ABSTRACT

WALKER, PAUL GRADY. Supporting Struggling Learners: How High School Principals’ Understanding of Response to Intervention and Special Education Eligibility Influences their Approach to Addressing Student Learning Needs. (Under the direction of co-chairs, Dr. Susan C. Faircloth and Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli).

The fundamental question any school principal asks himself or herself is: “What do I do when students are not learning?” To this end, this current phenomenological case study explored high school principals’ leadership in dealing with the phenomenon of how to respond to struggling learners.

In order to address the struggling learner, Response to Intervention (RTI) has been recognized as a framework to maximize the learning of all students, with the outcome of increased academic achievement. The goal of RTI is to prevent schools from waiting until the discrepancy gap between academic performance and the actual academic potential of the student widens too much (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998).

Research has shown that, due to a lack of schools implementing RTI strategies with fidelity, students are often incorrectly identified as needing the most restrictive settings and extensive services of special education, which research has often considered a “wait-to-fail” model (Yell, 2012). In such a “wait-to-fail” model, struggling learners do not receive needed services promptly when their difficulties are evidenced; instead they are neglected for several years, being set up to fail, until their achievement gap is wide enough for them to qualify for special education services.

The current study included interviews conducted with six high school principals, in order to determine the extent of their understanding of RTI and special education processes,
as well as to assess how this understanding impacted the ways in which each principal worked to meet the needs of struggling students. The findings of the study reveal that the principals did have understanding about RTI and special education eligibility topics, gleaned from their own education, district-level meetings, or their faculty colleagues; notably, though, many did not participate in structured professional development to further hone these skills. In addition, the study’s findings also indicate that high school principals employ various means of implementing RTI in their schools, such as special intervention times, core instructional methods, and staff trainings, but there were some questions raised about which approaches were the best research-based practices to use. Finally, principals in the study were in need of strategies to help them build an environment that promotes student engagement and focuses on student needs in order to increase overall academic success, particularly that of minority students.

Key Terms: Response to Intervention, special education eligibility, high school principal, special education, learning disability, progress monitoring, IDEA, NCLB, high school, specially designed instruction
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Supporting Struggling Learners: How High School Principals’ Understanding of Response to Intervention and Special Education Eligibility Influences their Approach to Addressing Student Learning Needs

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to the affected family members and all those whose lives were lost as a result of the horrific tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, which took place during the construction of this dissertation and caused shock and sorrow across the nation. In particular, I would also like to offer a special dedication to Dawn Hochsprung, the principal of Sandy Hook Elementary, who was killed that morning while protecting her students. Principal Hochsprung, like myself, held a degree in both school administration and special education, and she had begun a doctoral program (Ed.D.) in educational leadership at The Sage Colleges in Troy, New York during the summer of 2012. However, she was unable to complete her doctoral program before her life was so tragically taken.

As we shared professional qualities as school administrators and special educators, and since we both sought doctorates in education, it seemed most appropriate that I offer my respects to Principal Hochsprung within this dissertation’s dedication. Though I did not know her, I have extreme admiration for Principal Hochsprung’s accomplishments and her bravery in facing such a terrifying threat. Her story provided added motivation to drive me as I completed my dissertation, and I am therefore proud to dedicate this dissertation in her honor.
BIOGRAPHY

Paul G. Walker was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. After graduating high school, he attended Temple University, where he earned a dual Bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education and Special Education (K-12). After college, Mr. Walker began his professional career working as a special education teacher at the high school level, teaching students with mild to moderate disabilities. Mr. Walker was later sponsored by the school system, as part of their administration leadership program, to earn his principal’s certification from North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

After completing an administrative internship at the middle school level, Mr. Walker obtained a position as a high school assistant principal and began the doctoral program at North Carolina State University. His research explores issues related to how schools respond to struggling learners and special education implementation, and he is particularly interested in the complexities of instituting effective response to intervention strategies in the school.

Mr. Walker’s career aspiration is obtaining a state- or federal-level position involving educational leadership and policy, as well as securing a tenure-track professorship in a university environment.
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To my wife, Vicky, who has showered me with endless love, only you know the true trials, tribulations, and joys I have endured as I worked to earn this degree— from the bottom of my heart, thank you for being my guiding light.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There are an increasing number of students entering the high school level with learning gaps in reading. Such students, many of which are minority students from urban schools, are therefore unequipped to succeed academically. As Snow and Biancarosa (2003) found:

The lack of sufficient literacy skills is a major factor contributing to poor performance in high school and post-secondary education. Many students – particularly those in urban schools – lack the foundational literacy skills necessary to read and comprehend the academic texts appropriate for high school and beyond. (p. 6)

With this in mind, it is clear that schools need the infrastructure and training to properly instruct students with limited literacy, in order for the students to have any chance of success in or after high school. However, not only is there an absence of tools needed to help promote essential skills in literacy, but there is also a lack of clear understanding about how to teach literacy effectively in high schools. Thus, since the school principal holds a critical role in supporting his or her teachers as instructional leader, the current study examines the issue of how the high school principal is expected to respond to struggling learners when the skills needed to assist such students are often lacking in their staff.

Statement of the Problem

Academic success, graduating from high school, and attending some sort of post-secondary education can be major challenges for minority students, particularly for those who may have been placed incorrectly as needing special education services (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Cartledge & Dukes, 2009). These misidentified
students are placed in restrictive environments that serve to decrease the opportunities for them to take certain classes needed to graduate on time from high school, thus perpetuating the dropout rate. In its compendium report on national high school dropout rates over more than three decades, the United States Department of Education (2010) found that 75% of students graduate high school in four years in the United States. By comparison, however, only 55% of students with disabilities graduate high school with a diploma (Data Accountability Center, 2008). In addition, 40% of students with learning disabilities and 65% of students with emotional disturbances drop out of high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Researchers have found that students with emotional disabilities are more inclined to drop out of school (Kaufman & Chapman, 2004; Marder, 1992); be confronted with grim employment rates (Data Accountability Center, 2008; D’Amico & Blackorby, 1992); and be overrepresented within the prison system (Doren, Bullis, & Benz, 1996; Williamson, 2004).

While racial incongruence is not the focus of the current study, minority overrepresentation in special education is prevalent and should be addressed as a key issue. According to Cartledge and Dukes (2009), Black students are twice as likely as White students to be inappropriately and unjustifiably placed in special education environments that are restrictive compared to the general education environment of their peers. Notably, Black male students are especially overrepresented in the special education population. Klingner and Edwards (2006) addressed disproportionate representation of culturally diverse students in special education, stating:
The combination of historical racism and extremely ambiguous definitions, policies, and practices places the most vulnerable students at increased risk of inappropriate labeling and isolation. These serious outcomes reveal the fallacy of applying special education’s categorical mindset to what is essentially a continuum of human behavior. (p. 7)

Unfortunately, due to a lack of response to intervention strategies, students are too often incorrectly identified as needing the most restrictive label and setting of special education, which previous research has termed “wait-to-fail” model (Stage, Abbott, Jenkins, & Berninger, 2003). In this model, struggling learners do not receive needed services as soon as their difficulties are evidenced, and instead they are set up to fail for several years until their achievement gap is wide enough for them to qualify for special education services. Often, these struggling students are finally referred for a special education evaluation because high school staff is not prepared to meet their individual instructional needs (Gerber, 1988, 2005; Gersten & Woodard, 1994).

The high school principal has a direct impact on how students achieve in school, how teachers deal with struggling students, and the special education process overall (Marzano & DuFour, 2011). Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) maintained that, once students are determined eligible for special education services, they often continue to fail academically because school officials never adequately determined the student’s true cognitive and/or behavioral issue(s). Hence, the current study aims to understand the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning—specifically, how the extent of their understanding of
intervention methods and special education eligibility influences the way they address the learning needs of those students.

**Purpose of the Study**

It is the goal of this researcher to establish a clear purpose for the current study to allow the reader to make real-world connections and identify implications of the phenomenon being addressed. Creswell (2003) noted, “As the most important statement in an entire qualitative study, the purpose statement needs to be carefully constructed and written in clear and concise language” (p. 103), so as to avoid the error of many writers who “often leave this statement implicit, causing readers extra work in interpreting and following the study” (Creswell, 2003, p. 103). Through the development of the current phenomenological case study, the researcher examined the factors related to how a high school principal responds to struggling learners. The purpose of the study was to better understand the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning, and to assess how the extent of the principal’s understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI) and special education eligibility influence how they address the learning needs of those students.

Response to Intervention (RTI) has been promoted as a means by which schools can more effectively and efficiently meet the needs of struggling students. RTI is a delivery approach for providing services and interventions to students at increasing levels of intensity, based on progress monitoring and data analysis (Batsche et al., 2006). The RTI framework can address the academic and behavioral needs of students, with the goal of achieving positive student outcomes within less restrictive environments (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998), and is meant to offset the practice of the “wait-to-fail” model that has been coupled with utilizing
ability versus achievement discrepancy models. Rather than waiting to identify a large discrepancy between academic performance and academic potential of the student, the RTI approach is expected to maximize the learning and academic achievement of all students, specifically by thorough prevention, early identification, and intervention practices matched to a student’s specific needs. Moreover, when implemented with fidelity on a small scale, RTI has proven to help struggling learners through the use of scientifically research-based strategies and interventions, along with continual progress monitoring to determine if and how a student is responding to the specified interventions. Even the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) determined that “a local education agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation procedures” (IDEIA, 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10), 2004), and the process has been referred to as RTI.

The implementation of RTI represents a major change in models of how students have been identified for decades. In order to avoid the “wait-to-fail” phenomenon often seen applied to students needing special education services (Stage et al., 2003), a practice which delays the needed services for students with cognitive issues for years, RTI is a crucial approach for principals to know and embrace as they work to help determine a student’s special education eligibility within their schools. The researcher therefore hypothesizes that the extent of high school principals’ understanding of RTI, special education law, and related requirements has a major impact on their ability to make appropriate educational decisions for their students. Thus, the current study seeks to investigate whether increased understanding of RTI methods, coupled with professional development in special education,
can help principals to properly meet the needs of struggling learners by ensuring an appropriate special education eligibility determination.

**Research Questions**

Moustakas (1994) noted that the phenomenological research question “grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic” (p. 104); he continued by highlighting that the researcher’s own personal history with the topic allows the core of the problem to emerge and come into focus. In particular, Moustakas (1994) described a number of key characteristics essential to a strong phenomenological research question:

A. It seeks to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experience;

B. It seeks to uncover the qualitative rather than the quantitative factors in behavior and experience;

C. It engages the total self of the research participant, and sustains personal and passionate involvement;

D. It does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships; and

E. It is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions, vivid and accurate renderings of the experience, rather than measurements, ratings, or scores (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105).

For the current study, there was one main research question and three subset questions that framed the investigation:

1. What is the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning? To what extent is this a systematic approach?
a. How knowledgeable is the high school principal of the criteria for determining special education eligibility?

b. To what extent is the high school principal understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI)?

c. What additional and/or complimentary techniques or approaches does the high school principal use to address the needs of struggling learners?

**Significance of the Study**

Hess (2010) wisely asserted that “most educators labor in bureaucratic, rule-driven school systems that own more credit to the practices of early 20\(^{th}\) century factory management than to any notion of how to foster great teaching and learning in the 21\(^{st}\) century” (p. 2). Such an approach to teaching and learning creates a significant problem for high school principals working to respond effectively to struggling learners. Without the right tools and knowledge, principals frequently just succumb to the placement of students in special education, often after the detrimental “wait-to-fail” period discussed by Stage et al. (2003), rather than developing a system like RTI that focuses on high quality instruction and targeted interventions to counter student achievement gaps (Hoover, 2010).

Thus, the current study is important because high school principals may be operating using special education eligibility practices that have failed students for years. Consequently, when academic failure inevitably occurs, these students are marked as being in need of special education, when a Response to Intervention method may have made a real difference in their academic success (Dexter & Hughes, 2009). Studies regarding special education eligibility and RTI often rely on quantitative data drawn from achievement outcomes, but the
actual lived experiences of high school principals with these processes remain under-explored (Jenkins, Hudson, & Johnson, 2007; Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007). Likewise, much research is still needed regarding how to best prepare the high school principal to apply RTI practices.

The researcher’s aim in this study is to explore the experiences of high school principals, how they respond to struggling learners, and to what extent their understanding of determining special education eligibility and implementing RTI impact their decisions about how they address the learning needs of those students—thereby giving the voices of those living through this experience an opportunity to be heard, studied, and shared. Also, the results of the current study may be helpful to high school principals as they work with Individual Education Program (IEP) teams to determine special education eligibility and placement by using RTI to assist struggling learners.

**Methodological Framework and Overview of Research Design**

In determining the methodology and design of the current study, the researcher considered a number of factors. Merriam (2002) pointed out, “It is not uncommon to hear people ask whether a particular study is a ‘good’ study” (p. 23). She continued on to note that what is actually being asked is “whether the study was conducted in a rigorous, systematic, and ethical manner, such that the results can be trusted” (p. 24). With qualitative studies, in particular, the readers determine whether the research has meaning to their situation. Creswell (2003) described qualitative research as an investigation of a problem faced by society, examined without using numbers but with incidents and words instead, to create an overall picture of the subjects in their own setting. More specifically, qualitative researchers
gather data from notes taken during audio-recorded interviews and other methods. The data are collected and then used to understand what is being studied, backed by the personal experiences of those involved. Hence, a qualitative design is flexible and dynamic enough to allow the gathering of rich detail regarding conditions that exist, while at the same time allowing for the evolution of insightful data to emerge (Eisner, 1998; Gay & Airasian, 2000), making it ideal for the current research. Using a qualitative design, then, the researcher in the current study explored the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning, in order to assess how the extent of their understanding of RTI and special education eligibility influences the way principals address the learning needs of those students.

Since phenomenological methods deal with events and incidents that the researcher perceives as critical (Moustakas, 1994), a phenomenological case study approach seemed to be the most effective and ideal means of investigating lived experiences in order to explain how high school principals respond to struggling learners. Therefore, the current study relied on qualitative methods and phenomenological data that sought to provide contextualized research on special education laws and practices and the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. Data were garnered utilizing research on special education law, RTI methods, and the extent of principals’ understanding of these processes in striving to assist struggling learners. The data include perspectives as they are articulated in interviews created for this study, which were collected and then used to understand the phenomenon being studied, backed by the personal experiences of those involved.

Establishing study design also involves determining how many subjects or participants to include. Merriam (2009) simply claimed, “What is needed is an adequate
To this end, Stake (2006) proposed:

The benefits of multi-case study will be limited if fewer than, say, 4 cases are chosen, or more than 10. Two or three cases do not show enough of the interactivity between programs and their situations, whereas 15 or 30 cases provide more uniqueness of interactivity than the research team and readers can understand. (p. 22)

Noting the cautions of Merriam (2009) and Stake (2006), the researcher sought to present no fewer than four and no more than six cases for this phenomenological study. Additionally, the researcher’s main aim was to have a number of interviews that provided ample insights into high school principals’ understanding and methods when dealing with struggling learners. Thus, in order to determine the extent of their understanding of special education eligibility and the RTI framework in addressing the learning needs of struggling students, the researcher chose to interview six high school principals in the current study.

**Conceptual and Operational Definitions of Key Terms**

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA):* The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (P.L. 108–446), enacted by the United States Congress on December 3, 2004, is the most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997, a federal legislation which is specifically focused on the education of children with disabilities. Section 601(d) of IDEIA states the following purposes of the law: a) to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education,
employment, and independent living; b) to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected; and c) to assist States, localities, educational service agencies, and Federal agencies to provide for the education of all children with disabilities.

*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB):* The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires all students to have access to and progress in the general curriculum, a federal education policy that provides guidelines for public schools to improve education through specific changes. The framework of this reform to improve public education includes heightened accountability; enhanced flexibility and local control of funds; enhanced parental choice; and increased use of research-based instructional methods (Eisenhart & Towne, 2003).

*Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP):* This Federal office explicitly links early intervention services and RTI by sanctioning the use of funds to support RTI as long as the funds are used for services to nondisabled students in need of additional academic or behavioral support, and supplement, not supplant, other funds used to implement RTI. OSEP has supported the implementation of RTI by funding a number of related national centers focused on progress monitoring, response to intervention, response to intervention in early childhood, positive behavior interventions, and learning disabilities (Yell, 2012).

*Progress monitoring:* Progress monitoring is used to assess student progress or performance in at-risk areas, such as reading, mathematics, and social behavior, as identified by universal screening (Dexter & Hughes, 2009).

*Response to Intervention (RTI):* Response to Intervention (RTI) is a term used to describe a range of practices for monitoring progress in the academic and behavioral
domains, and for providing interventions in these areas (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007). RTI occurs within the general education setting through collaboration with the activities of other experts such as special educators and school psychologists. Notably, the 2004 IDEIA amendments incorporated RTI into the act’s regulations in two ways: the amendments allowed RTI to be used as one component of eligibility determination for specific learning disabilities, and also identified educational and behavioral evaluations and services and supports as possible means for implementing early intervention services (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973: A civil rights law designed to “eliminate discrimination on the basis of handicap in any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (§104.1). The law has direct application to K-12 students with disabilities, as the regulations cover any qualified person with a disability: (i) of an age during which non-handicapped persons are provided such services; (ii) of any age during which it is mandatory under state law to provide such services to handicapped persons; or (iii) to whom a state is required to provide a free appropriate public education under Section 612 of the Education of the Handicapped Act [§104.3(k)(2)].

Specially designed instruction: Adapting the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction, in order to: (i) address the unique needs of the child that result from the child’s disability; and (ii) ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children [§300.39(b)(3)].
Special education: Generally speaking, special education is specially-designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, intended to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability; when used in the law, its meaning is the same. Education is traditionally a state responsibility, with each state vested with the authority to determine its own policies within the parameters of federal requirements. However, IDEIA defines the term “special education” and establishes specific standards for its implementation, although how special education is actually instituted within schools and in practice remains a state and local decision.

Specific Learning Disabled (SLD): A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (IDEIA, 2004).

Struggling learner: Students who are not performing well academically in school based on one or more of these factors: “lack of motivation, absenteeism, learning disabilities, difficulties learning English as a second language, stressful family life, poverty, low expectations from adults, poorly trained teachers, ineffective instruction, disorganized schools, [and] lack of instructional resources” (Scherer, 2006, p. 7). There are also some quantitative indicators to determine whether a student is struggling, including a below-proficiency score or benchmark on state exams; rate of growth in an academic skill being slow compared to that of peers; and failing marks in classes (Fuchs & Mellard, 2003).

Universal screening: An initial step in identifying students at risk for learning difficulties, which targets students who struggle to learn even when provided a scientific,
evidence-based general education (Jenkins et al., 2007). Universal screening measures consist of brief assessments focused on target skills that are highly predictive of future outcomes, and screening is typically conducted three times per school year: in the fall, winter, and spring.

**Delimitations and Assumptions**

Delimitations are choices made by the researcher that describe the boundaries the researcher has set for a study. The following are delimitations of the current study:

1. The study was limited to high school principals within a school system located in the southeastern region of the United States. Since 2006, this school system’s graduation rate has decreased, although the state’s rate has sharply increased. The consistent decrease in the academic performance of high school students, coupled with the selection of high school principals available to participate in the study, made the school system optimal for purposeful sampling. Moreover, since the literature has asserted that RTI and special education eligibility practices differ for high school leaders compared to those in K-8 (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007), the current study focused on the high school, where RTI is less commonly implemented with fidelity.

2. The use of qualitative research methods allowed this researcher to tell a story from the perspective and lived experiences of high school principals.

3. It was expected that respondents would answer all interview questions honestly and to the best of their abilities.
Overview of the Study

Chapter One describes the purpose and significance of the current study. This study was an attempt to better understand the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning, and how the extent of their understanding of RTI and special education eligibility may influence their approach to addressing the learning needs of struggling students. The results of this study may be important to high school principals by evidencing the value of using RTI when working with IEP teams to assess special education eligibility and placement for struggling learners. Additionally, the information gleaned from this study may also help illuminate the merits of strong RTI implementation as the best response to a student who is found ineligible for special education.

Chapter Two reviews the related literature supporting this research. The literature review investigates the historical aspects of RTI and special education, synthesizes studies and insights regarding this issue, and describes how school principals currently address the needs of struggling learners. The researcher also highlights additional scholarly writings that focus on the role of the public school principal, special education law, and RTI frameworks.

Chapter Three outlines the research questions and explains why the qualitative research methodology of a phenomenological case study is most appropriate for exploring this topic, as well as describing the research design, sample selection, data collection, and data analysis of the study. Chapter Four presents the study findings. Finally, Chapter Five integrates the data drawn from the findings of this study with current research, and also discusses implications for future research and practices in the field.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Exploring the high school principal’s response to struggling learners requires a focus on various empirical works. Hence, following is a presentation of related literature stemming from academic journal articles and books, governmental documents, and other relevant material pertaining to special education eligibility, Response to Intervention (RTI), and how understanding of these processes impacts the high school principal’s approach to struggling learners.

The literature review begins with a description of the social constructivism perspective that formed the theoretical framework of the study, an overview of RTI as a model for the academic and behavioral success of all students, with tiered supports for struggling learners. Next is a discussion of how principal leadership influences implementation of RTI at the high school level and the various barriers that must be overcome in this high school environment. The chapter ends with a historical view of special education as a civil right, and examines how a student is found eligible for special education.

Review of Research and Related Literature

The review of the research and related literature relevant to this study aims, overall, to better understand the high school principal’s approach to struggling learners, and how the extent of the principal’s understanding of RTI and special education eligibility factor into how they address the learning needs of those students. One main research question and three subset questions framed this investigation:
1. What is the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning? To what extent is this a systematic approach?
   a. To what extent is the high school principal knowledgeable of the criteria for determining special education eligibility?
   b. To what extent is the high school principal understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI)?
   c. What additional and/or complimentary techniques or approaches does the high school principal use to address the needs of struggling learners?

These questions seek to glean what high school principals know, or do not know, about this topic, in order to understand how principals’ behavior and response to student learning needs can be better informed by RTI and special education eligibility determination practices.

Merriam (2002) states that, when using qualitative research, “the author needs to make a case that there is some gap in our knowledge about a particular phenomenon, and it is important to answer the questions raised by the study” (p. 19). As such, when evaluating qualitative research, the researcher must first ask, “What do we already know about the phenomenon, and what is the gap in our knowledge?” (Merriam, 2002, p. 19). Merriam (2002) goes on to point out, “The mere fact that this topic has not been investigated before does not in itself justify doing the research; maybe there is no need to know the answers” (p. 19). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) describe “the metaphor of the literature review as an extended conversation” (p. 43), and they outline certain aspects that the literature must address: the history of research on the topic, controversies within the literature, how others approached the topic, what is already known, and what remains to be done:
1. What does the research have to say about what is already known? Has anyone done anything similar or related to this study?

2. Where does this researcher’s proposal fit in with what has already been done?

3. Why is this research worth doing in light of what has already been done?

The following literature review seeks to answer each of these questions, in order to elucidate the information and value to be gained from the current study.

**Response to Intervention as a Framework for the Success of all Students**

1. Response to Intervention (RTI), a delivery approach for providing services and interventions to students at increasing levels of intensity based on progress monitoring and data analysis, has been endorsed by educational professionals and policymakers (Batsche et al., 2006). Although RTI has been primarily utilized in the academic domain to identify students with specific learning disabilities (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007), it has been recognized as a framework that can address the academic and behavioral needs of all students, with the goal of achieving positive student outcomes within less restrictive environments (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). For example, Saeki et al. (2011) established that RTI has strong behavioral prevention measures that “utilize evidence-based strategies and outcomes that prevent problems rather than react to problems by employing aversive consequences” (p. 44). In other words, using RTI practices in identifying and intervening for behavioral issues, can prevent the escalation of problems into increasingly unfavorable forms. However, it is important to note that RTI is not necessarily required by law. Moreover, how a particular state applies and implements RTI may vary widely. North
Carolina, for example, has adopted RTI statewide and is more active in promoting RTI than many other states.

RTI methodologies include high-quality, research-based, classroom instruction; continuous and frequent progress monitoring; implementation of research-based academic and behavioral interventions at multiple levels; and assessment of intervention integrity (Batsche et al., 2006). Adding to this, Wanzek and Vaughn (2011) cite three tiers of instruction implemented in an RTI framework:

- primary intervention (implementation of research-based practices in the critical areas of reading, professional development, and screening three times a year for all students),
- secondary intervention (small-group reading intervention and progress monitoring for students who are struggling), and
- tertiary intervention (intensive interventions for students for whom the secondary intervention was insufficient).

(p. 167)

Tier I’s primary intervention involves providing evidence-based reading instruction in the general education classroom to each student in the school, coupled with screening assessments approximately three times per year, in order to identify those students who are meeting grade-level standards with the core curriculum. As the implementation of high-quality Tier I instruction is expected to meet the needs of approximately 70% to 80% of the general student population in reaching benchmarks, supplemental instruction is needed for the 20% to 30% of students that may not reach grade-level standards within the Tier I core program (Vaughn, Wanzek, Woodruff, & Linan-Thompson, 2007). Similarly, Burns, Jacob, and Wagner (2008) maintain:
If schools fail to provide quality instruction for 80% of all students as measured by achievement outcomes, making conclusions about a child’s individual failure to respond rather than exploring an inadequate Tier I as potentially more causal would be very questionable practice. (p. 265)

Notably, the concern that Klingner and Edwards (2006) identify regarding the use of an RTI model is that Tier I is not consistently done with fidelity or, even when it is, there is lack of progress monitoring of the effects within the classroom that diminish its effectiveness.

Batsche et al. (2006) explain that Tier II should meet the needs of approximately 15% of the student population who are not exhibiting adequate response to Tier I practices. Thus, Tier II students need increased and more targeted interventions, and a specific educational plan. Additionally, Tier II interventions should be monitored regularly for a set amount of time, to yield data showing students’ response and progress.

Finally, Batsche et al. (2006) designate Tier III as intensive, sustained interventions, often serving a small portion of approximately 5% of the school population. Although Tier III could include special education in some models (Garcia & Ortiz, 2008), proponents of traditional special education service delivery models have asserted that special education is frequently a separate system; however, this is mostly due to the length of time needed for Tier III interventions to show an ambitious rate of growth (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011; Mellard & Johnson, 2008).

**Opposition to Implementing Response to Intervention**

The research and related literature recognizes that the rigorous implementation of RTI has many battles: staff resources and attrition; quality and consistent professional
development for school staff; curricular adjustments such as Common Core State Standards; limits of screening and progress monitoring tools and resources aligned with their students’ academic level; and scheduling students for interventions (Orosco & Klingner, 2010; VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2010). On the other hand, the potential positive results that high school principals could gain by implementing RTI could offer growth in their targeted intervention strategies for struggling students, thereby counteracting the often-restrictive nature of students placed and served in special education services. Still, the aforementioned issues related to implementation must be recognized as especially challenging in the high school setting.

To meet these challenges, an effective implementation of the RTI model requires a complete shift in how schools conduct business and, most importantly, has implications for the preparation of both general and special education teachers (Jenkins et al., 2007). In connection, Richards et al. (2007) claimed that “while catalyzed by special education legislation, RTI is essentially a model of effective schools with widespread implications for how all school personnel are prepared, acculturated to the school environment, and how they implement instruction in the classroom” (p. 60). Thus, as it is more than just a tool for teachers to address students with special education needs, RTI requires a move towards a more individualized look at each of the students in the class, as well as consistent monitoring of instructional progress using empirically validated techniques.

It should be noted that there are those concerned about RTI who encourage that it not be used or, if necessary, that it be used only with some well-defined changes. For instance, Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) describe RTI as a “fad” that does not have the consistency
among federal, state, or local agencies to defend its broad implementation. They argue that RTI may be overly utilized to the detriment of schools, thus denying or delaying a student’s right to a comprehensive evaluation, adding that if low achievement is the main characteristic, then most students with higher IQs may not qualify, though they may in fact need assistance. Overall, they contend that a comprehensive assessment should be compulsory prior to any intervention being implemented.

One of the most common concerns about RTI relates to staffing resources and increased attrition rates. Hugh and Dexter (2011) point out that, if the implementation of RTI leads to a decrease in students referred and found eligible for special education services, then overall resources and special education staffing will ultimately decrease. In addition, questions have been raised regarding how RTI would impact the population of students with disabilities who are already being served (Washington State Association of School Psychologists, 2004). These objections make clear that, although the goal of RTI is to provide a systematic method for all students to maximize their learning and potential, there nonetheless remains some tension regarding this shift.

Indirectly addressing the concerns related to having quality and consistent professional development to facilitate the most effective RTI implementation, Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) provide the following thought-provoking questions that can be used to help guide professional development regarding special education and RTI:

1. What does the term RTI refer to? Can we agree?

2. What constitutes an adequate “response” to instruction? Is this a matter of a measurement formula, observation, judgment, or all of the above?
3. Why is a system-wide model necessary? Why is RTI a whole-school framework?

4. Why is RTI a paradigm and not a model? That is, why is it a way of thinking about students, programs, and resources rather than a formula or prescription for matching programs to students?

5. What is the role of curriculum-based measurement in relation to traditional, standardized, diagnostic tests?

6. How should we address the problem of over-identification of students at risk that occurs with many screening tests?

7. How should we locate and respond to the needs of high-IQ, struggling students, even if they are not eligible for special education services in an RTI framework?

8. What is the relationship between “problem-solving” and the “standard treatment protocol” approach to RTI? Don’t all good RTI implementations require continuous, student-focused problem solving? Don’t all good RTI implementations require some level of use of standard protocols?

9. What knowledge and practice standards must be met for administrators, coaches, and teachers to use the RTI framework successfully? How much professional development time is required for those standards to be met?

10. Who should administer screening, diagnostic, and progress-monitoring assessments? What should the teacher’s role be?

11. If a student receives a comprehensive evaluation, what should be measured and who makes that decision?
12. How do we help administrators evaluate the quality and fidelity of implementation of instruction and intervention in their school? (p. 140)

Question like these show that, due to differences in interpretation and implementation, RTI is continually being developed and shaped (Zirkel, 2012).

An ever-present concern voiced by those opposed to RTI is that it will be overused as a method to delay or deny special education services. As a result, many researchers remain guarded in concluding that RTI is effective in reducing the high numbers of students being referred and found eligible for special education services. Aron and Loprest (2012), for example, wrote:

At best, [RTI] may be an effective driver of school-wide instructional improvement, one that also prevents the misidentification of learning disabilities (poor instruction sometimes leads to children being identified as having a disability), and that allows schools to intervene early with students with true learning disabilities. (p. 98)

RTI, then, has incited many questions and concerns from those who worry it might have unintended, damaging effects such as diminishing school resources, increasing staff attrition, and causing over-identification of special education students.

The Alignment of IDEA, NCLB, and Section 504

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act are aligned in their shared expectations of school systems with enhanced communication with parents and implementation of scientifically-based curriculum and instruction (Eisenhart & Towne,
2003). Even more, the intents, methods, and language of each of these legal acts is similar, and the principles of RTI support them as well.

The intent of NCLB is to increase the academic achievement of students across the nation. This law set the 2013-2014 school year as the target for public schools to show proficiency in both math and reading for all students and for all educators to be highly qualified (NCLB, 2002). In turn, the primary intent of the reauthorization of IDEA was to align it with NCLB. The language in IDEIA and NCLB are also comparable. Both stress the use of professionally sound interventions and instruction based on defensible research, as well as the requirement to deliver effective reading and behavior programs that will result in improved student performance and fewer children requiring special education services.

The main method to accomplish its goals is embedded in IDEA’S requirements that (a) special education teachers be highly qualified; (b) students with disabilities be included in statewide assessments; and (c) special education services be based on research-based findings. Most notably, NCLB required that schools must implement evidence-based practices, which results in an acute effect on the education of students with disabilities. Thus, even though RTI is not specifically used within NCLB, the tenets of RTI support NCLB by improving educational outcomes through continual collection of student outcomes in the classroom (Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006).

