve them through casual conversations with colleagues that occur spontaneously in workrooms and lounges, on bus duty and in school cafeterias, or while supervising students in hallways and on playgrounds (Hardman, 2012). Conversations, or teachers interacting with each other is a form of collaboration, a central tenet of PLCs. Dufour (2004), a leading scholar on PLCs noted,

The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement (p. 6).

An effective PLC requires the collaborative efforts of administrators and teams of teachers, and the degree of trust within the school's collaborative culture significantly affects PLC effectiveness relative to the performance of students (Bryk & Schneider, 2004; Forsyth, Barnes, & Adams, 2006). The role of trust and collaboration, conditions influencing professional learning communities will be examined in the findings chapters.

Some scholars have suggested PLCs, RTI and MTSS are systems that are all interconnected. Some scholars have suggested that RTI and PLCs are critical to system change (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Buffum et al. (2009) wrote,

The essential characteristics of a PLC are perfectly aligned with the fundamental elements of response to intervention. Quite simply, PLC and RTI are complementary processes, built upon a proven research base of best practices and designed to produce the same outcome—high levels of student learning (p. 49).

Dulaney, Hallam, and Wall (2013) presented that educators operating within MTSS become part of a system that supports high functioning PLCs that have at their core RTI practices of problem solving and data-driven decision making—practices which may become engrained in state, district, and school cultures.

Organizational Development and Theory

The possible overlap of PLCs, MTSS, and RTI imbedded within the pre-referral intervention process are all school structures that involve multiple stakeholders working independently and collaboratively to improve the education of all students. The literature on the pre-referral intervention process covered in this review is applicable to the literature on how schools function and operate and is applicable to the literature on organizational theory, development, and improvement.

Organizational development as a system-wide application and transfer of behavioral science knowledge to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of the strategies, structures, and processes that lead to organization effectiveness (Cummings and Worley, 2014). Organization structure describes how the overall work of the organization is divided into sub-units and how these sub-units are coordinated for task completion (Cummings and Worley, 2014). A sub-unit of a public school and the site of this study is the school's intervention team. The authors (2014) shared that the primary inputs to understanding group effectiveness is the organization's design, including its strategy, structure, and culture. The approach, structure, and culture of the study site are initially addressed in Chapter Four. The authors discuss group processes to promote effective interactions which include: communications, functional roles of group members, group problem-solving and decision-making, group norms, and the use of leadership and authority. These are all examples of characteristics demonstrated by a school's child study or intervention team. Each component is applicable to the pre-referral intervention process. The characteristics of high performing

teams, noted by Katzenbach and Smith's (1993) research, highlighted six distinguishing, high quality characteristics that are relevant to a school's intervention team as well.

The subsequent chapters highlight the role of faculty within the building and their involvement within this school's intervention team and the pre-referral intervention process in general. Cummings and Worley (2015) presented four key elements of employee involvement: power, information, knowledge/skills, and rewards. The role of teacher involvement was noted throughout the literature review and will be highlighted throughout this study. Furthermore, the examination of the pre-referral intervention process lends itself to their text and research on coaching/mentoring, organizational culture, and culture change. In a sense, the examination of the pre-referral intervention process is a snapshot of how the overall organization functions and operates.

A school culture may be defined as the guiding beliefs and expectations evident in the way a school operates (Fullan, 2007). Scholars have examined the similarities and differences between the constructs of climate and culture in schools. Van Houttee (2005) noted the compared definitions in a review of the literature, stating, "During the 1990s, the concepts of culture and climate began to appear together, and their similarities and differences began to be discussed" (e.g., Denison, 1996; Glisson, 2000; Hoy, 1990; Reichers & Schneider, 1990; Rentsch, 1990).

Culture concerns values, meanings, and beliefs, while climate concerns the perception of those values, meanings, and beliefs (Owens, 1987). Furthermore, Peterson and Deal (1998) defined culture as the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that have built up over time as people work together, solve

problems, and confront challenges. Similarly, Marzano, (2003) suggested a school's culture has to do with professionalism and collegiality— whether teachers believe and act as if they can achieve positive outcomes for students and whether they support each other, working collaboratively to achieve common goals.

Scholars have highlighted the importance of school culture. Numerous studies of school change have identified a positive school culture as critical to the successful improvement of teaching and learning (Fullan, 1998, 2001, 2011; Leithwood & Louis, 1998; Rossman, Corbett, & Firestone, 1998; Smylie, 2009). Deal and Peterson (2016) wrote that contemporary research continues to point to the impact of school culture on a variety of important outcomes. In a major meta-analysis of research on leadership and student achievement, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) discovered a strong correlation between aspects of school culture and how well students performed. Similarly, Deal and Peterson (2016) offered several examples of the functions and impact of school culture:

- Culture fosters school effectiveness and productivity,
- Culture improves collegiality, communication, and problem solving,
- Culture promotes innovation and improvement,
- Culture builds commitment and kindles motivation,
- Culture focuses attention on what is important and valued.

In the forthcoming findings, trust and leadership are presented as two notable characteristics embedded within the culture of the school in this study. The concept of trust is simple, yet can be complex. Blish (2016) offered the following view of trust,

which will provide the foundation of how trust is viewed in this study. The author (2016) shared,

Trust is a dynamic, interpersonal link between people, with unique implications for the workplace. Trust is defined as an expectation or belief that one can rely on another person's actions and words and that the person has good intentions to carry out their promises. Trust is most meaningful in situations in which one party is at risk or vulnerable to another party (p. 21).

Similarly, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) leading scholars on trust in schools defined trust as one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that is (a) benevolent; (b) reliable; (c) competent; (d) honest; and (e) open (see table 1). Furthermore, the authors noted that building trust takes time and patience, requiring effort and risks by everyone involved. Tschannen-Moran (2004) defined five facets of trust in schools, which was adopted for the forthcoming analysis:

- *Benevolence*: Caring, extending good will, having positive intentions, supporting teachers, expressing appreciation, being fair, guarding confidential information
- *Honesty*: Having integrity, telling the truth, keeping promises, honoring agreements, having authenticity, accepting responsibility, avoiding manipulation, being true to oneself
- *Openness*: Engaging in open communication, sharing important information, delegating, sharing decision making, sharing power
- *Reliability*: Having consistency, being dependable, demonstrating commitment, having dedication, being diligent

- *Competence*: Setting an example, engaging in problem solving, fostering conflict resolution, working hard, pressing for results, setting standards, handling difficult situations, being flexible

Intervention/Consultation Teams

Within the framework of multi-tiered interventions, general education teachers operate within the support and consultation of a child study team. Depending on the system within the specific district or school, this team may decide the type of pre-referral intervention or make the decision to begin an initial evaluation for special education services. Klinger and Edwards (2006) noted that in a multi-tiered support system, Tier 3 utilizes interventions that are developed through the support of a child study team. Lane, Mahdavi, and Borthwick-Duffy (2003) described the operations of a child study team,

After giving the teacher time to implement the suggested interventions, the team may reconvene to discuss the progress made by the child and to determine what further action needs to be taken. The team may refine the suggested interventions to continue working with the child in the general education setting, discontinue the process if the problem leading to referral is solved, or refer the child to special education for assessment to determine whether she is qualified for special education services (p. 149).

Pre-referral intervention teams are known by many names, including Teacher Assistance Teams, Student Study Teams, and Child Study Teams (Lane, Mahdavi, & Borthwick-Duffy, 2003). Usually a teacher who completes a referral form brings the student to the attention of a school's multidisciplinary team (MDT) (Yell, 2012).

Membership typically includes general educators, parents, administrators, and experts such as special education teachers, school psychologists, and counselors (Rankin & Aksamit, 1994). Similarly, Yell (2012) described the MDT's membership as typically composed of an administrator, special education teacher, regular education teacher, and a school psychologist. This team serves as decision makers regarding whether or not a student should receive a complete evaluation. However, without a federal mandate providing clear guidelines for specific pre-referral intervention practices are implemented in varied ways within and between the states (Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, & Cook, 2003).

Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, & Frank (2005) studied the status of pre-referral intervention teams (PIT). The authors found about two-thirds of the fifty states (and District of Columbia) (69%) mandate pre-referral interventions of some type. Forty-one percent reported that they mandate PITs, and 44% recommend them, making a total of 86% that either require or recommend PITs. Buck et al., (2003) suggested that one factor contributing to whether or not states require the implementation of pre-referral intervention programs might be the degree of importance that states assign to these programs. Although Buck et al., (2003) and Truscott et al. (2005) reported that 63% and 64%, respectively, of the states provided training, Truscott et al., (2005) found that 81% of the training was provided by the local education agency. These findings suggest that even though states may mandate the implementation of pre-referral intervention programs, there is no uniform training approach for their implementation (Sandidge, 2007).

In Minnesota, schools have a PIT or MDT team that oversees interventions, often called the student assistance team, child study team, child find, collaborative, or pre-referral intervention team. The authorities at the Minnesota Department of Education interpret Minnesota statute by advising,

Each school district develops its own child find procedures for referring a student who is suspected of having a disability. The group of persons who discuss a teacher and/or parent's concern(s) and develop the pre-referral interventions is often called a child study team. The child study team is comprised of general education and special education staff. The team may invite the parent to discuss the student's needs and obtain parental input in developing the pre-referral interventions (Individualized Education Program, (IEP), Evaluations, and Eligibility, n.d.)

In response to the growing dissatisfaction and concern about special education and the large number of students being inappropriately identified and referred for services in the late 1970s and early 1980s, efforts began to expand and improve the instruction and supports available to struggling students in the general education setting as an alternative to referral for special education. Central to these efforts were team-based pre-referral processes designed to increase general education teachers' capacity to meet the curricular, instructional, and behavioral challenges of struggling students (Nelis, 2012). When Chalfant, Pysh, and Moultrie (1979) originally articulated the concept of a team format for school-based consultation, the authors argued that benefits would accrue as teachers experienced support from their colleagues. Despite the original intent of

helping teachers and students in general education, Bahr and Kovaleski (2006) noted that such teams have persistently been linked to special education and specifically to decisions related to referral for special education evaluation.

Pre-referral intervention teams represent one of the most inconsistently implemented practices in education (Buck et al., 2003). To better understand intervention teams, scholars have examined the functioning of these teams (Lembke, Garman, Deno & Stecker, 2010) and how the teams discuss students (Fuchs, D., Fuchs, L., Bahr, Eemstrom, & Stecker, 1990), types of interventions recommended, (Bailey, 2010) and whether or not decisions were made prior to the meeting taking place (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 1982; Mehan et al., 1986). Mehan et al. (1986) argued that there is more to this process than simply reflecting students' measured abilities or their background characteristics. Moore, Fifield, Spira, & Scarlato (1989) found that large teams with poorly defined organizational structures did not seem to be effective at making decisions and their decisions tended to be made by one or two team members. Gutkin and Nemeth (1997) examined factors that influenced the quality of the decision-making process in pre-referral and other school-based teams. The authors noted that decisions were frequently made without achieving consensus and that it was common for some members to feel threatened by others on the team whom they perceived to have more power. Baer, Wolf, and Risely (1987) found that a related concern is the lack of correspondence between what people say they are going to do and what they actually do. Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow & Swank (1999) examined the fidelity of implementations across 500 school districts and found some teams implement with a high degree of

fidelity, while others demonstrated inconsistent implementation of interventions. In schools lacking a high degree of trust, endorsement of the pre-referral process is at risk.

Other structural forces within intervention teams have been studied and found to construct barriers to effective intervention teams and interventions. Researchers have examined time requirements (Brewer, 2010; Meyers et al., 1996), additional building-related responsibilities of staff (Doll et al., 2005), meeting efficiency (Brewer, 2010), and procedures and documentation (Doll et al., 2005; Fleming & Monda-Amaya, 2001). Other factors hindering successful teams include: lack of purpose and goal (Fleming & Monda-Amaya, 2001; Rubinson, 2002; Truscott, Cosgrove, Meyers, & Eidle-Barkman, 2000), trust and respect (Fleming & Monda-Amaya, 2001), communication (Whitten & Dieker, 1995) and treatment integrity (i.e. association between the designed and implemented intervention) (Gresham, 1989).

The impact of the implementation of pre-referral intervention teams can influence the implementation and outcomes of pre-referral interventions. Mahdavi, Borthwick-Duffy, and Lane (2001) suggested that teachers believe one mechanism for improving the outcomes of pre-referral interventions may be the adoption of some of the key features of direct behavioral consultation -- specifically, in-class demonstrations and follow-up assistance. Kovalski (2002) advocated for on-site demonstrations rather than lecture-based, group presentations. Bahr, Whitten, Dieker, Kocarek, & Manson, 1999) found that pre-referral team personnel rated teams as more effective when the process included rigorous follow-up procedures regarding the implementation of interventions. Even when some form of follow-up was provided, teams seldom used direct measures of student

outcomes, such as curriculum-based assessments or classroom behavioral observations (Rathvon, 2008). Instead, teams typically relied on verbal contacts for follow-up and teacher judgment for evaluating intervention effectiveness (Bahr, Whitten, Dieker, Kocarek, & Manson, 1999; Truscott et al., 2005).

Scholars have found benefits and impacts to implementing intervention teams. Evidence has suggested that rates of referrals to determine special education eligibility have decreased when pre-referral interventions were instituted (Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999; McDougal, Clonan, & Martens, 2000). Gravois and Rosenfield (2002) presented the results of three studies investigating the impact of consultation teams on referral patterns and indicated that overall referral and placement of students in special education was reduced when teams were implemented. The implementation of consultation teams can be challenging, the team utilizes two conflicting missions: one to assist the student in the area of concern, and the other, to demonstrate the student is not making adequate progress with an intervention, and warrants a referral for a special education evaluation (Knoteck, 2003)

Administration

The literature has demonstrated the frameworks, systems, and personnel involved in the pre-referral intervention process and possible challenges in its implementation. The literature has shaped the critical role of school-related personnel who can help make improvements to the pre-referral intervention process and support to teachers: school administrators (Lane, Mahdavi, & Borthwick-Duffy, 2003).

The participation of principals is frequently mentioned in the literature on problem-solving, consultative, or intervention teams. While some states mandate principal participation, numerous states, including Minnesota, don't require principal attendance. The literature has examined the role of administration in the function of child study teams, the pre-referral intervention process, and its possible implications. Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, and Cook (2003) found that almost half (49%) of the respondents in their study indicated that their intervention teams were led by school administrators or student service coordinators.

Administrators have the ability to empower (Blasé and Blasé, 1994), motivate (Eyal and Roth, 2011), mentor and promote intellectual growth (Popper, Mayseless, & Castellnovo, 2000) in teachers. Administrators may select or influence the type of intervention framework that functions within a specific school. Principals have the ability to offer guidance, leadership, and support, and have a better understanding and control of building and district resources. Rubinson (2002) studied problem-solving teams and found “without consistent leadership and commitment to the project from the principals, teams felt they were continually re-inventing themselves” (p. 207). The participation of administrators on intervention teams or the visible, but non-participatory, support of administrators has been linked with intervention team success (Rafoth & Foriska, 2006). Supportive school administrators allocate resources and ensure that staff members have sufficient time and training to provide the necessary support for their students (Debnam, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2011).

Administration: RTI/MTSS.

The role of administration is critical to staff feeling supported in program implementation (Rohrbach, Graham, & Hansen, 1993). DeBham, Pas, and Bradshaw (2011) examined teacher perception of administrative support in higher-tiered interventions and found that general education teachers perceived less support from administration than specialists (i.e. special education teachers) and noted positive school organizational climate was more associated with higher ratings of support. Crockett and Gillespie (2007) found principals needed to provide teachers support. Both studies, while RTI focused, highlight the critical support administrators can provide teachers. The role of principals offering support of RTI has been investigated.

Research has shown most teachers don't demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of components of RTI systems, as most respondents received a poor score on measures regarding the definition of RTI (Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, & Moore, 2014) and an understanding of its purpose (Tillery, Varjas, Meyers, & Collins, 2010). Culot (2011) interviewed practicing principals to investigate their role in managing, implementing, and evaluating RTI. The study concluded that the role of the principal is critical in successfully establishing an RTI model that has an emphasis on staff development, effective academic intervention, and student progress monitoring. The author (2011) noted results demonstrated professional development, the philosophy about intervention services being provided in or out of the general education classroom, and level of direct involvement by the principal were determining factors regarding the effectiveness of the RTI program. While this study was limited to a small sample size, it highlighted the significant role of a school principal in the pre-referral intervention process.

Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, and Moore (2014) found factors of successful implementation of RTI to include: the presence of administrative support via leadership teams (state-, district-, and school-level), collaboration between general and special education, appropriate funding, and access to necessary professional development and materials to implement evidence-based practices (e.g., universal screening measures, high-quality instruction, interventions, and progress monitoring tools) Ongoing professional development ensures school personnel have the skills and resources needed to implement and sustain evidence-based practices (Chard et al., 2008; Horner et al., 2005).

Administration: Support.

In their seminal study on school problem-solving teams, Chalfant et al. (1979) originally articulated the concept of a team format for school-based consultation and argued that benefits would accrue as teachers experienced support from their colleagues. Kruger, Struzziero, Watts, and Vacca (1995) found that administrative support was a critical aspect in the acceptance of teacher assistance teams by teachers. Lane, Mahdavi and Borhwich-Duffy (2003) found that the majority of the teachers expected to acquire classroom interventions, obtain professional support, and - to a lesser extent - inform parents of a concern from a consultation team.

Dolar (2008) examined administrative support within a broad definition, noting that not much is known about what principals actually do or say that is perceived as effective support by teachers. According to House (1981), support is a multi-dimensional concept defined by specific dimensions, including emotional support (esteem, affect,

trust, concern, listening), appraisal support (affirmation, feedback, social comparison), informational support (advice, suggestion, directives, information), and instrumental support (aid in-kind, money, labor, time, modifying environment). Literell, Billingsley, & Cross (1994) adapted these four dimensions of support to include: emotional, instrumental, informational, appraisal, and administrative.

Yoon and Gilchrist (2003) argued that the literature offers no clear definition of administrative support. Despite the expansion of intervention teams, the body of empirical research evaluating the effectiveness or specific characteristics of administrative support and outcomes of problem solving teams is limited (Rathvon, 2008). Most studies have focused on systemic outcomes (such as referral rates), reducing the disproportionate referral and placement of minority students in special education, and teacher attitudes (e.g., Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; Fuch et al., 1990; Gravois & Rosenfeld, 2006; Gutkin, Henning-Stout, & Piersel, 1988; Kovalski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999; McDougal, Clonan, & Martens, 2000; McNamara & Hollinger, 1997). Specifics and variables that have been mentioned as indicators of administrative support include: time for team meetings, support for in-service training, payment for time spent outside regular school hours, credit toward district service requirements, and clerical support for scheduling and record-keeping (Raforth & Foriska, 2006). The authors (2006) suggested that that these resources are only available from an administrative power source, either under an individual building principal's control or at the school's district level.

Evaluating effectiveness of problem-solving teams is complicated due to the diversity of models and applications (Rathvon, 2008). Raforth and Foriska (2006) argued

that in order to determine the efficacy of collaborative problem-solving teams via enhanced student outcomes, additional research on the relationship between specific variables that contribute to an interactive model of principal-teacher influence, shared instructional leadership, and specific administrative support mechanisms must be carried out. Additionally, the authors (2006) called for research on ways in which those supports affect school culture and influence successful collaboration between problem-solving teams. The authors offered the following illustration to describe a proposed model of administrator impact on problem-solving teams and different variables that may need to further investigated:

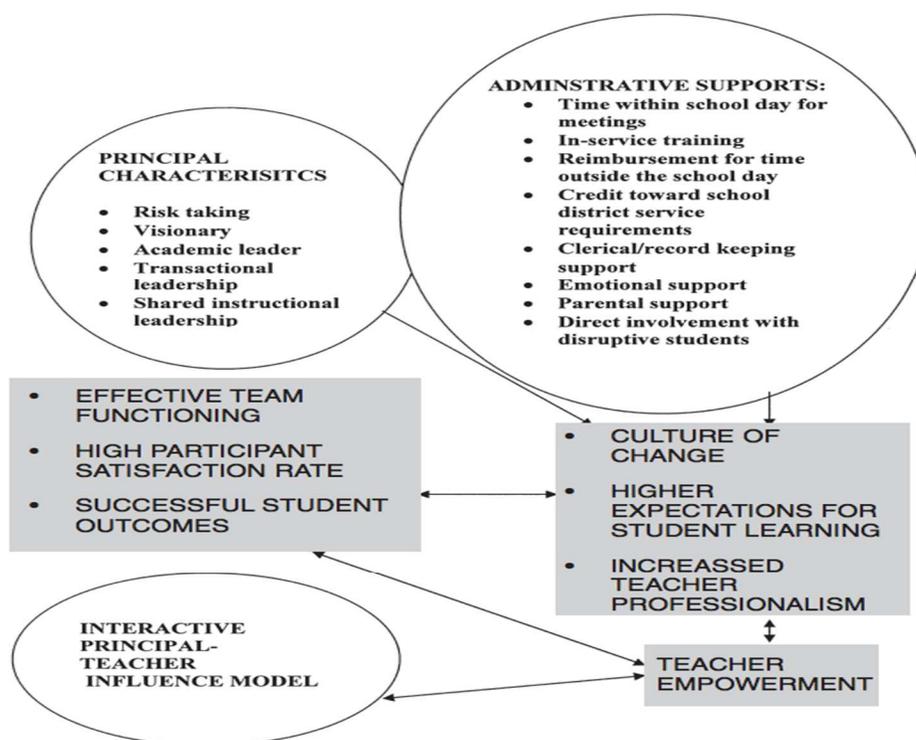


FIGURE 1. Proposed model of the impact of administrator support on collaborative problem-solving teams.

Figure 6: Administrative Support on Problem Solving Teams. Raforth and Foriska, (2006). Administrator Participation in Promoting Effective Problem-Solving Teams.

In a study by Yoon and Gilchrist (2003), emotional support, teamwork, and parental involvement were all investigated as means of support. The authors (2003) found that 37% of the teachers in their study valued the direct intervention of principals with students who displayed aggressive and disruptive behaviors. Direct intervention was followed by the provision of emotional support (22.8%), teamwork (14.2%), and helping parents get involved (12.2%). In a second study, sixty-percent of the elementary teachers surveyed indicated that they liked the direct involvement of the administrator in dealing with aggressive and disruptive students, particularly in actions that were punitive or removed the student from the classroom (Raforth & Foriska, 2006). Kruger et al. (1995) found that when administrative support was used to increase a teacher's sense of worth, their problem-solving skills and self-efficacy regarding planning and assessing interventions were enhanced. Finally, parent involvement in the pre-referral intervention process has been found to improve outcomes of interventions (Chen and Gregory, 2011).

Raforth and Foriska (2006) suggested administrative support may also include less tangible factors such as a commitment to academic quality, the propagation of a culture of change within the school, and the encouragement of teacher decision-making in the school. Kovalski (2002) was more specific in outlining the role of administrative support in the pre-referral intervention process. The author (2002) argued that the principal needs to demonstrate tangible support by attending pre-referral team meetings, articulating an expectation of instructional improvement, and fostering a collaborative

atmosphere among the teaching and professional staff. The author believed that administrative support enabled the coordination of instruction and support services. “The principal’s role is to assure that these services are deployed in a seamless fashion by helping to allocate the needed resources and by assuring that there is curricular and instructional overlap among personnel and processes” (Kovaleski, 2002 p. 4).

Scholars have found the importance of support, modeling interventions, training and professional development. Nelson and Machek (2007) reported that the teachers self-reported their knowledge of interventions as low, with over 90% indicating that more training in interventions would benefit them as practitioners. Kovaleski (2002) suggested that principals needed to be the lead person in articulating the pre-referral process to the entire school and assuring that the classroom teachers receive sufficient training to use the process effectively. Similarly, Hilton (2007) argued that teachers needed ongoing in-service along with supportive policies and leadership in order to achieve success. While training was perceived to improve the implementation of interventions, state level systematic training on intervention assistance process, specific strategies for professionals developing and implementing interventions, and district-level professional developments are highly variable (Buck et al., 2003; Truscott et al., 2005).

Researchers have highlighted the perceptions of administrators regarding their role in supporting teachers during the pre-referral intervention process and suggested that they recognize their role as valuable. Hamlett (2005) used ethnographic qualitative work via interviews to clarify the perspectives of administrators, concluding, “that campus administrators in general have a role in the pre-referral processes, specifically in

providing resources for teachers and utilizing resources in the pre-referral process” and emphasizing “the importance of the campus administrator having the knowledge and skills in the area of special education to administer an effective pre-referral process” (p. 216). Lastly, the author (2005) noted, “administrators felt responsibility to assure that there is no disproportionate identification of African American students identified for special education means being accountable in assessment of the pre-referral process (p. 224).”

Administration: Leadership-Formal and Informal.

The role of administration, formal leaders, and principals in the pre-referral intervention process lends itself to the scholarship on school-level leadership. The role of leadership in schools can be defined in a variety of ways. At the core of most definitions of leadership, two functions are offered: providing direction and exercising influence (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). Louis et al. (2010) stated “Leadership is all about organizational improvement; more specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question, and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions” (pp. 9–10). The role of formal leadership via the principal in the pre-referral intervention process was explored in this study and will be presented in Chapter Four.

Scholars have established the importance of teacher leaders in schools, and the role of principals’ in fostering teacher leadership. For example, Gigante & Firestone (2008) found that a key to teacher leader success is administrative support; alternatively, Wenner and Campbell (2017) found poor relationships with administrators or colleagues

were a factor that inhibited teacher leadership. Waldron and McLeskey (2010) found that distributed leadership is indispensable in school change efforts that address the development of effective, inclusive schools. Furthermore, the authors (2010) shared that when leadership is distributed it is assumed that teachers and other school personnel will take leadership roles and share in decision-making regarding changes in instructional practices. Scholars have also examined the role of distributed or shared leadership, suggesting it has the ability to influence and build characteristics of collaborative cultures within schools. For example, shared leadership may reduce teacher isolation and increase commitment to the common good (Pounder, 1999) and also encourage a focus on shared practices and goals (Chrispeels, Castillo, & Brown, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003). Louis, et al., (2010) defined shared leadership broadly to denote teachers' influence over and their participation in school-wide decisions with principals. Some scholars (e.g. Mangin, 2007; Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007) have found this form of leadership and decision-making leads to increased teacher trust and buy-in for change initiatives as well as increased student achievement.

The following authors encapsulated the essence of teacher leadership. Ghamrawi (2010) postulated, "The culture of teacher leadership entails that teachers engage in professional dialogue with colleagues, including a desire to: share ideas, knowledge, and techniques; participate in collaborative problem-solving around classroom issues; hone provocative lessons in teams; exhibit passionate professionalism; and enjoy extensive opportunities for collegial professional dialogue" (p. 315). Childs-Bowen, Moller, and Scrivner's (2000) formation of teacher leadership stated, "We believe teachers are leaders

when they function in professional learning communities to affect student learning; contribute to school improvement; inspire excellence in practice; and empower stakeholders to participate in educational improvement” (p.28). At its core, the pre-referral intervention process is a form of educational improvement for individual students. The role of teacher leadership in the pre-referral intervention process will be expanded in this review, as well.

Chapter Summary

Pre-referral interventions are strategies designed to address an identified need of a student. Pre-referral interventions are strategies that general education teachers are typically responsible for, and operate within a framework of supports within a school called the pre-referral intervention process. The pre-referral intervention process includes multiple stakeholders, building-wide supports, and systems operating independently and complementary of each other. Without clear federal or state mandates, these components and supports within a school may vary depending on the state, local education agency, or even schools within a district.

This review demonstrated that the pre-referral intervention process is structured by the school’s intervention framework. Previously called RTI, many schools have adopted an all-encompassing model of support for both academic and behavioral needs, referred to as MTSS. MTSS might be implemented independently, or in conjunction with school-wide behavioral supports (SW-PBIS, PBIS, PBS), intervention teams (i.e. child study/multi-disciplinary team), and other collaborative frameworks within schools, including PLCs.

The literature, which is supported by state statute, emphasized the role of the general education teacher and underscores the critical role of administration, intervention teams and other possible school-related personnel involved in the pre-referral intervention process. The research presented in this review highlighted the complexity, successes, and challenges of teachers attempting to support students using a team-based collaborative approach. Scholars have categorized pre-referral intervention as either academic or behavioral and research was presented on how scholars have examined teacher's perceptions and interpretation of student behavior. The examination of the pre-referral intervention process can lend itself to the research on organizational development and theory, school culture and leadership.

Since the emergence of pre-referral interventions and consultation teams by schools in the 1980s, scholars have held suspicions over this widely adopted practice, regarding the systems and processes utilized to determine students warrant a pre-referral intervention, and a possible referral for a special education evaluation. The pre-referral intervention process has evolved over the past thirty years encompass school support frameworks (e.g. MTSS, PBIS), and to support student social, emotional, and behavioral needs.