NCLB implemented an accountability system involving the assessment and reporting of progress through increased standardized measures, and the impact has implications for special education. In particular, such an accountability system influences special education teachers due to the development of appropriate assessments, inclusion of students performing
significantly below grade level, and determination of individualized instructional goals (Vannest, Mahadevan, Mason, & Temple-Harvey, 2009). Standardized assessments like these belie the practice of using an Individual Education Program (IEP) to measure student annual progress, because they measure the very progress that IEPs are intended to assess.

By comparison, Section 504 protects students who have any physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, such as hearing, seeing, speaking, thinking, walking, breathing, learning, and working. Unlike IDEIA, which lists specific qualifying conditions, any student who has an impairment that limits a major life activity can qualify for services under Section 504—even if those services do not meet the level provided in a special education program under IDEA. As a result, a student who needs some accommodation from the school, but who does not qualify for services as a student with a disability under IDEIA (e.g., a child with asthma or a food allergy), may be protected by Section 504.

**Special Education as a Civil Right**

The origin of special education programs like NCLB, IDEA, and Section 504 is a significant aspect for this literature review, because it sets the stage for the phenomenon of meeting the needs of struggling learners. Adding to this, it is also necessary to understand how special education was impacted by the Civil Rights movement. Researchers Kauffman and Landrum (2009) share that the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975, Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) were all passed in response to many in society feeling ostracized and mistreated. Hence, just as the need to provide protections to citizens whose rights were
repeatedly violated became the Civil Rights movement, the public school arena became an environment in which to advocate for all students’ right to access an education. Special education, then, has increasingly become an issue of civil rights.

EAHCA created the first guidelines for how students would be identified as needing special education services, and what these services may look like depending on the needs of the student (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007). Specifically, EAHCA’s task was to ensure that students with disabilities were permitted inside the physical school building and provided access to the appropriate resources; simply put, EAHCA “made the promise of getting students with disabilities into public schools” (Ikeda, 2012, p. 275). In the initial stages of implementation, special education services usually provided restrictive, self-contained, or resource-based settings. However, once students with disabilities were able to get into the school building, there was often the practice of separating them from their non-disabled peers. As a result, students identified as needing these services were often subjected to a restrictive delivery of their educational needs that also isolated them from the general student population. Such a trend of separating students with special needs from their regular education peers seems to mimic issues of a civil rights nature (Richards et al., 2007).

Efforts to counter this separation of students were imbedded in the amendments to EAHCA, as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997, which mandated that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum with their non-disabled peers. Along with 2001’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and the subsequent reauthorization of IDEA, termed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004), such federal legislation has worked to
better serve special education students by ensuring that students with disabilities are provided an equally rigorous curriculum (Hoover, 2010).

The matter of race and special education has also been an issue of concern. Klingner et al. (2005) addressed the disproportionate representation of culturally diverse students in special education:

The combination of historical racism and extremely ambiguous definitions, policies, and practices places the most vulnerable students at increased risk of inappropriate labeling and isolation. These serious outcomes reveal the fallacy of applying special education’s categorical mindset to what is essentially a continuum of human behavior. (p. 7)

Similarly, Artiles et al. (2010) and Cartledge and Dukes (2009) maintained that academic success, earning a high school diploma, and pursuing post-secondary education are all major challenges for minority students categorized as needing special education services. Cartledge and Dukes (2009) noted that Black students are twice as likely as White students to be placed in special education environments that are restrictive compared to those of their peers in general education. Speaking to the detrimental consequences of such an inequality, Patton (1998) also emphasized that many Black students are inappropriately placed and, as a result, “fail to receive a quality and life-enhancing education” because they “miss essential general education academic and social curricula” (p. 25). Thus, there are limited opportunities for minority students in special education to take the classes that mark a quality education, or to complete the credit needed graduate on time from high school.
**Special Education Eligibility**

Interestingly, the identification of and provision of services for children with special needs is not unlike the way that doctors identify and treat ill patients (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012; Sansosti, Goss, & Noltemeyer, 2011). In the field of medicine, doctors examine ill patients and implement tests to determine the reason for the ailment – once a cause is found, these professionals intervene to treat and cure the patient, responding with a sense of urgency. Likewise, teachers and administrators test students exhibiting learning difficulties in order to identify any special education needs, and RTI can be seen as an approach that helps to treat the student’s particular challenges. In fact, a variety of sources have formed connections between Response to Intervention (RTI) and Response to Treatment within the medical field (Yell & Drasgow, 2007).

With regard to the driving factors for appropriately determining special education eligibility, the fifth evaluation procedure outlined under “Special Rule for Eligibility Determination” in IDEIA (2004) states:

In making a determination of eligibility under paragraph (4)(A), a child shall not be determined to be a child with a disability if the determinant factor for such determination is (A) lack of appropriate instruction in reading, including the essential components of reading instruction (as defined in section 1208(3) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 [NCLB]. (20 U.S.C. 1414 (b)(5)(A))

This rule is tied directly to the language of NCLB, which is markedly more specific with regard to reading requirements than any prior legislation. In addition IDEIA (2004) indicates:
Notwithstanding section 607(b), when determining whether a child has a specific learning disability as defined in section 602, a local education agency shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual disability in oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skill, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation, or math reasoning. (20 U.S.C. 1414 (b)(6)(A))

In other words, educational agencies must be active in ensuring that the special education eligibility and placement processes are strengthened through the use of RTI; the improvement of these “pre-referral teams” through professional development on RTI; and the use of sound, norm-referenced instruments, along with the expanded use of curriculum-based measures. Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, and Young (2003) and O’Conner (2007) asserted that effective RTI implementation results from a reduction in the number of students who are referred and who qualify for special education. Oddly enough, this supposed strength and benefit of RTI is also used as a main argument for why RTI is problematic and potentially damaging to students.

Research has shown that prior to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), students were found eligible for special education services in the category of specific learning disability (SLD) only if a psychological evaluation found a significant discrepancy between the student’s aptitude and their achievement (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Hernandez-Finch, 2012; Ikeda, 2012). These researchers and others have argued that students were often labeled as having a SLD if they were thought to have average or
higher intelligence on a standardized test along with a significant discrepancy on a certain standardized measure of achievement in one or more academic areas.

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s (2006) website, the student’s parents and “a team of qualified professionals” shall determine whether a student suspected of having an SLD actually qualifies as a student with a disability. The team must include:

1. The child’s regular teacher, or, if the child does not have a regular teacher, a regular classroom teacher qualified to teach a child of his or her age (or, for a child of less than school age, an individual qualified by the local education agency to teach a child of his or her age); and

2. At least one person qualified to conduct individual diagnostic examinations of children, such as a school psychologist, speech-language pathologist, or remedial teacher. (n.p.)

IDEIA of 2004 also encouraged preventative screening and intervention prior to the use of a special education eligibility process, permitting school districts to use up to 15% of federal funding to support such early intervention services. As Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) indicated:

1. Students at risk for reading failure can be identified in preschool or kindergarten with simple, inexpensive screening assessments.

2. Intervention is most effective and least costly at the kindergarten and first grade levels.

3. Early intervention, outside of special education, can be sufficient to prevent or ameliorate potential learning disabilities in many students.
4. Regular classroom and supplemental instruction are key factors in improving student outcomes. (p. 137)

In their study on RTI and special education eligibility, Bradley et al. (2007) criticized the discrepancy model often applied to children with special needs, asserting that it has not been proven effective at providing early intervention to struggling students or enhancing other services. Specifically, this discrepancy model emphasizes that there has been a disconnection between what the student knows and how they perform, though it does little to actually influence the characteristics of meaningful, specially designed instruction in the classroom. Moreover, research has suggested that, once a student is found eligible for special education services, special education placement is usually not indicative of increased effectiveness in instruction or a greater rate of growth or achievement for students with learning disabilities (Gersten & Woodard, 1994).

To counter the rush to evaluate and then automatically place the student in need of special education, IDEIA legislation of 2004 prohibited states from requiring that this the discrepancy model be the only factor in determining eligibility, instead describing RTI in stating that a “local education agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation procedures” (20 USC 1414(b)(6)). Hence, IDEIA defined a major adjustment in how students had been identified for decades, and is also a huge distinction for high school principals to know as they help determine student eligibility within their schools.
The High School Principal’s Challenge in Implementing RTI

This literature review has established that the RTI model relies heavily on implementing high-quality, specific instruction and interventions as well as ongoing systematic assessments of student progress at each of the three tiers. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton (2010) asserted that, although the literature about the effectiveness of RTI in high school settings is lacking, some schools are working to implement RTI as a means of closing the basic skills achievement gap and perhaps preventing academic failure in content areas. Still, implementation of RTI in the high school setting has been historically based on an elementary model, since the tools and infrastructure of RTI are often more readily available at the elementary level. In a study by Sebastian and Allensworth (2012), high school principals questioned whether the sheer logistical and structural conditions unique to secondary settings were immediate barriers when attempting to implement RTI. In essence, they argued that there are some aspects of a high school (such as the block scheduling, lack of literacy teachers, and credits) that may appear to inhibit screening, progress monitoring, and tiered intervention efforts. Other research (e.g., National High School Center, 2010) has concurred,

Since effective RTI implementation requires individualized small group instruction, the logistical challenges have to be overcome. Principals have reported feeling overwhelmed in their attempt to restructure in order to meet the needs of struggling students, whether or not the student’s needs are apparent (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2011). In addition, Ikeda’s (2012) study highlighted several barriers to implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) in the high school setting that have become evident over the past fifteen years:
1. Educators in schools desire to implement practices that will result in academic success for all students, but these individuals may not have the skills they need to deliver instruction that is differentiated beyond the standard accommodations provided from special education.

2. When teachers implement proven practices that are scientifically-research based with evidenced-based outcomes, students often show academic gains.

3. Schools find it difficult to implement these proven practices within school settings and within the standard time of the educational day.

4. An RTI system will reinforce teacher referrals to special education referrals without proper pre-referral strategies.

5. An RTI system that relies on teacher referral for special education identification will result in disproportionate representation of students identified.

6. There is a fear that special education identification rates may not reduce when RTI is implemented.

7. Interventions-based system of identification has not led to better Individualized Education Program (IEP) outcomes for students identified as eligible for special education services, so RTI may be ineffective. (p. 275)

In spite of these barriers, Wanzek and Vaughn’s (2011) study illustrated that “effectively implemented, the percentage of students with severe academic difficulties will be reduced and a reduction in students identified for special education will likely occur” (p. 168). In essence, the thought is that students who may have been evaluated and found previously
eligible for special education services, due to a lack of effective instruction, would then have the educational interventions met within the general curriculum.

As Ikeda (2012) implied, the readiness of teachers with regard to identification and monitoring is unquestionably critical for successful RTI implementation. A high school environment requires improving students’ foundational skill sets within literacy (reading writing, listening, and speaking) and math, while also providing the required Tier I content knowledge of the science, social studies, language arts, history, and foreign language disciplines. As such, when doing RTI with fidelity, general education teachers must look more closely at students’ individual learning needs and develop strategies and skills that can be executed to address these specifically (Jimerson et al., 2007). Hence, schools need to develop expertise in data-based decision making and the administration of ongoing progress monitoring measures, such as curriculum-based measurement, and it is also paramount that these skills be embedded in general education teacher preparation programs.

As much if not more than teacher preparedness, the role of principal leadership is vital to the success of RTI in assisting struggling learners. Youngs and King (2002) found that the high school principal has a significant role in creating and developing meaningful and effective professional development that can have a positive impact on student achievement. As Matthews and Crow (2010) asserted in their study on principal leadership, while some principals may not have a direct effect on student learning, they do have a significant indirect effect that happens initially through the principal’s influence on “working setting, motivation, and capacity” (p. 74). According to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, “There’s no such thing as a high-performing school without a great principal. . . .
You simply can’t overstate their importance in driving student achievement, in attracting and retaining great talent to the school” (Connelly, 2010, p. 34).

To have a strong influence and place due emphasis on student achievement, principals must be adept in the curriculum. Marzano (2012) contended that principals and their staff must have a clear focus on student achievement that is guided by relevant and timely data:

1. The school leader ensures clear and measurable goals are established and focused on critical needs regarding improving overall student achievement at the school level.
2. The school leader ensures clear and measurable goals are established and focused on critical needs regarding improving achievement of individual students within the school.
3. The school leader ensures that data are analyzed, interpreted, and used to regularly monitor progress toward school achievement goals.
4. The school leader ensures that data are analyzed, interpreted, and used to regularly monitor progress toward achievement goals for individual students.
5. The school leader ensures that appropriate school-level and classroom-level programs and practices are in place to help all students meet individual achievement goals when data indicate interventions are needed. (p. 10)

In fact, Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010) found a relationship between principal leadership, effective instruction in the classroom, and student achievement, writing:
The framework of organizational supports for student learning starts with leadership as the driver for change. School leaders work to enhance the professional capacity of the school through a deliberate focus on staff quality, strengthening faculty learning and teachers’ capacity to work together to align the curriculum and strengthen overall instruction. (p. 64)

In other words, when principal leadership is intentional and systematic, the culture of the school is positively impacted.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Two’s review of the literature related to the current study included a review of the empirical studies on Response to Intervention (RTI) as an effort to maximize the learning of students with special needs, while not waiting until the discrepancy is so wide between actual academic performance and the actual academic potential of the student. Existing research has shown that, due to a lack of RTI strategies, students may be incorrectly identified as needing the most restrictive label and setting of special education – a problem that research has often considered a “wait-to-fail” model. In this model, struggling learners do not receive needed services as soon as their difficulties are evidenced, and instead are set up to fail for several years until their achievement gap is wide enough for them to qualify for special education services. The research endorses improving Tier I through differentiated instruction for each student, which should limit special education services to students with more severe learning disabilities. Additionally, the literature points to the view of special education as a civil right, and addresses how a student is found eligible for special education. In Chapter Three, the phenomenological case study research design that was utilized in this
study is detailed, including the design, sampling, and procedures for data collection and analysis.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three explains why a qualitative phenomenological case study research methodology was an appropriate design for the current study. In addition, this chapter describes the social constructivism perspective as the theoretical framework for this study and how it influences the researcher’s subjectivity. This chapter also presents the research design, sampling criteria, data collection, and data analysis of the current study.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the high school principal’s systematic approach to students who are not learning, and how the extent of their understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI) and special education eligibility influence how they address the learning needs of struggling students. The researcher’s goal is to provide a description of the participants’ first-hand experience with the phenomenon.

Rationale for Research Methodology

Qualitative design

Creswell (1998) described qualitative research as a valuable tool for researchers attempting to understand groups of people the way the people themselves want to be viewed. Qualitative research is an investigation of a problem faced by society, which is researched without using numbers but instead incidents and words to create an overall picture of the subjects in their own, realistic setting (Creswell, 2003). Indeed, data collected through qualitative methods such as interviews and observations of study participants has become a fundamental manner of doing educational research and evaluation, and so qualitative research “should be judged as credible and confirmable as opposed to valid and reliable"
(Merriam, 1998, p. 85). In this regard, the qualitative approach was ideal for examining the research questions established in the current study.

The literature is saturated with quantitative studies that have implications based on statistical outcomes. Thus, in this study, the researcher examined data in a qualitative manner to share the lived experience of the person or group being studied (Yin, 2009) – i.e., high school principals. Within the qualitative realm, the researcher also approached this study from the constructivist perspective, which maintains that multiple realities exist that are socially constructed, and holds that “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Thus, using a qualitative, constructivist design, the current study sought to tell a story from the perspective and lived experiences of high school principals, in order to gather emerging themes for future implications. Seeking this information directs the research towards qualitative data and its usefulness in identifying the extent of principals’ understanding and the rationale behind their actions.