This review featured scholarship on how teachers interpret and perceive student behavior, the pre-referral intervention process, and the variety of models present in schools today. Some scholars have suggested that there are implications of the pre-referral intervention process, including an increase in special education referral and identification rates, disproportionate representation of students of color in special

education, and other long-standing issues in education. This review demonstrated the need for a continued and updated scholarship on the pre-referral intervention process: intervention frameworks, intervention teams, teacher perception of student behavior and behavioral supports, and other support systems in schools (including PLCs, PBIS) as more schools begin to develop, implement, and refine MTSS frameworks as a means to supporting and educating all students. The review offered in Chapter Two serves as the foundation of this study's design, which is presented in Chapter Three.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

Qualitative research is known for interpreting real-life everyday experiences of individuals or groups (Creswell, 2013). This study was originally designed to be a methodical inquiry into the perceptions, roles, and experiences of general education teachers in an ever-evolving complex network of systems and supports within a school called the pre-referral intervention process. This study was designed to highlight how a school defined and implemented the pre-referral intervention process, how teachers were supported, and how decisions were made regarding student support. This chapter highlights study assumptions, research design and methodology, participants, data sources, trustworthiness of data, data collection, and ethical considerations.

Assumptions

This study was constructed with the underlying assumption that the preconceptions, past experiences, and perceptions of general education teachers in the pre-referral intervention process will inform the investigation of how teachers navigate the pre-referral intervention process. It also assumed that investigating the role of general education teachers informs the scholarship regarding teachers' identification of student need, decision-making process, experiences with intervention teams, and implementing interventions. Furthermore, it's assumed that that the decision to initiate the pre-referral intervention process through the consultation of an intervention team (and implementation of pre-referral interventions) influences the rates at which students are

referred for special education, evaluated for special education, and potentially placed in special education.

Researcher Positionality

Prior to presenting my study design, it's important to identify and establish my positionality, and how that may impact this study, data analysis, and further research on pre-referral interventions. I have spent a decade working in special education. As a special educator who taught and evaluated children to determine if they were eligible for special education services, I began to notice that students in my district's special education programs for students with emotional/behavioral disorders were predominately African-American/black and primarily male. After some preliminary investigations, I found this disproportionately true in many districts across the Twin Cities Metro, Minnesota, and the United States. These observations began an inquiry into the overrepresentation of students of color in special education and the processes by which children's needs are identified and supported prior to consideration for the pre-referral intervention process.

I questioned and developed suspicions regarding the pre-referral evaluation process and the strategies within schools that are designed to assist teachers in supporting struggling students. As an educator and active participant in a school's intervention and assessment team, I suspected that teachers at times, demonstrated confusion with the pre-referral process. This led me to question whether teachers are equipped, supported, and trained to implement pre-referral interventions to support the diverse needs of students.

I also wondered if some teachers avoided bringing students to intervention teams because they didn't believe in the efficacy of the process. This made me ponder the perception of teachers and if they believed in, supported, and understood multi-tiered intervention support systems, collaborate planning, or intervention teams. Lastly, my experience as a teacher informed my inquiry of whether school administrators and districts were equipping teachers with the necessary training, support, and feedback during the pre-referral intervention process to adequately support students in need. The review of the literature, offered in Chapter Two, supported many of the suspicions I developed as a teacher. The review highlighted the complex network of school supports and the multitude of factors influencing the pre-referral intervention process. My experience as a teacher served as the foundation for my inquiry and the development of this study.

Study Design

Consistent with the literature on pre-referral interventions summarized in Chapter Two, my inquiry into the pre-referral intervention process focused on the role of the general education teacher. Qualitative inquiry was selected and found to be the most appropriate method of inquiry to develop a deep understanding of the role of the general education teacher in the pre-referral intervention process. Scholars (i.e. Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) have suggested that qualitative inquiry is an appropriate approach for when little is understood of phenomena and can be used inductively to develop theory. Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing

the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). The phenomena implicated in this study focuses on disability identification rates and the disproportionate representation of students in different disability categories. The study focused on how teachers interpreted student academic progress and classroom behavior, began the pre-referral intervention process, made decisions to implement an intervention, and took these steps prior to evaluation for special education.

Case study was determined and selected to address inquiries developed for this study. Case studies are appropriate when the unit of analysis can be bounded in particular temporal, social, or physical ways (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Stake (1995) presented six major responsibilities of a qualitative case study researcher, including: 1) bounding the case, 2) selecting the phenomena of interest, 3) seeking data patterns, 4) triangulating observations and bases for interpretation, 5) considering alternative interpretations, and 6) developing assertions or generalizations about the case.

One of the common pitfalls associated with case study is that there is a tendency for researchers to attempt to answer a question that is too broad or a topic that has too many objectives for one study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (2009) suggested that boundaries could prevent this from occurring. Researchers have outlined options to bound the case, including time and place, (Creswell, 2013) time and activity (Stake, 1995), or definition and context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This case study was bounded to the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years, a time when the school was refining its intervention framework into a full-fledged, refined MTSS model and focusing on implementation of pre-referral interventions.

There are three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective (Stake, 1995). This study was designed as an instrumental case study. An instrumental case study is defined as when a researcher begins with a research question or problem and seeks out a case that offers illumination (Stake, 1995). This study began with the goal of investigating teachers navigating the pre-referral intervention process and was bound by focusing on the roles and experiences of general education teachers. It utilized multiple data sources and triangulation of data to increase validity and trustworthiness through data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2005).

Interpretative Approach

Within the naturalist paradigm, interpretive constructionism argues that the core of understanding is learning what people make of the world around them, how people interpret what they encounter, and how they assign meanings and values to events or objects (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) presented that the constructivist-interpretative paradigm, which assumes a relativist ontology (many possible realities), a subjectivist epistemology (understandings are co-constructed by the researcher and research participant) and naturalistic (non-experimental) methodologies.

While this study was designed as a case study, this study drew on elements of a grounded theory approach to research. The intent of a grounded theory study is to move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). This study was designed to investigate phenomena and generate or “ground” in data from participants who have experienced the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory was initially developed and elaborated by Glaser and Strauss, and later by others;

grounded theory focuses on systematically analyzing qualitative data to elucidate the key forms of action undertaken by participants in a particular situation (Clarke & Friese, 2007). Traditional grounded theory asks of researchers that they enter the field of inquiry with as few pre-determined thoughts as possible (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Clarke (2005) noted that, originally, grounded theory had positivist underpinnings, arguing traditional grounded theorists approach research with a blank slate when entering the field of inquiry to achieve legitimate theoretical sensitivity.

Charmaz (2006), in an effort to expand the realm of grounded theory into other research paradigms, proposed an approach to grounded theory that embraced a constructivist stance within qualitative inquiry that allowed the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants and the interpretation of analysis. The author (2006) presented this constructivist and interpretive perspective on grounded theory known as constructivist grounded theory. Creswell (2007) noted, “Charmaz advocates for a social constructivist perspective that includes emphasizing diverse local worlds, multiple realities and the complexities of particular worlds, views and actions...with a focus on theory developed that depends on the researcher’s view, learning about the experience within embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships, and making visible hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity” (p. 65). Ontologically relativist and epistemologically subjectivist, constructivist grounded theory reshapes the interaction between researcher and participants in the research process and in doing so brings forth the notion of the researcher as author (Mills, et al., 2006). Charmaz described, “constructivist grounded theory” as a response to

critiques that grounded theory had become overly formulaic and positivist, and not responsive enough to the ways that researchers and participants co-construct meaning (2014, pp. 12-13).

Epistemological Considerations

My selection of constructivist grounded theory for a methodology aligns with my epistemological posture. As a researcher, it's important to define and recognize my own identity in acquiring knowledge because it drives my research, shapes the type of methods I have selected, and recognizes that my own lens and view of the world may impact my research. I best align with the constructivist research paradigm. In a constructivist perspective, meaning does not lie dormant within objects waiting to be discovered but, rather, it is created as individuals interact with and interpret these objects throughout the world based off historical and social perspectives (Crotty, 1998). Simply put, constructivists create knowledge and truth (Lincoln and Denzin, 1998) and according to Crotty (1998), explore individual human subjects engaging with others in the world and challenge the belief that there is an objective truth that can be measured or captured through research inquiry.

Exploratory Research Questions

This study was designed to examine the role of the general education teacher in the pre-referral intervention process. Originally, three exploratory researcher questions were developed: 1) How do teachers navigate the pre-referral intervention process? 2) What role do teachers' preconceptions, prior experiences, and perceptions play in the pre-referral intervention process? and 3) What role does perceived support from

administration play in the pre-referral intervention process? As this study progressed and preliminary findings emerged, the study evolved from focusing on intervention teams and the pre-referral intervention process to a focus on the implementation of the pre-referral intervention process. Attention was also focused on the structures, supports, and factors influencing decisions within the pre-referral intervention process. Five distinct research questions emerged as the foundation and focal point for this study:

- 1) How do teachers navigate the pre-referral intervention process?*
- 2) How is the pre-referral intervention process implemented at the site of this study?*
- 3) What role do teacher's preconceptions, prior experiences, and perceptions play in the pre-referral intervention process?*
- 4) What role does perceived support from administration play in the pre-referral intervention process?*
- 5) How do educators interpret and support student behavior?*

Site Selection

I carried out a thorough deliberation to determine an appropriate site to conduct this study and expand upon these research questions. Upon determining that these questions offered an opportunity for an in-depth examination of how a school currently operates, I decided to focus on a single school for this study. To delve deep into examining the pre-referral intervention process, beyond a simplified explanation of an intervention framework, my goal was to select a site where rapport and a relationship could be easily established between the researcher and research participants. In this study,

the inquiry was focused on teachers reflecting upon their position within a potentially complex intervention framework and understanding how fellow teachers, interventionists, and administration, students and families impacted their actions. Being able to delve deep into this process within the building was critical for this study. Additionally, this study also was designed to secure a study location with the willingness and participation of the building's administrative team and other internal stakeholders.

After much deliberation, I determined that there was a school where I, as the sole investigator of this study, had established rapport with participants and the administration was open and supportive to having a study conducted within the district. This is a school where I previously taught for five years and I believe that my relationship and familiarity with staff improved my in-depth and responsive interviewing approach. Rather than selecting a site with little pre-existing knowledge or background, I opted to select a school where my basis of knowledge and familiarity with the site would enable a deeper investigation into the teachers' perspectives, as familiarity of the researcher is already established. Considering that the district no longer employed me at the time of the data collection, I believed my inquiry did not serve as a conflict of interest to staff nor was my position within the district compromised or impacted by this study.

Setting

This study took place at a large public elementary school in a smaller district in a large metropolitan area. The elementary is a K-4 building with approximately 580 students and one of two elementary schools in a district with one middle and one high school and a total district enrollment near 3,000 students. The district borders the largest

city in the state in a metropolitan area of over 3 million people. The building and district could be considered urban, suburban, or even urban/suburban when considering district demographics. The building has a minority enrollment of slightly over 50% (with African-American/Black serving as the dominating minority group) and is a Title I eligible school (having a nearly 60% free and/or reduced lunch rate). For confidentiality purposes, the building will be given the pseudonym and referred to as Pike Elementary.

Data Collection

The original study design was to begin with a brief document analysis that was projected to be used to define the conditions in which the intervention team existed at Pike Elementary. After a document analysis, two shorter interviews were planned with the principal and psychologist. The literature has demonstrated that the principal (e.g. Rubinson, 2002, Rafoth & Foriska, 2006, Kovalski, 2002) and psychologist (e.g. Ysseldyke, Reynolds, & Weinberg, 1985; Ysseldyke, Dawson, Lehr, Reschly, Reynolds, & Telzrow, 1997) have a significant influence over interventions teams. In my experience at this school, it was noted that both have a significant role on the school's intervention team. Brief interviews were designed to further define the conditions of the pre-referral intervention process at Pike within which general education teachers operate. The two interviews were designed to frame the two observations I was projected to conduct on the intervention team (called the Student Assistance Team) and the two rounds of interviews with six general education teachers.

To better understand the intervention team meetings at Pike Elementary, my original intentions were to attend two intervention team meetings. My familiarity with the

site helped me determine that the intervention team at Pike was called the Student Assistance Team, and staff typically refers to as either the SAT Team or SAT. My intentions were to become a participant observer, which Glesne (2006), described as consciously observing the research setting; its participants; and the events, acts, and gestures that occur within them.

My original intentions were to maintain a reflexive journal, in addition to field notes during the observations. The reflexive practice aims to make visible to the reader the constructed nature of research outcomes, a construction that originates in the choices, and decisions undertaken by the researcher during the research process (Mruck & Breuer, 2003). The observations, while open-ended, were designed to obtain information, including: agenda distribution, team membership, dialogue structure, meeting attendance, clarity of expectations, intervention construction, decisions, and outcomes.

Study Evolution

Unfortunately, my initial study design and scope was slightly altered during the data collection phase. The initial approach was designed to conduct two brief interviews, which would inform the observations. Unfortunately, when observations were attempted to occur, SAT Team meetings were canceled due to lack of student need. Chapter Six will provide SAT team data for the 2016-2017 school year, which demonstrates a significant reduction of SAT team referrals (less than 10). The subsequent data collection determined this year to be an outlier school year, as the previous and subsequent school year had referral rates (teens and in the 20s) more consistent with yearly referral rate averages.

This is where the study began to evolve from focusing on the actual SAT team meetings to more broadly how teachers experience and perceive the entire pre-referral intervention process. Without observations to help triangulate data, the primary source of data collection was obtained from interviews and data was triangulated through interviews with various internal stakeholders within Pike Elementary.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) described in-depth qualitative interviewing as a key to naturalistic research methods, suggesting it allowed researchers to talk to those who have knowledge or experience with the problem of interest (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). I began interviewing just as I originally planned, conducting interviews with the principal and psychologist. The questions used to guide the initial interviews with the principal and psychologist can be found Appendix D and Appendix E.

I acknowledge my pre-existing relationship with the principal and how that could possibly influence teacher outcomes. Some staff members at Pike may have noted my pre-existing relationship and close connection to the principal during my tenure in the district. I conducted my interview with the principal first, then moved on to the psychologist and other staff members. It is noteworthy that, during the interview, the principal did not ask about any other participants and appeared to acknowledge the importance of anonymity.

These first two interviews were conducted off-site at public locations within the boundaries of the district. In my experience as a teacher, Kindergarten students were brought to the SAT team at a lower rate than other grades and, often times, the school was hesitant to even consider special education evaluations for K students, especially

considering many of the students at Pike were experiencing school for the first time, as a number of students did not attend pre-school. Considering the population of students, and the uniqueness that this was a K-4 elementary school, as compared to most elementary schools that are K-5, the focus of this study was on grades 1-4. An original e-mail inquiry of participation interest was sent to 17 1st-4th-grade teachers. Of the 17 teachers, six teachers responded with their willingness to participate. Follow-up emails were sent two weeks after the initial email to non-respondents. A few teachers declined and the rest did not respond. Initial interviews were conducted between May and July 2017. Interview locations were determined based on the participant and were not conducted during school contact time. Appendix F offers a detailed framework used to conduct initial questions.

Strict confidentiality was enforced and those who elected to participate were informed that the district supported the study, they would all be given pseudonyms, and their participation would not be made public. Data collection occurred outside of school business hours at a location established by the participant. By the time the data collection occurred, I no longer worked for the district nor at the site of this study. Upon completion of the first round of interviews, a theory was developed (see data analysis section), a second set of questions was constructed (see: Appendix G, H, I, & J) and interviews were conducted to inform the hypothesis, themes, concepts, patterns, or new and unanticipated ideas that emerged after the initial interviews. A second round of interviews was conducted between February and May of 2018, which led to another round of data analysis.

For the second round of interviews, an email inquiry was sent to each original participant to gauge their interest in participating in the second round of data collection and a follow-up interview. Of the original six teachers, only three responded with a willingness to participate again. It's noted that the inquiry for participation occurred during the springtime, which is often a busy time for teachers, as compared to the original data collection, which occurred primarily over the summer. A second, follow-up inquiry was sent to the original six participants. The results remained the same, however, with only three teachers responding with their willingness to participate. In addition to these three teachers, the principal and psychologist also agreed to participate in round two. Based on the data analysis from the first round of interviews, another staff member was added: the school's behavioral intervention teacher who operated the school's behavior program.

Study Participants

The study had nine total participants. For the purpose of this study, each participant was given a pseudonym. Teachers were divided into two categories: veteran and non-veteran teachers. A veteran teacher was defined in this study as someone who had taught at the building for at least three school years, not including time potentially taught at another school or district.

Table 1: Study Participants at Pike Elementary

Name (Pseudonym)	Role/Title	Years of Experience/Race/Ethnicity
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Jeff	Principal	Experience: Over 10 years at Pike as principal, over 20 years experience as a principal, not including time as a teacher. Race/Ethnicity: White
Ryan	Psychologist	Experience: Nearly 10 years of experience as a psychologist in Pike's district, working in multiple sites Race/Ethnicity: White
Mia	Teacher (Veteran)	Experience: 10 years of teaching, all at Pike Race/Ethnicity: White
Natalia	Teacher (Veteran)	Experience: Over 10 years of teaching at Pike, and a few years of experience at another school Race/Ethnicity: White
Steve	Teacher (non-Veteran)	Experience: Less than 3 years of teaching at Pike, 1 at another school Race/Ethnicity: White
Megan	Veteran	Experience: Over 20 years of teaching experience, all at Pike Race/Ethnicity: White
Emily	Teacher (non-veteran)	Experience: Less than 3 years of teaching at Pike, over 5 years of experience in another district Race/Ethnicity: White
Anna	Teacher (Veteran)	Experience: Over 10 years of teaching experience, all at Pike Race/Ethnicity: White
Mr. Drake	Behavior Interventionist Teacher (Veteran)	Experience: Over 30 years in education, including time as an administrator. Race/Ethnicity: Black/African <i>Note: He was added to the study for the second round of data collection only and holds the distinction of being Pike's only licensed general education staff member of color.</i>

Data Analysis

My initial approach to data analysis was projected to be deductive. The first round was designed to explore initial inquiry of how teachers perceived and experienced the pre-referral intervention process and building supports. However, after conducting the first rounds of interviews, it was evident that an inductive approach was more appropriate for this study. This enabled the study to develop its own theory, which will be presented in the findings chapters.

An initial theory was developed based on main themes and concepts from the first round of data collection. The initial theory, which is presented in the findings chapters, was investigated further, using an inductive approach to reasoning, during the second data collection. Creswell (2013) proposed the following approach for grounded theory data analysis and representation, which I adopted for my analysis:

Table 2: Grounded Theory Data Analysis

Data Analysis and Representation	Grounded Theory Study
Data organization	Create and organize files for data
Reading, memoing	Read through text, make margin notes, form initial codes
Describe the data into codes and themes	Describe open coding categories
Classifying the data into codes and themes	Select one open coding category for central phenomenon in process Engage in axial coding-casual condition, context, intervening conditions, strategies, consequences
Interpreting the data	Engage in selective coding and interrelate the categories to develop a “story” or propositions
Representing, visualizing the data	Present a visual model or theory Present propositions

Note: Adapted from: Creswell, (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*.

Each interview was transcribed. The computer program, QSR NVivo was used to analyze, manage, shape, and analyze my data. The data analysis process consisted of three phases of coding - open, axial, and selective (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In the open coding phase, the researcher examines the text for salient categories of information supported by the text (Creswell, 2013). Once my categories were identified, I selected an open coding category (a central phenomenon) as the central feature of the theory and returned to the database to inform my second round of interview construction. This informed the axial coding process and provided insight into specific code categories. Information from this phase shaped the selective coding process (where a code paradigm yields a theoretical model that constructs or supports the theory), which I demonstrate through concept maps offered in the findings chapters. Selective coding can create a conditional matrix that can visualize the conditions and consequences related to the central phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Study Limitations

This study included staff from a single public elementary school, including seven licensed teachers, six general education teachers from Grades 1-4, one behavioral specialist (intervention teacher), one licensed school psychologist, and one licensed principal. Data collection was limited to interviews and the collection of documentary data and the 2nd round of data collection was limited to six staff members, including four licensed teachers. Therefore, the findings do not necessarily reflect the views of all staff members in the building or district. Lincoln and Guba (1985) presented that transferability is the ability to have findings have applicability in other contexts. The

study seeks to include sufficient details of the setting so that readers can make judgments as to whether understandings gleaned from this study may be usefully applied to other settings.

It's noted that the implementation of pre-referral interventions and a variation of the pre-referral intervention process is implemented in all public schools. The depth of this study made it challenging to expand it to multiple buildings or districts. However the conclusions, recommendations, and implications generated by the study will be useful to researchers, policymakers, school leaders, and educators in multiple settings, as Pike Elementary is similar to many public elementary schools, both suburban and urban, across the United States.

Trustworthiness

This study provided a rich and detailed description of the perceptions, experiences, and understandings of the experiences of the general teachers in the pre-referral intervention process. Guba (1981) proposed four criteria that should be considered by qualitative researchers to construct a trustworthy study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

1) Credibility: Credibility was achieved through my familiarity with the staff and framework of support systems within the school district and my understanding of the prereferral intervention process as a former member of the child study team and special education department at the host site. Convenience and purposeful sampling of staff members (staff members willing to participate in the study) was used to negate researcher bias in the selection of participants, meaning that teachers were given the chance to opt

out of the study. Lastly, triangulation of data was used throughout the data collection and data analysis phase.

2) *Transferability*: External validity is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Merriam, 1998). I must acknowledge that this study is limited to one site. While transferability could come into question in this case study, the pre-referral intervention process is implemented in all public schools in Minnesota and, in some form or another, across the United States. This study, while limited to one site in one district, could potentially be used as a pilot or foundation for further studies or investigations on the teacher perception of the prereferral intervention process. Stake (1995) suggested that while an individual case [study] could be unique, it is an example within a broader group and, as a result, the prospect of transferability should not be immediately rejected.

Dependability: In order to address the dependability issue more directly, the processes within the study are reported in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work – not necessarily to gain the same results, but for the value of viewing the research design as a “prototype model” (Shenton, 2004). It is my goal to provide an in-depth coverage of this process, which is summarized in this analysis. Shenton (2004) recommended this can be achieved by ensuring the analysis sections include: the research design and its implementation, the operational detail of data gathering, and the reflective appraisal of the project.

Confirmability: The concept of confirmability is the qualitative investigator’s comparable concern to objectivity (Shenton, 2004). Again, the triangulation of data was

used throughout this study. The interviews with both the school psychologist and principal regarding their roles on the student assistance team will be used to help ground the interviews of the teachers, in addition to the review of referral records. When considering confirmability, the question of my own role and bias in this study may come into question. Miles and Huberman (1994) considered that to be a key criterion for confirmability: the extent to which the researcher admits his or her own predispositions. My experience as an educator informed the initial construct of the study, however, the grounded theory developed for this study was developed based on study findings.

Key Participants, Terms, and Phrases

The findings chapters provide study data and results from this study. This study has adopted and identified the following key participants commonly found in public schools:

Key Participants:

- *General Education Teacher:* General education teachers are classroom teachers who serve as the central focus of this study and are responsible for teaching content and standards to all children in their classrooms.
- *Special Education Teacher:* a licensed special education teacher who is responsible for providing instruction and services to identified special education students.
- *Administrator:* The principal is the leader and sole administrator at this school.
- *Psychologist:* The psychologist primarily serves the school by conducting special education evaluations, but also has an active role in the school's intervention team. The psychologist has an active role on the pre-referral team in determining which pre-referral interventions are selected.
- *Interventionists:* Licensed staff members who are members of the intervention team. Interventionists serve in student support roles throughout the building, including administering academic or behavioral interventions. The building has dedicated interventionists in the area of reading and math. The building also has

an ELL interventionist who works with children who are English language learners and need additional support in the area of reading. Their efforts can be considered either Tier 2 or 3 interventions. The lead reading interventionist serves on the school's intervention team and other interventionists may attend, subject to the request of the team.

- *Behavior Interventionist Teacher*: This staff member was a licensed teacher whose role was to support students with behavioral concerns and in need of behavioral interventions.
- *Counselor*: This individual serves the building in a tradition counseling model, providing support, as needed, to identified students, providing social skills instruction, both “pushing-in” to the classroom, and conducting “pull-out” services for both small groups and individual students. This person serves on the building's intervention team.
- *Social Worker*: Similar to the counselor, the social worker serves a variety of roles in the building, including working with families on community-based supports, and providing supports to students throughout the day. This person also supports groups and individual students, as needed. This person serves on the building's intervention team.
- *Paraprofessional*: A non-licensed staff member designed to support programs, teachers, student(s), as determined by staff in the building. Primarily, they support students already placed in special education, but can be available to support non-disabled students at the discretion of licensed staff and administration.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the qualitative study, which was designed to better understand teachers' experiences in the pre-referral intervention process. This study was founded on the assumption that investigating teachers' perceptions and experiences informs the identification of student needs, teachers' decision making process around seeking the support of teacher-leaders or the intervention team, and the implementation of pre-referral interventions. Furthermore, this study was also founded on the assumption that rates of pre-referral interventions and its efficacy influence referrals for special education evaluations and qualification rates. The study was constructed based

on the investigator's experience and observations as a special education teacher.

This study was designed as a constructivist grounded theory case study at a school referred to as Pike Elementary. Pike Elementary is a large K-4 suburban school in a major metropolitan area. The site was selected due to the researcher's familiarity with the research site and the support of the school's administrative team. The investigator experienced some challenges and setbacks during the data collection process that occurred over the course of one calendar year, but two rounds of data collection occurred for this study. Teachers at the school were contacted for optional participation, which resulted in six general education teachers between grades 1-4, the principal, psychologist, and behavior specialist participating in either one or both rounds of data collection.

After the first round of data collection, an initial theory was created using inductive reasoning. The theory was created using an open-coding method, both by hand and using the computer program NVivo. After an initial theory was created, the theory was further explored through the second round of interviews (which is presented in the forthcoming chapters). The study is limited to the perspectives and experiences of the study participants and may not reflect the views and experiences of all staff at Pike Elementary. Despite the smaller sample size, trustworthiness was created through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter also offered an explanation of key participants, terms and phrases. The next three chapters offer study findings and provide the grounded theory developed for this study.

Chapter 4: The Pre-Referral Intervention Process:

An Overview of the Model, Navigation, and the Role of Administration

It's there for a reason, and if it aligns with the school and the district mission, and I know not every school has got the same kind of community as the school that we're in, I think that everyone's really supportive and we want to do what's best. And we all have the best intentions for it, so I think, if everyone's buying into the process and the process is clear, then it's going to be effective. -Mia, teacher

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter Four is to describe the pre-referral intervention process at Pike Elementary. The pre-referral intervention process encompasses a series of systems, stages and processes working independently and interwoven together. This chapter will outline and define the three distinct stages and systems teachers navigate to implement pre-referral interventions. The framework of the pre-referral intervention process will frame the grounded theory presented in Chapters Five and Six. The following concept map outlines Pike Elementary's pre-referral intervention process. A detailed analysis will be provided in this chapter:

The Pre-Referral Intervention Process at Pike Elementary

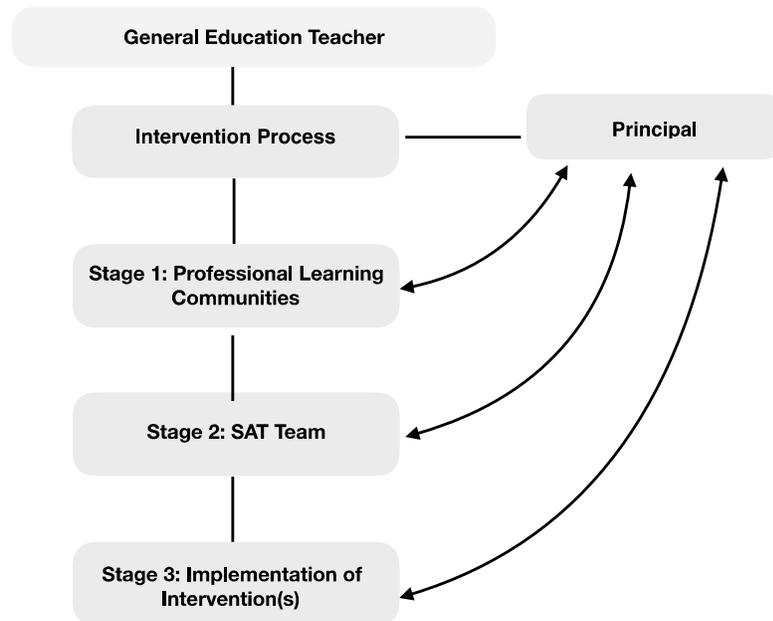


Figure 7: The Pre-Referral Intervention Process at Pike Elementary. A Concept Map

The Pre-Referral Intervention Process: A Model Defined

MTSS & PBIS.

Pike Elementary used a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) intervention framework to support its students. Ryan, the psychologist, shared that the school was evolving into using a full-fledged MTSS framework during the year of the study and had conducted staff development regarding components of the framework. The school had a committee, including Mia, Ryan, and Jeff, the principal, on the implementation committee and team.

Jeff described the comprehensive system, which included: universal screening, progress monitoring, formative assessment, research-based interventions [matched to students' needs], and data-driven educational decision-making utilizing defined student outcomes. He began by sharing, "Well, it's evolved since you [researcher] were here, since you were with us," noting that the framework has grown and evolved since my tenure in the district. He described the school's universal screeners and progress monitoring system. The school continued to use state and district standardized testing, along with building-wide academic screeners to make data-driven decisions. The principal further shared, "Progress monitoring data would indicate whether the child was weak, with younger grades, letter sound, letter phonemic awareness, and with older grades more reading fluency and comprehension." He referenced (Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI), which is a primary Tier III literacy intervention that the school uses. The Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI). is a powerful, short-term intervention, that provides daily, intensive, small-group instruction, and supplements classroom literacy teaching (Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI), n.d.). The type of interventions was not thoroughly explored in this study, however, it's noted that the school has a reading and math interventionist teacher, and Minnesota Reading Corps, an evidence-based literacy intervention to support students within its MTSS framework.

At the time of the study, Pike was working to further develop, refine, and improve its approach to literacy interventions. The school was beginning the process of introducing the Path to Reading Excellence in School Site (PRESS) interventions for reading. The principal, psychologist, and one teacher who participated in this study were

on the PRESS implementation team (receiving additional training on PRESS) and shared that during the 2016-2017 school year there was a staff development session on PRESS Interventions at the school with Dr. Clayton Cooke from the University of Minnesota.

According to the Minnesota Center for Reading Research at the University of Minnesota, PRESS is a framework that structures literacy achievement in grades K-5 within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) or Response to Intervention (RTI) context (Path to Reading Excellence in Schools Sites, n.d.). According to PRESS's website, the primary goal of PRESS is to work with teachers and administrators to establish school-based systems and practices for all K-5 students to become capable readers (Path to Reading Excellence in Schools Sites, n.d.). The PRESS website offered the following illustration to demonstrate how PRESS can be embedded into an existing framework:

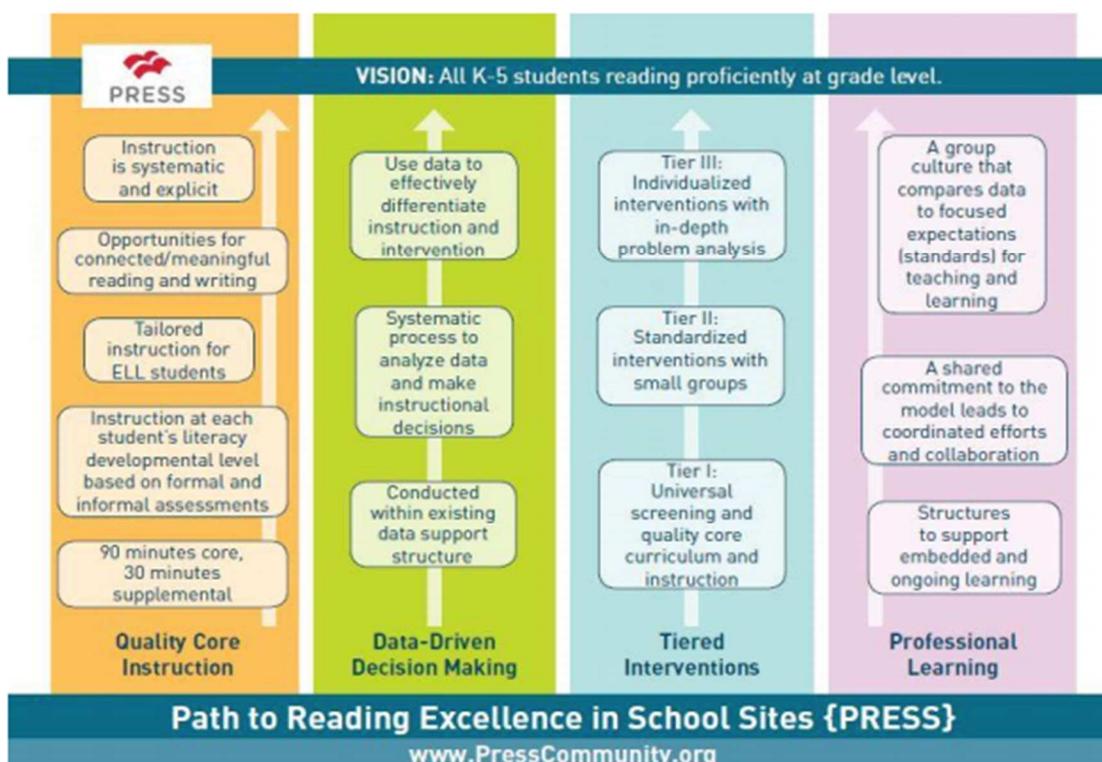


Figure 8: PRESS Intervention Framework. Path to Reading Excellence in Schools (PRESS). Retrieved from: <https://mcrr.umn.edu/programs/path-reading-excellence-schools-sites-press>

Pike's principal, Jeff, shared that the evolution of MTSS at Pike Elementary has enabled the building to strengthen its behavior supports, sharing,

There are times, too, when the situation is chronic and it's urgent and in those situations, sometimes we've been known to move through a referral quickly, but there is an identified tier one system, an identified tier two system and it's more quantitative today than it has been in years gone by.

He elaborated on the school's language, universal-wide supports, and how data is tracked, offering,

Part of the foundation of it [MTSS] is to use a PBIS framework in your school and then to understand that there are identified tier one interventions and tier two interventions that you would do with kids, and those tier one interventions are strategically taught throughout the building on a regular basis.

He further illustrated the evolution of the system, describing some possible past instances, sharing, “instead of just being sort of willy-nilly about what your intervention would be, there is a system that helps us define what that intervention would be”.

Both Jeff and Ryan shared that the school has begun working with Dr. Clayton Cooke, a professor at the University of Minnesota who specializes in MTSS frameworks. Jeff indicated,

He’s helped us in refining our PBIS system. He’s helped us understand why we need specific expectations and how we need to teach those expectations in the different areas of the building in a systematize role. He’s helped us to define what the tier two interventions are and how to track those interventions, and the fact that they are indeed scientific interventions; it’s not something we’re kind of making up.

Jeff indicated that the school has implemented behavior screeners, “Presently we’re using can’t do/won’t do screeners. It’s a scientifically-based screener that helps us to understand whether it’s a skill deficit, an acquisition issue, or a performance issue.” The school has aligned and defined interventions based on the screeners. “The can’t do/won’t do system helps us identify which one is best for the child, whatever score comes back on the screener, and leads us or guides us to a specific intervention.”

Jeff mentioned that the PBIS framework included school-wide behavior supports including: common language, expectations, and how these expectations will be taught to children. PBIS also include rewards (i.e. blue tickets), school celebrations called monthly kickoffs, and other incentives. The MTSS framework and PBIS system helped create the structure and guide the pre-referral intervention process.

Navigating the Pre-Referral Intervention Process

You're not a failure if you can't figure a student out on your own.
–Megan, teacher

The pre-referral intervention process at Pike Elementary can be broken down into three stages. Understanding each of the three stages creates an awareness of how teachers, administrators, and intervention team members are all interwoven into the pre-referral intervention process and strengthens the school's professional learning community (PLC) model to support teachers.

Stage One: PLCs & Identification

Ryan described the intervention framework as “teacher driven”. The first step in stage one begins with the general education teachers and their roles, actions, and decisions. General education teachers began the pre-referral intervention process by identifying a particular need of one of their students and determined it to be a problem, issue, or concern. After problem identification, teachers cited ownership over the students' needs and attempted to address the problem by carrying out their own interventions by tapping into their own “toolboxes”, and tracking their own data to try to

help their students. Natalia shared, “First thing that I do is I keep track of my own data, whether it's anecdotal records, or data that has been gathered...”

After identifying a student need and attempting to address the problem on their own, teachers began the next step in stage one: working with members of their PLCs, building personnel, or interventionists, seeking their counsel and advice. Professional learning communities were grade level teams comprised primarily of members of one's grade level team (i.e. all 4th grade teachers are members of the same PLC). Meeting frequencies varied depending on the staff development calendar however, it was noted that typically, a team met at least once a week. Teams met at defined times and discussed topics including data, grade-level planning, and student needs. Grade level PLCs were noted to have common prep time and many teams opted to eat lunch together. At this stage, teachers discussed needs of students, shared ideas and strategies internally, as a support for struggling students. Lastly, at the end of stage one, teachers collaborated with the principal for a consultation on the student to develop a plan and, if needed, to determine appropriate next steps.

Stage Two: SAT Team Consultation and Intervention Selection

After consultation with the principal during stage one, if further supports or a plan for the student was needed, the teacher would bring their concerns and needs, along with student data, to the school's Student Assistance Team (SAT) (which most participants referred to as SAT or SAT Team). The SAT team serves as the building's multi-disciplinary intervention team. This team was comprised of the principal, psychologist, counselor, social worker, nurse, classroom teacher and interventionists. Attendance of

interventionists varied depending on the student being discussed, and their need(s). When a general education teacher attended the meeting, they too were considered a member of the team. This principal-led team developed the appropriate interventions and steps to address the needs of a child. Historically, these meetings have been scheduled for Wednesday mornings before the students arrive.

Prior to attending the SAT team meeting, teachers shared they were expected to fill out a referral form. Teachers noted their role was to communicate the needs of their student to the team in order to advocate on their student's behalf

Prior to sending them to SAT, there are forms that we have to fill out describing our concerns, data to support our concerns and needs, whether we've had parent communication, and how that has been accepted by the parents. Every time I go through, I always ask what do I need to make sure I have everything in place before I go because I want to make sure I do it right.

Data forms, or referral forms, were a means of communicating data about the student prior to the SAT team meeting. One teacher summarized the importance of communicating on behalf of the student,

My expectation is that the student's name is known and that the teachers and other staff members get to know a little bit of the back story, so that they're able to assist in others ways that I haven't been able to get to the student. The ways that I've tried on my own and just kind of ask for help to see if we can get them the help that they need some good advice and expertise.

Natalia described attending SAT team meetings as a form of advocating on behalf of the students,

I feel like my role as a teacher going into the meeting [SAT Team] is to provide information about the child, so he/she can get help and, in the meantime, if that student is getting help, I am also getting help, which provides the other students in the classroom the education that they deserve. So I've realized that my role as an advocate for everyone involved in that situation, is to communicate the needs of this child.

Stage Three: Implementation of Intervention(s)

After the SAT team makes a recommendation for intervention(s) during stage two, either the general education teacher, interventionist, or a combination of both will implement an intervention(s). Typically three things would occur:

- a) The classroom teacher will implement an intervention, either class-wide or individually,
- b) An interventionist will implement an intervention, or,
- c) A combination of multiple school personnel will implement an intervention or interventions.

After a timeline set by the SAT team, often a four to eight week period, the team will reconvene and discuss the student and his/her progress. The principal noted usually when the team meets for a second time, one of three things happens. "We either say we're done, we've fixed the issue, we need to stay the course because we're seeing some decent progress, or we decide that we're tanking and we maybe would define another

intervention and run that for another four to eight weeks”. In some instances, depending on the severity of the needs of the student, the team may recommend moving forward with a special education evaluation.

Possible Next Steps (or Stage Four)

If the SAT team determined that a special education evaluation was warranted, the referral for an evaluation would then get sent to a separate team, called the Child Study Team. This team was comprised of the special teachers, the psychologist and principal. The Child Study Team met weekly to discuss students undergoing special education evaluations. Historically, this has been held weekly on Mondays at this school. This is a team that conducted both initial and re-evaluations on students to determine if they meet (or continue to meet) eligibility according to state criteria for special education services

Section Summary

The purpose of this section was to provide an overview and define the components of the pre-referral intervention process at Pike Elementary. The pre-referral intervention process included Pike’s PLC model, PBIS framework, MTSS framework, and intervention team. These systems, in conjunction with the principal and other school personnel, encompassed the entire pre-referral intervention process through which teachers must navigate to support a student who is struggling.

The Critical Role of Administration: Paramount to the Implementation of the Pre-Referral Intervention Process

The principal is very helpful, answers lots of questions, and if he doesn't have an answer at that time, or doesn't seem like there's anything to say, he thinks about it, will come back and check-in, talk with us (teachers) and check in one-on-one. He's known to come into the classroom and look at the student specifically, see what observations he can make. He really puts himself in the situation just to know and see and really be part of it.
–Mia, teacher

This study explored the involvement of administration in the pre-referral intervention process at Pike Elementary. At Pike, staff emphasized the critical role of the building's lone administrator, the principal, Jeff. Staff described being supported by the principal, and relied on their formal leader for collaboration during the pre-referral intervention process. Staff believed that the principal ensured the pre-referral intervention process, and its systems and sub-systems (i.e. PLCs, PBIS, MTSS), were being implemented at Pike Elementary.

The Pre-Referral Intervention Process: Implementation

The principal served as an integral piece of the pre-referral intervention process at Pike Elementary. The principal has arguably the most important role in the implementation stage of the pre-referral intervention process. The principal oversaw and ensured that the process was being implemented throughout the school and that appropriate members of the school were communicating and collaborating. General education teachers described the building's principal as having a critical role in the school's pre-referral intervention process and each teacher perceived that the principal supported them individually and the intervention framework overall.

Both inexperienced and veteran teachers described themselves as being supported by the principal through each stage of the pre-referral intervention process. When teachers were asked to describe support, they all described the high level of trust they have with their administrator. Examples of how teachers trusted Jeff can be illustrated by applying Tschannen-Moran's (2004) five facets of trust: openness, benevolence, reliability, competence, and honesty to teacher's perceptions of Jeff.

Openness.

Teachers felt the principal provided support during each stage of the pre-referral intervention process by being open. During the first stage, teachers cited they would seek out the principal prior to implementing their own strategies or informal interventions. They also sought his counsel to determine whether the student warranted discussion on the SAT team. Together, through a consultation, the principal helped the teachers make the decision on how to proceed. During stage two, teachers' cited the principal as constructing and disseminating the agenda, facilitating the SAT team discussions, taking notes during the meetings, and establishing the follow-up SAT team meetings to review data obtained on interventions administered. During stage three, teachers also described communicating with the principal if an intervention wasn't working. If teachers had concerns or challenges implementing interventions requiring the collaboration and support of multiple school-related personnel, they would communicate and collaborate with Jeff. Jeff would give advice, support the situation as needed, or sometimes simply listen. Teachers sometimes simply wanted to give the principal a "heads up" on some challenges they were experiencing.

Benevolence.

Both inexperienced and veteran teachers identified the principal as trustworthy during the pre-referral intervention process. Emily shared,

He's really supportive, and he knows the kids, he's really in tune with the parents in our student population. He's someone who takes a lot of pride in having a community in the school whether it's teacher, or just with students. So I think that he's a really approachable person, too, so that's something. I feel good going to him if I have any concerns and he's always been supportive of me.

Another teacher echoed the same sentiment. Natalia shared, "I feel my principal is very supportive and he wears a lot of hats and he thinks of a lot of perspectives of everyone involved. He is very much about the child's emotions, he wants them all to succeed, every one of them".

Reliable.

The principal was referenced as being reliable and accessible. All teachers noted that the principal was always available and open to suggestions and ideas to support a student during stages one, two and three. In addition to accessibility, all teachers shared they had a positive relationship with the principal and felt comfortable approaching this individual because they trusted him. Natalia shared, "The principal makes sure this process is happening and he's immediate. He doesn't wait days to do it. It's immediate and timely."

Competence.

The principal supported teachers by serving as a resource. If a teacher felt an intervention needed modification, or if a teacher felt an interventionist wasn't implementing an intervention effectively, the principal would serve as a sounding board and listen to their concerns as an instructional leader. Natalia said that the principal supported this process by offering advice, noting,

Often times, it's with advice. Giving me advice on things that have worked with other students in the past, or maybe there's something I didn't know about the child that happened in prior years since...maybe something he knew about that I didn't know about that child in another part of the building that I didn't see. So sometimes it's with advice, sometimes it's as a middleman to go talk to.

Sometimes it's calling the parent directly.

Honesty.

In addition to being open, teachers also felt Jeff provided honest suggestions and input. Mia shared, "the principal is very helpful, answers lots of questions, and if he doesn't have an answer at that time, or doesn't seem like there's anything to say, he thinks about it, will come back and check-in, talk with us (teachers) and checks in one-on-one. He's known to come into the classroom and look at the student specifically, see what observations he can make. He really puts himself in the situation just to know and see and really be part of it."

Ryan, the psychologist, believed the SAT team at Pike was implemented more effectively because of the role of formal leadership within the pre-referral intervention

process. Ryan's perspective is noteworthy as psychologists are often described in the literature as having a significant role on intervention teams. Ryan also works in more than one building in the district and serves on SAT teams in multiple buildings. His perspective offers an opportunity for comparison. He shared that at Pike, the SAT team is "more cohesive, or better run."

Ryan gave multiple examples demonstrating that the SAT team was run more effectively, highlighting how the principal's active role impacts the overall process and components within it. There is a massive impact when it gets back to some of those "squeaky wheels". The "squeaky wheels" he referred to were having meetings run efficiently with clear communication, set agendas, an understanding of the students being discussed at SAT team meetings, and ensuring students are actually getting supported. Examples of these "squeaky wheels" also demonstrate why the psychologist and teachers found the principal trustworthy. These specific examples can be illustrated through Tschannen-Moran's (2004) facets of trust, further highlighting the critical role of Jeff and formal leadership in the pre-referral intervention process at Pike Elementary.

Honesty.

In his experience in multiple buildings, the psychologist shared that communication can be strained and challenging during SAT team meetings. These meetings focus on how to support children in need; many have significant needs and bring out differing views and opinions from professionals. Sometimes teachers wanted to use these meetings as vent sessions.

Since the principal was active within the process at Pike, the principal was able to foster honest dialogue that was focused on the needs of the child. Ryan offered a vignette as an example of direct, honest dialogue used by the principal, sharing, “Okay, we have these 30 students who are identified. These are the levels of support that they need. Here are the interventions that are being put in place for them.” Conversely, at the other sites, the SAT team doesn’t have clear language or leadership within the meetings.

The impact of formal leadership has been paramount in Ryan’s experience in the district as a veteran school psychologist. To illustrate the impact of poor structure and communication with SAT team meetings, Ryan gave an example of another school in which he has worked. “At that site, the principal is not active in the process and instead of focusing on the needs of students, the SAT team meetings can turn into a venting session for teachers.” Speaking from his own experience, without the principal present,

Conversely, the other building, that the principal isn’t a member of any of those conversations, they aren’t able to be quashed right away when teachers are complaining about behaviors that they have in class and not having support because that person [formal leader] doesn’t sit on the team and can’t speak towards that.

Reliability & Competence.

Ryan described Jeff as trustworthy, predictable, reliable, and viewed him as the leader of the SAT team. “The principal is there to help make those administrative decisions.” “There are things that do impact the decisions that are made at that meeting [SAT team], that the administrator needs to be apart of.” Ryan gave a series of examples

and scenarios to support his belief from his experiences in the district. “For example, there’s a student that we’ve said, maybe we should look at switching classrooms. Without that principal there, we [SAT team members] don’t have that authority, regardless of who is leading the meeting.” At Pike, with principal participation, “That decision can be made at the spur of the moment, in terms of, we as a team think this is the best interest of the student and we have somebody here with the authority to say this is going to happen.”

The principal’s view of formal leadership in this process mirrors the views of both teachers and the psychologist. Jeff suggested that the administrator has an active role in planning, developing, and overseeing the pre-referral intervention process, sharing, “Part of my role is procedural, part of it is strategic planning.” The principal also shared the importance of fostering collaboration to make this system work. The principal shared that it’s challenging to get everyone to work together and acknowledged that there are some critics within the building who may never fully support the process. The principal stated, “We’ve got a couple people that probably don’t belong. They probably aren’t ever going to know the success of MTSS because they don’t have a belief system that’s going to support that. Part of this journey is for staff to see why were doing it. Here are the beliefs that are consistent with schools having success with this.” The principal then argued that the building will need to reflect and “look internally” to see if the common beliefs in schools with intervention frameworks are present within the building.

Section Summary

At Pike, teachers rely on formal leadership for support. Study data suggests that the principal was trustworthy, had an active role, and ensured the pre-referral intervention process was being implemented. All teachers shared that they trusted the principal and described the principal as open, reliable, accessible, competent, knowledgeable, and honest. The teachers, both experienced and inexperienced, shared that they trusted the principal. The school psychologist, who had the perspective of working in multiple buildings, triangulated the data of the teachers, sharing that the principal at Pike was trustworthy and supportive of teachers and ensured the pre-referral intervention process was being implemented. As a result, students who needed support were being supported. At Pike Elementary, the principal had an active and critical role in the pre-referral intervention process.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Four provided an overview of the pre-referral intervention process; including the PLC model, PBIS and MTSS frameworks, and SAT Team (intervention team). The pre-referral intervention process was defined and broken down into three distinct stages. This chapter also described the key role played by the principal in the process. The staff trusted the principal and found him very supportive in navigating this process. The principal provided consultation and advice, and had a critical and active role in ensuring the pre-referral intervention process was being implemented at Pike. The psychologist described the principal's role as ensuring the "squeaky wheels" of the pre-referral intervention process were occurring within the building, meaning that the systems

and staff within Pike were working together to support children. The next chapter begins to describe the differences between academic and behavioral interventions, and how teachers described academic interventions as clearly defined, collaborative, and widely agreed upon by staff.

Chapter Five: Academic Interventions: Clarity, Agreement, and Collaboration

*I think when it comes to academics it [pre-referral intervention process] is helpful.
There's no bias in it. –Emily, teacher*

**Introduction to a Grounded Theory: Interpreting the Differences Between
Academic and Behavioral Interventions**

Chapter Four provided an overview of the framework, systems and school-related personnel, including the principal, involved in the pre-referral intervention process at Pike Elementary. This study defined two broad categories of interventions: academic and behavioral. Chapter Five will begin with a brief overview of how staff viewed interventions differently. This will lead into an explanation of staff's explanation of why interventions were viewed differently, which serves as the foundation for this study's grounded theory.

The next two chapters will describe this study's grounded theory, which found that despite Pike Elementary having a defined, collaborative pre-referral intervention process and utilizing a full-fledged MTSS model, staff defined, interpreted, and believed there was a distinct difference in selecting, implementing, and determining the efficacy of academic and behavioral interventions. The grounded theory developed for this study maintains that educators view academic and behavioral interventions differently because academic interventions are more objective, less biased, and can be defined and implemented with greater fidelity. Additionally, the theory argued that behavioral interventions were more complex, requiring decisions and involvement of multiple

stakeholders, and dependent on the subjective interpretations of teachers and staff members.

Types of Interventions: Academic vs. Behavior

Stage three of the pre-referral intervention process involved a teacher implementing a pre-referral intervention based on the recommendation of the SAT team (stage two). Some teachers varied on how they viewed interventions. For example, one teacher viewed their efforts to implement either an academic or behavioral intervention as the same. When asked if there was a difference between academic and behavioral interventions, Mia, replied, “Not necessarily, I just wanted to do the best for each student,” however, most teachers viewed the type of interventions differently. Emily shared when asked if the process helps kids, “I think when it comes to academics it is helpful.” Emily believed the school focuses more on academic interventions, sharing, “There’s not a lot that’s being done as far as behavior goes. I think most of our interventions focus on academics.” Another teacher believed that academic interventions were more clearly defined in their scope and how to implement them. Steve shared, “For academics, they’re a little more clear cut. I think because when you’re looking at specific areas academically and a child is struggling, it’s a little easier to assign an intervention.” Staff perceived the pre-referral intervention process for academics as challenging to navigate based on some barriers, however they described the pre-referral intervention process and implementation of academic interventions as positive, supportive, and helpful for their students.

Academic Interventions: A Structured Collaborative Effort

For academics, they're a little more clear cut. I think because when you're looking at specific areas academically, and a child is struggling, it's a little easier to assign an intervention. –Steve, teacher

This next section will outline the challenges teachers faced in implementing and navigating each stage of the pre-referral intervention process. Despite these challenges, this next section will elaborate on why staff described the pre-referral intervention process as a positive experience and supportive of kids, particularly for academic interventions. It will elaborate on the epigraph offered at the beginning of this section, describing Steve's description of academics.

Academic Interventions: Challenges.

Study participants described challenges in their efforts to navigate the pre-referral intervention process and implement pre-referral interventions. Natalia, a veteran teacher, highlighted the challenges of managing time to implement something specific for one student while balancing the needs of an entire classroom. She shared, "As a regular education teacher, my attention and energy are spent a lot on this child who needs help, and I'm not able to give that attention to the other students in the classroom. Megan, a veteran teacher, shared that time is a barrier, noting that teachers needed more time to fill out the paperwork associated with this process and pointing out that the amount of time taken during her prep period was already occupied with PLCs, planning, and preparations for her classroom.

Multiple teachers shared that the district had reduced the number of support staff, referred to as paraprofessionals. Teachers shared the importance of paraprofessionals in

providing support to students. Natalia believed that sometimes students needed someone to conference with them individually and, with a class full of kids, this can be challenging for a teacher, sharing, “Some students fall through the cracks because we have a needy population and some of those students do fall through the cracks based on availability of staff.” This teacher offered a vignette, highlighting the importance of being able to immediately support a student’s needs and the complex role general education teachers face when attempting to address the needs of all students. “We need people for them. They need more than what one teacher can provide for them, so if they are putting their heads down during the lesson, then we have someone with them to guide them through the process, maybe in a slower way. If their head is down because they need someone to talk to, because I don’t have time to sit with them and ask them, ‘Hey, why are you sad today?’ and I can’t leave my twenty-eight other kids at that time so another person would be wonderful.”

Teachers varied in the type of training they received and in their understanding of the actual intervention framework used. During the data collection phase, the district was in a multi-year process to develop and advance its intervention framework to a more full-fledged and refined MTSS framework. Jeff (the principal), Ryan (the psychologist), and Mia (a veteran teacher) were involved in the building’s planning team to help implement the PRESS framework and shared that there was a staff development session during the school year on PRESS and MTSS. The session provided an overview of the screeners, the data collection, and how reading interventions would eventually be structured in the school.

When asked if they have received training on the pre-referral intervention process, staff responded with mixed answers and most didn't reference this training session. Some staff suggested that they receive training annually at the beginning of the year. Some staff suggested that they hadn't received any training on interventions or the framework used. When asked, most staff couldn't identify RTI or MTSS as the intervention framework used at this school.

Furthermore, some teachers confused the SAT Team and the Child Study Team. The SAT team, which is discussed in this analysis, supported teachers by assisting in the selection of pre-referral interventions and supporting students in general education. The child study team supported students in special education and conducted special education evaluations.

For the purpose of this study, a new teacher was defined as working for three years or less in the building (not including a possible experience as a teacher prior to being employed at Pike Elementary). A veteran teacher described the hardships new teachers faced, describing it takes time to understand Pike's pre-referral intervention process, learn to advocate on behalf of students, and to develop, trusting, collaborative relationships with fellow teachers.

Two of the participating teachers were defined as newer teachers. Both newer teachers noted that the pre-referral intervention process was not thoroughly explained to them when they were hired and they were slightly confused on how it operates. Emily shared, "As a new teacher it was kind of confusing. I still feel like I'm trying to learn the ropes. I don't feel it was very thoroughly explained and so there's not a great way for me

to even describe how the process is.” To navigate this lack of clarity and understanding of the model, Emily responded by advocating, and asking a lot of questions. When asked to explain the pre-referral intervention process, Steve described a series of building supports and some strategies, “Basically, we see a new batch of kids every fall. We kind of observe them for a couple of weeks and if we see any red flags, then that’s when we bring them to ADSIS [behavior intervention program] and kind of go from there.” Steve struggled to identify how the team functioned, including the frequency of meetings, “I don’t know if they hold weekly meetings to organize a system and support the teachers that may need help...” and “I do kind of wish that there would be a little bit more of a structure in that school, our school...so teachers are aware of what support we have, and how to navigate it.” The same teacher experienced challenges with time, noting it was hard to focus on supporting students with interventions at the beginning of the school year. He described how busy he was focusing on developing relationships with students, and managing other tasks. He said, “As a teacher, you’re thinking about a hundred different things and initiatives that you’re working on during the day and it’s a little confusing to try to get a student involved in that [intervention] right off the bat...”. Emily shared that, as a newer staff member, she navigated the ambiguity of this system by asking a lot of questions and described that it took her multiple school years to develop the comfort and relationships with staff to ask these types of questions.

Section Summary

This section offered the perspective that most teachers believed it was easier to define the academic versus behavioral needs of students. One teacher described academic interventions as more “clear cut”. Teachers experienced challenges and barriers to supporting their students. One teacher felt the paperwork was time-consuming, teachers experienced a reduction of support staff, and staff didn’t feel they had been fully trained on the intervention model used at Pike. Newer teachers said they weren’t trained at all. The next section will cover how they addressed the challenges and found the pre-referral intervention process to be a helpful and positive experience.

Academic Interventions: A Well-Defined, Collaborated Approach to Supporting Students

Despite experiencing challenges and a lack of formal training for inexperienced teachers, all teachers supported the pre-referral intervention process. Teachers described the pre-referral intervention process as a helpful, positive experience and believed it was a mechanism to help students and promote professional growth for educators. Teachers described academic intervention as more clear-cut and less biased. Teachers described the process of implementing academic interventions as clearly defined, collaborative process. This next section will describe the defined process and perceptions of teachers as they navigated the process from pre-referral to implementation of academic interventions.