*Phenomenological case study*

Case studies can be classified as descriptive, interpretive, or evaluative and, according to Merriam (1998), can examine an object, program, person, organization, phenomenon, or anything that might be considered an entity. There are three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective, which are also referred to as multiple case studies (Stake, 1995; 2005). While some consider single and multiple case studies to be different in methodology, Yin (2009) identified them as “variants within the same methodological framework— and no broad distinction is made between the so-called classic (that is, single) case study and
multiple case studies” (p. 53). When a collection of cases is researched to provide understanding about a topic and larger collection of cases, the study is termed a collective, instrumental case study (Stake, 2006). The current study, with its focus on the experiences and views of six different principals, utilized the collective or multiple-case study design.

Phenomenological research is a strategy associated with the essence of human experiences dealing with particular phenomena that are expressed or described by participants in a research study (Creswell, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). The current case study’s purpose was to examine the phenomenon of the high school principal’s approach to struggling students and explore how their understanding of RTI and special education eligibility influence the way they address those students’ learning needs. By focusing on individual principals’ views in order to understand the phenomenon in question, the current study’s goal aligned with the nature of a phenomenological study because its focus was “one in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

Researchers have noted that pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than to explain as it works to ascertain knowledge about how people think and feel, beginning from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Husserl, 1970). Moustakas (1994) suggested that “phenomenology should not focus so much on the researcher’s interpretation, but on the investigator taking a fresh perspective of the phenomenon” (p. 41). According to Denscombe (2004), with this phenomenological methodology, a more in-depth understanding can be constructed from the
researcher’s basic understanding about the topic. Hence, this study’s phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to hear the stories of high school principals and to gain rich, thick descriptions of the phenomenon in question.

Research Questions

Moustakas (1994) asserted that the phenomenological research question “grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic” (p. 104), and allows the core of the problem being studied to emerge and come into focus from the researcher’s own personal history with the topic. Moustakas (1994) outlined some key characteristics essential to strong phenomenological research questions:

(A) It seeks to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experience;

(B) It seeks to uncover the qualitative rather than the quantitative factors in behavior and experience;

(C) It engages the total self of the research participant, and sustains personal and passionate involvement;

(D) It does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships;

(E) It is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions, vivid and accurate renderings of the experience, rather than measurements, ratings, or scores. (p. 105)

Therefore, with these guidelines in mind, there is one main research question and three subset questions that framed the current investigation:

1. What is the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning? To what extent is this a systematic approach?

   a. To what extent is the high school principal knowledgeable of the criteria for
determining special education eligibility?

b. To what extent is the high school principal understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI)?

c. What additional and/or complimentary techniques or approaches does the high school principal use to address the needs of struggling learners?

Because the researcher did not know specifically what the high school principals knew or did not know about the topic, such open-ended research questions were ideal.

**Site Selection and Sampling Criteria**

Creswell (2005) described purposive sampling as a researcher’s deliberate choice of the particular individuals with whom the phenomenon will be explored, the use of which is directly related to the researcher’s specific questions and purpose (Patton, 2002). The current study used purposive sampling, in part based on the logistics of gaining access to high school principals and the need to adhere to pre-established policies, permissions, and procedures of the school district being studied and North Carolina State University.

Merriam (2009) wrote, “What is needed is an adequate number of participants…to answer the question posed at the beginning of the study” (p. 80). To this end, Stake (2006) proposed:

The benefits of multi-case study will be limited if fewer than, say, 4 cases are chosen, or more than 10. Two or three cases do not show enough of the interactivity between programs and their situations, whereas 15 or 30 cases provide more uniqueness of interactivity than the research team and readers can understand. (p. 22)
Based on the guidance of Stake (2006) and Merriam (2009), the researcher sought to present no fewer than four and no more than six cases for the current phenomenological case study. In addition, the researcher’s main aim was to conduct a number of interviews that provided ample insight to aid the understanding and discussions of the phenomenon of high school principals’ response to struggling learners and the extent to which their understanding of RTI and special education eligibility criteria are influencing factors. Since case studies make no claims to be generalizable, due to the small sample size and because the data gleaned are predominantly non-numerical, there was no way to establish that data collected in this study would be representative of some larger population (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). The study was therefore isolated to a sample of six high school principals located in the eastern section of the United States. Consent from school leaders to access the principal’s campus had to be approved by the Data and Accountability department of the identified school district prior to the study’s beginning and by the Institutional Review Board of the university.

The practices regarding special education eligibility determination and Response to Intervention of a high school principal is often different than those isolated to the elementary and middle school levels, and these influence how the principal will respond to struggling learners. Rather than compare the principals at different levels, the researcher chose to focus on the high school principal for a bounded case (Yin, 2009). While the principal’s expertise in the processes of RTI and special education eligibility, as well as his or her years of experience, may have influenced the study’s findings and would inevitably be a factor in selection criteria, the principals all have the common challenge of determining what to do
when students are not learning, and how they go about making those decisions was the matter being studied.

**Informed Consent**

The identity of the participants was kept anonymous throughout the study and dissertation development by using pseudonyms for the high school principals. Initial communication began by providing participants with a description of the study; the reasoning for the selected participants; the purpose of the project; study procedures; risks and benefits; expectations of privacy and confidentiality; participant rights; and the choice to withdraw at any time.

As required by the Institutional Review Board of North Carolina State University, through which the current study was reviewed and approved, participants were required to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix B) to indicate their exercise of free will and choice in participating in the study. Consent from the subjects’ school system was also needed for the participants to take part in this study.

**Data Collection**

As described by Creswell (1998), qualitative research is a field-based inquiry process in which data are collected as words and the researcher strives to construct a complex picture and tell a story through the perspectives of others from detailed interviews. In such in-depth phenomenological interview processes, interviews provide a formal structure for storytelling and a way that humans come to know each other; interviews are particularly useful when a researcher is interested in taking larger meaning from people’s stories, as they provide an opportunity for sharing details of and reactions to experiences (Seidman, 2006). Furthermore,
interviews can offer a researcher rich detail because the interviewee has opportunities to question what is not clearly understood, providing additional information to complete a vivid picture for the researcher. Besides gaining knowledge regarding others’ views, another benefit of the interview process is that the researcher’s self-understanding grows, making the experience enlightening and rich for both participants. Spradley (1979) noted that such a process of discovery continues as the researcher analyzes the data from each interview (as cited in Merriam, 1998), because the data can then be used to aid in offering implications based on the personal experiences of those involved.

A qualitative design and interview procedure should be flexible and dynamic enough to gather rich detail about conditions that exist while allowing for the evolution of insightful data to emerge (Eisner, 1998; Gay & Airasian, 2000). According to Burgess (1982), interviews can enable researchers “to probe deeply, uncover new clues, open up new dimensions of a problem and to secure valid, accurate, inclusive accounts that are based on personal experience” (p. 101). Stewart (1982) added to this by noting that interviews also allow the researcher an opportunity to explain “how individuals construct the meaning and significance of their situation from the complex personal framework of beliefs and values, which they have developed over their lives in order to help explain and predict events in their world” (p. 45).

Accordingly, then, interviews were the major source of data collection to construct meaning and implications for this study. Data were primarily collected from each of the participants through the use of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C), along with follow-up questions that often evolve when conducting qualitative
research interviews, thereby creating rich, descriptive data (Gay, 1996). The descriptive data obtained from opened-ended and follow-up questions allowed the researcher to attain information concerning the perceptions and individual experiences of the participants, in order to help understand the high school principal’s approach to struggling learners and how the extent of their understanding of RTI and special education eligibility influenced the way they address the needs of those students.

To increase the validity of the principal interviews, the researcher heeded Creswell’s advice when conducting interviews. Validity has been defined as the researcher's interpretation of the participants’ perceptions or understandings of the topic of interest (Merriam, 2002). Creswell (2007) specified an approach to directing interviews for the greatest validity:

During the interview, stay to the questions, complete the interview within the time specified (if possible), be respectful and courteous, and offer few questions and advice. This last point may be the most important, and is a reminder of how a good interviewer is a good listener rather than a frequent speaker during the interview. (p. 134)

Interview Structure

Interview Protocol

The use of an interview protocol worked to counter varying levels of questions based on the researcher’s preconceived ideas about a particular principal’s response to how they address the needs of struggling learners.
As Yin (2009) noted, the interview protocol for a case study is a “major way of increasing the reliability of case study research and is intended to guide the investigator in carrying out the data” (p. 79). Using an interview protocol in the current study, then, prevented the researcher from asking random questions based on preconceived ideas about a particular principal’s response to how they address the needs of struggling learners. In addition, to ensure that the interviews with the high school principals resulted in data that aligned with the study’s purpose, the current study followed a semi-structure protocol as outlined below with notes on outcomes:

1. The researcher invited the principal participants to the study through an emailed correspondence (see Appendix A) sent from a North Carolina State University GMail account to their professional email address.

2. Within this email, participants were provided the parameters of the study, as well as the option of declining the invitation. Three high school principals that were invited to the study did decline based on various reasons, most of which involved schedule conflicts.

3. Participants were not given a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview because, for validity of results, the researcher did not want them to formulate preconceived responses. One principal, Gary, did request to have the questions in front of him while the researcher conducted the interview. The researcher explained that he would clarify and repeat any of the questions as needed, but, in the interest of uniformity, could not provide a printout of the questions. In addition, depending on
the flow of the interview and the responses received, the researcher added some questions while deleting others for different participants.

4. The researcher interviewed each participant one time, in the principal’s school building.

5. Follow-up questions were asked during the original interview as needed.

6. The principal and the researcher were the only two individuals present during the interview process.

7. The interviews for each of the participants ran no longer than 90 minutes. The shortest interview was with Richard Morgan and the longest with David Stevens; however, regardless of the length, the quality of all interviews was notable. None of the principals rushed through the questioning, and all seemed eager to share their stories about what was transpiring in their schools and how they responded to struggling learners.

8. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed within 48 hours of the session. However, once the interview was completed, it actually took about six days to get the audio transcribed through a company named Casting Words.

9. Participants were given an opportunity to review transcripts of the completed interviews. Both David Stevens and Daniel Washington requested to view the transcripts and were provided the unedited text in its entirety; however, neither had follow up questions or needed any clarification.

10. The researcher coded the data for emergent themes.
Despite the researcher’s early concerns that he might have to stray from the protocol in some unforeseeable situations, following the interview protocol (see Appendix C) proved to be successful in conducting the study.

*Interview Questions Script*

Moustakas (1994) acknowledged that a “general interview guide, or topical guide, is used…with broad questions to facilitate the obtaining of rich, vital, substantive descriptions of the researcher’s experience of the phenomenon” (p. 116). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) differentiated the structured interview, where each participant is asked the same series of questions, from a semi-structured method that “allows the conversation to flow more naturally, making room for the conversation to go in unexpected direction” (p. 102).

Therefore, in the current study, the researcher created and employed a uniformed interview script to ensure that all of the high school principals responded to similar questions through a semi-structured interview (Weiss, 1994) that also allowed for unique follow-up questions as warranted. The specific questions asked in the current study’s interview script are outlined in Appendix D.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the aspect of qualitative research that most clearly distinguishes it from other traditions of research (Maxwell, 1996). That is, a major component of conducting qualitative research is that data are analyzed continually during the study, from conceptualization through the entire data collection and into the interpretation and writing phases (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The researcher should reduce and condense data to seek
meaning, beginning at the start of the study and continuing throughout the data collection process.

In qualitative research, coding serves to organize the data and rearrange it into categories that facilitate the comparison of data within and between these categories, thus aiding the development of theoretical concepts (Strauss, 1987). These codes or categories emerge generally from the data, beginning with the field interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Sipe and Ghiso (2004) noted that “all coding is a judgment call” since we inevitably bring “our subjectivities, our personalities, our predispositions, and our quirks” (pp. 482-483) to the process. Coding allows the researcher to manage data by labeling, storing, and retrieving it for future analysis, according to the defined categories. Themes can be developed from the participants’ data, and rich, thick descriptions can be created by coding; Saldana (2009) provided an example in noting that “the word ‘security’ can be a code, though ‘false sense of security’ would act as the theme” (Saldana, 2009, p. 13).

In the current study, data analysis included reading the interview transcripts, transcribing them, and coding the data gathered into categories of themes. More specifically, in the data analysis phase, the researcher followed the six-step process as outlined by Creswell (1998), which included:

1. Organizing and preparing data.
2. Carefully reading and transcribing the data.
3. Using coding to design a detailed analysis of the information.
4. Generating a description of the findings by themes.
5. Representing the descriptions in a narrative and visuals.
6. Analysis to make meaning of the data.

The goal of the data analysis process was to describe lived experiences and supplement existing research regarding the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning, with particular regard to how the extent of their understanding of RTI and special education eligibility are factors influencing how they approach these students. As such, the researcher followed Creswell’s (2007) suggestion and conducted the current study’s phenomenological data analysis by “going through the data (e.g., interview transcriptions) and highlight[ing] significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 61). Additionally, the researcher used a combination of *in-vivo coding*, taking direct quotes from the participants, and *descriptive coding*, using one word to describe the entire quote, as techniques to analyze the data and produce themes (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2009).

**Research Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness**

Validity, reliability, and trustworthiness are essential components to assure that data collected are as exact as possible (Creswell, 2003). In qualitative research, internal validity is a goal rather than a product (Maxwell, 1996), and defines the congruency of the researcher's findings with reality. Reliability, on the other hand, is the researcher's interpretation of the participant's perceptions or understanding of the topic of interest (Merriam, 2002), and “is confirmed by determining if the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). While some have argued that "qualitative research should be judged as credible and confirmable as opposed to valid and reliable" (Merriam, 1988, p. 85), still, the researcher
sought to make the current study valid and reliable, so that other investigators could feel comfortable using the findings as a reputable source.

With regard to trustworthiness of the current study and its findings, the researcher endeavored to counter any issues of trustworthiness by employing triangulation and seeking the help of peer reviewers. *Triangulation* has been described as the utilization of various sources to provide evidence that confirms a theme or perspective (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). With the use of six high school principals and data from various sources to validate the findings, triangulation in the current study was strengthened. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined the peer review process as an external check of the research, usually done by a peer of the researcher who works to delve deeply into the researcher’s intentions by asking tough questions about the research, its interpretations, and methods. Two fellow researchers and colleagues acted as peer-reviewers of this study. In addition to triangulation as a tool for increasing trustworthiness, *bracketing* is a technique in which the researcher sets aside, as much as possible, all preconceived notions and experiences so the thoughts and stories of the participants can be best understood (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing is essential for validity because it “allows the researcher to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2007, pp. 59-60).

**Limitations of the Study**

As a relatively small, phenomenological case study, there were limitations to this research. First, as a study of only six high school principals who worked in one school system, the restricted demographic area limited this study in part, thus the results should not
be generalized outside of the sample area. Second, using the phenomenological framework for this study also had its challenges and limitations. According to Moran (2000), phenomenological researchers have been:

extraordinarily diverse in their interests, in their interpretation of the central issues of phenomenology, in their application of what they understood to be the phenomenological method, and in their development of what they took to be the phenomenological programme for the future of philosophy. (p. 3)

Hence, such variety in how researchers interpret phenomena often leads to ambiguity in its application, making it another limitation of the current study. To counter the potential ambiguity, the researcher adopted the philosophy of Moustakas (1994), who suggested that “phenomenology should not focus so much on the researcher’s interpretation, but on the investigator taking a fresh perspective of the phenomenon” (p. 41).

Thirdly, the researcher cannot conclude anything about gender and RTI since the entire sample was composed of males.

**Researcher Subjectivity**

This researcher has experience as a middle and high school special education teacher and intervention coach. As a high school administrator who has encountered the high school principals’ dilemma on how to respond to struggling learners, the current researcher was convinced that it is an issue significant enough to require an in-depth study. At the time of the study and dissertation, the researcher was working to support the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) in all of the school system’s schools by working with teachers and specialists at elementary, middle, and high school levels.
Due to his background, the challenge was for the researcher to subjectively analyze the data without prejudice or bias (Merriam, 2002). Moustakas (1994) claimed that researchers who conduct phenomenological case studies are always in the process of making judgments about the significance of the data collected. For this reason, a key determinant of the quality of case study research is the quality of the insights and thinking brought to bear by the particular researcher (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). To address this, Bogden and Biklen (2007) emphasized the importance of a researcher recognizing personal perspectives and biases, similar to Husserl’s (1931) indication that researchers should bracket “personal assumptions about reality of the world and focus instead on how elements of subjective experience both limit and guide our inferences about what we perceive” (Husserl, 1931, p. 26). In doing so, the researcher works to acknowledge his own personal perspectives by bracketing his or her personal experiences in an effort to understand the feelings described by the participants (Creswell, 2007).

Harding (2004) also urged researchers to practice strong objectivity and bracketing by asking the following questions:

1. How do my values, attitudes, and beliefs factor into my research process? Do I ask questions from my own perspective regardless of others?
2. How does my own agenda and position shape not only what I ask but also what I find?
3. How does my research standpoint (the attitudes and values I bring to the interview situation) influence how I gather, analyze, and interpret the data? From whose perspective am I conducting the research? (p. 129)
Simply put, it is important that the researcher take his own subjectivity seriously, be actively prepared to listen to the participants, and dismiss any personal agenda in response to the findings within the interview and research processes.

Notably, the current study was grounded in a social constructivist lens. *Social constructivism* expresses the idea that mental structures and how the mind operates are constructed by the mind rather than acquired in a passive fashion (Burman, 2007). Through the social constructivist lens, people look for meaning in the world wherein they reside and earn their livelihood, with varied results and multiple interpretations (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Mertens, 1998). Accordingly, then, different individuals take varied paths resulting in diverse states. Since the goal of the researcher in the current study was to take the lived experiences of a group of principals and help construct meaning and implications to inform the research questions, the constructivist perspective was an ideal technique because it coincides with the phenomenological approach in which individuals describe their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Eichelberger (1989) described the methodological work of the constructivist researcher as follows:

They want to know what meaning people attribute to activities… and how that relates to their behavior. These researchers are much clearer about the fact that they participants who provided the data in the study. They often carry out their research much as anthropologists do in their studies of culture. They do a great deal of observation, read documents produced by members of the groups being studied, do extensive formal and informal interviewing, and develop classifications and descriptions that represent the beliefs of the various groups. (p. 9)
In other words, constructivists believe that knowledge is constructed personally and socially based upon experiences. By contrast, Noddings (1990) asked, “What has the assumption to do with judging the status of general knowledge claim? How do we judge when one knows and when s/he does not?” (p. 11). The phenomenon being addressed in the current study, the role of the high school principal and their response to struggling learners, explored the principal’s ideas of how his or her experiences have constructed meanings, especially as it pertains to the elements of Response to Intervention (RTI) and special education eligibility. Thus, in order to make sense of this phenomenon, the six principals were interviewed in a manner that promotes his or her constructions of the meaning of their situation.

**Chapter Summary**

The preceding chapter outlined the phenomenological case study methodology used in the current study, including the design, sampling, data collection, and data analysis processes. The findings of this phenomenological study are presented in Chapter Four.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of the current study was to explore high school principals’ response to struggling learners and to assess how the extent of their understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI) and special education eligibility criteria influences the way they address student learning needs. To gain insight into this phenomenon, the researcher conducted interviews with current high school principals. Using the lens of phenomenology, which focuses on the lived experience of the participants (Creswell, 2003; Moustakas, 1994), the essence of each participant’s story endured while also allowing for a cross-case analysis that enabled the researcher to delve into the phenomenon more deeply. Chapter Four presents the findings of six cases developed as part of this phenomenological case study.

Interview Analysis

The researcher followed Creswell’s (2007) recommendation to conduct phenomenological data analysis by “going through the interview transcriptions and highlighting significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 61). Additionally, as discussed earlier, the researcher used a combination of in-vivo coding (taking direct quotes from the participants) and descriptive coding (using one-word to describe the quote) as a technique to analyze the data and produce themes (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2009). Codes developed as they emerged from the data and were continually analyzed.

Specifically, in organizing and analyzing the data gleaned from the phenomenological data collection process, participant responses were grouped into three narrative types – textural, structural, and textural-structural – that, together, helped the researcher assign
meaning to the principals’ stories to inform the overall research queries regarding how they identify and assist struggling learners. The textural narrative of an experience includes “the whole account of an issue, problem, situation, or experience … a clear portrait of what is” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 60, emphasis added). The interviews in the current study provided extensive textural narratives that the researcher was able to then use to build a structural narrative to evince how the phenomenon was experienced, with the qualities, feelings, thoughts, and conditions that underlie and form its essence (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, integrating the textural and structural descriptions provided the researcher with a textural-structural narrative, a “synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 144) to form a universal description that represented the group as a whole.

To increase reliability and validity of the data, the researcher utilized an interview script to ensure that all of the high school principals responded to similar questions through a semi-structured interview (Weiss, 1994). Unlike a structured interview where each participant responds to the same series of questions, the semi-structured interview method used “allow[ed] the conversation to flow more naturally, making room for the conversation to go in unexpected direction” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 102). The results of the current study demonstrate clearly that the semi-structured method permitted responses that were not anticipated. Although the participants’ responses were analyzed collectively, it must be noted that, since case studies are not necessarily generalizable due to the relatively small sample size, the data collected in this study should not be considered representative of some larger populations (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001).
The objective of the interviews was to gather samples of the participants’ responses to help answer this study’s single research question and three sub-questions:

1. What is the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning? To what extent is this a systematic approach?
   a. To what extent is the high school principal knowledgeable of the criteria for determining special education eligibility?
   b. To what extent is the high school principal understanding about Response to Intervention (RTI)?
   c. What additional and/or complimentary techniques or approaches does the high school principal use to address the needs of struggling learners?

The six participants – Gary, William, Arthur, Richard, David, and Daniel – were identified for this research study based on their varying levels of experience as high school principals. The gender, age, ethnicity, and races of the principals were not factors in their selection or analysis, and the cases were analyzed collectively.

Gary, William, and Arthur both had additional experience as middle school principals but, for the purposes of this study, the focus was on their experience as high school principals working with struggling students. David was completing his first year as a high school principal, while Gary and Daniel had been principals for six years, providing a good range of participant experience.

The interviews were conducted and concluded within a two-month period. All of the participants gave explicit permission to have their responses audio-recorded, and the audio files were kept confidential, housed in a secure place, and destroyed upon completion of the
study. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed using a company named CastingWords, again with the participants’ permission. The identities of the six principals were kept anonymous by using pseudonyms, and the researcher also did not include any information in the transcribed responses that might infer identity.

Principal Background and Educational Experience

Principal Case #1: Gary Donovan

Gary had been principal at his current high school for six years at the time of the study, though he had worked in education for a total of 29 years. He was a Social Studies teacher and a Health and Physical Education teacher for nine years before earning his Master’s degree in Administration, at which point he held his first middle school assistant principal position for two years. Additionally, Gary was an elementary school principal for 10 years and a middle school principal for four years. When considering his principal experience at the elementary, middle, and high school levels combined, Gary had the most experience of all the principals that participated in the study.

Principal Case #2: Will Miller

Will had been a high school principal for about two and a half years, all of which was served at his current school. At the time of the study, though, Will was in his 17th year in education. He had been a high school business-marketing teacher at a large, comprehensive magnet high school. He also spent five years as a high school teacher, and then five years as a high school assistant principal. Prior to returning to serve as a high school principal, Will served five years as a middle school principal.
**Principal Case #3: Arthur Mobley**

Arthur was in his second year as a high school principal and 17th year in education when the study was conducted. He began as a sixth grade English teacher with an in-class resource – a special education teacher paired with a general education teacher— for academic English and Honors English. Arthur was a middle school assistant principal for four years prior to attaining a high school assistant principalship.

**Principal Case #4: Richard Morgan**

Richard had a total of 33 years in education. He began his educational career as a music teacher for 17 years. After teaching, he became a high school assistant principal and then moved on to a role as assistant principal of a middle school. Afterwards, he earned a position as a high school principal.

**Principal Case #5: David Stevens**

David had just completed his first year as a high school principal when participating in the study. He began teaching in the early 1990s as a trade and technology teacher, and was a middle school teacher for five years before transitioning to become a high school teacher as he most wanted. Then, after completing a Master's in School Administration and conducting a full-time internship at a high school, David served as an assistant principal at a high school for seven years.

**Principal Case #6: Daniel Washington**

Daniel had been the principal in his current school for about a year and a half when he participated in the study, though he was completing his 23rd year in education. Daniel began his educational career working as a GED instructor, which he did for four years. He
also worked as an eighth-grade math teacher at an alternative school for three years until he got an opportunity to teach math at the community college. At the community college, he taught various levels of mathematics, held a position as department chair, and acted as a college liaison. The college liaison position helped him design and create an early college high school, where he later served as high school principal for five years before starting at the school where he worked at the time of the study.

**Participant Responses**

*Factors Causing Students to Struggle*

In order to discuss aptly the issues that surround meeting student learning needs, it was important to first look at the factors that might cause students to struggle. All of the participants addressed the topic directly.

Gary and Arthur both agreed that students struggle in school due to various factors, many of which are not necessarily just about the student but include certain external causes. Gary pointed out that reasons why a student failed ranged from “an undiagnosed disability, to lack of motivation, to a broken home where they don't feel loved and secure, or to not having role models.” As evidence of factors unrelated to the student’s abilities, he noted that he has had many students who were talented but still dropped out of school. Will and Richard added to Gary’s notion of role models having great influence, and both emphasized the relationship dynamic between the student and the teacher as paramount. Will added that he often received feedback from high school students such as, “That teacher doesn't like me and I don't like the teacher, so I'm not going to go to class,” adding, “The relationship piece between teachers and high school kids…is huge.”
Arthur noted that it is “not always skill-based, why a kid struggles – a lot of times, it could be mental health, it could be depression, or it could be a lot of other reasons.” He went on to share that helping struggling learners is a great challenge, especially when the student has failed and repeated grades many times or has sporadic attendance or behavioral issues:

…but then there's the student who's 17 or 18 years old, still a freshman or a sophomore. They're a very different type of student. Some of them are major behavior problems, some of them are not, they just skip or they cut school. There's no consequence you can give them. You can't take them to court, you can't hold a grade over their head because they really don't care, or at least they don't present like they care. That's a very different student to deal with, and I think you keep trying.

Thus, despite many barriers, Arthur acknowledged that some students drove him to further action and incited him, as principal, to continue trying to help them.

An unanticipated idea touted among some of the principals was not only the idea that minority students predominantly underachieve, but also the recognition that there may be social or school structures and staff beliefs that actually encourage this trend. David and Daniel both discussed race as a factor in why students fail and, notably, they were the only two principals that specifically did so. David’s experience taught him that the reason students fail is not just about the particulars of why the failure occurred; instead, he believed that society has systematically, either directly or indirectly, encouraged their failure, commenting, “We have students that fail almost because they're destined to fail.” Adding to this, Daniel noted:
If you dig deeper in the data, I think you will find that most of the students who are failing are minority students. It seems to be the reoccurring cultural issue. There's [a] disconnect between teachers and students, mainly teachers and minority students. This sense or theory or belief subconsciously that one size fits all is just not working for a select group of students, and I'm mainly talking about the African-American males who are at the top of that list, and Hispanic students. Huge disconnect there.

In this statement, Daniel revealed the limited techniques of some teachers towards assisting struggling learners, particularly minority students. Specifically, these comments point to the cultural disconnect that can occur between the teacher and students from racial/ethnic minority groups, often resulting in an inadequate ability to build a beneficial academic relationship that effectively meets the student’s learning needs (Artiles et al., 2010; Cartledge & Dukes, 2009; Klingner et al., 2005; Patton, 1998).

Approaches to Student Learning Needs

When trying to gauge the high school principal’s goal in helping students who are not learning, it was essential to gather their thoughts and lived experiences about learning and teaching. More specifically, the primary research question focused on gleaning whether there was any systematic approach to addressing the students’ learning difficulties:

1. What is the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning? To what extent is this a systematic approach?

All of the study participants agreed that every student can learn, though they had various perspectives on what this meant and how it might look in their particular school building. For example, Gary wanted to make learning a reality for all students, but he
admitted that “the mission statements that we've had in this building certainly have phrases that allude ‘that all students can learn.’” and pondered if it was so in actual practice. Will emphasized that, as the principal, it was his job to encourage his school to meet every student where they are: “All those students are going to be very different, but every student has the ability. I also would say every student wants to learn.” Arthur stressed, “All students can learn, have a right to learn, and it's our responsibility as a school to ensure that they learn, even though that might take different resources, supports, and those kinds of things.”

Daniel’s thoughts aligned with Arthur’s in his assertion that “it's one thing to believe all students can learn, then another thing to have people within a school or an educational organization put things in place to assure that all students can learn.” Comparably, David took the viewpoint that required a more in-depth look at how our actions and environment influence the idea that all students can learn. His lived experiences, in particular, involved being from the northern part of the United States where challenges were different, as he noted:

My move here to North Carolina was a wakeup call, because I came into the South, vestiges of racial discrimination, cultural discrimination, systems and structures in place to keep those who were in control in control, and those who are not in control in balance, perpetuating deficits and troubling learners.

Thus, overall, the high school principals participating in the study had varied views about the degree to which their response to struggling students was supported by systematic structures or protocols.
Understanding of Special Education Eligibility Determination Criteria

The current study helped the researcher better understand the extent to which high school principals are knowledgeable about the criteria for special education eligibility determination, through the participants’ answers to the first research sub-question:

1a. To what extent is the high school principal knowledgeable of the criteria for determining special education eligibility?

The results of the study indicate that the participants had a range of understanding regarding how students are found eligible for special education services.

Formal assessments. Gary expressed that, in his school system, students who have a 15-point discrepancy “between their God given abilities and their performance level” often are found eligible for special education. He noted that a psychologist provided educational and psychological testing to identify any such discrepancy, stating that this method of eligibility “is pretty cut and dry, pretty basic, when it comes down to diagnosing some disabilities,” since a mathematical formula is used to assess students. Thus, Gary’s interpretation of how students are identified was based in part on eligibility requirements for specific learning disabilities being determined by calculated assessment. Gary is referencing the use of the fifteen-point discrepancy currently allowable by law. However, he also noted the fact that an Individual Education Program (IEP) team, comprised of the student’s parents as well as “school personnel, psychologist, a regular educator that has the kid in class, [and] an administrator, which is called the LEA (local education agency)” worked together to make “a team decision based on the data that's present.”
In regards to finding a student eligible for special education, David shared a similar experience as Gary, commenting:

We would test the student and make a decision based on the results of the testing. Very rarely did we get to the point where we tested a student and then failed to find them eligible. …they were found eligible because we had done, I guess, what you would call due diligence, early on, to say, ‘OK this is something that has merit and we're pursuing it as such.’

The use of formal assessments to determine special education eligibility, then, was common among the principals participating in the current study.

**Parental involvement.** Unlike Gary and David, Will did not focus on the mechanics of how a student becomes eligible, but instead revealed how the special education determination process often leads to students getting services without necessarily needing them:

I've certainly seen situations where a very vigorous parent is able to get services for their student to almost give them an advantage. I have certainly seen situations where they were primarily driven by non-academic behaviors that caused students to be academically deficient.

In addition, Will spoke about having experience with students who were found eligible for special education services but ultimately found it detrimental to their overall learning.

Arthur, who admitted that he was “not a specialist in this,” responded similarly to Will in noting that the determination process for special education eligibility often begins with the parent calling or emailing the teacher or school, stating something like, “Hey, I'm
really concerned. I've always kind of wondered about this, whether or not my child might have a learning disability." Notably, Arthur also stressed that finding a student eligible in high school should be a rare case:

I think the biggest thing, we have a surprising number of new referrals at the high school. I think that's what surprises me. I just would've thought that if a student that we end up identifying as special education has been in the system elementary and middle, if we're noticing it, why had it not been picked up in the past?

Richard expounded on Arthur’s assertion that the numbers of students being found eligible for special education in high school is troublesome and leads to questions about the efficacy of the process. He remarked, “Some students will slip through the cracks sometime and get to the high school, and we may have to test students.”