Collaboration

Veteran staff described the culture of Pike Elementary as collaborative. Collaboration was interpreted and defined as staff working together, helping one another,

and supporting each other to help all students. Mia described the collaborative culture and how it aided the implementation of pre-referral interventions at Pike, sharing,

It's there for a reason, and if it aligns with the school and the district mission, I know not every school has the same kind of community but [our] school that we're in, I think that everyone's really supportive and we want to do what's best... we all have the best intentions..."

Veteran teachers experienced the collaborative culture of Pike. Five of the seven teachers in this study were defined as veteran teachers. This study defined veteran teachers as teaching at Pike Elementary at least five years. Prior experiences with the pre-referral intervention process helped create positive staff perceptions of the process, promoted staff buy-in, and, as Mia noted, made the process clear, particularly for academic interventions. Mia described the benefits of collaboration, "I think it does help because it brings out different points that maybe I haven't thought about as an individual teacher because I don't know everything." Furthermore, she continued, "Just getting more people on board to help out, with [students in need] is a really strong way to go through the special education referral process...because it gives a kid a chance". Megan described the collaborative efforts, "I feel like the teamwork is very strong and you shouldn't have to try to figure out a student by yourself. There are always people to go to, as long as you're asking the right questions and trying to get help for the student." Megan continued, "You're not a failure if you can't figure a student out on your own."

Veteran teachers' positive perceptions of the pre-referral intervention process described Pike as having a collaborative culture. They were influenced by their roles and

experiences in developing, strengthening, and refining the intervention framework at Pike Elementary. As a former employee, during my tenure I witnessed the process evolving, including the hiring of a behavioral interventionist, a member of the AmeriCorps Reading Corps, and a school counselor. Referenced earlier, the principal shared, “The process has evolved since you [researcher] left.” Multiple veteran teachers, who were considered veterans when I began working at the school in the 2011-2012 school year, also shared that the processes had evolved and developed. A few veteran teachers mentioned that the process wasn’t defined when the SAT team was first introduced. Over time, despite not having extensive training, teachers began to understand their role in the pre-referral intervention process. Teachers developed understandings of the necessary paperwork, expectations of the process, effectively participation in the SAT team meetings, understanding the principal’s role, and how to utilize building supports. Megan described the development and refinement of the pre-referral intervention process, sharing, “It’s changed since I started teaching. I’ve been teaching for over 20 years and I feel like it’s gotten more streamlined, and I feel that the teams work really well together and there aren’t so many questions about whether I should test [evaluate for special education] the student or not because of the pre-referral intervention process.”

Collaboration: Trust & Leadership

Staff described their experience with the pre-referral intervention process as helpful...most of the time. Natalia shared, “I think its works 80% of the time”. Steve described academics interventions as more “clear cut” and Emily stated, “I think when it comes to academics it is helpful. There’s no bias in it”. Teachers described two themes

that developed their positive perceptions of the pre-referral intervention process for academics that were imbedded within Pike's collaborative culture: trust and leadership. Both trust and leadership aided teachers in supporting academic needs and academic interventions and assisted teachers in overcoming challenges. Trust and leadership helped teachers navigate the implementation of academic interventions in each of the three stages and also influenced their positive perceptions of the pre-referral intervention process.

The definition of trust adopted for this study was presented in Chapter Two. Bligh's (2016) description of trust offered in Chapter Two was adopted for this analysis. The author (2016) defined trust as the following,

Trust is a dynamic, interpersonal link between people, with unique implications for the workplace. Trust is defined as an expectation or belief that one can rely on another person's actions and words and that the person has good intentions to carry out their promises. Trust is most meaningful in situations in which one party is at risk or vulnerable to another party (p. 21).

The definition of leadership adopted in this section focused on the influence teachers can have on fellow teachers. This section focuses on informal, shared, or distributed leadership. Shared leadership denotes teachers' influence over and their participation in school-wide decisions with principals (Louis et al., 2010). Both trust and shared leadership were found in each of the three stages of the pre-referral intervention process. Shared, distributed leadership and informal leaders will be used interchangeably in this review. Any staff member who is not the principal is considered an informal leader.

Stage One.

Teachers articulated a clearly defined, supportive, consultative model embedded within Pike's PLC model. Teachers described informal leaders [fellow teachers] and other colleagues [interventionists] as supportive, helpful, and trustworthy. They provided guidance, advice and strategies, and sometimes, they just listened. Mia described the open communication and support from her PLC, "We talk a lot during our collaborative meetings, at lunch, or during our prep time." This support was notable for Emily and Steve, both inexperienced teachers. They sought counsel and trusted the advice they received from informal leaders. Steve shared how he trusted informal leaders on his grade level team. Steve relied on them to support him and he sought their counsel because many of them have significantly more experience and may have experience or expertise in an area where he needed help. "Some of the teachers that I've worked with in my grade level team have been in my school for 30 years, so they've done this plenty of times." He also shared that he would seek out others in the building [interventionists, veteran staff]. "I definitely go to those people that have experience in the school to give me advice." Similarly, Emily shared that she asked a lot of questions.

Stage Two: SAT Team.

Teachers described the support they received during stage two, when they collaborated with the SAT team members and the principal. At this meeting, teachers sought the counsel, advice, and support from this team. Natalia described members of the SAT Team as experts, "They all bring in different expertise to try to find all the possible areas they could provide assistance for the child and advice that a regular education

teacher would need to help that child.” Furthermore, members of the team were described as trustworthy and open-minded, “I feel like everyone is open to listening to how to help out the student”. During the meeting, the SAT team, created a dialogue around the student. Steve shared, “There are a lot of moving pieces, even though it seems like a fairly routine meeting.”. Natalia shared, “[they] ask me really great questions, and make me think about things maybe I haven’t tried, maybe help us dig a little bit deeper into what might be the needs that the student.” Natalia felt the team offered a lot of suggestions and ideas, sometimes almost too many, sharing, “Sometimes I feel a little overwhelmed with the advice they give, “Try this. Try that, try that...” and, so I really have to work hard on being open-minded and accept the advice they give me...” Staff trusted the recommendations and decisions of the SAT team members and this was apparent for recommendations regarding academic interventions.

Stage Three: Implementation

During stage three, teachers were responsible for the implementation of the interventions selected by the SAT team. Academic interventions were implemented, either by the classroom teacher or interventionist, a staff member who specializes in either in English/Language Arts or Math. An intervention teacher would implement an intervention, either by pushing into the classroom, or more likely pulling the student out of class to work in a small group or individually. Staff were expected to track data, and use data to determine the efficacy of interventions. Staff described it easier to implement academic interventions, track data, and determine if the intervention was successful; academic interventions were less subjective. Emily shared, “You can see how they’re

(kids) doing on these reading responses and quizzes and tests or interactions with you and other students.” Natalia shared similar experiences, noting, “Academics are easier to track because you can see the improvements...academic intervention to me is easier to maintain because it’s consistent, it’s non-emotional, and it’s easy to pay attention to when you’re teaching.”

Section Summary

This section provided an overview of the pre-referral intervention process, focusing on academic interventions. Staff described a clear understanding of how they were supported within the school’s collaborative culture. Teachers described that they trusted informal leaders whom they sought for counsel, advice, and recommendations. Veteran teachers understood how to navigate each stage by gaining support from staff and inexperienced teachers described themselves as advocating for their students by asking a lot of questions and relying on informal leaders for advice. Teachers shared examples of how they utilized and trusted informal leaders.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with a brief introduction into the grounded theory developed for this study: the differences between academic and behavioral interventions. This chapter defined three stages in the pre-referral intervention process used to implement academic interventions. Teachers described academic interventions as more clearly defined, less subjective, involving little bias, and not reliant on staff’s interpretation of what’s considered at-risk. Teachers believed academic interventions were easier to identify, implement, track data, and determine efficacy. Teachers described the

implementation of academic interventions and how they utilized collaboration with informal leaders and the principal to overcome challenges they experienced. Despite experiencing challenges, teachers described the support they received within Pike's collaborative culture as positive and helpful. Teachers found they relied on trust and shared leadership during each of the three stages of the pre-referral intervention process. Trust and leadership aided the teachers' positive perceptions of the pre-referral intervention process, describing it as supportive and a clear means to help students. The next chapter will describe how staff interpret and make sense of student behavior and behavioral interventions.

Chapter Six: Behavioral Interventions: Subjective Judgment, Disagreement, and

Discord

I think the biggest part of education's problem is miscommunication. When you have a classroom full of kids who are very boisterous about learning, if you don't have a teacher willing to accept it either, or other students in the class are impacted by that, it can be a problem. -Natalia, veteran teacher

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter Six is to continue to define how staff perceived the differences between academic and behavioral interventions and the interpretation of student behavior. Chapter Six will highlight the complexities, factors, and dynamics that educators at Pike Elementary experience in attempting to promote positive student behaviors and behavioral interventions. The data presented here contributes to the grounded theory on the subjective interpretation of student behavior, which is introduced at the end of the chapter. The theory holds that the interpretation of student behavior is subjective based on human assessment, even in the complex, defined and established pre-referral intervention model and collaborative culture at Pike Elementary. Chapter Six will begin with an introduction, offering staffs' perceptions of student behaviors and the causes and underpinning of student behavior. It will be followed with an analysis of behavioral interventions, the principal's role supporting behavior interventions, and collaboration with families to support student behavior. The following concept map is introduced below, to illustrate the complex factors that staff perceived as influencing student behavior that will be addressed in this chapter.

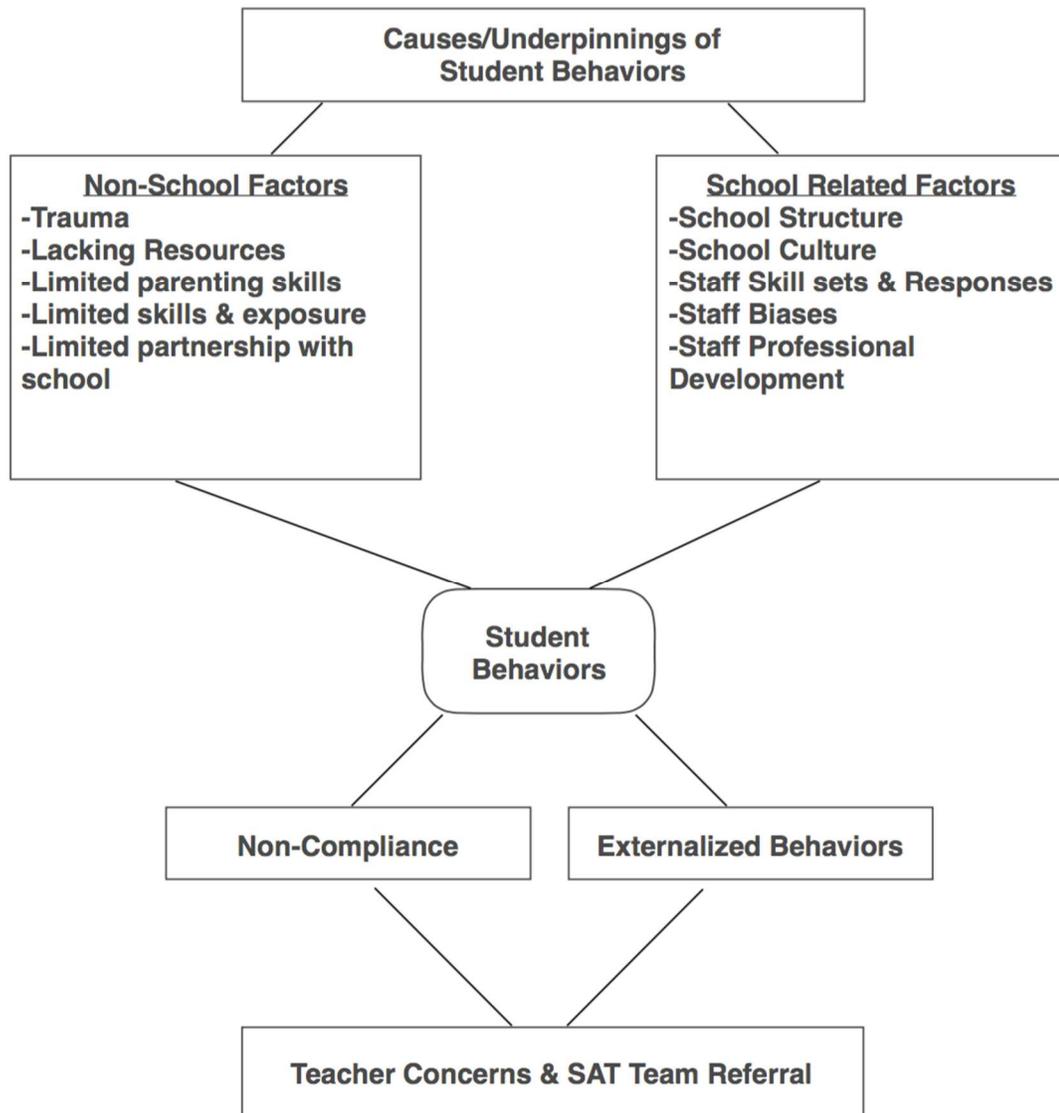


Figure 9: Student Behavior Concept Map. A concept map created presented staff perceptions of student behaviors.

Identification

I just think [student] behavior is more complicated in general because of all the different factors that are usually contributing to students' behaviors.

–Emily, teacher

In the previous chapter, Steve illustrated the complexities surrounding the identification of student behavior and developing pre-referral interventions for student behavior. Steve shared, “For academics, they’re a little more clear cut. I think because when you’re looking at specific areas academically and a child is struggling, it’s a little easier to design an intervention”. He believed that behavioral interventions are more complex, as noted in the epigraph previously offered at the beginning of this section. Steve described variables that may impact a student’s behavior, sharing,

It could be relationships or lack of relationships that they have with their student, teacher or peers. It could be things that are happening at home and it could be something that happens regularly on the bus on the way to school. It could be kind of like a gap in things that they weren’t ever taught, or many other things. It seems so much broader and each kid is kind of like a little puzzle.

The investigation into teacher perceptions of and experiences with student behavior began with an inquiry into past SAT team records to identify the types of concerns that were being brought to the school’s intervention team. Referral data from the past four years is provided in the following table and categorized into two broad categories: academic vs. behavioral concerns. Behavior is categorized as broad, meaning any non-academic concerns (i.e. social, emotional, or behavioral):

Table 3: Pike Elementary SAT Team Records

School Year:	Total	Boy	Girl	White	Non-White	Academic	Behavioral	Behavior Non-White	Behavior White
2014-2015	27	19	8	12	15	19	8	4-Boy 0-Girl	3-Boy 1-Girl
*Note: one student was referred for both academic and behavior									
School Year:	Total	Boy	Girl	White	Non-White	Academic	Behavioral	Behavior Non-White	Behavior White
2015-2016	21	12	9	10	11	12*	10*	3-Boy 2-Girl	2-Boy 3-Girl
*Note: one student was referred for both academic and behavior									
School Year:	Total	Boy	Girl	White	Non-White	Academic	Behavioral	Behavior Non-White	Behavior White
2016-2017	9	9	0	5	4	6*	4*	3-Boy 0-Girl	1-Boy 0-Girl
*Note: one student was referred for both academic and behavior									
School Year:	Total	Boy	Girl	White	Non-White	Academic	Behavioral	Behavior Non-White	Behavior White
2017-2018	15	12	3	4	10	9*	7*	3-Boy 0-Girl	3-Boy 1-Girl
*Note: one student was referred for both academic and behavior									

The referral data indicates that in each year, boys were referred to the SAT team more than girls. Additionally, students with academic issues were brought to the team slightly more than behavioral related concerns. In two of the three years, non-white students were referred more often than their white peers. It's noted that these elementary-aged students were not interviewed or asked how they defined their race/ethnicity category or aligned themselves. The race/ethnicity of a student was identified based on the teacher's referral and corroborated by the school's principal when reviewing the school's referral data.

Student race/ethnicity was recorded and defined broadly for this analysis. A student's race was noted on a selection box (i.e. race of student White, African-American/Black, Hispanic) on the referral sheet teachers were required to fill out in order to have a student brought to the SAT team, however school's data collection for the SAT team didn't disaggregate race in detail. Considering this, students were categorized

broadly in the records review as either white or non-white. It's noted that during the 2016-2017 school year, only nine students were referred to the SAT team. No additional information was provided on details of this year, however in the investigator's familiarity with the building, 2015-2016 and 2017-2018 appear to be more consistent with previous years' SAT team referral numbers in the past decade.

The secondary data collection phase investigated the underpinnings of why teachers referred students with behavioral concerns to the school's SAT team. This was where staff's subjective interpretations and differing opinions began to vary. It's noted that the definition of behavior concerns, at-risk behaviors, challenging behaviors, and antecedents of student's behavior was defined differently based on the subjective interpretation of the staff member. All participants were asked how they defined challenging behaviors, which were summarized and categorized into two broad, overarching behavioral categories: non-compliance and externalized behavior. Below is a table, arising from the data, summarizing staff's definition of non-compliance and externalized behavior that staff believed warranted a referral to the school's SAT team:

Table 4: Student Behavior Defined: Non-Compliance & Externalized Behavior

Non-Compliance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -work refusal -refusal to stay in seat -head down on desk -sleeping -withdrawn, little/no engagement from academic learning/school activities -unaffected by situation (no response to prompts, redirection, consequences) -walking around the room -walking out of the classroom -walking in the hallway during class
Externalized Behavior-Aggression
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -yelling, at staff or students, threatening staff -talking to other students(i.e. interrupting instruction, student work time, intentionally distracting other students) -tossing/throwing school supplies, including pencils, scissors, -aggression, including, hitting, kicking, punching

Staff elaborated and explained in greater detail what non-compliance and externalized behaviors looked like in their classrooms and school and perspectives varied based on a staff member's role in the school. First, the school's administrator, the principal, identified aggression as a behavior of concern. The principal gave a few examples of students currently in the building sharing, "We've got a little kindergartner right now who is escalating from a one to a five [behavior rating scale] and it happens in seconds". He described the externalized behaviors, "It was adult scissors in hand, jabbing and stabbing at staff members, and throwing classroom objects, kicking, hitting, and biting" and the aggression could be directed at either staff or students.

Ryan, the psychologist, gave examples of both non-compliance and externalized behaviors, including, “tossing chairs, picking on other students, getting up and leaving the room, wandering around the room, talking to other students while the teacher is teaching, inability to retain focus, and difficulties of self-regulation of anger.” Behavior interventionist, Robert Drake categorized behaviors of concern as disruption. “We have those who will disrupt class continuously and don’t give the teacher a chance to actually teach.” Mr. Drake elaborated, “They’re either talking while the teacher is trying to teach, walking around the room, walking out of class. They get bored and some just wander the hallways. Others just keep blurting out the entire time the teacher is trying to teach.” Classroom teachers offered differing perspectives. Mia shared a broad perspective of challenging student behavior,

“There are all kinds of behaviors that could be challenging depending on how they’re dealt with. There could be just the basic refusal to do work, behaviors that are a lot more... interrupting of the whole learning environment... or kind of an explosive behavior.”

Steve found non-compliance behaviors as the most challenging, sharing, “there’s a lot of work refusal and a lot of ‘I don’t care’ and kids off-task.” Steve elaborated, describing off-task as, “When off task, they are walking around the room, yelling in the back of the room, throwing pencils, avoiding work, leaving their seats and walking around to talk to someone else.” Natalia, a veteran teacher, shared that non-compliance was the most difficult student behavior to support. “It’s probably the hardest one for me to deal with, they just say... ‘No, I’m not doing it. ‘You can’t make me.’ Kids will respond, ‘you can’t

make me do it, what are you going to do if I don't do it? Take my recess away? Fine.”

Natalia acknowledged that some students would “come at her” verbally or even physically and that was hard, but not as hard as non-compliance and work refusal.

Section Summary

This chapter began with an introduction of how staff defined at-risk and problematic behavior. Staff's definitions were categorized into two broad categories: non-compliance and externalized behaviors. SAT team referral data from the past three school years was provided. The at-risk behaviors offered were the type of behaviors that warranted a referral at Pike to the building's SAT team. The next section will provide an overview of staff's perceptions of the causes and underpinnings of student behavior.

Causes/Underpinnings

Human nature dictates that we have our own biases. No matter how much in the forefront you can bring them, you're never going to be truly objective.
—Ryan, school psychologist

All study participants believed that behaviors of concern were primarily related to the student's life outside of school. Staff, however, held differing views and beliefs on what exactly was the cause and underpinnings of student behavior and didn't believe that it could always be attributed to one specific reason. These causes of student behavior can be grouped into the following categories: trauma, resources, and the structure of the school.

Trauma.

The principal believed that trauma was the cause of most of the challenging behaviors at the school. When asked about the antecedent of student behaviors, Jeff

shared, “Well, trauma causes it often times; it’s often a big predetermining factor or precursor.” The principal explained that trauma could be complex because it can be more situational or a prolonged trauma. “There can be situational pieces that trigger behavior, like it might be a little rowdy today because I didn’t get much sleep last night. And in the kid’s life, they can have a really bad day, and I might see this behavior escalate, but when the trauma is deep-rooted, the behaviors are richer and they’re more complicated, and not easy to solve.”

The principal referenced a challenging Kindergarten student who was attending Pike school during the year of the study. This student displayed aggressive behaviors including throwing pencils, kicking, hitting, and biting. When explaining the cause of the behavior, the principal explained, “He watched his dad abuse his mom for his entire life. So the entire time he’s been alive, he’s seen that behavior.” He gave another example of another Kindergartener,

He’s going through the foster care system. That’s been incredibly traumatic for him. The things that he experienced as a three and four-year-old are impacting his behavioral choices today. He saw things happen, like animals being abused, and he was threatened with “I’m going to kill you” by an adult who grabbed him by the shirt.

Mia, a veteran teacher shared, “Maybe they have gone through some trauma and they just have a lot of things that they have to deal with before they’re ready to learn in the classroom. And that could be showing up as being really withdrawn or with outbursts

of behavior.” She elaborated on some of her students chaotic home lives, “They have so little stability in their lives outside of school.”

Resources.

The principal elaborated and defined trauma, more broadly, as “homelessness, poverty, a lack of resources” and added that “we’re seeing that’s really something that’s increasing when we do social emotional screeners on kids. About half of our classrooms are showing [students] at risk”. Within the overarching category of lacking resources is where staff’s perspectives began to differ on the impact of home life and school behavior.

Steve gave examples, citing three-to-four students who were displaying challenging behaviors in school during the school year of the study, suggesting that mental health was the cause. Steve shared,

One [student] this year was diagnosed with depression. All of them are seeking psychiatric help outside of school. One of them lives with his grandparents. His Mom and Dad...I don’t know how.... homeless, they just kind of left them with Grandpa and Grandma so he’s dealing with those issues.

Steve continued, sharing, “I just don’t think school is a priority for a lot of them when they get here. We are working on life skills, not so much the education part.”

Ryan viewed it more as socioeconomic status, or limited access to resources, as the cause of behaviors, sharing the example of families’ views, “The value of education...struggling to make ends meeting” and “My education hasn’t gotten me anywhere” or “Frankly, I’m working three jobs just to make my rent payments.” He offered the following vignette from the perspective of the families the school tries to

support, “How do you really want me to be supporting the kid, you’re day care [school], you guys [educators] take care of the behaviors. I’m working three jobs to try to make ends meet, I’m not home to see the behaviors myself”.

Robert Drake offered a different perspective and definition of resources, believing that families lacked resources for their children. Robert Drake, who serves as the school’s behavior specialist and intervention teacher, oversaw the school’s behavior intervention program. He is the staff member who supports most students described in this study and most of the students displaying non-compliance and externalized behaviors at Pike. He also offers the unique perspective, and distinction of being the school’s only licensed staff member of color to work with general education students. When asked about the underpinnings of student behavior, he primarily blamed the parents. “Well, I think the foremost thing is the lack of discipline at home. My thing is that most of our kids have unstructured home life.” He went onto explain:

A lot of people say that if you come from low economic status, the chances of you disrupting the class is going to be higher. Well, it could be true, could be not true, but the things is, most of, or a lot of, our parents do not have the skills of parenting, and that is, for me, the crux of the matter; the lack of parents’ skills to parent.

As a result of the lack of parents’ access to resources and the limiting of parental skills, some staff at Pike believed the roles of educators evolved and changed over their careers. Mr. Drake, in reference to parents lacking the nurturing skills to be parents shared, “So the school is left with that responsibility to try to be parents and teachers,

which is, of course, impossible, but we try to do it anyways.” Steve described himself as needing to be a parent, father-like figure to many of his students. Natalia, a veteran teacher, shared a similar perspective, noting the increase in the demands of educators and what schools are expected to provide for families now. In turn, Natalia also offered a perspective on the needs of families with limited resources, including financial resources. Natalia shared,

I just feel like our job is getting bigger and bigger, because it’s not happening outside of the classroom. We feed them snacks, we feed them breakfast, and we send food home. We teach them please and thank you, some of ‘em; I comb their hair and braid it. And hygiene, don’t forget hygiene, we teach hygiene, too.

School Structure: Underpinnings of a Eurocentric model.

Three staff members questioned if the structure of public schools were conducive to the learning of all students from all backgrounds and races, and whether the structure of schools impacted actions and behaviors of students. Mia, who believed that trauma was often the root of child behavior, also reflected on the structure of school, questioning whether school’s are based on a more Eurocentric model, sharing,

In my recent years, a lot of the students that I’ve had, when they act out the most, they’re either being asked to perform in an environment or a structure that is something that they’re not accustomed to, or it’s just a drastically different than what they have going on in their lives outside of school, or they are being asked to do work that is challenging for them.

Ryan, the school psychologist, also believed that the expectations of the school system contribute to the challenging behavior of students. He shared, “I think people look at it [student behavior] as they’re not engaged, but it’s really the student’s executive functioning; they just can’t regulate their own bodies. We’re demanding more and more of students to just sit and pay attention, but we don’t have movement breaks.” The psychologist went on to share, “We’re just trying to cram in so much during the day and I think kids are lower in our district than what administration would like to see. I think kids come in with a lot more trauma than what administration would like to acknowledge.”

Mr. Drake questioned the structure of public education as it relates to categorizing students and how educators view differing cultures. He shared,

We have to be very careful how we view it [culture]. Black kids, for instance, the Department of Education lumps all black kids as African Americans, when in fact, all black kids are not African Americans. You have Africans, as a part of that demographic and they represent different cultures, different countries, different sets of values, it’s all-different, it’s not the same. Yes, these kids are all black, but they represent different cultures, different values.

Mr. Drake’s comments alluded to historically Eurocentric practices, including students sitting quietly in rows, authoritative disciplinary practices, learning knowledge with little connection or relevance to their home and everyday lives.

School Structure: Culture.

Some staff members questioned the impact of cultural differences between home and school, arguing that public schools, including Pike Elementary, were not structured to support all students from all cultures. Emily shared,

I think we expect students to act, behave, talk, speak a certain way inside the classroom and when students' culture at home is different from that, and we see them behave otherwise in our classroom, those are the ones that we consider as acting out when that might just be their home culture.

Similar to Emily, Natalia shared, "Yeah, I truly believe it [differing cultures] does, because what is acceptable in one culture does not fit the norm of a school atmosphere." She gave the example of "So being loud and large is not what you want in a school environment". She elaborated,

What the problem is, when you have all these cultures come together, where you have one culture who is calm and quiet and do get scared in large environments, to a culture that thrives with discussion and argument...it's the way they communicate. The communication differences coming together are where often times there is miscommunication.

Natalia shared how educators communicate, respond to, and adapt to differing expressive communication styles of students can influence student behavior. She shared,

I think the biggest part of education's problem is miscommunication. When you have a classroom full of kids who are very boisterous about learning, if you don't have a teacher willing to accept it either, or other students in the class are

impacted by that, it can be a problem. I think you have to really set a norm in your classroom that some of the time it's okay for big and bold, and other times we need it quiet and calm.

She followed this up by saying, "I think that's a hard balance." She went onto discuss social norms and how to teach a consensus and how previous exposure and life experiences impact a student's ability to understand norms.

Study participants who weren't teachers also reflected upon and questioned their own potential biases and culture. They expressed how they pondered whether the culture they represent, which differs from many of their students, impacted student behavior and whether staff could objectively assess student behavior. For example, the epilogue offered at the beginning of this section, shared Ryan's belief that bias is apart of human nature. Mr. Drake shared, "Definitely there are a lot of times where we do have a difference of opinion on culture, what we need to do to intervene for our minority kids."

Sometimes the differences of opinion were due to a lack of cultural awareness and understanding. Ryan believed teachers had good intentions to support kids with behavioral needs, however, it was challenging for staff to interpret and understand student behavior objectively when it comes to race and culture. "I think teachers, given their helping profession, truly strive to be as objective as they can be [understanding student behavior], and they don't view race as the overwhelming reason why the behaviors are happening." Ryan believed it was difficult for educators to understand and interpret student behavior due to cultural and racial differences, "Given we [educators] are predominantly white, we come in with a different set of experiences than students of

color.” The leader of the school, the principal, believed that cultural differences should be on the forefront of staff members’ minds, but also acknowledged the differences in culture, suggesting that a sociocentrism exists within each culture.” He also shared, “If we understand or believe that there’s a sociocentrism to cultures, then that sociocentrism has to dictate instruction.” He described black urban culture as more verbal than white culture. He described the importance of providing students opportunities to be verbal and engaged in the classroom instruction and the importance of structure in the classroom,

If we don’t garner that responsiveness in our instruction, you’re going to breed behaviors. That’s where the use of attention signal protocols, call and response [protocols] discussion protocols, response protocols and movement protocols are critical. The more that those things exist [in the classroom], the greater chance or likelihood there is that the behaviors you like see would subside.

Additionally, Mr. Drake highlighted the challenge of categorizing student behavior and believed that behavioral support and interventions needed to be viewed individually. He shared that he’s observed staff generalizing student behaviors and advised against it, sharing

One of the biggest things about race and culture is that people have developed a lot of stereotypes over the years... and in teaching these kids they have to learn how to navigate those very fine lines between race and culture. If you generalize stereotypes of different races, you’re headed for problems. You’re headed for serious problems because every child, regardless of their race or culture, is different.

Echoing the beliefs of Ryan and Mr. Drake, Mia and Natalia, both veteran teachers, acknowledged possible cultural differences between students and staff and believed that societal norms and expectations exist and vary based on the setting. They also believed it was their role and responsibility as classroom teachers to teach kids how to code switch. Natalia offered the following vignette, sharing,

I think you have to honor as much as you can. Social norms depend on where you are at. I've had this conversation [with students]. If you go to the bank, are you going to go in yelling and screaming? Having a good time with your friends? Or are you going to go in and do some business? When you go in and do some business, you have to act a certain way. It's just social norms. Some of them just don't have those experiences in life to come in [to school] that way.

Mia echoed the same point. She shared the importance of teaching kids how to code switch and how one can behave and act differently based on the environment. She shared, "They call it kid culture now. Kid culture is changing, but we also talk about code switching and how there is an expectation for behavior when the kids are at school. She continued to elaborate, "They have to learn both. They have to understand their culture, but they also need to know what is an appropriate way to act or behave when you're in certain situations."

Section Summary

This section summarized staff's perceptions of the causes and underpinnings of at-risk behavior and behaviors of concerns in their students. Staff believed trauma, a lack of resources, (including poverty and limited parenting skills) were the causes of student

behavior of concern observed at school. Staff also questioned whether a cultural dichotomy occurred between the culture of schools and the culture of students' home lives. Staff were concerned that students experienced differing expectations and cultural norms between home and school. They also expressed concern that most of the educators at Pike are challenged with objectively understanding student behavior, since a cultural difference does exist between some students and staff.

Behavioral Interventions: Varying Approaches to Implementation, Staff Skillsets, & Responses

I always say you really need to have to develop a relationship [with the student] to determine what their need is for behavioral interventions.

–Steve, teacher

To address behavioral concerns and cultural differences and, ultimately, student behavior, participants shared differing skills and approaches utilized at Pike Elementary to support behaviors. This section will begin by highlighting both the barriers teachers faced in implementing interventions and the multi-faceted approach used. Examples will demonstrate how staffs' responses, interpretation, skills, and practices influence student behavior and behavioral interventions.

Barriers: Challenges in Defining a Behavior Intervention

While the ultimate responsibility of implementing a pre-referral intervention lies with the teacher, the principal underscored the fact that the collaborative effort involved in implementing a behavioral intervention involves multiple stakeholders. He demonstrated that a behavioral intervention may be challenging to define because it's not necessarily a single step or intervention, such as a reading intervention. If a student has

academic concerns in reading, they'll likely work with the reading interventionist. For behavioral interventions, it's more of a collaborative, team approach involving a myriad of factors, steps, decisions, stakeholders, and internal and external influencers. Jeff shared,

The SAT team is going to detail what is going to be done following the meeting, and there isn't a one role for one, there isn't one thing that we do. There are a lot of things we do. We might gather a health history. The nurse might do that. We might develop a check-in, check-out system. The behavior specialist would help on that and then the classroom teacher and the behavior specialists would work on that. We might decide that there is a literacy intervention that we're going to do with five kids and they're a part of that and the reading teacher would track that data. Maybe there is a visual schedule and preferential seating that we're going to try, and the teacher would have to follow through on that. So we'll put the special education teacher on the visual schedule or something like that. We're going to leave that meeting with an array of different things and different responsibilities that people could be given.

This can be challenging for teachers because, while it's a collaborative effort with numerous moving pieces and personnel involved, the responsibility does fall on the teacher to ensure everything happens. Ryan shared, "The building kind of operates on this idea that if I'm not hearing anything, I am assuming that it's going okay." He also shared that with the intervention implementation, "It's really up to the teacher to say

they've done it." There aren't any formal checks and balance systems to ensure implementation beyond the follow-up SAT team meeting [4-6 weeks].

One teacher believed the efficacy of an intervention was subject to the efforts of the team and sometimes breakdowns occur. Mia shared, "It probably depends on the makeup of the team. I think it probably depends on the follow through by all the members of the team. I know that if it's decided that one of my students is going to receive an academic intervention and then the person who's supposed to be administering the intervention doesn't follow whatever procedure we've determined, that's where the breakdown is going to happen. If there's a communication breakdown, the process is not going work so well." It was beyond the scope of this study to investigate the rate at which teachers felt a breakdown may occur. However, most teachers felt a communication breakdown more often occurs with behavioral interventions and, sometimes, it was due to differing perspective from staff on what the student needed.

Mia described the difference between types of interventions and gave examples of commonly used behavioral interventions. She described behavior supports as behavioral monitoring, giving the student breaks, letting the student leave the room and that the highest tiered behavioral interventions likely occurred with the support of the behavioral interventionist or interventionist (i.e. counselor, social worker).

Some staff members were critical of behavioral supports and interventions used within the school. Emily was critical of the SAT team, and described the discussion as "having more of a struggle with" and "not very streamlined for everyone". Ryan, the psychologist, was critical of Mr. Drake, the behavioral interventionists, practices. Ryan

believed the supports offered didn't fully address students' needs, sharing, "I think it's totally putting the band-aid on the problem." Ryan was also critical of the data collection processes used by Mr. Drake's program to determine efficacy rates of behavioral interventions. He offered an analogy to describe subjectivity of practices and data collection,

If you want to look at an academic analogy, you can say, "Hey, the kid has gone up ten points, it's [behavior program] doing its job! Where, really, if there was an efficacy behind that same academic intervention, that student's growth would have been a hundred points.

Ryan explained his analogy, describing that data is subjective and can be interpreted to make it look like you want. In his analogy, the student's growth has "gone up 10 points" but he was suggesting that while it showed some growth, it didn't fully address the needs of the student. The behavior program, which had its own classroom, was helpful in a sense to the school, but he further explained his band-aid comment when describing the behavior program. "It's doing something, just because it's a place for kids to go if they're not in the classroom causing an issue, but I don't think it's getting at the root cause of what's going on for the kid," he said. Natalia held reservations regarding the objectivity around student behavioral data, too. She described it as more difficult to track compared to academic interventions and questioned the role of educators influencing student behavior, sharing, "I think the behavioral is harder to track because, what if all of a sudden, I'm having a bad day and I'm more critical of the child because I'm having a bad day?"

The communication breakdowns Mia described occurred due to a staff member's interpretation of student behavior, the type of intervention selected, and a lack of fidelity in implementing the intervention. The principal expected teachers to collaborate as behavioral strategies were individualized for each student. Jeff shared,

The classroom teacher would need to work jobs, to work with the behavior specialist to make sure that intervention takes place and is handled appropriately. If it's a check-in and check-out, then we've got a morning, mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and end of the day check-in, check-out. Tallying of the goals are written on the check-in and check-out sheet that's customized for the kid.

Jeff elaborated further, describing that behavioral interventions were "customized to each child depending on their specific need, and then we have three levels of performance for each of the areas. "We score them accordingly and just keep track of them during the day."

Steve wasn't able to describe the strategies Mr. Drake did to actually support students when they were in Mr. Drake's classroom. Steve hoped it was helpful for the students though. Ryan and Natalia were critical of some of the strategies used by the behavior program. The perspectives and experiences of Natalia and Ryan were inconsistent with how the principal described behavioral interventions. Natalia and Ryan described them as more "cookie-cutter" type approaches, whereas the Jeff the principal described them as more individualized. Ryan offered the following vignette,

I think it's a catch-all for all the students that come in, "We're going to do a check-in, check-out sheet" and "Oh, half the school year has gone by and it's not

working. Well, maybe we'll have them for a lunch group." This versus a true [intervention] of what is going on, where does the student need support, what are the behaviors of concern (like a true mini-functional behavioral assessment) and then tailor the intervention around the data that's collected, as opposed to just a one size fits all intervention.

Natalia was also critical of some of the strategies implemented by Mr. Drake's program and practices. She shared, "We have a big push for charts and I don't always see the benefit from them, depending on the students. Some students will respond well to it for three weeks and then it loses its zest. It loses its effectiveness, so you've got to switch it up." Jeff the principal acknowledged that interventions might need to be modified during the implementation stage. He emphasized the importance of making data-informed decisions. He gave an example of a first grade student who, through data, determined that he was getting a spike in referrals to the behavior program and staff concluded that the behavior program was a reward because he liked spending time with the adults in the program, and they determined it was occurring at the same time everyday. So the team modified the student's plan. Instead of the student coming into the physical space of the behavior program, staff would meet him in the hallway, and then he'd go right back to class and address the issue. "We started doing that consistently and every time he was sent [to behavior program] that's what we did, and his referrals, boom, they just nose dived." Jeff described this as "an analysis and an application."

As a classroom teacher, Natalia experienced a lack of consistency and fidelity of implementation of behavioral interventions. Her experiences highlighted the challenges

she experienced using a team-based, collaborative approach to supporting student behavior. Natalia shared, “I don’t find all the time that ADSIS [behavior program] is as consistent as I want them to be”. Natalia, in particular, described this as more situational and she opted to disregard the intervention, instead using her personal judgment, based on the situation, if an individual student should go to the behavior program’s room or not, even if it’s planned. This teacher shared,

I don’t send them [students]. I keep them in my room and I deal with it my way because I don’t want it to be a reward for them and we have had that situation where they get rewarded when they had one for the worst weeks they’ve ever had. So often times. I’ll keep them in my classroom and I’ll have a system set up for rewards when it’s truly earned.

She explained that the lack of structure in the behavior program influenced student behaviors, “When they leave my classroom is when I often see a real breakdown on behavior, when they go to a special or in the hallway. In my classroom, I can control the behaviors.”

Veteran teachers shared, at times, that they had to speak to the interventionist to “get on the same page.” Natalia had experienced a breakdown during the implementation stage before and described how, over time, she developed the skill as a veteran teacher to address the situation with appropriate staff members [i.e. interventionists, principal]. Natalie shared, “It’s evolved over time. I think you have to go and communicate.” She was explicit on how she would navigate a possible breakdown. The teacher cited her experience and existing relationships with staff as a precursor, noting, “If I felt as though

I had developed a relationship with them, I'd say, "Hey, this is...not okay." Like I will go in and say full straight out, I don't email it, I don't call it, I go right in face to face and say, "Here's the situation..." When discussing the comfort of having open dialogue, Natalia shared that she felt comfortable, but that the comfort level developed over time, sharing, "Yea, but a new teacher wouldn't feel comfortable doing that." Emily, an inexperienced teacher, described how it took her three years to develop a comfort level of advocating for a student. Emily shared, "It kind of depends on the teacher. I feel like now as I'm entering my 4th year at the school, I finally really.... this past year, my 3rd year was when I really felt comfortable standing up for a student and even if other teachers may have disagreed, or their parents disagreed, I felt like I could finally speak up. This is what I see in my room, here's the data to show this."

A Different Role for the Principal: Facilitation Conversation, Massaging Relationships, and Ensuring Collaboration

Ryan's description of the "squeaky wheels" of the pre-referral intervention process was illustrated by Jeff's description of his role as principal in the pre-referral intervention process. Jeff acknowledged possible communication breakdowns and was explicit regarding the importance of implementing team-based approaches to support behavioral interventions, being collaborative, and having strong open communication. Jeff felt a big part of his job was to ensure collaboration, sharing, "Honestly, a big part of my role is just talking to people, massaging relationships, getting people to talk to each other, facilitating conversation, and it's been hard, especially when race is involved." The principal shared that race is challenging for behavior interventions because people can

have different views on norms and expectations and that in these type of situations, people have to collaborate and work together.

Jeff shared that staff needed to communicate and needed to listen to one another and his role as the principal was to hold people accountable. He had a situation where a newer staff member was struggling to collaborate and became territorial over the work of supporting student behaviors and he found that concerning and problematic. Jeff shared,

I have to hold you [staff member A] accountable; you [staff member B] need to listen to what she's [staff member A] saying. You have to give it a try and have to move your personality out of it. We've had some of those issues, and one person isn't going to be here [Pike] next year because there are too many other people on the team that see her [staff member A] as being territorial and I can't have that.

That's not going to work. We have to think of ourselves as intersecting circles instead of an island.

Jeff didn't go into any more details about this specific staff member, however, in this situation, Jeff described a staff member struggling to collaborate and the result was, that specific staff would not be returning to the building. Jeff also described his role of "massaging relationships" as a means to discussing race, helping staff confront their own possible cultural biases and differences that they may have possessed. He felt it was complicated when race was involved. Jeff shared that Mr. Drake believed that a staff member was racist. Jeff explained, "She doesn't understand her own limits; treats everybody like they're white, middle class kids and she wants to talk to kids like that, but she would never say that, but that's what the behavior shows." Jeff shared that Mr. Drake

became defensive about this staff member's role in supporting students and behavior. Jeff shared that his role was to get involved and help, "So part if it, again, has been that coaching piece. I was trying to help [coach]". The principal gave another example of adding two new staff members to the intervention process. These staff members hadn't yet developed a strong working relationship together and the principal recognized it. The principal shared,

So, part of my role there was to work with the human element, coach each, coach them on each other and how they're thinking, how they're processing, getting them to see that they're both, indeed, trying to do the same thing. We just got to work together on this.

Staff's Supports, Strategies, and Approaches to Supporting Student Behavior

Building relationships.

Staff offered the differing strategies they used in an attempt to interpret and support student behavior. Steve shared the importance of re-setting and coming to school with a fresh attitude and providing kids with a clean slate each day. He shared,

I'm trying every day, I just reset and I come in with 100% attitude with them. I end up just being more of a Dad to them during the day and relating with them and I understand that. I try to meet their needs and come to a common ground with them.

First and foremost, some staff shared the importance of engaging with students. More specifically, they shared an importance in building relationships with them. Steve shared,

I find I get the best results from students when I actually invest in wanting to care about them and wanting to know about their life outside of school. Whether it's talking about what they did last weekend or asking how their night was.

Whenever they come in, the first thing I want to do is make that connection with them right off the bat.

Mia shared, "I think that first I have to get to know my students because sometimes the behavior that they might be showing can change if they have an established relationship with me." She went on to cite the importance for students to have an adult they can trust in the school, but shared that the adult doesn't have to be the classroom teacher.

To support student behavior and implement behavioral interventions, two teachers shared the importance of engaging staff members and relied on their support. Natalia shared that she started by trying to determine the cause of the behavior and if it was related to a "can't do or won't do" - meaning, was the student avoiding the task by choice or avoiding the task by due to a lack of skill? She started by trying to talk to the student and see if they were willing to talk to her. She also offered them a chance to write it. She shared she had multiple students who used journals to communicate with her and express themselves within her classroom. She shared she'd rely on and engage her colleagues, saying, "If they already had a relationship with the counselor or social worker, some kind of support system we have here at school, I would dismiss them to go talk about it."

Similarly, Mia shared if she wasn't making progress with supporting the student, "Then I'd look beyond myself to find another adult who might be able to help them make a connection. I don't generally have a hard time making connections with kids, but every

once in a while it's nice [referencing the support from others]." Steve also shared his willingness to be direct with kids by stating they will be going to Mr. Drake's room if they don't meet the classroom expectations. Mr. Drake suggested staff could utilize him as a resource, as well.

Natalia shared the importance of trying to determine the antecedent of student behaviors and how her interpretation of behavior influenced her response. She offered a vignette to describe how she supported non-compliant behaviors,

If they were just refusing to do the work at the time but I knew they could and they weren't normally a behavior issue, I would usually just leave them be and then address them later and say, 'You're still missing this sheet, I want you to do some of it at home or maybe some more in the AM' (because I don't want them to lose the skill either).

Alternatively, she shared that her response would be different if the student's issues were chronic, rather an isolated incident she'd connect the student to a support team member outside of the classroom. She offered,

I would still hold them accountable for the work because it gets to a point where you can't always have behaviors impacting skills. They're always going to be behind, they're always going to have struggles in life because it's not going to go away, the gap is just going to get bigger. I try hard to judge the situation effectively, to say now his behaviors are impacting his academics because he's always choosing to leave, or he's always carrying the baggage of what happens at home.

Professional Development.

Jeff has served as a building principal for over twenty years. He believed teachers become successful by addressing student behaviors through professional growth. Jeff stressed the importance to his new teachers that they need to become reflective, learn from their mistakes, and put in the time; behavior support is a skill that develops over time. Jeff gave a detailed vignette and example, which one of his teachers was experiencing. A long-term substitute teacher in a Kindergarten classroom was filling in for a teacher on maternity leave. He shared how the teacher's inability to reflect and her struggle to learn and adapt impacted her ability to meet the needs of her students. He illustrated that there isn't always a cookie-cutter, clear answer for responding to and supporting student behavior and there was a symbiotic relationship between adult responses and student behavior. He shared, "I said to her yesterday, 'This is really an ugly situation, nobody can tell you what to do here. We can give you suggestions about it, things you can try, but this is a trial and error thing, and you've got to figure this out.' But I don't think she's picking up on the fact that she is the trigger." Then, he shared why this teacher continued to struggle with her role in supporting student behavior. "She doesn't get that, and until she's self reflective about that, I don't know....I hope that it'll change".

In Jeff's experience as a principal, he's observed newer teachers struggling with being reflective; they don't have the experience to have self-reflection skills developed out of their teaching programs yet. He shared the importance of experience in this field, stating, "New teachers often times have a really hard time with this." He continued, "The

more experiences you have, usually the better you are, the more intuitive you are; you can read things better.”

While Natalia’s previously shared comment acknowledged challenges tracking and interpreting behavioral data, she shared her reflective skills and how she constantly reflects to determine what her role was in influencing student behavior, “I think the behavioral is harder to track because, what if all of a sudden, I’m having a bad day and I’m more critical of the child because I’m having a bad day?” In Jeff’s administrative experience, newer teachers struggled with prioritizing, too.

There are three components, or categories your time fits into when you’re a new teacher. You’re either going to focus on what you teach, you’re going to focus on how you teach, and you’re going to focus on who you teach.

Jeff continued, “New teachers spend most of their time on what they teach. They spend less time on how to teach, and who to teach.” He described two new teachers going through their evaluation process and during the evaluation he shared the importance of how you teach, and who you teach versus the content, and they both responded with, “Oh man, that makes sense!”

Newer teachers can learn but they have to put in the time, according to Jeff. He shared Pike had a new 4th grade teacher who’d been swimming since the beginning of the year and took the what, how, and who conversation hard in September. “She has taken traumatic behaviors and seen how to neutralize them because she’s working hard. Because of her reflective nature and her perseverance, and because she’s got some experience under her belt, she understands that she needs to spend more time on the

‘who,’ I’ve really got to understand this and I’ve got to put my time in at night into thinking about the who and how I can help them.” He offered the following illustration to give a clear example, “Instead of figuring out, okay, were going to start the rational number project next week, I have to get this fractions lesson down and establish what we’re going to learn and how.” The principal shared how this can be a steep learning curve. He gave another example of another new teacher on staff, sharing, “I’ve got my first year teacher this year; she’s tired. She’s just fried because she just doesn’t have the experience yet to think about all these kids and doesn’t have the repertoire, doesn’t have the toolbox yet to work on some of those things or be successful on some of those things.”

To build a teacher’s toolbox, teachers needed time, coaching, and professional development. Teachers have varying skillsets and experiences at addressing and supporting student behavior. Teachers also have different experiences and training on student cultures and behaviors. Staff shared the importance of collaborative professional learning focusing on student cultures and behaviors. Staff at Pike emphasized the importance of building relationships with students, but the emphasis a teacher puts on relationship building was up to the teacher. Mia shared, “It depends on how you value that, if you don’t see a value, then you wouldn’t want to put energy into making that happen.” She went onto share, “I have also seen teachers that have struggled with management [behavior and classroom] and just building relationships with students. You can give them all the strategy suggestions that you have, and it doesn’t mean that they’re going to figure out how to make that work.”

Mr. Drake believed that educators from a non-diverse background have the ability to improve their ability to understand behaviors of students from a different race and/or culture. Mr. Drake emphatically shared, “There are some teachers that go above and beyond to understand that.” He added, “Especially teachers that want to go the extra mile, those teachers that are really making this a career.” He shared that he has observed teachers doing this at Pike Elementary,

There are some teachers who I know just want to be there to be able to help these kids. So they learn as much as they can about the cultural values of these different kids to be able to impact their lives. For this to occur, Mr. Drake believed that teachers have to want to learn and grow. He stated,

There are some who believe that, Well I’ve got my degree already and I don’t really need anything else. I have my degree and just teach. The theoretical part comes with the degree, but the practical part is where I have to go over and beyond, go to workshops, reading, read more, get involved with other cultures, and just put yourself in situations to learn more. And there are teachers that really do that. It takes work and it takes serious...yeah, that’s attached to your career, and how far you want to go with it.

Section Summary

This section demonstrated that a behavioral intervention was a series of steps, decisions, and actions of multiple stakeholders attempting to collaborate together to support an individual student with behavioral needs. Yet staff described many barriers they experienced in an effort to implement behavioral interventions. Some staff were

critical of the strategies used at Pike and felt they were more “cookie-cutter” approaches, not individualized, and didn’t fully address the underlying issues the students were experiencing. Some staff criticized Mr. Drake’s approaches, experienced communication breakdowns, and questioned the fidelity of the implementation of behavioral interventions. One teacher described how, at times, she wouldn’t send students to work with Mr. Drake because of a differing view of expectations. Teachers emphasized the importance of building relationships with students and to support student behavior and they relied on fellow staff members for support. The principal described his role in the pre-referral intervention process, which the psychologist coined the “squeaky wheels”. The principal described his role as ensuring collaboration by massaging relationships, ensuring staff were communicating, coaching staff and addressing cultural differences and bias. Lastly, the principal believed that it takes time for teachers to develop their skillsets in supporting student behaviors and need access to collaborative professional learning focusing on student cultures and behaviors to develop their reflective skills.

Collaborating with Families: Bridging The Cultural Divide

To truly support all Pike students and students with behavioral concerns, staff felt it was important to connect and partner with families. They felt building a trusting partnership based on open communication was a starting point when trying to support student behavior. They found this was critical, too, if any cultural divide or differences existed, and stressed the importance of having open and honest conversations about the challenges and concerns of their student. The principal addressed the importance of how he approached addressing these situations, too.

Internal and External Stakeholders: Creating a Family

Natalia, a veteran teacher, shared that she attempted to support student behavior and her approach to working with students from differing cultures was involve parents by being open and honest. “I want to let you [parents] know this weighs heavily on me. I never have a problem confronting a parent.” She continued, “What is happening at home is impacting your child’s education and this situation that is on your child’s mind is impacting their learning...” She cited her ability to have open conversations with families was due to her experience, but described the challenges newer teacher have with dialogue with families, “, “I don’t have a problem doing that, but I know that new teachers would really struggle with that”. Natalia described that as a teacher-leader, she helped a newer teacher with have an honest conversation with a family at the most recent parent-teacher conference.

Jeff, too, shared the importance of building trust with families and as principal, this fell under his responsibility -- what Ryan described as the “squeaky wheels” of the pre-referral intervention process. Jeff shared that an important part of his role as principal was to “massage relationships,” but his comments weren’t exclusive to school staff. He served as a liaison between internal and external stakeholders and attempted to break down racial and cultural barriers. Jeff shared that he has experienced and acknowledged that some parents struggle to inherently trust the public education system. He shared,

There’s another side to this, and it has to do with trust and it’s highly relational and it’s not only about what I look like. I see it more with older kids than I do younger kids and I see it more with adults than I do with younger kids.

The principal was referencing the power and influence of having staff that can relate, identify, or even look like the demographic the district serves and alluded to the importance he placed on racial congruence with staffing. The principal shared an instance where he asked a parent to come in to discuss her son's behavior and choices he was making in school. To explain how some families lack trust in educational systems, he gave me the backstory of a mother and family he was working with during the time of the study, sharing,

There's an experiential piece with authority and trust that exists in her mind because of her experience. Because in her entire life, she's had problems with authority, and every time that she had a problem, that authority figure was white. So now I'm that person. Meaning, as a white male and leader of the school, he's not able to convey the same message in a manner that's respectful and resonates with the family because of his position and his skin color.

Jeff went onto explain a recent interaction he had with this particular mom, her boyfriend, and their son who attends Pike. He highlighted why he's been intentional about racial congruence with his staff. Jeff shared,

She's black and her boyfriend is black, and he's from the South Side of Chicago. When they came in, I wanted them to feel comfortable and be an equal partner in the planning and decision making process for their son, however, we [principal and counselor] knew the family would be reluctant to agree to receiving any additional support in school.

Knowing this, the principal said to the parents,

Would you please meet the ADSIS person [behavioral specialist, Mr. Drake] because I'd like you to listen what the staff from that program has to say. The dad agreed, and as soon as Mr. Drake walked in, the parent's demeanor immediately changed. Mr. Drake walks in the door and her body language changes immediately. As soon as she laid eyes on him, it changes, because of his skin color; it's the same as her. He sat down, greeted her, called her ma'am, looked the dad in the face and shook his hand. Then the dad began to talk mom into doing the service. He asked the family if they wanted to meet the other staff member in the program. He invites in the paraprofessional from the program, and she walks in and sees the tats on the woman, recognizes it, her dialect changes and said, "Y'all from the South?" referencing the South Side of Chicago, which is where the paraprofessional was also from.

Jeff summarized the experience of having Mr. Drake and the paraprofessional's background to support the family, describing the relationship went from tense and uncomfortable "to family". Jeff has been strategic about the hiring and staffing of his behavior support team. He wanted a team that could work with parents and, based on his perspective, he has done that. He explained, "So this team we have, this is strategic because our team looks like our kids. Half the kids, half the kids in our school are kids that have a different skin color than I do so half of our behavior team has to be black, or not white, and that's why we have a team like this.

Section Summary

The last section of Chapter Six stressed the importance of building collaborative partnerships with families and that this was a critical step in supporting student behavior. The principal believed part of his role, as leader of the school, was to ensure collaboration and open communication occurred between staff, manage relationships, and break down any possible cultural barriers between internal and external stakeholders. Teacher relied on open and honest communication with families. The principal offered a poignant vignette from a recent situation with a family that was reluctant to the practices of the school due to a cultural difference and the family's lack of trust with educational institutions. In this scenario, the principal stressed the importance of building trust, partnerships with families, and address cultural differences between home and school. The principal found it was easier to bridge cultural divides using racial congruence with staffing; having culturally and linguistically diverse staff on site to assist in building partnerships with families.

Summary of Findings Chapter

Chapter Six defined the types of behaviors of concern that warranted a referral to the school's intervention team over the past three years. Staff believed they were witnessing externalized and non-compliance behaviors due to factors associated with the students' lives outside of school. Students have experienced trauma, and many families were either impoverished or had limited access to resources. Staff also questioned the structure of schools and how that may accentuate a cultural difference between school

and home for their students. It was presented that it's challenging for most staff to truly view behavior objectively since many of their students were of a different culture.

Behavioral interventions were more complex processes when compared to academic interventions. Behavioral interventions were often a series of steps and actions implemented through a collaborative effort between multiple stakeholders. The involvement of multiple stakeholders yielded some communication breakdowns and challenged the ability to implement interventions with fidelity. Some staff criticized the school's behavioral intervention program and approaches used by Mr. Drake, believing they didn't address the underlying issues and were more "cookie cutter" approaches that weren't individualized.

In order for the pre-referral intervention process to be successful, particularly for behavioral interventions, the principal needed staff to collaborate and communicate openly. Part of his role as building principal was to encourage the development of positive relationships between staff members and also provide coaching on discussing race and cultural differences. The principal believed that it takes time for educators to learn to support behaviors and, as principal, it was his responsibility to provide professional learning on collaboration, student cultures and behaviors, and the development of reflective skills.