Daniel’s input comprised a bit of each of the aforementioned factors discussed by the other principals. He expressed that eligibility determination starts with a conversation about a student’s struggles, mainly between the regular education teacher and the special education teacher, but then “could lead to other things, like testing and stuff like that. All of a sudden, a student generates either a 504 (Section 504 protects students who have any physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, such as hearing, seeing, speaking, thinking, walking, breathing, learning, and working) or an IEP. That's normal process.”

**Development and implementation of an IEP.** To explore further details about the high school principal’s understanding of how a student becomes eligible for special education, the researcher sought to understand the participants’ lived experience of actually
creating an Individual Education Program (IEP) for a student. With regard to developing an IEP for a particular student, Gary expressed what the actual IEP conversation might look like from his experience, remarking, “It's the job of the LEA [local education agency] to possibly stop the conversation and say, ‘Hold it. We can't go down that road. This is the wrong conversation.’” He also addressed the constant struggle to keep the conversation targeted within an IEP meeting:

The dance between what the special education teachers seeking for this child, and what the regular education [teacher] feels comfortable and confident. The parent may request something that's completely off the mark, and asking for extra services that certainly don't need to be provided, because it's affiliated with the disability. Those are real basic key things that get missed.

Gary’s comments pointed to the discrepancy between the parents’ wants, the presumptions about the student’s abilities or disabilities, and the student’s actual needs, as issues that affect the IEP development.

Will and Richard’s experience pertaining to the implementation of an IEP aligned, as they both shared that students often use the accommodations and modifications outlined in the IEP appropriately. Like Gary, Will mentioned that his district had made a more concerted effort to assist with the difficult conversations that special education teachers and teams need to have with parents of his students:

It is leveling the playing field for them, providing them the support they need. I know that many of those students, when I sit in IEP meetings. These kids are putting the time in outside of school. The parents are doing what they can do to support them.
Without the support that they do have in place, they probably would not be nearly as successful.

As a result of this teamed approach between teachers, students, and parents, Will felt good overall with the services provided and what took place in the IEP meetings at his school.

Conversely, Arthur and Daniel expressed more caution than Will and Richard about the IEP and its implementation. Arthur commented:

The last few years have become more about using the tools in the system than it is about looking at the kid, the goals, and the strategies. I feel like my role is always to bring data to the table, because I feel like that's where, a lot of times, we're lacking.

He added, “The easy part of the process tends to be [determining] ‘Are they eligible or not?’ The difficult part becomes, ‘What exactly does this student need?’” Similarly, Daniel expressed clear doubts regarding the effectiveness of the IEP and whether it actually works well for students:

Do I think special education services make a significant difference in closing gaps? No, I do not. It's not because educators are not giving it their all. It's too overwhelming. The process to create this document allows for improvement, which is always good. My problem is that after everybody leaves the room, then it's more about compliance, monitoring, checks and stuff like that. Once the kid is immersed back into the population, they get lost mainly in large settings.

Thus, the comments of Arthur and Daniel pointed directly to the inherent problem of effectively implementing any IEP plan that has been developed.
Based on his observations as a new principal at a high school, David was unsure exactly how special education services and the IEPs were helping students; he conceded, “The purest answer is that I don't yet know, because I know that we are not doing things well enough.” It should also be noted that, prior to his current position, David had come from a school that practiced an in-class resource model, also known as an inclusion model, in which a regular education and special education teacher worked together as a team to address the learning needs of all students. Hence, he was critical of his current school’s lack of such a model, stating, “In our inclusion model, it would appear that we are barely maintaining a compliant level of inclusion.”

*Understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI)*

In the interviews conducted for the current study, the participants also addressed how much they knew about Response to Intervention (RTI) as an approach to aiding struggling students, as queried in the following research question:

1b. To what extent is the high school principal understanding about Response to Intervention (RTI)?

Overall, all of the high school principals participating in the study had some understanding of RTI, though to varying extents.

**Defining RTI.** Gary understood that “Response to Intervention or response to learning is how you respond when students are not learning.” He added that such responsiveness has less to do with what the students will do, and is instead more about how adults will respond to a student who is failing a particular subject. In essence, Gary asserted that it is related to a school’s systems and structures, and to being proactive, claiming, “Find
the child before it becomes a problem, by your own data research. You're reaching out to the kid, before he's reached out to you. It's building that kind of culture.”

Though his interpretation was similar to Gary’s, David was able to provide more specifics about RTI:

I am now seeing RTI as to say that we can avoid over identification, which is a case that we have here now, where I currently work and live. We can avoid over identification, because what's good for everybody is good for one. What's good for one is good for everybody, in terms of RTI.

David also spoke of the importance of having a strong Tier I within the RTI framework, which, as discussed in Chapter Two, includes evidence-based reading instruction and triannual screening assessments for all students, in order to identify whether students are meeting established core curriculum standards (Vaughn et al., 2007). David stated, “In that model, we should have a very robust series or system and structure of interventions that we implement that provides support for all. If we do what's good for all, it's good for one.”

David, then, seemed to have some understanding of RTI.

When asked to define RTI, Daniel smiled and quickly responded, “The first question I would ask you, though, is this Response to Intervention or Response to Instruction?” His response informed the researcher of Daniel’s comprehensive understanding that RTI can be both Response to Intervention and Response to Instruction. As did David, Daniel showed that he understood Tier I of RTI, but he displayed further understanding in also alluding to Tier II, which is characterized by a specific educational plan for the student along with more frequent and more targeted interventions, monitored to track the student’s response and
progress (Batsche et al., 2006). More specifically, Daniel provided an astute comment suggesting the importance of both Tier I and Tier II in successful RTI:

If you are responding to core instruction and you're paying attention to what core instruction looks like – student engagement, student learning, teaching and learning – then one hand washes the other and you should be able to better align interventions… Response to Interventions should be more adequate because you know the core instruction is where it needs to be… when so much emphasis is put on intervention and you don't pay attention to the instruction, then you're just shooting in the dark with your intervention.

Thus, Daniel’s statements indicated his comprehension of RTI as a framework requiring a combination of Tier I’s instructional focus with Tier II’s frequent interventions.

Like Daniel, Will was able to provide an apt description of RTI, and he also addressed the tiers of service:

What I've learned about that as a structured model looks at just, again, the level of tiers of service that a total student population may fall within, in that a bulk of the intervention around the RTI model. It falls on the shoulders of the classroom teacher. He also added that RTI should involve daily instruction that is best suited to all students’ needs, which he referred to as differentiation. Richard’s interpretation of RTI was similar, as he also explained that RTI involved tiers of service based on data. Additionally, Richard spoke of his school’s use of a “pyramid of intervention” to guide this work.

When the researcher asked Arthur to define RTI, he responded by noting that it encompassed much of what was discussed during the interview:
Response to intervention or instruction is looking at academic crutches, pulling that data. It's looking at it on the individual student level—what additional accommodations we might need to help a kid. It's pulling in specialists [such as psychologists] for accountability so we can determine if there's some psychological issues. To me, that's what it is, we focus on core instruction, and I think we're good at that here. We can get better, but we need to ensure the first day's good core instruction, and then for those students who aren't responding to that core instruction, what do we need to do differently? It's find the kids that are struggling, and what are you going to do to help them?

Arthur’s input, along with that of the other participating high school principals, indicated that they all had a sound understanding of RTI and the nuances that can differentiate the appropriate actions and instructional methods needed for each individual student.

**Implementing RTI.** The principals also addressed the effectiveness of implementing RTI. Daniel stated that if you asked any of his teachers to define “RTI,” they would understand what it means, but would also express the fact that it is not necessarily about instituting a specific intervention for any certain student:

…when you mention RTI, our teachers know somebody is doing something to try to help a kid, whatever that may be. It might be something as a simple phone call home on the week. It may be putting the kid out of core instruction and giving them some time to catch up in another environment. I want to emphasize that, yes, we have this whole list of interventions and things that we try, but we're very careful to make sure
that we're not just saying, ‘This worked for Mr. Walker's son. We're going to try it with Mr. Washington.’

In a similar thread with Daniel, Arthur felt like he and his staff were moving toward doing all they could to help students who struggle:

I think the one challenge we still have as high school principals is dealing with everything that we deal with at the building level. Such things as getting clear training, and staff development, and understanding as to what exactly we should be doing with Response to Instruction, and what are those research-based best practices?

Hence, both Daniel and Arthur shared questions regarding how best to implement RTI.

David sought to take advantage of being a new principal as an opportunity to focus on RTI as one of his primary tools for facilitating better learning in his school:

In essence, what is good for many is also good for an individual. I have now, as of recently, begun to see the pyramid of intervention differently as I'm now a school principal because I can, in essence, move chess pieces and make movement within the school, in a way that I could not completely do as an assistant principal.

Just as David noted the increased influence he had as a principal, Gary highlighted the fact that he had to make difficult decisions to help all students, which required the support of his staff. His responsibilities included dividing resources, managing allotments of teachers, and allocating money in various ways in order to create systems and structures that can respond better for his students. Gary described the way he tried one systematic method for some time and then, with staff support and based on data, decided to implement another structure that more directly responds to struggling students:
We have lunch…that is divided and creates 30 minutes within a day to respond better to students who are struggling. The next year we moved away from this lunch model to a flex period, because we believe that's better for the students. It's more of a direct response to students that are not learning. That includes the entire faculty, when you start building systems and structures.

In Gary’s RTI implementation model, he instituted an established time each day intended for focused work with struggling students.

Techniques Used to Meet the Needs of Struggling Learners

The current study also provided insights into the kinds of techniques that high school principals use to assist struggling students, as posed in the final research question:

1c. What additional and/or complimentary techniques or approaches does the high school principal use to address the needs of struggling learners?

For example, when Gary was asked how he was able to meet the needs of struggling learners, he had a distinctly pensive demeanor as he shared:

Some of my failures have been in this area… I used to think that I could run a school with 2,200 kids and still coordinate the intervention. I've learned that this now has to be more of a systematic approach, where the whole school has to buy in. We set time aside to talk about those children. If one intervention doesn't work, we're quick to transition to something else.

Gary, then, accepted ownership of the situation in trying to help students who are not learning, and implied that the responsibility extended to all of the school.
Will and Richard responded by expressing their focus on helping staff maximize student engagement in the class. Will stated:

We have teachers in the building that could probably teach a class on the history of cardboard boxes and yet any kid in the building would not miss that class. Because of the relationship that that teacher had, somehow that teacher finds a way to make lessons engaging and connect the kids. How do we convince teachers to be a certain type of teacher so that they can engage with all kids?

Such student engagement relies heavily on the ability of the teacher to maintain a high level of interest in the topic, the instructional methods, or learning in general.

Arthur’s approach was especially different from the other participants. He wanted to find a programmatic method to help meet the needs of struggling students based on a gap in their skills, by specifically using an online reading program. He expressed the shift he was trying to emphasize with his staff and students, stating, "I've got you [students] for four years and…in that time I don't want you to just get through. I want you to improve your reading skills and improve your math skills" In addition, Arthur created reading classes for students who came to him with skills below grade level, in order to help them succeed.

David reported utilizing a plethora of ways to intervene with students who, based on data, were known to have many at-risk indicators. Out of the four core periods in the schedule of students, he instituted a “fifth block” of intervention time designed to benefit students who are failing due to an achievement gap:

By taking a group of students that could go either way: one day failing or one day they could be successful, I'm trying to do everything I can to push them up. I use that
analogy in terms of not pushing them up, a pyramid of intervention, but I'm trying to push them up to the top of our tiers of students in success.

In addition, this intervention time worked to help those students who might be failing based on lack of motivation.

Though Daniel’s interview encompassed much of what the other principals stated, his response stood out from the others because he emphatically maintained that he had to do whatever needed to reach students; he stated, “My role is to make sure we do everything without breaking any laws to get a kid to the finish line. That's putting it in layman's terms.”

For Daniel, then one of the biggest techniques used to meet the needs of struggling learners was direct, intentional, and persistent principal action.

*Participation in Professional Development*

Some of the questions in the interviews were asked in order to determine if principals took part in any specific professional development that has aided in their understanding of issues related to assisting struggling learners, specifically in topics related to special education and RTI implementation. Moreover, these questions were meant to ascertain if the principals felt the need for any such professional development activities.

*Training in special education policies and procedures.* In addressing professional development for special education policies and procedures, Daniel acknowledged that, as an administrator, one usually first learns about special education through college courses; however, he pointed out, once in the role of a principal, one’s perspective becomes more global. As an administrator, though, he noted the fact that he has to seek out, on his own, any professional development he might want; he stated, “Unless you're actively out there just
participating in professional development, it just doesn't come knocking at your door. It's not routine for principals or administrators to sit around and talk about special education.” Daniel therefore found the best way to keep abreast of special education policies and procedures was to maintain open communication with the special education expert within his school building, and Gary conveyed the same experience:

You learn from other people's mistakes and errors, to hiring rock solid special education people who know what to do, and have an outstanding department chair who know the ins and the outs of special education… I don't have to do my job and their job. I'm virtually in daily contact with our department chair and talking about specific cases… knowledge can be powerful when it comes to special education.

Both Daniel and Gary, then, relied heavily on the expertise of colleagues to help them stay abreast of developments in special education.

Will, however, shared that he had been part of at least two sessions where someone from the special education district office provided training for the administration team, specifically on topics pertaining to behavior intervention plans and related disciplinary procedures surrounding special education. Similarly, Richard reported going through some training and was able to recall some specifics:

I've taken several courses that talk about the different special education issues, and they're not on the tip of my tongue. I have some certificates [laughs] that verify that. We've had workshops, especially from the state, on special education because of the numbers that we've had. We have a high referral rate, so we've done training
regarding interventions to be done before students have been referred. We've had the training on the referral process.

Thus, the responses from Will and Richard suggested that some high school principals do engage in professional development around special education.

Of the principals in the current study, David appeared to be the most adept in his knowledge of special education, which aligned with trainings he had attended. He stated:

I've had at least two professional development trainings that have been how to be an LEA [local education agency]. These are eight-hour trainings condensed into a few hours. I've had arguably 10 hours of LEA training. I've had other meetings that are identified specifically as meetings that are related to exceptional children's issues. Those are all updates and things like that. Here, in my current environment I would say I've had a few hours here in this year in how we do things here in professional development.

In contrast to David’s relatively extensive experience, Arthur did not mention any particular training he had received around special education issues, policies, or procedures. Notably, however, he did have experience working as a content teacher in an in-class resource setting where he was paired with a special education teacher, and he may have had some informal training in that environment.

**Training in the implementation of RTI.** With regard to training in implementing Response to Intervention (RTI), David noted his participation in an array of professional development that worked to link both special education and RTI. He further shared that he had completed regional training that “focused on alternatives to discrepancy and the
identification of students using this multi-tiered systems of support in lieu of the historical exceptional children's identification model.” During his training, David was able to take part in “creating a consensus model for what would be the state challenges to moving to this model for this new type of discrepancy model of identification.” This training addressed the issue of whether or not such an RTI model would increase or decrease the number of students found eligible for special education. Arthur also reported going to one conference held by his district office, with a nationally-renowned keynote speaker, which he believed was the largest official professional development that he had ever attended.

Two of the principals in this study did not have any direct professional development in RTI, but expressed having been involved with some training that addressed quality instruction and, arguably, provided comparable knowledge. For instance, Gary did not highlight any specific RTI training that he attended, but he did respond to the question by discussing the professional development he had offered his staff at the building level:

We're losing a lot of our staff development time by the state mandates, and things like that, so it's becoming increasingly difficult, and with the inclement weather we've had recently, we've had it difficult even getting the time, but when we do we hold it sacred.

On the days he could, Gary reported that, based on his own education, experience, and practical knowledge, he trained staff on differentiation and examining what quality instruction – which he stressed is the basis for implementing any RTI model with fidelity – looks like in the classroom. Resembling Gary, Will did not share any specific aspects of professional development he had attended, though he was aware that ongoing information
about RTI was shared at the district’s monthly principal meeting. Will added that the bulk of information regarding RTI was provided to a specific staff member in his school whose main job responsibility was to aid in coordinating interventions. He admitted that he relied on the individual to share the information with him.