Lastly, staff suggested that in order to support and address student behavior, they needed to develop collaborative partnerships with families built on open and honest communication. At times, the principal believed his role was to facilitate relationships between internal and external stakeholders and help break down any possible cultural

barriers. The principal illustrated the importance of facilitating relationships through dialogue to build trust with families and in the example he offered, he acknowledged that for that family to trust the school, they would need to partner with someone of a similar cultural background. The principal expressed the importance of racial alignment with staffing and the benefits offered to many of the Pike Elementary students and families.

Summary of Ground Theory

Interpreting the Difference Between Academic and Behavioral Interventions

Chapter Three presented the study design for this investigation into the pre-referral intervention process at a single public elementary school. This study investigated the roles, responsibilities, perceptions, and experiences of the elementary general education teacher. Chapter Four presented a map, outlining three stages within the pre-referral intervention process, which incorporated the school's MTSS framework, PBIS and PLC models and SAT team (intervention team) and highlighted the critical role of the principal, which was encapsulated as the "squeaky wheels" including: massaging relationships, ensuring collaboration, and confronting race and staff biases. Chapter Five offered an overview of implementing academic interventions and why staff believed there was a difference between academic and behavioral interventions.

Data analysis from the study has yielded a grounded theory that despite Pike's development and advancement of its pre-referral intervention process to include PLCs, PBIS, SAT team, behavioral and academic screeners, and a collaborative school culture where staff generally trusted one another, staff held differing views and opinions on the differences between academic and behavioral interventions. The theory holds that

academic interventions are more objective and easier to define and interpret; whereas, behavioral interventions were more subjective and complex, involved multiple steps and stakeholders, and were largely based on the subjective interpretations of staff members. Staff members had varying degrees of experience in recognizing the cultural bias of these behaviors. Staff adopted different strategies in interpreting and making sense of student behaviors, including collaborating with staff and the principal, engaging in professional learning, and building partnerships with families. The following table represented this grounded theory, illustrating staff's definitions and interpretations of staff's differences between the two types of interventions:

Table 5: Academic versus Behavioral Interventions

Academic Interventions versus Behavioral Interventions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less Subjective • Less Biased • Clearly defined roles/expectations for staff • Clearly defined three stage process • Clearer communication • Easier to track data • Less school-related personnel involved • Easier to implement with fidelity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More Subjective • More Biased • Collaborative Approach • More Communication Breakdowns • Lack of fidelity of implementation • Requires more training, reflection from staff • Better supported by experienced staff • Active involvement from principal • Data tracking can be confusing, unclear, or even subjective • Influenced based on staff backgrounds, trainings • Influenced based on staff responses • May requires greater partnership with families • Blurry roles between the three stages

Chapter 7: Implications for Practice and Recommendations

Introduction

My experience as an elementary special education teacher exposed me to the systems and subsystems within a school and the complex roles and responsibilities of all teachers, particularly general education teachers. This study was developed based on my experience as an elementary special education teacher and my firsthand experience with the cultural phenomena of disproportionate representation of students of color in special education, particularly the disability category emotional/behavioral disorders (e.g. Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Finn, 1982; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999).

One of the early scholars on disproportionality, or overrepresentation, summarized the foundation of this present day study. Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, (1982) believed that the disproportionate representation is a problem if students are invalidly placed in such programs due to poor-quality instruction or if the special education program blocks progress and reduces the likelihood of returning to the regular classroom. Hosp and Reschly (2003) argued that the relationship between eligibility and referral suggests that a better understanding of disproportionate representation in special education categorization requires investigation of factors affecting referral rates and processes.

My experience conducting special education evaluations exposed me to the factors, systems, supports, and processes within a school that students and families experience prior to the decision to refer a student for a special education evaluation

known as the pre-referral intervention process. I developed this study after exploring the historical outcomes of the rates at which referrals become special education placements (e.g. Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, Wishner, and Yoshida, 1990; Algozzine, Christenson, & Ysseldyke 1982; Clarizio, 1992; Ysseldyke, Vanderwood, Skinner, 1997) and understanding the critical role of general education teachers (e.g. Yell, 2012). This study was developed to investigate the complex role of the general education teacher and how they perceived, navigated, and defined support in the pre-referral intervention process.

This study focused on teachers of elementary students and was developed as a single-site constructivist grounded theory case study at a K-4 public elementary school during the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years. This particular school established their pre-referral intervention process into multiple steps within three distinct stages and included the school's professional learning community (PLC), intervention framework (MTSS), positive behavioral intervention supports (PBIS), and the intervention team (SAT Team).

This study found the school to have a collaborative culture, where teachers relied on trust and support from teacher leaders and the principal to navigate each of the three stages. Staff emphasized the critical role of the principal in the pre-referral intervention process. The principal ensured that the pre-referral intervention process was being implemented and that staff were collaborating, communicating, and that he fostered professional learning of teachers, and teachers were confronting any racial biases or cultural differences.

This study found a notable distinction between two types of interventions: academic and behavioral interventions. In terms of clearly defining interventions, tracking data, determining efficacy, and ease of implementation, staff found that academic interventions, as opposed to behavioral interventions, were much easier to manage.

The grounded theory developed from data collected for this study holds that despite having a defined pre-referral model, a collaborative school culture, and a heavily involved principal, behavioral interventions were more complex to implement and were largely based on the subjective interpretations based on staff's perceptions of student behavior. Staff members held varying degrees of experience in recognizing the cultural bias rooted in many of these student behaviors and staff adopted differing strategies in interpreting and making sense of them.

Staff members defined at-risk behaviors, including non-compliance or aggression, as those that may warrant the support of an intervention. Staff members varied in defining the causes and underpinnings of student behavior, believing it was rooted in both non-school factors (such as trauma, poverty, lacking resources and parenting skills) and school-based factors (including school culture, structure, and staff's skillsets and responses).

Staff members varied in defining a formal behavioral intervention, as the behavioral interventions commonly involved a series of steps, decisions, and actions from multiple stakeholders. Some staff members criticized commonly used behavioral supports and strategies within the building. To support student behaviors, a team-based approach

was often used. Differing opinions relative to required student supports reduced fidelity of implementation and led to communication breakdown among staff members.

For a team-based approach to successfully support student behaviors and implement behavioral interventions, staff agreed on the importance of building relationships with kids and collaborating with internal stakeholders. The principal believed his role was to ensure staff were communicating openly and collaborating in their efforts to support kids. The principal further defined his role as to help teachers develop their critical thinking and reflective skills, aid their professional learning on student race and culture, discuss race and culture, and ensure collaboration was occurring among staff members. Professional learning was described as critical in supporting student behaviors, as the ability of the staff members to interpret, understand, respond to, and support student behavior was acknowledged as influencing student behavior.

Lastly, to support student behaviors and implement behavioral interventions, staff (including the principal) described the importance of building partnerships and collaborating with families to support students. The principal acknowledged that some families lack trust in the public education school system and that race and culture influence this partnership. The principal believed his role was to foster racial discourse, bridge any cultural divide between educators and families in an attempt to support students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The principal shared his belief of racial alignment in his staffing and his strategic approach to staffing the school's behavioral intervention program with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an interpretation of the results of this study. This chapter will be divided into two sections: Implications for Practice and Recommendations. The implications for practice informed the construction of the recommendations. Each section will be divided into three categories: Organizational Management & Theory, Leadership, and Interventions & Student Behavior. The following graphic provides a roadmap for this chapter:

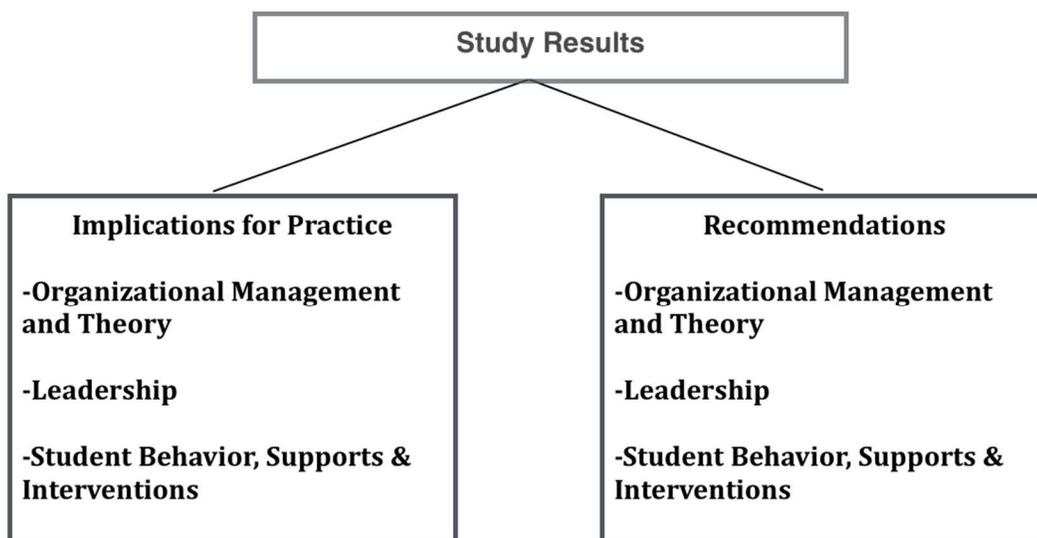


Figure 10: Study Results: A Concept Map

Implications for Practice

Organizational Management and Theory

I. Professional development time is required to develop educators' understandings of intervention frameworks, pre-referral intervention processes, and student behaviors. During the course of this study, a staff development session was dedicated to the implementation and refinement of the school's MTSS framework.

Despite this training session, staff struggled to describe all components of the pre-referral intervention process, identify RTI or MTSS, or describe the amount of training the district has provided. Veteran teachers cited experience as their training and newer teachers described a lack of training and other challenges, choosing to respond by asking lots of questions. Similar to the findings of this study, scholars, such as Tillery, Varjas, Meyers and Collins, 2010 have found that educators have struggled to identify and describe intervention frameworks. The authors (2010) found teachers within the school district were unfamiliar with RTI and the school-wide positive behavioral support systems (PBIS), despite staff development and training. In another study, Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, Moore (2014) showed most teachers didn't demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of components of RTI systems, as most respondents received a poor score for the definition of RTI. This was consistent with the findings in this study.

Districts must dedicate time for professional development to the pre-referral intervention process, MTSS or any of its components, and adequate staff development time in order to train teachers. Studies have found teachers support the introduction of intervention frameworks (Greenfield et al., 2010) and hold positive perceptions of possible outcomes [for students] from intervention frameworks (Nunn, Lantz, and Buikofer, 2009).

The pre-referral intervention process afforded staff member's professional learning opportunity from their colleagues. Study results suggested that teachers require reflective skills and cultural competence, along with strong communication and collaboration skills, to support student behaviors. The role of teachers influencing student

behavior was noted. The principal gave examples of providing reflective coaching sessions for his teachers to reflect on the “who” of teaching verses the “what” of teaching. Study results highlighted the importance of on-going professional learning for teachers, which Feinman-Nesmar (2002) described as a continuum; not a finite event.

A 2014 national survey found few teachers were “highly satisfied” with the ongoing professional training they receive (Teachers Know Best: Teacher’s View on Professional Development, 2015). Research has shown that much of the professional development teachers currently receive does not improve either teacher or student performance (Tooley and Connally, 2016). A 2016 survey found district and school leaders are committed to professional learning, but teachers lack decision-making authority over their own professional development and are not receiving adequate time for job-embedded professional development (The State of Teacher Professional Learning: Results from a National Survey, 2017). This survey’s results suggest that school and district level leaders likely determine the professional development calendar in districts. More specifically, some scholars have outlined the need for professional learning focused on student behavior. With student behavior outcomes as the focus, professional learning enhances educators’ understandings of the behavioral practices in which they need to engage to teach positive social behaviors, reinforce desirable behaviors, and prevent problem behaviors from occurring (Mathur, Estes, Johns, 2012). To demonstrate steps in the decision-making process for professional learning, a framework of back-mapping (Killion, 2002; Mathur, Griller Clark, & Schoenfeld, 2009) demonstrates the role of professional development in supporting positive student behavior:

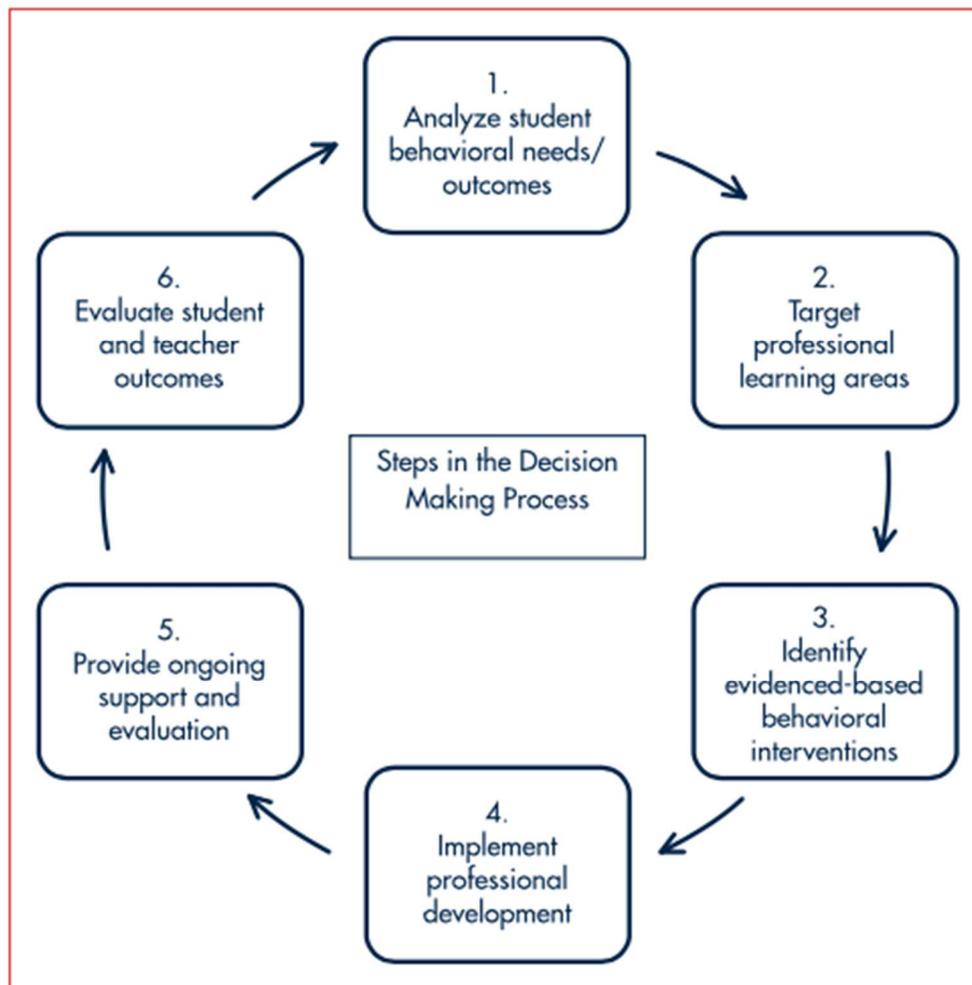


Figure 11: Professional Development on Student Behavior. Mathur, Griller Clark, & Schoenfeld (2009) Professional Development: A Capacity-Building Model for Juvenile Correctional Education Systems.

II. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have a critical role in the pre-referral intervention process at Pike Elementary. The role of PLCs and intervention frameworks (e.g. MTSS, RTI, RTI/MTSS) working in conjunction varies. Statute doesn't require schools in Minnesota to use a PLC model, or embed PLCs within the pre-referral intervention process, but teachers at Pike Elementary have found this model helpful in terms of gaining support and eliciting strategies, suggestions, and advice from fellow

teachers and staff. Studies (i.e. Evertson and Smithey, 2000; Joyce and Showers, 1982; Knight, 2004) have noted that mentors and coaches can encourage and support fellow colleagues in applying new approaches and strategies in their classrooms. Teachers navigated stage one of the pre-referral intervention process using the embedded PLC framework.

Some scholars have argued that PLCs and intervention frameworks should co-exist and be complementary processes within a school. Buffum et al. (2009) articulated the importance of bringing RTI and PLC practices together, suggesting that the essential characteristics of a PLC are perfectly aligned with the fundamental elements of response to intervention (RTI). The authors (2009) shared, “Quite simply, PLC and RTI are complementary processes, built upon a proven research base of best practices and designed to produce the same outcome—high levels of student learning (p. 49).” Scholars have highlighted the importance of PLCs in schools and the importance of collaboration. DuFour & Eaker (1998) suggested that the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities. The power of teachers is enhanced when teachers work collaboratively in highly effective teams (Eaker, 2016).

III. Trust has aided the development of staff collaboration at Pike

Elementary. Historically, some researchers, such as Novick (1999), have argued that the structure and organization of most elementary schools are not conducive to collaboration as classrooms physically isolate teachers from one another. Embedding the PLC model into the pre-referral intervention process has helped develop trust and build collaboration

at Pike Elementary. Scholars have examined the positive benefits of staff members building collaborative, working-partnerships together.. For example, some studies (e.g. Stevens and Slavin, 1995; Kohler et al., 1997) have examined the effects of peer-teacher relationship in improving social relationships among students or increasing engagement. Bryk and Schneider (2002) are seminal scholars on the role of trust in schools. The authors (2002) documented a strong statistical link between improvements in relational trust and gains in academic productivity. Relational trust focused on trust between individuals, such as teachers-teachers and administration-teacher. The authors shared that relational trust does not directly affect student learning. Rather, trust fosters a set of organizational conditions. They also found that schools with strong, trusting relationships among staff members are more likely to result in teachers who are willing to learn and engage in new practices. Where trust is present, cooperative behaviors, such as engaging personally, sharing information, and relying on other team members, are more likely to emerge (Costa & Anderson, 2011; Louis, 2007).

Similar to Nelson (2009), Hallam et al. (2015) investigated trust and collaboration in PLCs and found that trust facilitated collaboration. The authors' (2015) results were consistent with the findings in this study. The authors found that collaborative team trust develops when participants fulfill their assignments and responsibilities and show mutual kindness and patience. The authors offered the following graphic on how the two are intertwined. Clearly, teachers recognize that being kind and patient with other team members and reliable in fulfilling their responsibilities build trust and eventually lead to

increased collaboration (Hallam et al., 2015). The authors offered the following graphic on how the two are intertwined:

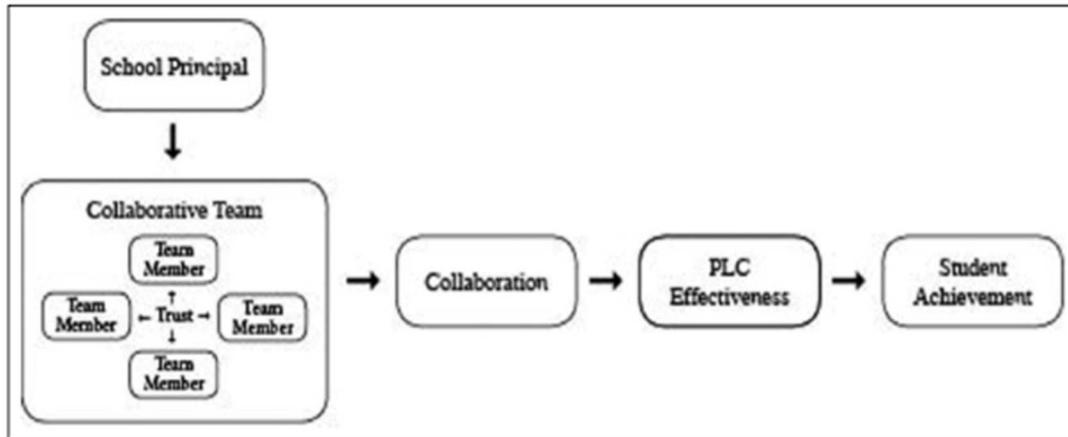


Figure 12: Trust Influence on PLCs. Hallam, P. R., Smith, H. R., Hite, J. M., Hite, S. J., & Wilcox, B. R. (2015). Trust and collaboration in PLC teams: Teacher relationships, principal support, and collaborative benefits.

This graphic illustrates the relationship between trust, collaboration, and building organizational conditions that Bryk and Schneider (2002), described as influencing student achievement. Tschannen-Moran (2001), a leading scholar on trust within schools, found that collaboration is needed to develop results orientation when it's fostered in schools with high trust. Some scholars (e.g. Bryk & Schneider, 2004; Stoll et al., 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2001) have suggested that an increased effort toward developing team trust and sustaining trust throughout the school culture can improve education for all students. It can also result in teachers (e.g. Barry & Stabb, 2008) believing they are change agents within the school. Other scholars, including, Epstein, Atkins, Cullinan, Kutash, & Weaver (2008), noted that social relationships and collaborative opportunities

can play a critical role in supporting teachers in managing disruptive behavior in their classrooms.

Leadership

IV. The Principal at Pike elementary has a critical role in the pre-referral intervention process. All study participants described the principal as having a critical role in the pre-referral intervention process. The principal ensured the pre-referral intervention process was being implemented in the school. He also ensured collaboration and communication occurred between staff, provided teachers guidance and professional learning, and helped foster relationships between the school and families.

Researchers have suggested that school administration has a critical role in the pre-referral intervention process. In this study, the principal was heavily involved in the first two stages of the pre-referral intervention process. In a study on principals and RTI, Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, and Moore (2014) found successful implementation of RTI included the presence of administrative support. Kovalski (2002) was more specific in outlining the role of administrative support in the pre-referral intervention process. The author believed that the principal needs to demonstrate tangible support by attending pre-referral team meetings, articulating an expectation of instructional improvement, and fostering a collaborative atmosphere among the teaching and professional staff. The author (2002) believed that principals need to be the lead person in articulating the pre-referral process to the entire school. This is consistent with findings in this study. The principal at Pike described his role as ensuring the pre-referral intervention process was

being implemented. During the study, the principal was continuing to develop and refine the intervention framework at Pike Elementary, too.

Kovaleski (2002) also suggested that the focal point of the principal in the pre-referral intervention process was to develop collaborative relationships between staff and oversee the entire process. This is consistent with what Hamlett (2005) found when studying the principals' perceptions of their own roles in the pre-referral intervention process. The author concluded that, "Campus administrators in general have a role in the pre-referral processes, specifically in providing resources for teachers and utilizing resources in the pre-referral process" and "the importance of the campus administrator having the knowledge and skills in the area of special education to administer an effective pre-referral process" (Hamlett 2005, p. 216). Hamlett's study findings were consistent with the views of the principal at Pike. The principal described his role as being a supportive resource and providing counsel and advice to teachers.

One example of the "squeaky wheels" that Ryan, the psychologist, described was leading the SAT team meeting. At Pike Elementary, the principal was the facilitator of the SAT team meetings. Studies (e.g. Doll et al., 2005; Hampton, 2004) have found that having a clear facilitator in team meetings is essential. Nellis (2012) presented that characteristics of quality team facilitators include being respected by colleagues, assertive in their role, focused, comfortable in the facilitator role, and flexible. In addition, the author (2012) shared leaders need facilitation skills, including the ability and willingness to redirect the team, when necessary, to maintain focus and time limits.

Staff described the principal as collaborative and supportive and examples were cited to reflect that other members of the SAT team had a voice within the meeting and an active role in supporting students. The principal fostered the leadership of others within the SAT team, which some scholars have argued is critical in developing teacher leaders. Chamberland (2009) observed that, “Even when a team shares a common purpose and is given the autonomy to make decisions, the principal needs to make a continual effort to encourage the leadership of others” (p. 104). Gigante and Firestone (2008) stated, “They [teacher leaders] want to know that administrators understand the teacher leader role and find it important” (p. 323).

The Pike principal fostered collaboration and trust at Pike. The illustration offered by Hallam et al., (2015) demonstrated the role of the principal in fostering conditions that yielded trust and collaboration within a school. Forsyth, Adams, and Hoy (2011) presented an overview of the history of the empirical-research on school trust that began in 1985. The authors (2011) noted that one of three clusters of the examination of school trust were noted in regular publications through 1998 (Hoy & Kupersmith, 1985; Hoy, Sabo & Barnes, 1996; Hoy, Tarter, & Wiskowskie, 1992; Tarter, Bliss, & Hoy, 1989b; Tarter, Sabo, & Hoy, 1995; and Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). This on-going study found the general finding of faculty trust in the principal was related to faculty trust in colleagues and faculty trust in schools. A school principal’s behavior has been shown to influence teacher motivation, teacher job satisfaction, teacher learning, and school wide collaboration—all of which are linked to trust among school participants (Leithwood et al., 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

The Pike principal also fostered teacher and informal leadership. Informal leaders had critical roles in stages one and two in the pre-referral intervention process. Gigante & Firestone (2008) found that a key to teacher leader success was administrative support; alternatively, Wenner and Campbell (2017) found poor relationships with administrators or colleagues were a factor that inhibited teacher leadership. The authors (2017) go on to cite multiple studies, noting that when principals are unsupportive, teacher leaders are often unable to fulfill their duties, either because (a) there are not structures or resources in place to assist the teacher leaders (Klinker, Watson, Furgerson, Halsey, & Janisch, 2010), (b) the principal does not allow the teacher leaders the authority or autonomy to complete their work (Friedman, 2011), (c) the teacher leaders do not feel appreciated or recognized for the work they do (Sanders, 2006), or (d) the faculty as a whole does not feel compelled to attend to the work of the teacher leaders (Margolis & Doring, 2012). Nevertheless, the roles of teacher leaders are seldom effective without the support and encouragement of their administrators (Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006). To foster a vision of a school improvement culture through teacher leaders, principals and teachers need to work together, creating a rich culture of trust and collaboration between the two leadership positions (Andrews & Crowther, 2002).

The Pike principal offered a poignant vignette at the end of Chapter Six regarding the importance of, in his experience, building partnerships with families, particularly families of color. The literature has noted the importance of building school and family partnerships. Parental involvement is an important indicator of student success in school (Pattnaik & Sriram, 2010). Studies (e.g. Epstein et al., 2009; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson,

& Davies, 2007; Ingram, Wolfe, & Leiberman, 2007; Matuszny, Banda, & Coleman, 2007; Reeves, 2005; Sirvani, 2007) have found that as the relationship between parents and schools become more connected, student achievement increases. Scholars (e.g. Auerbach, 2010) have argued that parent involvement has been critically shaped by race, class, gender, culture, and language, and influenced by a school's response to diverse families.

Studies have shown that families living below the poverty level are more likely to have little contact with educators, support education indirectly behind the scenes, receive a “generic” education for their children, and challenge the status quo to advocate for their children (Cooper, 2009; Lareau, 1989; López & Stoelting, 2010; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). Minority families continue to experience power differences and conflicts in their relationships with school personnel (Reynolds, 2010). The principal is a key stakeholder in creating partnerships between school and family and this is a role the principal at Pike took seriously. School leaders must convince teachers, students, parents, and community members of the value of working together for the benefit of the school and the students it serves (Epstein & Rodriguez-Jansorn, 2004).

V. Teacher leadership aids the implementation of the pre-referral intervention process. A key finding of this study was the importance of teacher leaders in the pre-referral intervention process, particularly the prominent role served during the first two stages. The role of teacher leaders is documented in the literature and has become an established feature of educational reform (Akert & Martin, 2012). York-Barr and Duke (2004), in a seminal study, were the first to identify the need of linking teacher

leadership to student learning in the literature. Scholars have since suggested teacher leadership contributes to a variety of characteristics likely found within the culture of a school and can contribute to a collaborative culture, similar to the collaborative culture of the school in this study. Scholars have demonstrated that teacher leadership can yield myriad of benefits within a school, including: professionalism (Moller & Pankake, 2006), reciprocity of leadership between principal and teacher (mutual and interactive influence) (Anderson, 2004) and purpose and satisfaction (Chew and Andrews, 2010). Scholars have also demonstrated that teacher leadership improves teacher quality and ensures educational reforms efforts work (Scrivner, 2000) and builds collaboration and promotes teacher retention (Muijs & Harris, 2006).

Student Behavior, Supports and Interventions

VI. Student behavior is challenging to understand and behavioral interventions are challenging to define, determine, and implement. This study found staff held varying perceptions of non-school related factors influencing student behavior, including: poverty, trauma, and limited resources. The varying perceptions of staff are reflected in the literature, as well. For example, trauma is well-documented in the literature as a factor influencing student behavior. Trauma can impair a youth's ability to pay attention, establish appropriate boundaries, cognitively process information, as well as control anger, aggression, and other impulses (Cook et al., 2005), which may result in acting out and other externalized behaviors in the classroom (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention State Training and Technical Assistance Center, 2013). Shonk & Cicchetti (2001) found that youth who had experienced maltreatment were less

likely to display appropriate social skills and become engaged in school. Furthermore, they generally demonstrated more externalizing and internalizing behaviors than non-maltreated youth.

Ryan, the psychologist, argued that students lacked executive functioning (EF) skills. Working memory, mental set-shifting, and response inhibition are examples of core executive functions that map onto dimensions of behavioral self-regulation (Anderson, 2002; Blair & Diamond, 2008). Poor EF is associated with cognitive deficits, poor socio-emotional adjustment, and poor academic functioning (Biederman et al., 2004; Blair, 2002). This may manifest itself as a lack of concentration, a lack of understanding of cause and effect, an inability to understand mental states, and/or impulsivity (Riggs, Jahromi, Razza, Dillworth-Bart, & Mueller, 2006).

Scholars have also examined other factors influenced by socio-economic status, poverty, or accessibility to community supports and resources. Poverty has a profound and predictable association with children's cognitive abilities, physical health, and social-emotional development (e.g. Bradley and Corwyn 2002; Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997; McLoyd 1998). Youth from impoverished families have more social-emotional difficulties and engage in more behavioral risks than youth from middle-income families (e.g., Korenman et al. 1995; Wadsworth and Achenbach 2005; Duncan et al. 1998). It's difficult for educators to pinpoint the antecedent of all student behaviors; rather, educators may have greater success at making predictions of the underlying issues resulting in student behaviors.

Some study participants were critical of behavioral supports and interventions used within the school. Behavioral interventions were challenging to define, as they were often described as a series of collaborative steps, practices, and efforts from multiple stakeholders. The following fictional vignette is offered to illustrate the complexity of defining a behavioral intervention to a singular approach:

Duke is a 3rd grade, African-American/Black male student being supported by Mr. Drake in Pike's behavioral intervention program. Duke has been observed displaying both non-compliance and externalized behaviors, including work refusal, yelling at teachers, throwing classroom supplies when work is perceived as difficult, and occasionally threatening to hit and punch staff and students. This behavior occurs in the general education classroom, on the playground, and in the lunchroom. To support Duke, the school has put him in the behavior program that Mr. Drake operates. Mr. Drake implements a check-in check out (CICO) system at the beginning, middle, and end of the day. The CICO system is tied into a weekly token economy system where Duke can earn weekly and monthly rewards if displaying safe and appropriate behaviors. Duke also begins and ends his day in Mr. Drake's classroom and has access to Mr. Drake's room on an as-needed basis throughout the day. Additionally, Mr. Drake and the behavioral support paraprofessional do daily periodic spot checks on Duke. Mr. Drake provides a weekly summary of student behavior to the family at the end of the week.

While Duke's support plan was fictitious, it was very similar to approaches of support systems I've observed as an educator. This vignette is a series of mini-

interventions, steps, and actions and it's difficult to determine one specific pre-referral intervention. The following questions illustrate the subjective interpretation of Duke's behavior and behavioral intervention:

Behavioral Causes/Identification: Why is Duke displaying both non-compliance and externalized behaviors? Are they interconnected or isolated incidents? Why is Duke refusing to do work? Is it above his instructional level? Do the tasks require extensive homework at home? If so, does Duke have support at home to assist him with his homework? Is Duke's behavior as a result of staff's implicit bias in their analysis and interpretation of his behavior?

Behavior Intervention Identification: What was the intervention in his vignette? Was the intervention the CICO system? The behavior spot-checks? Family communication? The alternative location to start/end the school day? Token economy system? Access to the behavioral intervention room? The support from the interventionist and paraprofessional?

Scholars have examined practices, strategies, and interventions that can be incorporated into classrooms that influence student behavior, further highlighting complex factors that may influence student behavior. Scholars have demonstrated variety of strategies found to support student behavior. Many of these are approaches staff would use to support students like Duke. For example, scholars have shown the following strategies improve student behavior: classroom layout and physical environment (Wong and Wong, 2009), classroom routes and structure (Kern and Clemens, 2007), and

teaching classroom expectations to increase engagement (Brophy, 2004; Evertson & Emmer, 1982; Johnson, Stoner, & Green, 1996).

Additionally, scholars have demonstrated the following strategies from teachers support student behavior: using active supervision [scanning, moving, interacting] within the classroom (Depry and Sugai, 2002), prompts or pre-correction [restating expectation] with active supervision, (Colvin, Sugai, Good, & Lee, 1997; DePry & Sugai, 2002; Lewis, Colvin, & Sugai, 2000), prompts and pre-correction with appropriate behavior (Arceneaux & Murdock, 1997; Faul, Stepensky, & Simonsen, 2012; Flood, Wilder, Flood, & Masuda, 2002; Wilder & Atwell, 2006) and prompts with transitions to new routines (Alberto & Troutman, 2013).

Scholars have also found increased rates of opportunities for students to respond [questioning, responding] supports student on-task behavior and promotes correct responses while decreasing disruptive behavior (Carnine, 1976; Heward, 2006; Skinner, Pappas & Davis, 2005; Sutherland, Alder, & Gunter, 2003; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001; West & Sloane, 1986) and contingent praise [behavior-specific praise] is associated with increases in a variety of behavioral and academic skills (Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2010).

Scholars have found positive student behavior increases with interventions, including behavior contracts (Drabman, Spitalnik, & O'Leary, 1973; Kelley & Stokes, 1984; White-Blackburn, Semb, & Semb, 1977; Williams & Anandam, 1973), group contingencies (Barrish, Saunders, & Wolf, 1969; Hansen & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2005; Yarborough, Skinner, Lee, & Lemmons, 2004), and token economies (Jones & Kazdin,

1975; Main & Munro, 1977; McCullagh & Vaal, 1975). Other practices found to support student behavior include planned ignoring (Hall, Lund, & Jackson, 1968; Madsen, Becker, & Thomas, 1968; Yawkey, 1971) and differential reinforcement (Deitz, Repp, & Deitz, 1976; Didden, de Moor, & Bruyns, 1997; Repp, Deitz, & Deitz, 1976; Zwald & Gresham, 1982).

Recommendations

Organizational Management and Theory

I. Increase and clarify professional development on systems and subsystems within schools particularly the pre-referral intervention process. This study found that the pre-referral intervention process had three distinct stages and included PLCs, PBIS, MTSS and the SAT team. This study found that teachers were not able to fully describe the pre-referral intervention process or what MTSS was, despite a training occurring during the year of the study. Inexperienced teachers shared their confusion and a concern for their lack of training, requiring inexperienced staff to advocate by asking lots of questions.

It's important that teachers understand the supports and resources that they have available to them to better support all of their students. Steve described how he wished he received more training. The importance of training on intervention frameworks has also been documented in the literature. Tillery et al. (2010) found that pre-service teachers were unfamiliar with innovations such as PBIS and RTI. Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez (2009) found that general education teachers felt negatively about their skills related to key components of RTI (assessment, progress monitoring). Similarly, Greenfield et al. (2010) found teachers were concerned about their lack of knowledge regarding the implementation of interventions and appropriate instruction. If teachers, particularly new teachers, are uncertain about the support systems within a school, it's possible that students may be delayed in getting the help they need or fail to receive help at all.

This study recommends that the district in this study, and all districts, examine their pre-service training, mentorship, and induction programs for new teachers. It's also recommended that districts examine the content and materials offered in these support programs to determine if the pre-referral intervention process and systems (e.g. MTSS, PBIS, PLCs, SAT team) are being conveyed to teachers. Studies have found that teacher preparation is key to effective implementation and positive student outcomes related to RTI (Compton et al., 2012; Denton, 2012; D. Fuchs, Compton, Fuchs, & Davis, 2008; Gerber, 2005; Gersten et al., 2008; Vaughn et al., 2009). Since these studies were RTI-focused, it's also recommended that research be expanded to develop an understanding of the relationship between teacher preparation and MTSS. Lastly, this study also recommends more research on best practices in how to train teachers on intervention frameworks (including MTSS) how MTSS is implemented in schools, and how teachers can learn to best navigate intervention frameworks.

II. Provide professional development on advocacy skills of teachers. Self-advocacy is a critical skill and one teacher described that it took her three years to feel comfortable developing at Pike Elementary. A veteran teacher described how it takes time for teachers to develop the ability to advocate and say things like, "I need help" or "This student needs help." This may be influenced by structural conditions, including trust and collaboration. Most of the teachers in this study were veteran teachers who alluded to the strong relationships they had with each other, and how they have spent years developing these relationships, understanding how the school system operates and working with the principal. Teacher leaders who advocate effectively are not only aware

of the promises and restraints of the educational system, but they are active in creating spaces where the diverse needs of students who have been marginalized are met at both the classroom and school levels (Krovetz & Arriaza, 2006).

It's critical that all students have access to the supports they need to be successful in school. In this study, the ability to self-advocate on behalf of students can be linked to teacher professional learning and racial self-awareness. Considering that it may take time for teachers, particularly new teachers, to develop the skills to fully advocate for themselves or to advocate on behalf of their students, it's important to provide teacher training. The literature on teacher leadership and advocacy focuses more on the motivations and practices of teachers who advocate on behalf of students within classrooms and schools (Levine, 2018). Bradley-Levine (2011) found that teacher leaders struggled to determine the best ways to influence their colleagues so that all teachers met students' needs across the school. Collay (2010) found that teacher leaders who advocated were motivated to struggle with and for students who have been marginalized because, like some of their students, they have experienced ostracism based on race, class, gender, language, and culture during their formative years. It's recommended to continue research on advocacy skills of teachers and how to train and develop teachers' skills in self-advocacy on behalf of students. It's advised that district leaders support their teachers in advocating for their students and students' needs.

III. District- and state-level leaders need to ensure building level leaders (e.g. principals) have the tools and resources to imbed collaboration into a school's culture and the school's pre-referral intervention process. This study offered a

snapshot of the confusion that existed within a single building on staff's understanding of the school's intervention framework. Zirkel (2011) argued that there is a lack of uniformity in the implementation of RTI, as school districts and states are often confused about the manner in which RTI should be implemented. If staff within a single building were confused regarding the intervention framework, it's reasonable to conclude that confusion, or a lack of uniformity, likely exists across districts and even across the state. District-level involvement and commitment to MTSS can facilitate a school's implementation efforts and improve outcomes when districts provide financial support, engage in joint problem-solving, and support long-term systems change (Handler et al., 2007). Findings of this study support a recommendation of investigating the role of the district office and the part it plays in the development and implementation of the pre-referral intervention process. This study also recommends that policy makers and state-level leaders examine the state's role in supporting the district's implementation of intervention frameworks and the pre-referral intervention process.

IV. Further examine the interconnectedness of systems within the pre-referral intervention process, including PLCs, PBIS, student assistance (intervention) teams, and MTSS. Mundschenk and Fuchs (2016) examined the interplay between PLCs and intervention frameworks, specifically RTI. The authors (2016) noted the importance of collaboration in order for both to exist within a school. They further explain that the successful implementation of RTI requires teachers to engage in a collaborative, iterative process that depends first on an organizational structure supporting meaningful change in the school, which may be accomplished

through PLCs. The pre-referral intervention process at Pike was implemented and largely dependent upon PLCs, PBIS, MTSS, and the SAT Team co-existing and complementing each other. It's recommended that, as schools likely continue to evolve their MTSS framework from a more historically-rooted RTI model (which was originally designed to support academic needs of students) that research expands the interplay to include all features and components that are included within MTSS, such as social and emotional learning or behavioral supports.

As noted in the literature review, RTI and school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) share many similar characteristics. SWPBS uses three prevention tiers to organize effective social skills instruction and behavioral interventions along a continuum of increasing intensity (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Through the years, the term PBIS has become interchangeable with School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions Supports (SWPBIS) (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). Four elements, Outcomes, Data, Practices, and, Systems, are considered an interactive approach used in SWPBIS (Flannery, Frank, Cato, Doren, & Fenning, 2013). The following figure offers how these elements work together:

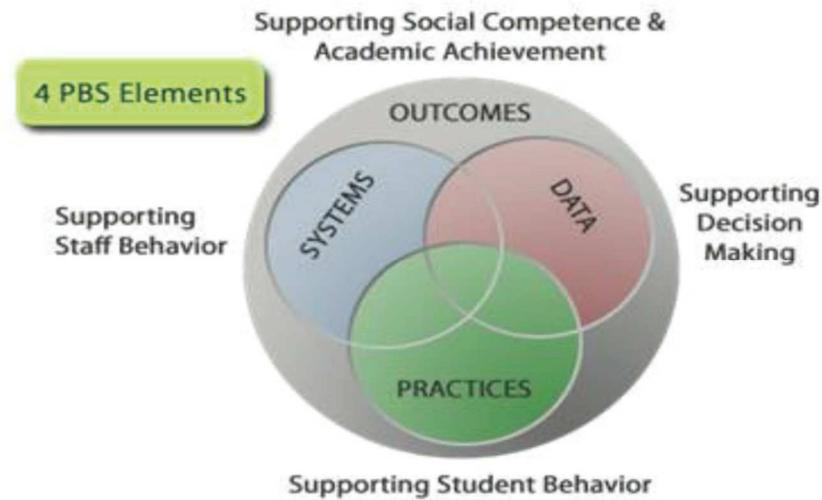


Figure 13. Conceptual Framework SWPBIS used in Elementary, Middle, and High Schools. Baker & Ryan (2014) Adapted from: The PBIS Team Handbook: Setting Expectations and Building Positive Behavior.

For SWPBIS to be successfully implemented, a series of systems within a school and staff must work separately and together. For example, study results indicated teachers relied on trust and collaboration during stage one of the pre-referral intervention process. Both trust and collaboration likely influence a school's ability to implement SWPBIS and PLCs. Additionally, study findings study found teacher leaders and the principal to have a critical role during stage one.

The SAT team was utilized during stage two of the pre-referral intervention process. Collaborative school consultation with teamwork is an interactive process in which school personnel in general education and special education, related services support personnel, families of students, and the students themselves, are working together. Ideally, they are sharing their collective diversity of knowledge and expertise to define needs, plan, implement, assess, follow through, and re-examine ways of helping

students develop to their fullest potential (Dettmer, Knackendoffel, & Thurston, 2013). Teachers reported that the SAT team is a group-based decision making process. Group-based decision-making has been, and will likely continue to be, used extensively within RTI frameworks (Gutkin & Curtis, 2009). In the current American education system, interdisciplinary teams are the norm rather than the exception in schools (Algozzine et al., 2012). This trend is largely due to legislation like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, which increased the implementation of tiered models of support such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) (Markle et al., 2014). It's noted that if schools continue to use these systems and approaches, their procedures and processes may overlap and become interconnected. It's also noted that if structures of intervention and support exist in schools, it's recommended to examine if, and how structures of intervention may promote or discourage racial bias in the assessment of student(s) needs.

At Pike, PLCs have a role and are connected to the school's intervention team and the pre-referral process. Both the PLCs and MTSS framework, including elements of PBIS, embrace common language and school-wide incentive plans. These behavior tickets and awards were encompassed in the school's intervention framework and the overall pre-referral intervention process. Study results demonstrated the interconnectedness of systems (PLCs, MTSS, PBIS, and conditions (i.e. trust, collaboration) within the school's culture that influenced the ability for these systems to be implemented and co-exist. If these systems co-exist at Pike, it's very likely that this occurs at other schools, too. Considering this, it's worthy of exploration by researchers,

as it informs policy and lawmakers how systems within schools interact with one another. Equally so, it's important for building and district-level leaders to understand how these systems exist and, if needed, how to merge them together effectively.

Leadership

V. Encourage or require principal participation in intervention teams in the pre-referral intervention process. This study found the school's principal had a critical role in ensuring implementation of the pre-referral intervention process. The principal made certain that subsystems (i.e. MTSS, PBIS, PLCs, SAT Team) were being implemented, the school was developing and refining the intervention framework, data collection was taking place, decisions were based off data, teachers were supported with counsel and advice, staff were communicating and collaborating, the school was building partnerships with families, and teachers were confronting any biases due to racial or cultural differences. The principal described his role of ensuring collaboration as "massaging relationships." The psychologist underscored the principal's role in making sure that the "squeaky wheels" were occurring within the school.

Researchers have noted the critical relationship between of administration and intervention frameworks (e.g. Kovalski, 2002; Rathforth and Foriska, 2006). These scholars have highlighted the impact of administration in the pre-referral intervention process. According to current statute in the state of Minnesota, administrator participation is not required on intervention teams yet, in this study, the principal had a critical role within the team and within the pre-referral intervention process. The psychologist offered

relevant examples in Chapter Four of barriers he experienced without administrative support in a different school within the same district as Pike.

Findings of this study, including the statements of the principal, emphasized the importance of collaboration in order to implement behavioral interventions. Scholars have questioned the impact of collaboration and influencing conditions, including trust, as it relates to student achievement. Cranston (2009) suggested a lack of trust within a collaborative team could interfere with the team's ability to meet important goals. Scholars (i.e. Cosner, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000) argued a lack of trust in schools increased teacher vulnerability and behavior that could impede communication, inhibit shared understanding, and stifle student learning. This study recommends that principals consider their participation on intervention teams and that policy and lawmakers strongly consider developing a state statute to make principal participation on intervention teams mandatory. Lastly, it's also advised to continue to examine how trust, collaboration, particularly within intervention teams are influenced by trust building, teacher advocacy, and racial and cultural factors within schools.

VI. Examine and promote teacher leadership in schools. Burke's (2009) findings reinforced the notion that principals have the ability to set the tone for creating a culture of teacher leadership. The previous section recommended principal participation on intervention teams and the pre-referral intervention process. Barth (2001) declared, "Schools badly need the leadership of teachers if they are to improve" (p. 84). Scholars (e.g. Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006; Danielson, 2006) have introduced the importance of the relationship between teacher leadership and school improvement, noting the that

role of teachers continues to expand beyond the classroom walls (Tillery, Varjas, Meyers, & Collins, 2010) into systems of support, including PLCs (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Teacher leadership, in conjunction with administrative leadership, can foster a school culture of shared expectations to support all students. The pre-referral intervention process, in a sense, is a means for supporting all students in need. It's recommended to further examine the role of the teacher leaders in PLCs, and the factors that influence the implementation of the pre-referral intervention process (fostering school culture and support systems: PLCs, intervention teams, PBIS, MTSS). It's also recommended to examine the role of teacher leaders who serve as interventionists, focusing on their roles in implementing the highest-tiered interventions, the curriculum, methods, and supports used to increase cultural competence or reduce bias in instructional supports, and collaboration with teachers.

VII. Further examine the role of principal and district influence on structural dimensions of racial inequality in schools and achievement. This study described staff's perceptions of the differences between home and school culture and its influence on student behavior. Study results indicated the principal provided professional learning opportunities through reflection and coaching sessions, enabling staff to better confront any racial biases or ineffective practices they were using to support student behavior. Study results also found the principal worked to build collaborative partnerships with families.

Ladson-Billings' (1994) seminal study was the first to coin the phrase "culturally relevant" pedagogy. Since then, researchers have used numerous names to describe the

efforts to educate all students, including students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including: culturally responsible, culturally compatible, culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, and culturally relevant (Irvine & Armento, 2001). Regardless of the terminology used, culturally responsive education is one of the most effective means of meeting the learning needs of culturally different students (Gay, 2000, 2010; Ford, 2010; Harmon, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2010). School administration has a critical role in ensuring that culturally relevant, responsive, and appropriate practices are being implemented within a school.

Results of this study indicated that school culture and structure influenced staff behavior, suggesting that the underpinnings of Eurocentric practices used within the school influence at-risk student behavior. The use of appropriate cultural practices, in an effort to support all students from all backgrounds, ties into some scholarly work on critical race theory. For the past two decades, CRT (Critical Race Theory) scholars in education have theorized, examined, and challenged the ways in which race and racism shape schooling structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso, Parker, Solorazano, and Lynn, 2005, p. 3). Ledesma and Calderon (2014) shared that CRT in K-12 education is identified in themes: (a) curriculum and pedagogy; (b) teaching and learning; (c) schooling; and (d) policy/finance and community engagement. Dixon and Anderson (2018) organized CRT literature into six “boundaries” for education and, notably, the second category is: CRT in education examines the role of educational policy and practices in the construction of racial inequality and the perpetuation of normative

whiteness. Ledesma & Calderon (2015) expressed the need for educators to examine the attitudes that they bring into their classroom.

Sullivan and Artilles (2011) suggested Welner's (2001) "zone of mediation," a theoretical tool for analysis of the policy's influence on inequitable outcomes. Welner (2001) theorized four types of forces intersecting in local schools to create a zone of mediation, shaping how educational policies are implemented: inertial, technical, normative, and political forces.

Thorius and Maxy (2015) summarized Welner's forces:

Inertial forces are those related to the deeply embedded cultural practices of school-ing, or ways of doing school, in the local site. These forces include widely held beliefs about teaching, learning, and students, as well as daily routines that have developed over the history of that site's existence. *Technical* forces refer to the ways in which the site is organized and its operational functions, such as how resources are locally allocated. *Normative* forces refer to prevailing beliefs about people's inherent worth and capacities, including conceptions of race and racism, class and classism, and notions of intelligence. Finally, *political* forces reflect individuals' concerns shaped by imbalances in power between stakeholders across educational systems and society.

It's recommended that researchers continue to expand the role of critical race theory and other possible structure forces to better identify the education practices that may influence the barriers of educating all students.

An approach the principal used at Pike was helping support teachers through coaching, consultation, feedback, and reflection to address the needs of students and develop culturally responsive approaches and practices to Pike's student population. The principal also appeared to approach racial tensions by identifying relationships. He focused on fostering relationships between staff and between families and the school. While it appeared race and culture was addressed between individuals, study participants didn't mention that race, culture, or bias was addressed at a building-wide level.

CRT scholars (i.e. Boler, 2004; Pollock, 2004; Schultz, 2003; Thompson, 2005) have argued that race is present, but silenced, muted, and ignored within schools. Study results were inconclusive on how race, cultural, and possible bias were addressed on a building-wide level. The focus on individual relationships could be an example of how race was operationalized within the school, focusing on relationships rather than uplifting race and having discourse about race at a building-wide level. It's recommended to continue to examine factors of racial discourse and how race is approached, addressed and also, not addressed within the school and examine practices that foster a clear process for addressing racial issues within schools.

The principal at Pike Elementary emphasized the importance of his role as fostering collaboration between staff, and promoting reflection with staff in order to better collaborate, learn, and reflect on how they interpret student behavior with the result of moving towards more shared assessments of student behavior. The notion and importance of self-reflection has been made relevant by educators. Palmer (1998)

contended in his book, *The Courage to Teach*, “We teach who we are,” offering the following example of how his life experiences impacted his teaching practices:

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life.

Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self knowledge- and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject...In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my own unexamined life- and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. (p. 2)

Palmer's notion of self-reflection and reflexivity holds implications for current educators, which the principal at Pike understood and attempted to foster into teachers at Pike.

Danielewicz (2001) explained,

Reflexivity is an act of self-conscious consideration that can lead people to a deepened understanding of themselves and others, not in the abstract, but in relation to specific social environments...[and] foster a more profound awareness...of how social contexts influence who people are and how they behave...It involves a person's active analysis of past situations, events, and products, with the inherent goals of critique and revision for the explicit purpose

of achieving an understanding that can lead to change in thought or behavior. (p. 155-156)

The principal described the challenges in teaching reflection to some staff and cited examples of staff being both successful and struggling with reflection. Gay and Kirkland (2003) described reflection as challenging because teachers confuse reflection with describing issues, ideas, and events; stating philosophical beliefs, or summarizing statements made by scholars. Teachers miss the analytical introspection, continuous reconstruction of knowledge, and the recurring transformation of beliefs and skills that are essential elements of self-reflection (Stronge, 2002). It's recommended that current and future practicing educational leaders prompt reflection in their teachers and examine professional learning opportunities to improve their reflexive skills.

At Pike, the principal had an active role in developing partnerships between the school and families. Educators described this as a critical step in supporting student behavior and implementing behavioral interventions. The principal offered an example of how he partnered with one family. Addressing the needs of all subgroups [cultural/ethnic] takes strong support from the leadership (Dessoff, 2009). The principal at Pike attempted to build partnerships with families of all subgroups and backgrounds. Msengi (2007) reported that when families and teachers are from different ethnicities, they are likely to have differing expectations of school.

Scholars have presented various models of family and school partnerships and the five dimensions of parental involvement were originally coined by Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon (1997). These five dimensions include: parenting, assisting

with homework, communicating with the school, volunteering time at the school, and participating in school decision-making. Epstein et al. (2009) added a sixth dimension: collaborating with the community. The importance of school-family partnerships was an important step in the implementation of pre-referral interventions. It's advised that school leaders examine school-family partnership models and practices, to ensure that families are given opportunities to support the efforts of the school.

Student Behavior and Behavioral Interventions

VII. Further define and clarify what constitutes a behavioral intervention.

This study offered a series of approaches and suggestions regarding staff responses to addressing challenging student behavior. Staff described some commonly used practices within the school and some were critical of these practices. The principal described behavioral interventions as less of a singular intervention and strategy and more of a series of collaborative efforts of “responses and approaches” to behavior, involving multiple stakeholders. Scholars (i.e. Todd, Campbell, Meyer and Horner, 2008) have examined specific targeted behavioral interventions, such as examining the effects of a check-in, check-out (CICO) system. The principal referenced CICO systems used within the school, and it's a known practice of Mr. Drake within the school's behavioral intervention program, however, based on data offered in Chapter Five, it is noted that a CICO intervention is likely a strategy in a series of steps in a support plan at Pike to implement a behavioral intervention.

As referenced earlier, the fictional vignette of Duke highlighted the subjectivity and also the challenges in interpreting student behavior along with the complexity in

defining the actual behavioral intervention for Duke. The supports offered to Duke illustrate some of the approaches described by Pike staff, where multiple steps and supports were used to address the behavioral needs of a student. This vignette also implicates the notion of variability of defining behavioral interventions within and across school districts. Defining behavioral interventions is subjective and is based on the school or district's interpretation of what constitutes a behavioral intervention

The school district of Pike Elementary has chosen to staff a behavioral program. Some districts do not utilize this approach. Moreover, MN statute 125A.56 only defines that a school needs to implement a scientific research-based intervention, but doesn't objectively define such an intervention for behavior. An important finding of this study is the recognition that a behavioral intervention is not a singular approach. This constructs the question, "How are districts defining scientific research-based interventions?" This study recommends further research on how educators interpret and define behavioral interventions.

The rate of success with behavioral interventions, supports, or approaches to address student behavior is likely the last opportunity for a student to succeed fully in the general education setting prior to being considered for a special education eligibility. Considering previous research has demonstrated the high rate of referral-to-eligibility rates, it's recommended that researchers and policymakers examine the complex roles and dynamics of behavioral interventions to provide further guidance and practical information to guide school leaders and districts in the pre-referral intervention process.

It's also noted that districts aren't required to report pre-referral intervention data to the state, including the rate at which pre-referral interventions are deemed successful, or even the number of special education evaluations that are administered. Districts report their child counts to track special education rates, but not pre-referral interventions, the preceding steps to special education, according to the Minnesota Department of Education website:

The information contained in the child count reports is collected each year and represents a count of Minnesota children and youth, ages birth through 21, who are eligible for and receiving special education and related services. This count is completed through the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS). It is reported to the U.S. Department of Education and provides the most basic and useful information regarding special education demographics in Minnesota (Child Count, n.d.),

This study recommends policy and lawmakers explore the possibility of collecting data on the rates in which students are referred to intervention teams, the types of interventions, the effectiveness of interventions selected and implemented, and, lastly, the rate at which students are referred for a special education evaluation from the school's intervention teams.

VIII. Improve selection of behavioral interventions through the use of a more formal data-collection system (e.g., a Functional Behavioral Assessment). This study found behavioral interventions were more complex than academic interventions and at Pike, a behavioral intervention is often defined as a series of collaborative efforts of

“responses and approaches” to behavior from multiple school personnel. The selection of appropriate behavioral interventions can be challenging and can be influenced by staff’s subjective interpretation of the student’s behavior. For example, the previous section offered a vignette of Duke, a student displaying externalized behaviors both in the classroom and within other environments throughout the school. Let’s say those externalized behaviors were aggressive behaviors, including kicking, yelling, destruction of school property, and running out of the school. The behaviors occur daily when the student is in crisis and it can require multiple staff members up to 30 minutes to de-escalate the situation. The student has received multiple out of school suspensions.

If Duke’s behaviors were more significant, as noted in this updated vignette, would staff still attempt to support him through a behavioral intervention? Would the team advise adjusting the intervention or trying a different approach? Would the SAT team advise moving forward with a special education evaluation? Would the increase in externalized behaviors influence staff’s decision making? Jeff the principal shared that, in some instances (depending on the severity of the needs of the student), the team may recommend moving forward with a special education evaluation. Herein lies the subjectivity of staff’s interpretation of the behavior, and how it can influence decisions and possible outcomes. This is what Knotek (2003) believed to be conflicting missions of intervention and assistance teams.

To align with the mission of the pre-referral process, the SST must assist the student in the area of behavioral concern. However, the opposing mission of the SST is to demonstrate that the student is not successfully meeting the behavioral standards of the

general education setting and, therefore, must meet the criteria for special education evaluation and placement. The conflict of these two missions can have a significant impact on the delivery of behavioral interventions and create difficulty in differentiating between those students with short-term challenges and those with a genuine EBD (Knoteck, 2003). This conflict can also yield questions around the potential impact of implicit bias a compounding factor influencing the decision-making process of students.