Similar to Will, Arthur also spoke about the conversation around RTI and intervention happening at the district level, noting, “There've been a couple mini presentations at principals meetings at the district level that we've gained some knowledge on.” In regard to these presentations, Arthur expressed his avid interest and overall enthusiasm for learning about interventions when he stated, “I'm one of those crazy folks who try to read all of the district newsletters, especially when the intervention newsletter comes out. I wade through that information and see what's there about Response to Instruction.” Additionally, Arthur claimed he kept in constant contact with his special education team and school-based RTI team to keep abreast of the latest updates.

Daniel’s response pointed to the value of a team-based approach to helping students. While he felt that his district office had done a great job sharing the concept of RTI and working with intervention coordinators at his school, Daniel believed strongly that a competent and caring team was needed for successful RTI. He noted as well that professional development could be the best and still not be implemented at the school level if he, as principal, failed to cultivate it in his staff. He added, “I’ve got to go back to having the right people in the right seat on my team within my school.”
General Embedded Themes

Generally, most principals in the current study recognized that a struggling learner is not necessarily a failed learner, though there was not necessarily a method to determine what worked and what did not. It was not a surprise that the principals who focused on student engagement had a more positive influence regarding their student’s ability to be academically successful. Also, there was a belief among the principals that all students can thrive, though staff’s actions may send the opposite message about all students being capable of learning.

The principals had some understanding of special education eligibility, though there seemed to be a commitment to completion of a process and compliance among them all, rather than a problem-solving approach. More specifically, most of the principals’ understanding regarding special education eligibility seemed to be the result of their participation in Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings. Practically all the participants shared that there were inconsistent opportunities for new learning and questioning of current understanding.

With regard to Response to Intervention, participants had reasonable understanding of how RTI serves as an eligibility method for specific learning disabilities, though David and Gary held the most factual understanding. Overall, three major themes emerged from the data:

1. Principals have reasonable understanding of RTI and special education eligibility.
2. Principals need more strategies for building a student-engaged environment for learning.
3. Principals are often unwilling agents in a school system where practices incite poor academic achievement for students, especially minority students.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter reviewed the collected data based on the study’s research question. Cases were presented and analyzed, using a cross-case analysis method for all six interviews. Based on the findings gleaned from the combination of in vivo and descriptive coding used, recurring emergent themes were noted. The final chapter presents the implications of these findings and themes, as well as offers recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Chapter Five provides a summary of the current study that includes a statement of the purpose, overview of the findings, and conclusions. This chapter begins with a review of the problem, the research questions, and data collection methods. The next section includes an interpretation of the findings, using a combination of research gleaned from the literature review and themes derived from the coding of data. Finally, this chapter offers implications for future research, with specific recommendations for addressing the problems raised by the research and data in this study.

One main research question and three subset questions framed this investigation:

1. What is the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning? To what extent is this a systematic approach?
   a. To what extent is the high school principal knowledgeable of the criteria for determining special education eligibility?
   b. To what extent is the high school principal understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI)?
   c. What additional and/or complimentary techniques or approaches does the high school principal use to address the needs of struggling learners?

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the high school principal’s approach to students who are struggling to learn, and how the extent of their understanding of special education eligibility and Response to Intervention (RTI) – two distinctly related processes – influences the way they address the learning needs of struggling students. As determined by
the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, “a local education agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation procedures” (IDEIA, 2004); this process has been referred to as RTI, and it represents a crucial shift in mindset regarding how students are identified as being in need of special education services.

A review of literature indicated that, due to a lack of RTI strategies, school officials often incorrectly identify students as needing the most restrictive label and special education placement, which research has often considered a “wait-to-fail” model. In this model, rather than delivering needed services to struggling learners as soon as their difficulties are evidenced, the student’s achievement gap is allowed to widen enough for them to qualify for special education services (Stage et al., 2003). Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) found that once students are determined eligible for special education services, they often still continue to fail academically because school officials never adequately determine the student’s true cognitive and/or behavioral issues. Moreover, Fuchs et al. (2003) and O’Conner (2007) asserted that effective RTI implementation should result in a decrease in the number of students being referred to and qualifying for special education.

Research has suggested that the high school principal has a major impact on student achievement in school, methods teachers use to address struggling students, and how students become eligible for special education services (Marzano & DuFour, 2011). To confirm these findings, in the current study, high school principals were interviewed in order to understand the extent of their understanding of special education eligibility determination and RTI procedures, as well as to assess how their degree of understanding influenced their ability to
make appropriate educational decisions to aid struggling students. To this end, the current research study utilized a multiple-case design involving six participating principals – Arthur, Daniel, David, Gary, Richard, and William – who were identified as participants based on their varying levels of experience working as a high school principal; the gender, age, ethnicity, and races of the principals were not factors in their selection. Since case studies are not necessarily generalizable due to the small sample size and because data were predominantly non-numerical (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001), data collected from this study cannot be viewed as representative of a larger population.

As the phenomenological approach deals with events and incidents that the researcher perceives as critical (Moustakas, 1994), a phenomenological case study design was chosen for the current study. Such an approach served as an especially ideal lens because it enabled description, rather than explanation, of the phenomenon in question; additionally, it allowed the researcher to begin without hypotheses or preconceptions, so as to strictly ascertain how people think and feel (Husserl, 1970). In particular, phenomenological methods proved to be most effective for this study because they permitted the researcher to explore the lived experiences of how high school principals have responded to struggling learners.

This study utilized qualitative methods and data that provided contextualized research on special education law and practice and the RTI framework. Data were garnered utilizing existing research on federal special education laws and RTI practices, as well as in-depth, audio-recorded interviews that gleaned principals’ understanding of and perspectives on these concepts as tools for assisting struggling learners.
Interpretation of Findings

In conducting this study, the researcher believed that increased understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI) methods, coupled with special education professional development, can ensure an appropriate eligibility determination within special education and, thus, accurately meet the needs of struggling learners. Accordingly, the findings of the current study suggest a myriad of ways that the high school principal might approach struggling learners. In particular, the three major themes that emerged were found to be intrinsically tied to the ways that high school principals worked to meet the needs of students who are not learning, and are noted below:

1. *Principals have some understanding about RTI and special education eligibility.*

   These principals are more familiar with the concepts associated with RTI rather than having a specific understanding of the processes involved in RTI. More specifically, while principals have a basic understanding of topics related to RTI, as gleaned from their own education, and though some may learn about developments in RTI and special education from district-level meetings or their faculty colleagues, many do not participate in structured professional development to hone their skills relative to RTI.

2. *Principals are in need of strategies to build an environment that promotes student engagement,* one in which teachers are able to maintain a high level of interest among students in the topic, the instructional methods, or learning in general. Also, in such an environment, principals themselves should focus on student needs to increase their overall engagement and academic success.
3. Principals are often unwilling agents in a school system where practices incite poor academic achievement for students, especially minority students, despite the fact that principals may recognize and fight to counteract such systemic issues.

**Emergent Themes and Implications for Practice**

*Theme 1: Principals have limited understanding of RTI and special education eligibility.*

Overall, the current study found that the principals in this study had limited understanding of the concepts of special education eligibility and RTI, though they believed in the importance of these frameworks in assuring quality instruction for all students. Rather than receiving explicitly impractical responses from the principals, which might have suggested lesser, even negligible understanding, the findings reveal responses of an analytical and accurate nature. The researcher therefore concluded that the principals were open to learning more about the concept of RTI, and willing to work toward stronger implementation of it in their schools. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that such limited understanding in principals has potential legal and ethical implications, as failure to correctly implement required procedures can result in due process hearings and possible litigation. To sum up the interpretation of the findings, the researcher described participants’ understanding in the areas as limited, and not at the level of an authority. The emerging theme aligned with the following research questions:

1a. To what extent is the high school principal knowledgeable of the criteria for determining special education eligibility?

1b. To what extent is the high school principal understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI)?
This theme was perhaps the most surprising aspect of the study.

First, it is arguably true that the principals, overall, could benefit from professional learning and more knowledge of special education eligibility and RTI. Second, such professional development opportunities would include learning the significance of how these processes influenced struggling learners. Instead, however, the interviews in the current study indicated that, among principals, a understanding of special education eligibility and RTI appeared to beget a focus on compliance and completion of a process, rather than the more effective and more needed problem-solving approach to maximizing the processes to the students’ utmost benefit.

For instance, from his experience as a high school principal, Will described how the process of special education may hinder a student’s academic growth. He also shared an example suggesting that a school focused on RTI may circumvent such concerns, specifically because school officials often erroneously deem students eligible for special education because they are unsure how else to approach their needs:

…yes, behaviors were impacting the student, but did those behaviors really correlate to a learning disability? I wonder that. I think with having been at the middle school level I also saw that there was some learned behavior. If I do this [behavior], as a student, then I know I'll get this support… This is part of the reason why I believe, and this is just my opinion, so many ninth grade students struggle in their ninth grade year. At the middle school level, sometimes you can be academically deficient and fail, but you still move from the sixth grade to the seventh grade to the eighth grade. All of a sudden, you get to the ninth grade, and it's based on credits. If you don't have
the credit, you don't become a tenth grader… I think there's also a small degree of learned behavior: ‘I have an IEP. I have a disability. I'm not passing my class, I'm not passing EOG [End of Grade tests], and I'm still getting promoted.’

Will’s response pointed to his awareness of a clear problem with over-referral to special education for students with behavioral issues, as well as their subsequent promotion through the grades when not academically ready (Guthrie & Springer, 2004; Moats, Kukics, & Pasternak, 2009).

When asked about professional learning opportunities regarding special education and eligibility determination, all participants explicitly conveyed that they had participated in some form of professional development, though it became apparent that their application of any significant understanding gained regarding guiding principles and standard procedures was limited. In other words, in their interviews, the principals expressed more of a personal viewpoint and approach surrounding the concepts of special education eligibility and RTI, rather than views based on specific protocols, regulations, and laws. Such an approach served only to compound the problem at hand, because students with cognitive issues had not received needed services as soon as their difficulties became evident. Many of these students eventually demonstrated an achievement gap, one of the qualifying factors for special education eligibility, which was wide enough for them to receive special education services. Unfortunately, however, even once the learning needs were realized, principals often found themselves unprepared to meet aptly these students’ individual instructional needs, because the gap had become too wide and virtually impossible to close. As Daniel asserted:
One of the reasons you had to try so many things before you actually hopefully get to the thing that does work is because you really didn't have a good understanding of what the core instruction looked like. You respond to intervention by first taking a look at instruction. They're not one and the same, which is a mistake I think we make sometimes.

Previous research also supports Daniel’s statement, especially the idea that any initial intervention for students is best realized and implemented by looking at core instructional methods (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007; Hill, King, Lemons, & Partanen, 2012). Core instruction, also termed classroom instruction, is Tier I of the RTI model (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007), and is composed of three elements: a) a core curriculum based on scientifically-based research; b) screening and standardized testing of students at least three times per year to determine instructional needs; and c) ongoing professional development to provide teachers with the tools needed to guarantee every student receives quality learning (Vaughn et al., 2007).

**Theme 2: Principals are in need of strategies to build a student-engaged learning environment.**

The current study’s findings suggest that principals are in need of strategies to help them foster a learning environment marked by student engagement. This theme aligned with the following research question:

1c. What additional and/or complimentary techniques or approaches does the high school principal use to address the needs of struggling learners?

Principals in this study noted Academic Engaged Time (AET) as one of the approaches used in their schools. AET can be defined as the number of minutes each day/week students
receive quality academic instruction and demonstrate behaviors that reflect student engagement within that instruction (O’Conner, 2007; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). As Crawford and Torgersen (2007) wrote:

Effective use of instructional time, specifically, academic engaged time, is a strong predictor of student achievement at all levels. Instructional leadership and guidance can help ensure that teachers have time to plan collaboratively, how to spend instructional time, minimize transition time, and maximize student engagement. Effective pedagogy and high-quality teacher-student interaction are key elements in this work; the effective use of access methodologies guide teaching and promote learning for all students. (pp. 8-10)

Thus, the use of AET has been directly related to increased literacy, engagement, and learning.

In contrast, Will shared an example of a disengaged student in his junior year who was capable of the work but refused to do it; this provided evidence that starkly contrasted the outcomes associated with AET:

…here is a young man who is just willing to almost give up his entire junior year. I think he has failed every class so far this school year. But he had no problems, and no difficulty passing all of his classes [in] 9th and 10th grade years…I have spent hours this school year meeting with this young man and his parents. You can have a one on one conversation with him, and it's almost as if he has convinced himself that school no longer matters: ‘I'm only coming here because if I don't come my parents are going to kick me out of the house. If you try to make me do anything then I'm going
to tell you where you can go.’ His parents and staff members here at school don't know how to reach him because it's almost like you can't reason with him.

Will’s student, then, exhibited the affective attitude and resulting poor performance of a student who is not academically engaged (Akey, 2006; Awang et al., 2013; Erdogan et al., 2008).

In his interview, Daniel gave a comparable example of students who, though seemingly gifted, did not pass the tests for acceptance into the academically- and intellectually-gifted program:

Kids who don't have a chance to take an honors class or an AP class and they're sitting in these classes and they're getting information in a very non-engaged environment, and on top of that, they're getting information that they really already know. So they zone out… if she's [the student] starting to exhibit behaviors at home where she's starting to get bored with work, that can become a problem if it's not addressed at school. I can't tell you how many gifted kids end up in alternative type settings because they weren't challenged… What that leads to is not doing homework, not studying for tests, because they feel like they already know that stuff and they're not being challenged. That leads to bad grades. That leads to kids failing, but we attribute failing to low academic ability… But when you dig a little bit deeper, you find that the kid has all academic ability in the world, but they're failing because [they’re saying to themselves], ‘I'm not going to do the work because I'm bored. It's not challenging.’ That exists more than people know.
Though these students should be engaged in learning regardless of the course or topic at hand, it is clear they were not fully engaged in their classes, perhaps because they were not being properly challenged. Hence, students like these, who were not properly identified as gifted and, thus, misplaced in their classes, are often not challenged academically, resulting in a lack of student engagement that can lead to behavioral issues that, in turn, affect performance. Furthermore, the fact that good behavior and successful performance is associated with academic engagement in gifted students implies that teachers in non-gifted classes should work to actively engage their students as well, in order to promote better learning.

In addition to managing student behavior and engaging students in the classroom, one of the main problems that the current study highlighted and attempted to uncover from the interviews was the ways in which a high school principal overcame student literacy issues. All of the high school principals in this study had a common concern about the lack of literacy instruction in the classrooms, since each believed that some students in their school were below benchmark in literacy. To respond to the issue, the principals who participated in the study did employ aspects of a systematic focus on literacy by providing individualized reading instruction to students in need, though it was limited. Still, the real question that arose from the study’s findings is how these principals used data to determine which and how many students are disengaged in their studies specifically because they struggle as readers. Research has indicated that 69% of 8th grade students fall below proficiency in their ability to comprehend the meaning of text at their grade level. Of these students, 26% actually read below basic level, which means they are unable to comprehend and analyze text at their
grade level as needed to succeed (Lee, Griggs, & Donahue, 2007). This data aligns with research indicating that high school students with average reading ability may even be ill-equipped to meet the expectations of literacy needed for the workplace (Williamson, 2004).

To counter the dilemma of students who are disengaged in the classroom due to their below-level benchmark skills in literacy, the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2008) provided recommendations for teachers to aid adolescent readers:

1. Provide explicit vocabulary instruction.
2. Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction.
3. Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation.
4. Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning.
5. Make available intensive and individualized intervention for struggling readers that can be provided by trained specialists. (n.p.)

With these guidelines in mind, and armed with an understanding of how student disengagement adversely affects academic performance, principals may be better equipped to aid struggling learners.

Theme 3: Principals are often unwilling agents in a school wherein practices incite poor student academic achievement, especially for minorities.