Unfortunately, common practice often leads the teacher to fall into a pattern of passing the student with challenging behaviors through the disciplinary process, ultimately resulting in a number of disciplinary infractions or even a referral to special education personnel (Sterling, Turner, Robinson, and Wilczynski, 2001; van Acker et al. 2005). The student's disciplinary history carries a significant weight in the referral and evaluation process for EBD and investigations into both school disciplinary practices and special education evaluation processes have found such referrals to be biased (Knoteck, 2003). In addition, current school disciplinary practices rarely allow for some students of color demonstrating such challenging behaviors to receive appropriate behavioral interventions before referrals, thus setting a series of events in motion that ensure school failure (Noguera 2003).

Some study participants were critical of the behavioral supports and approaches of Mr. Drake and the school's behavioral intervention program. For example, Chapter Six offered the perspective of Jeff the psychologist, who described current interventions and practices as lacking individualization and failing to fully address the needs of the student. The vignette offered by Jeff, the psychologist in Chapter Six is presented again,

I think it's a catch-all for all the students that come in, "we're going to do a check-in, check-out sheet" and "oh, half the school year has gone by and it's not working. We'll, maybe we'll have them for a lunch group" versus a true [intervention] what is going on, where does the student need support, what are the behaviors of concern, like a true mini functional behavioral assessment, and then tailor the intervention around the data that's collected, as opposed to just a one size fits all intervention.

The psychologist referencing a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is noteworthy, as they are the individuals who conduct FBAs in school districts. For decades, the use of the functional behavioral assessment (FBA) has been used in the identification and understanding of challenging behaviors to develop more accurate and valid behavioral interventions in U.S. schools (Moreno and Gaytan, 2012). Gresham, Watson, and Skinner (2001) described FBAs as a gathering process of critical data and information on antecedents and consequences in order to determine the reason (i.e., the function) for the challenging behavior. The behavioral hypothesis is, more specifically, a behavioral statement that is comprised of three components: Antecedent, Behavior, and Consequence (A-B-C) (Moreno, 2011). Fox and Gable (2004) detailed three stages – indirect assessment, direct assessment, and hypothesis testing. Moreno and Gaytan (2012) offered the following figure outlining the stages in the functional behavioral assessment process:

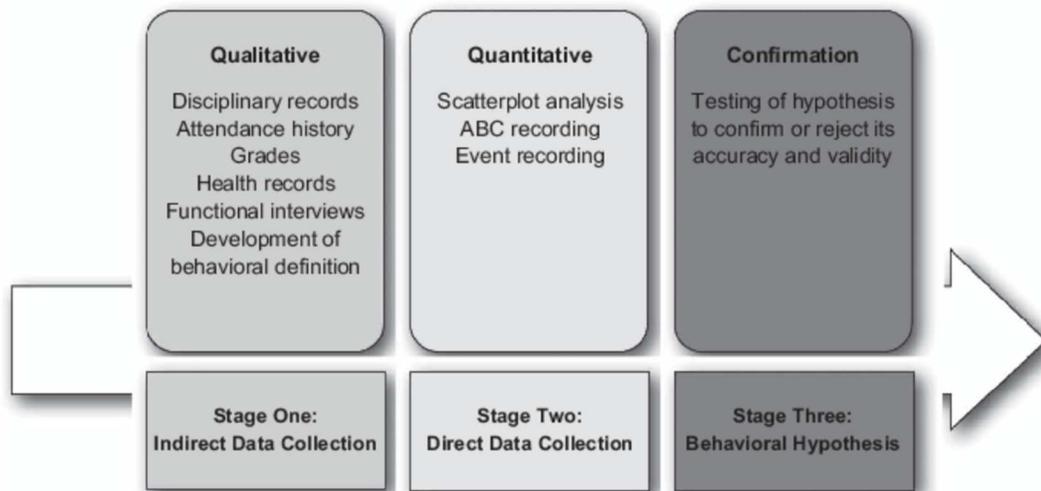


Figure:14 Functional Behavioral Assessment Process. Moreno, G., & Gaytan, F. (2012). Retrieved from: Reducing subjectivity in special education referrals by educators working with Latino students: using functional behavioral assessment as a pre-referral practice in student support teams.

In Minnesota, statute provides the framework for the role of FBA's in school. Minn. Rule 3525.0210, subp. 22 outlines and defines functional behavioral assessment (FBA):

"Functional behavioral assessment" or "FBA" means a process for gathering information to maximize the efficiency of behavioral supports. An FBA includes a description of problem behaviors and the identification of events, times, and situations that predict the occurrence and nonoccurrence of the behavior. An FBA also identifies the antecedents, consequences, and reinforcers that maintain the behavior, the possible functions of the behavior, and possible positive alternative behaviors. An FBA includes a variety of data collection methods and sources that

facilitate the development of hypotheses and summary statements regarding behavioral patterns (Functional behavioral assessment or FBA.).

While the FBA has traditionally been used for student populations that have already been identified with EBD and are receiving special education services, the process can be used with any population regardless of their academic environment or background when incorporated into a student support team, or at Pike, the SAT team. (Crimmins and Farrell 2006; Fesmire, Lisner, Forrest, & Evans, 2003; Moreno 2011; Scott, Liaupsin, Nelson, Jolivette, 2003; Sterling-Turner, Robinson, and Wilczynski 2001; Walker, Cheney, Stage, Blum, & Horner, 2005).

Moreno and Gaytan (2012) argued that the usage of FBA in the pre-referral process can reduce the likelihood of educator bias. The authors (2012) noted,

After qualitative data has been collected from functional interviews, educators can continue with the FBA process by operationalizing the target behavior and conducting a quantitative data collection. The second advantage of the FBA process is systematically incorporated in the protocol. The direct data collection stage allows educators to examine challenging behaviors through an objective lens, identify triggering conditions and reinforcing consequences, and filter out any personal or professional biases. This advantage can be particularly critical when there is a difference in backgrounds between students and educators, thus reducing the impact of the diversity rift (p.9).

The importance of understanding and supporting students as objectively as possible is critical in a school's effort to support student behavior. This study found it challenging

for educators to understand and interpret student behavior objectively and questioned some practices in place at Pike to support students (i.e. CICO, charts, groups).

Researchers and policymakers are advised to explore successful practices school districts are using to interpret student behavior and determine how behavioral interventions are defined and selected. It's also advised that lawmakers examine other states' practices in the usage of FBA's and behavior intervention plans (BIPs). Zirkel (2015) offers an updated overview of state law provisions for FBAs and BIPS for students with disabilities, but it's unclear which states allow FBAs to occur for general education students. Lawmakers are strongly advised to consider current statutes and practices that will further promote objective assessments of student behavior to aid in the selection of pre-referral behavioral interventions.

IX. Further expand research on behavior intervention programs and behavior rooms providing behavioral support and how school districts are using intervention funding (e.g. CEIS and ADSIS funds) in Minnesota. The Minnesota Department of Education website outlines these federal and state funds, presenting,

Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CEIS) are services provided to students in kindergarten through grade 12 (with a particular emphasis on students in kindergarten through grade 3) who are not currently identified as needing special education or related services, but who need additional academic and behavioral supports to succeed in a general education environment (Coordinated Early Intervening Services, n.d.)

Minnesota Department of Education website also presents,

Alternative Delivery of Specialized Instructional Services (ADSIS) is an application process for districts and charter schools to apply for state special education aid. The purpose of ADSIS is to provide instruction to assist students who need additional academic or behavioral support to succeed in the general education environment. The goal is to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals to special education by providing supports early to struggling students (Alternative Delivery of Specialized Instruction Services, n.d.).

Pike Elementary uses ADSIS funding to offset the costs of the paraprofessional working under Mr. Drake's direction. Pike structured the program, formally called ADSIS by some at Pike, as a classroom with a licensed teacher (Mr. Drake) and a paraprofessional who support students both academically and behaviorally. This support is commonly used as a Tier III behavioral intervention within the school. Students access the program with parent permission and the strategies and supports offered to the student within the ADSIS program are subject to the endorsement of the SAT team and the discretion of Mr. Drake and the classroom teacher.

This approach provides an alternative to widely used approaches for student behavioral support, including office referrals, in- and out-of school suspensions, or restorative justice. These approaches differ from seclusion, an approach sometimes used as part of a special education plans that confines a child alone in a room from which egress is barred.

Limited scholarship appears to exist on behavior rooms and behavioral programs that mirror how Pike has determined to utilize Mr. Drake, the school behavior interventionist/specialist. It's advised that Minnesota lawmakers study and investigate how ADSIS-eligible school districts are using ADSIS funding. Comments from the psychologist in this study suggest that data can be manipulated to show efficacy of the program. It's also recommended that the Minnesota Department of Education research the efficacy of such programs, including at Pike, and the rates at which students from the ADSIS program ultimately end up being referred for special education evaluation.

X. Examine how schools may use qualitative measures to influence and assess interpretation of student behaviors, intervention selections, intervention efficacy rates, and special education referral and identification rates.

The pre-referral intervention process began by teacher's identifying and interpreting a student's behavior as warranting additional support. Factors influencing staff's interpretation of student behavior was outlined in this study. The interpretation of student behavior is inherently subjective. For example, if multiple educators observed Duke's behavior in the vignette offered in this chapter, would their observations yield the same outcomes and recommendations? Would Duke's behavior be interpreted and supported with the same practices, interventions, and supports in an urban, large school versus a small rural school? Would staff's interpretation of Duke be impacted by his race? It's difficult to say, however, it's noted that the influence of racial bias and stereotypes on school personnel's perception of student behavior and discipline decisions has been established through several experimental studies, though they have involved

randomization of vignettes about students with whom educators have little context (Chang & Sue 2003; Dunkake & Schuchart 2015; Okonofua & Eberhardt 2015).

Blaisdell (2015) found that students were often subjected to discipline for failing to adhere to, what the author described as “white norms” or forms of classroom participation that are based on white cultural behaviors.

The previous section recommended the usage of FBAs to interpret student behavior in the pre-referral intervention process in a more objective, data-driven manner. Since FBAs are not a practice adopted prior to assessing students for special education, current practices may involve more qualitative and subjective practices, despite school districts’ efforts to use data-driven approaches. Staff at Pike described social-emotional-behavioral screener, as well as behavioral data, and the principal described the current intervention selection process as less qualitative as compared to previous years. Despite these approaches, study data suggested staff continue to rely on their interpretation of student behavior to make decisions in the pre-referral intervention process, establish interventions, and ultimately determine the efficacy of the interventions.

There are several ways of assessing children’s social-emotional skills, including interviews, direct observations, behavior rating scales, sociometric techniques, self-reports, and projective techniques (Merrell, 2008). Teacher ratings are the most common means of collecting universal social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) screening data for elementary school-aged students (Maggin & Mills, 2013; Walker, Cheney, Stage, Blum, & Horner, 2005).

Bruhn, Woods-Groves, and Huddle (2014) found that standardized behavioral rating scales are most often used to conduct universal social, emotional, and behavioral screening. Direct behavior-ratings (DBRs) are also used to screen students for behavioral problems by combining behavior-rating scales with teachers' direct observations of student behavior (Chafouleas, 2011). Levitt, Saka, Romanelli, and Hoagwood(2007) noted that self-report SEB screeners are often found beginning at the middle school level, meaning that at the elementary level, screening was likely completed by classroom teachers. This was the practice used at Pike.

McConaughy and Ritter (2014) described the advantages of behavior rating scales to include: (a) information is quantifiable, reliable, and valid, (b) they are composed of multiple items that yield a broad range of potential problems, and (c) information is organized in a systematic way by groupings of syndromes. Results from a behavior rating scale demonstrate the severity level of a child's behaviors on behavioral constructs (e.g., aggression) on a large scale for allowing ease for understanding. The use of behavior rating scales has been recognized as valuable and cost effective, especially when it comes to identifying social-emotional functioning in large groups of children (Lidz, 2003).

Although rating scales are generally considered reliable and valid, they are not truly objective measures of problems because they are just based on the informants' perceptions (McConaughy & Ritter, 2014). Behavior rating scales do not provide complete information about the individual's personal or environmental factors, information relevant to the function of a behavior problem, or an explicit description of the behaviors of concern (Angello et al., 2003; McConaughy & Ritter, 2008). Behavior

ratings can be impaired or influenced by the rater's memory, values, attitudes, and motivations, as well as situational factors (McConaughy & Ritter, 2008). Behavior rating scales can also produce variation in the reliability and validity of a measure depending on the time element involved with making the rating (Merrell, 2008).

Scholars have explored teacher rater differences in universal SEB rating scales, although scholarship and results are limited at this time. Smith-Millman et al. (2017) examined three universal SEB screeners for elementary-aged students and found that between-teacher differences accounted for between 7.7 and 20.5% of the variance in student scores. Spleet et al. (2018) noted the limitation of Smith-Millman et al., (2017), indicating that the authors (2017) did not examine the non-student SEB functioning factors that predict this variance in student scores.

Peters et al., (2014) examined the variance in teacher-rated SEB assessment scores of 4th and 5th graders. They found 20-34.6% of the variance in internalizing, externalizing, social skills, and competence ratings were attributed to teacher and classroom-level differences. Results found few significant predictors at the teacher-classroom and school-levels. Results indicated teacher self-efficacy in classroom management and discipline significantly predicted differences in teacher ratings on the externalizing and social skills domains. Splett et al., (2018) examined between-teacher variance in teacher ratings of student behavioral and emotional risk to identify student, teacher and classroom characteristics that predict such differences, taking data from seven elementary schools in a single district's implementation of universal screening, including 1,241 elementary-aged students rated by 68 teachers. Analyses followed multi-

level linear model stepwise model-building procedures. The authors (2018) detected a significant amount of variance in teachers' ratings of students' behavioral and emotional risk at both student and teacher/classroom levels with student predictors explaining about 39% of student-level variance and teacher/classroom predictors explaining about 20% of between-teacher differences. The authors found significant predictors included student gender, race ethnicity, academic performance, disciplinary incidents, teacher gender, student-teacher gender interaction, teacher professional development in behavior screening, and classroom academic performance.

We detected substantial differences between teachers and identified several variables unrelated to student behavior that significantly predict teachers' ratings of student behavior. These variables represent a step toward informing professional development, multi-method data collection, and interpretation practices. However, a notable amount of variance remains to be explained (Splett et al., 2018, p.8).

Splett et al., (2018) presented that a sizable amount of teacher-level variance remains unexplained and the generalizability limitations of the current literature to universal SEB screening in MTSS leaves a critical gap in the best practice implementation of universal SEB screening. While scholarship is limited at this time, it's important to better understand factors that may influence variances in teacher ratings of SEB assessments and screeners, including implicit bias. Similar to Splett et al., (2018) this study calls for more research to identify teacher and classroom level factors that contribute to teacher variance in universal SEB screening scores and, more broadly, how

educators interpret student behavior. Additional scholarship in this area could improve data collection practices and interpretation of behavioral screeners. Additional scholarship on a school's usage of SEB screeners in their MTSS and pre-referral intervention practices could inform decision making practices and possible outcomes in the in the pre-referral intervention process. The implications for outcomes and success rates of pre-referral interventions contribute to long-standing issues in public education, including the rates at which special education referrals lead to special education eligibility and placement, the cultural phenomena surrounding different racial/ethnic subgroups in different disability categories, and the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education.

It's advised that districts further explore current practices in implementing behavioral screeners and their influence in interpreting student behavior and educational decisions. It's recommended that policy and lawmakers support practices that ensure more objective measures and practices in interpreting student behavior, selecting behavioral interventions, and determining efficacy.

Chapter Summary

The grounded theory developed for this study maintains that despite having a defined pre-referral intervention process, collaborative culture, and administrative support, the interpretation of student behavior was largely based on the subjective interpretations from staff. Also, behavioral interventions, as compared to academic interventions, were more complex to determine, implement, and support. This chapter provided implications for practice and recommendations for educators, researchers,

policy and lawmakers to consider, including the importance of professional learning for teachers, and that the pre-referral intervention process is influenced by trust, collaboration, PLCs, the principal and teacher leaders. This chapter also noted the complexities and challenges to understanding student behavior and defining behavioral interventions.

This chapter offered recommendations, including increasing professional learning opportunities for teachers, to examine the interconnectedness of school systems within the pre-referral intervention process and to continue exploring the role of the principal and teacher leaders, and how race is discussed in schools. Lastly, this study recommended defining behavioral interventions, adopting more objective approaches to select behavioral interventions, expanding scholarship on the usage of behavioral interventionists in schools, and examining how qualitative measures and staff interpretation of student behavior may be subjective in nature resulting in possible biases in behavioral data (from universal social, emotional, behavioral screeners). These factors may influence decisions and outcomes in the pre-referral intervention process, special education referral, and identification rates.

Study Summary

This study demonstrated the interconnectedness of support systems (i.e. PLCs, PBIS, MTSS, intervention team) and educators collaborating together that encompassed and defined an elementary school's pre-referral intervention process. Study results demonstrated the critical role of the principal, teacher leaders, and notably, a distinct difference between academic and behavioral interventions. Staff defined at-risk behaviors

that warrant an intervention as either non-compliance or externalized-aggression. The grounded theory developed suggested that staff interpreted academic interventions as more objective and “clear cut”, whereas behavioral interventions involved an educator’s subjective interpretation of student’s behavior. Complex factors were associated with the definition, interpretation, and support of student behavior through interventions.

Implications of practice were noted, including professional learning for teachers and the importance of systems (i.e. PLCs, PBIS, MTSS, intervention team), leadership (formal and informal), and the possible influence of cultural factors and subjective decision-making within the pre-referral intervention process. Recommendations for additional research were suggested in the areas of organizational management, theory, and leadership. It is further recommended that educators, leaders, policy and lawmakers further define and clarify best practices to support at-risk students. Lastly, it is recommended that all education stakeholders consider, acknowledge, and accept the likely impossibility of objectively interpreting, and making sense of student behavior in schools.

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Appendix A

Interview Recruitment Letter-Principal & Psychologist

Dear Elementary [Principal or Psychologist]

This letter serves as a formal request to invite you to participate in a study of the pre-referral intervention process in the elementary school setting, specifically the building in which you serve. This research will focus on role of the general education teacher's understanding of the prereferral intervention process, how the teacher navigates multi-tiered intervention frameworks, and how and what they consider support while implementing interventions. Information gained from the study will illuminate the role and highlight any possible needs of educators and could be beneficial to educators, policymakers, and researchers.

Participation in the study will entail **one** interview up to 30 minutes in length, throughout the remainder of the 2016-2017 school year and **two** observations of your school's intervention team. Dr. XX, XX Superintendent has granted me permission to conduct this research within the district, subject to your approval.

The observations and interview will only be audiotaped with your consent. All data from the study, including audiotapes, will be coded to insure confidentiality, and kept on a password-protected computer on at my locked, private residence. Only my advisors and I, who are trained data analysts from the University, will have access to data and they will be bound by a strict code of confidentiality. Any disclosure of information from the study will use a pseudonym in order to protect your identity. Moreover, you will have the opportunity to review sections of draft reports, should you potentially be quoted to insure that you are comfortable with the ways in which you are represented (no one else will see these quotations prior to this review). Possible risk factors from your participation are no greater than your normal school activity.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and your decision regarding participation in this study will not affect your relations with Fridley Public Schools. If you decide to participate, you are completely free to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time.

This interview and study is being conducted by Malai Turnbull, Ph.D. candidate in Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Minnesota, under the guidance of Dr. Peter Demerath (pwd@umn.edu). If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me at 763-350-1575 or turn0247@umn.edu. Thanks very much.

Sincerely,

Malai Turnbull
Ph.D. Candidate, University of Minnesota

Appendix B

Interview Recruitment Letter-Teacher

Dear Elementary Faculty,

This letter serves as a formal request to invite you to participate in a study of the pre-referral intervention process in an elementary school. This research will focus on role of the general education teacher's understanding of the prereferral intervention process, how the teacher navigates multi-tiered intervention frameworks, and how and what they consider support while implementing interventions. Information gained from the study will illuminate the role and highlight any possible needs of educators and could be beneficial to educators, policymakers, and researchers.

Participation in the study will entail: **two** interviews up to 60 minutes in length, throughout the remainder of the 2016-2017 school year at your discretion.

This interview will only be audiotaped with your consent. All data from the study, including audiotapes, will be coded to insure confidentiality, and kept on a password-protected computer on at my locked, private residence. Only my advisors and I, who are trained data analysts from the University, will have access to data and they will be bound by a strict code of confidentiality. Any disclosure of information from the study will use a pseudonym in order to protect your identity. Moreover, you will have the opportunity to review sections of draft reports, should you potentially be quoted to insure that you are comfortable with the ways in which you are represented (no one else will see these quotations prior to this review). Possible risk factors from your participation are no greater than your normal school activity.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and your decision regarding participation in this study will not affect your relations with Fridley Public Schools. If you decide to participate, you are completely free to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time.

This interview and study is being conducted by Malai Turnbull, Ph.D. candidate in Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Minnesota, under the guidance of Dr. Peter Demerath (pwd@umn.edu). If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me at 763-350-1575 or turn0247@umn.edu. Thanks very much.

Sincerely,

Malai Turnbull
Ph.D. Candidate, University of Minnesota

Appendix C

Teacher/Admin Consent Form

Pike Elementary Faculty

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH

Prereferral Interventions – Malai Turnbull, Ph.D. Candidate, Sole Investigator

I consent to participating in research entitled: Teacher Perceptions of Prereferral Interventions: Processes, Supports, and Implications

I agree to participate in this study through the form of an interview. I understand that this interview will only be audiotaped with my consent, and that all data from the study, including audiotapes, will be kept on a password protected computer at a locked private residence.

Malai Turnbull has explained the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my participation. Possible benefits of the study have been described, and I acknowledge that I have the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily.

Staff's Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

Appendix D

Principal Interview Questions-Round 1

Introduction: Thank you Principal X for agreeing to participate in this study on the preferral intervention process. I'm going to ask you a series of questions regarding your role as principal in your role in the school's intervention framework and support system. As I previously mentioned in when reviewing this study with you, this interview will be recorded. At any time you may discontinue the interview. Thank you for your time.

[Note, this interview is open to additional questions and probes depending on interview responses]

Questions for Principal:

District Related Questions:

- How does this school district describe and define its intervention framework?
- Does this site have a specific name for the intervention framework? What's it called?
- What are the differences between tier 1, 2, and 3 interventions at this site?
- What is considered tier-3 interventions?

Building Specific Questions Principal Role and Intervention Team:

- Can you describe the function and purpose of this team at your school?
- Who comprises the membership of this team?
- How are interventions determined and selected?
- Does the team perceive there is an individual who facilitates this meeting?
- Does the team perceive a person to be a leader of this team?
- What is your role on the intervention team?
- How does the building's intervention team determine the types of interventions selected?
- What are the expectations for general education teachers when they attend an intervention team meeting?
- How is your school implementing scientific research based interventions (SRBI)?
- If so, how are SRBI interventions selected?
- Is this a consensus, team based decision?
- How are interventions determined to be successful or not successful?

Teachers Role:

- What type of supports and training are provided to teachers during the intervention process?
- Who is responsible for supporting and training teachers during the prereferral intervention process?
- How do you support your teachers during this process?
- What types of supports have teachers requested during this process?
- What type of supports do teachers need to successfully implement interventions?
- What is the role of teachers after implementing an intervention?
- If interventions are not successful, what is the next step?

Appendix E

Psychologist Interview Questions-Round 1

Introduction: Thank you Psychologist X for agreeing to participate in this study on the preferral intervention process. I'm going to ask you a series of questions regarding your role as psychologist in your role in the school's intervention framework and support system. As I previously mentioned in when reviewing this study with you, this interview will be recorded. At any time you may discontinue the interview. Thank you for your time.

District Related Questions:

- How does this school district describe and define its intervention framework?
- Does this site have a specific name for the intervention framework? What's it called?
- What are the differences between tier 1, 2, and 3 interventions at this site?
- What is considered tier 3 interventions?

Building Specific Questions: Intervention Team

- Can you describe the function and purpose of this team at your school?
- Who comprises the membership of this team?
- How are interventions determined and selected?
- Does the team perceive there is an individual who facilitates this meeting?
- Do you perceive there to be a leader of this team?
- How does the building's intervention team determine the types of interventions selected?
- What are the expectations for general education teachers when they attend an intervention team meeting?
- How is your school implementing scientific research based interventions?
- If so, how are interventions selected to be implemented at this school?
- Is this a consensus, team based decision?
- How are interventions determined to be successful or not successful?

Building Specific Questions: Psychologist Role:

- What is your role on the intervention team?
- What are the expectations for you as the psychologist on this team?
- How is your role different when compared to other staff members on the intervention team?

Building Specific Questions: Teachers Role:

- What type of supports and training are provided to teachers during the intervention process?
- Who is responsible for supporting and training teachers during the prereferral intervention process?
- What type of supports do teachers need to successfully implement interventions?
- What is the role of teachers after implementing an intervention?

Appendix F

Teacher Interview Questions-Round 1

Introduction: Thank you Teacher X for agreeing to participate in this study on the preferral intervention process. I'm going to ask you a series of questions regarding your role as a teacher in the school's intervention framework and support system. As I previously mentioned in when reviewing this study with you, this interview will be recorded. You're name will remain anonymous for this entire process and will not be shared with anyone. At any time you may discontinue the interview. Thank you for your time.

Teacher Related Questions:

- What is your level of experience teaching as a licensed teacher?
- How many years have you taught at this school?
- In your experience in this district, have you ever had to implement any prereferral interventions?
- How do you describe the school district's intervention framework?
- Does this site have a specific name for the intervention framework? What's it called?
- What do you consider a formal intervention?
- When is it appropriate to implement an intervention on a student?
- What are the differences between tier 1, 2, and 3 interventions at this site?
- What are considered tier 3 interventions?
- Have you ever sought assistance from personnel outside of your classroom?
- Prior to seeing assistance from outside of your classroom, have you exhausted all your resources and ability as a teacher?

If answered yes, then:

- How have you sought outside assistance for a student in your classroom?
- When have you sought support outside your classroom?
- What are the resources available to support you?
- Please describe any people or things that have served as a means of supporting you.

Appendix G

Principal Interview-Round 2

Introduction: In your last interview, you mentioned that race is challenging for behavior interventions because people can have different views on norms and expectations in these types of situations. I want to ask you a few questions about that.

1. First, tell me about some of the challenging behaviors, behaviors of concern, or behaviors that may warrant one of your teachers seeking assistance of the SAT team.
2. What are the causes of some of these behaviors?
3. Tell me about the relationship between teachers and the challenging behaviors you mentioned above.
6. Tell me about the role of race and culture and its relationship between behaviors of concern in your school.
7. From your perspective, can teachers truly (or objectively) view and understand behaviors of students of a different culture or race?

Appendix H

Psychologist Interview-Round 2

Introduction: After my preliminary round of data collection, a theme emerged surrounding the possible differences between academic and behavioral interventions. I want to ask you a few questions about behavioral interventions in the pre-referral intervention process.

1. First, tell me about some of the challenging behaviors, behaviors of concern, or behaviors that may warrant one of your teachers seeking assistance of the SAT team.
2. What are the causes of some of these behaviors?
3. Tell me about the relationship between teachers and the challenging behaviors you mentioned above.
4. Tell me about the role of race and culture and its relationship between behaviors of concern in your school.
5. From your perspective, can teachers truly (or objectively) view and understand behaviors of students of a different culture or race?

Appendix I**Teacher Interview-Round 2**

Introduction: After my preliminary round of data collection, a theme emerged surrounding the possible differences between academic and behavioral interventions. I want to ask you a few questions about behavioral interventions and student behavior in the pre-referral intervention process.

1. What student behaviors provide challenges in your classroom? In the school? Tell me about some of the challenging behaviors, behaviors of concern, or behaviors that may warrant you seeking assistance of colleagues or the SAT team.
2. What are the causes of some of these behaviors?
3. Tell me about how you perceive these behaviors, why are you observing the behaviors you noted in your classroom?
4. Tell me about your role as a teacher with these behaviors.
5. Lastly, for students of a different culture or race, how do you support them if they are displaying some of the behaviors you noted (only ask if noted)?

Appendix J

Behavior Interventionist Teacher Interview (Round 2 Only)

Introduction: I'm meeting with you today to learn more about behavior interventions and their role in the pre-referral intervention process and how race and culture intersects this process.

I know we have a relationship working together for a few years and also some discussions of race in schools. I want to ask you a few questions about your experience in your current role as the ADSIS coordinator at Pike Elementary.

1. First, tell me about your experience as a licensed teacher, working in a building with teachers who are almost exclusively from a different race. What's it like being on the only teachers of color in this building?
2. What are some of the challenging behaviors in your school? Tell me about some of the challenging behaviors, behaviors of concern, or behaviors that may warrant teachers seeking assistance from you, the SAT team, or students who may become members of the ADSIS program.
3. What are the causes of some of these behaviors?
4. Tell me about how you perceive these behaviors, why are teachers observing the behaviors you noted before in their classrooms?
5. Tell me about the relationship between teachers and behaviors of concerns that teachers are observing?
6. Tell me about the role of race and culture and its relationship between behaviors of concern in your school.
7. From your perspective, can teachers truly view and understand behaviors of students of a different culture or race?
8. Lastly, from your perspective as a teacher of color, tell me about what you've observed from teachers of a different race/culture trying to support students from culturally/diverse backgrounds?