Research has suggested that high schools are mostly failing minority students living near or below the poverty line (Jacobson, 2012; Kaufman & Chapman, 2004). Black and Latino students have markedly higher dropout rates than their White peers. In 2009, the dropout rate for Latino students was an astounding 17% and the rate for Black students was
9%, while the dropout rate for White students was much lower at 6%. Interestingly, Asian students had the lowest dropout rate of the demographic groups studied, at only 4% (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). American Indian/Alaska Native students dropped out at a rate of 5% in 2009 (Stillwell & Sable, 2013).

While issues associated with low Socioeconomic Status (SES) arguably contribute to the relatively high dropout rates of Black and Latino students, other factors may also have an influence, particularly misplacement in special education. Achieving academic success as demonstrated by graduating from high school and pursuing post-secondary education can be a real challenge for minority students placed unjustifiably in special education environments (Artiles et al., 2010; Cartledge & Dukes, 2009). Even more, Black students are overrepresented in the special education population in general (Blanchett; 2009; Gardner & Miranda, 2001); in fact, Black students ages 6 to 21 years of age were found to be about 1.5 times more likely to receive special education services than students of similar ages in all other racial and ethnic groups combined. In addition, Blacks are twice as likely as White students to be placed in more restrictive special education environments compared to those of their general education peers (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009), and such an inequality can have deleterious effects on the quality and extent of their learning.

Evidence supporting this theme was elucidated through the lens of the principals interviewed. Daniel’s assertion, for example, fell in line with the research of Cartledge and Dukes (2009):

This issue is about multiculturalism… if I use the demographics of my school, you're talking about a population of over 85% to 90% minority, with 76% of those being
female. Very diverse backgrounds and it is one thing to have Common Core, a standard course of study, whatever you're using, and another thing to integrate into your curriculum aspects of those students' background, that “carrot” that you know is going to engage them in their learning. That's multiculturalism. If you dig deep in the data, I think you will find that most of the students who are failing are minority students.

The findings of this study demonstrate that minority overrepresentation in special education continues to be a prevalent and major factor in special education placement and academic treatment of students, an issue which principal David addressed in his interview:

My move here to North Carolina was a wakeup call, because I came into the South, vestiges of racial discrimination, cultural discrimination, systems and structures in place to keep those who were in control in control, and those who are not in control in balance, perpetuating deficits and troubling learners.

As David’s comment noted and previous research has suggested, if the practice of separating students with true special needs from their regular education peers became the procedural standard, it would represent issues of a civil rights nature (Richards et al., 2007). To prevent such civil rights violations from happening, educators must instead focus on measurable outcomes such as standardized testing and academic performance when assessing a student’s need for special education. The main research question in the current study asks about the high school principal's approach to students who are not learning. This question proved to be important because high school principals often operate using practices that have failed students for years. When academic failure inevitably occurs, these students are often
marked as students in need of special education, when a Response to Intervention (RTI) method may have made the difference for their academic success (Dexter & Hughes, 2009). Addressing more literally this theme of students being failed by some high school principals’ practices, Gary emphasized in his interview that many students, specifically minority students, are stuck for years in a “failure cycle” that many never escape:

> They don't know how to get out of it. They don't know the politics... their parents may be in poverty... working three or four jobs. We have generational poverty where there hasn't been anybody successful coming out of their families for generations, so they don't even know to get out of that. The fault isn't the child; it's the organization that has to develop systems and structures to address each and every one of them. I look at it as a surgeon: You don't use a scalpel for taking out stitches. The idea here is you've got to have the right diagnosis, with the right tools, with the right treatments, and the right people.

This theme is especially significant because, if there are practices in the schools that encourage or work to cause student failure, the processes of special education and RTI will be ineffective overall.

Speaking as well to the issue of race and achievement, Arthur recalled a counterexample of this theme during his first opening staff meeting:

> I start with a huge presentation I did on achievement gaps and got teachers to realize, ‘Yeah, here we are at whatever, 90% achieving, but you've got 98% of our White students achieving and only 40% to 50% of our Black students, or 40% of students with disabilities, or 30% of our ESL [English as Second Language] students. Is this
OK to you that you can essentially flip a coin and decide whether or not a kid is going to pass based on their ethnicity or some other academic background?’

Hence, Arthur seemed to make clear to his staff that academic presumptions or special education placements based on race are problematic at best, just as Patton (1998) maintained, and arguably discriminatory.

**Implications for Research**

It should be noted that the purpose of this study was not intended to solely discuss the merits or areas of improvement of the processes of special education and Response to Intervention. Rather, the current study sought to determine how principals’ understanding of these processes affects the way they are implemented in their schools. Findings suggest that, in many cases, special education appears to be an initial resort as opposed to the last option for school staff; that is, once school staff members are unsure of what to do with a student who is struggling, special education too often becomes the main option for that student. From the findings of the current study, however, the researcher believes that many educational leaders want to change this practice and mindset in our schools, and encourages the discourse and future research that this dissertation may therefore induce.

Studies regarding special education eligibility and RTI often rely on quantitative data drawn from achievement outcomes, but the actual lived experiences of high school principals has remained largely under-explored (Jenkins et al., 2007; Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Richards et al., 2007). Based on the current study’s findings, one recommendation for future research is to conduct qualitative studies that explore the principal’s experience more deeply.
In particular, though this study relied on the lived experience of six principals, race, ethnicity, gender, and age were not factors in their selection; thus, future research could benefit from increasing the sample size and placing a particular focus on the diversity of the participants, specifically with regard to experience and school levels. In addition, researchers may want to include female high school principals to see if there are any gender differences in principals’ understanding of RTI.

Moreover, more research on the influence of special education eligibility and RTI for minority students is recommended, because extant data has suggested that they have been the unjustly overrepresented in special education (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009; Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Consequently, the overall academic performance of many minority students has suffered.

The literature review indicated that, although the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) does not mention Response to Intervention, the tenets of RTI support NCLB by improving educational outcomes through continual collection of student results in the classroom (Yell et al., 2006). In addition, the primary intent of the authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004) was to align it with NCLB. While not found to be common knowledge among the principals interviewed in the current study, seeing the interconnectedness of IDEIA and NCLB is essential, for reasons highlighted in NCLB regulations:

Too often in the past, schools and LEAs have not expected students with disabilities to meet the same grade-level standards as other students. The NCLB Act sought to correct this problem by requiring each State to develop grade-level academic content
and achievement standards that it expects all students—including students with disabilities—to meet. (NCLB, 2001, 67 F.R. 71710, 71741)

Karger (2005) aptly summed up the relationship between these two pieces of educational legislation:

Thus, IDEA and NCLB converge with respect to expectations for the educational performance of students with disabilities: IDEA requires that students with disabilities have access to the same curriculum (according to their individualized needs) as students without disabilities so that they can meet the educational standards that apply to all children; NCLB establishes the expectation that students with disabilities can meet the same standards as students without disabilities. (p. 14)

Remarkably, however, none of the principals in this study mentioned IDEA, NCLB, or Section 504 in any specific manner in relation to RTI or special education eligibility. It is therefore recommended that future research focus more on the high school principal’s knowledge of IDEA, NCLB, and Section 504 and the influences of these legislative acts on their decision-making when working to meet student learning needs.

The results of this study also suggest that additional research on the role of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) should occur, especially as it connects to RTI. MTSS is “a continuum of evidence-based, system wide practices that support optimum academic and behavioral instruction in order to address the unique needs of the children within a specific student body” (California State, 2013, p. 1). Thus, MTSS is considered the umbrella under which academics and behavior fall, and differs from RTI in that it not only targets the academic needs of struggling students, but also provides a focus on student behavior. MTSS
also has particularly crucial implications for future educational practices, especially with regard to the way it impacts how the language we use in teaching evolves.

Significantly, MTSS also prescribes the use of a problem-solving model whose key elements vary, though it generally involves four steps. Overall, this model provides a structure through which student goals can be “identified (problem identification), databased reasons why those goals are not being met can be generated (problem analysis), instruction/interventions are developed (intervention), and the impact of that instruction/intervention on student outcomes is evaluated (response to instruction/intervention)” (California State, 2013, p. 2). The Team-Initiated Problem Solving Model (TIPS) is the accepted model used within MTSS as a means to discuss student achievement (Newton, Todd, Algozzine, Horner, & Algozzine, 2009), a framework for conducting effective meeting operations and using data for problem-solving and decision-making. Though there are various problem-solving models used nationally, TIPS is the model adopted by the state of North Carolina. The components of TIPS include the following:

1. Collect and use data.
2. Identify the problem.
3. Develop hypothesis (why the problem is occurring).
4. Discuss and select solutions.
5. Develop and implement an action plan.
6. Evaluate and revise the action plan. (Newton et al., 2009, n.p.)
In this model, the two critical components include using a structure of ICEL (Instruction, Curriculum, Environment, and Learner) and RIOT (Review, Interview, Observation, and Test) to problem-solve.

An assumption that school officials often make is thinking that student learning problems exist primarily in the learner, which leads to an underestimation of the degree to which teacher instructional strategies, curriculum demands, and environmental influences impact the learner’s academic performance. Accordingly, ICEL requires that four key domains of learning are assessed: Instruction, Curriculum, Environment, and Learner, and helps to ensure that a full range of relevant explanations for student problems is examined (Christ, 2008). RIOT similarly utilizes four potential sources of student information: Review, Interview, Observation, and Test, to encourage educators to attempt to collect information from a variety of sources in order to control for potential bias (Wright, 2010).

Although the principals participating in this study were able to list both internal and external issues that cause students to struggle, none highlighted any particular problem-solving methods that they used in their school, thus reaffirming the need for models like those described above. Rather than school staff thinking of RTI as simply a means to determine a student’s eligibility for special education, schools must accept a more problem-solving approach. Even more, there is a larger need for a significant shift in the mindset required to move from commitment to compliance with a process and, by adopting a culture marked by problem-solving, the focus can move toward a commitment to academic excellence for all students. Research has suggested that a focus on both the academic and
behavioral expectations of MTSS, using the TIPS model, would undoubtedly work to maximize the learning potential of all students. According to Gamm et al. (2012):

Using a tiered, systematic, and school-wide approach— which links socially appropriate behaviors and student engagement in academic work into a seamless system— has the great potential to increase student engagement in learning and reduce behavioral and disciplinary distractions. In this way, academically engaged time and behavior are connected strongly to student achievement. Best practices in MTSS thereby support appropriate and acceptable behavior and bolster student achievement, and can result in less reactive interventions and a greater concentration of scarce personnel and program resources onto students in greatest need. (p. 7)

Thus, this study’s strength is that it can serve as a data resource to help researchers frame their thoughts on the impact of a high school principal’s understanding of RTI and special education eligibility in aiding struggling learners based on shared experiences. Because of the high school principal’s obvious influence on student achievement, it was appropriate to focus the cases on these principals’ lived experiences in order to glean this data for future research.

**Conclusion**

The current study aimed to uncover how high school principals use Response to Intervention (RTI) and special education to aid struggling learners. From this data, the researcher was able to deduce how the extent of a principal’s knowledge influenced whether a student requires determination of special education eligibility or RTI. In particular, the current study’s findings are important for those who are school administrators, special
education directors, and anyone who works with struggling students, because incomplete or limited understanding of special education eligibility and RTI can beget confusion and misapplication that may have patently damaging consequences to student learning as well as legal consequences for the principal and his/her school.

Phenomenology was a crucial lens to utilize for this case study because understanding of special education eligibility determination factors and RTI processes was encouraged. The principals that participated in the study made clear their belief that all students in their schools had the ability to be successful, so the fundamental remaining question, then, is, “What do I do when students are not learning?” To this end, the current phenomenological case study explored high school principals’ leadership in dealing with the phenomenon of how to respond to struggling learners. In order to recognize when the interviewed principals did not have full understanding of these processes, the researcher’s position as a special educator and one who leads conversations with schools about RTI implementation was critical.

More specifically, the current study focused primarily on the stories of six principals and their individual quests to aid struggling learners. There was one main research question and three sub questions that framed this investigation:

1. What is the high school principal’s approach to students who are not learning? To what extent is this a systematic approach?
   a. How knowledgeable is the high school principal of the criteria for determining special education eligibility?
b. To what extent is the high school principal understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI)?

c. What additional and/or complimentary techniques or approaches does the high school principal use to address the needs of struggling learners?

The interview questions were meant to dig deeply into the respondents’ experiences and practices in order to provide information about their learning and teaching to inform more generalized conclusions about high school principals and struggling learners.

Overall, the outcome was that the participants were candid and thoughtful, and they gave far from “cookie-cutter” responses. Findings suggest that these high school principals had limited understanding of RTI and special education eligibility processes. Principals can arguably gain such understanding easily from professional development and existing research but, at the same time, the researcher did not come across any literature stating that excellent understanding of these processes would ensure each student was guaranteed the best education possible. Nonetheless, from the principal responses in the current study, the researcher was able to determine that the concept of RTI is not foreign to principals and, in fact, frequently, albeit loosely, aligns with other schoolwide efforts to assist students.

Additionally, the literature maintains that the school principal must know the basic aspects of RTI to not only aid in the success of all students, but particularly those who are struggling, whatever the reason for their difficulties (Bradley et al., 2007; DiPaola et al., 2004). Thus, the researcher also wanted to know if any of the interviewees would openly acknowledge a lack of understanding involving the key elements needed to implement RTI with fidelity at their schools. The findings of this study indicate that these high school
principals do know and employ various means of implementing RTI in their schools, such as set-aside intervention and tutorial times, core instructional methods, and staff trainings; however, there did appear to be some question about which approaches were the best research-based practices to use.

In addition, the literature touts that most of the research around these topics has been focused on teacher applications and not a school principal’s view (Jacobson, 2012; Matthews & Crow, 2010). To meet this understanding gap, the principals in this study attempted to define RTI and express what the term meant to them. Notably, though, even though there were discussions about the concepts of RTI and special education eligibility, these principals’ responses appeared to be based largely on practical applications. Though their responses were based on ideas and not necessarily any literature or particular references to policy and law, the principals in the current study were nevertheless enlightening and informative in evidencing that, just as Klingner and Edwards (2006) asserted, RTI is not, in fact, consistently practiced with fidelity at schools.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the researcher’s findings in this dissertation do not account for any definitive answers on the issue of RTI and school principals’ involvement with the identification and assisting of struggling learners, only findings that have larger implications. The researcher simply provided herein an interpretation of the findings in line with the phenomenological data collection process and the three types of narratives (textural, structural, and textural-structural) that evolved to summarize the participants’ stories. Still, the results of this study may certainly be helpful to principals, colleges of education, and public school leaders as they work with Individual
Education Program (IEP) teams to determine special education eligibility and placement using RTI when helping struggling learners.

In all, through a phenomenological case study of six high school principals, the current study sought to better understand principals’ understanding and implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) and special education eligibility determination processes, in an effort to determine the extent to which such understanding affected these principals’ efforts to assist struggling learners. The findings indicate, overall, that principals do use systematic approaches to help students who are not learning. Moreover, they are somewhat informed about the criteria for determining special education eligibility and the processes of RTI, yet still they employ a range of additional techniques, including securing engaging teachers, using online reading programs, and establishing set-aside intervention times, to address the needs of struggling learners.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Initial Email to Principals

Dear (Principal Name),

My name is Paul G. Walker and I am pursuing my doctorate in Educational Administration and Supervision from North Carolina State University. I am also an employee of Wake County Public School System as a Senior Administrator within the Intervention Services department. In partial fulfillment of the requirements for this degree, I am writing a dissertation. I am asking if you would take part in a research study to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue.

You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. In essence, your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the responses that you provide.

If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be interviewed by the researcher. You will be asked questions about your experience with the struggling learner. The face-to-face interview is expected to last 90 minutes and will be audio-recorded. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up phone call similar to the face-to-face interview, which will last about 15 minutes.

If you have an interest in participating, the next step is that I will provide a form to you where you will find additional details about the research in which you are being asked to participate and where you can sign consent. Please reply to this email (pgwalker@ncsu.edu) to express interest in participating in this study and/or for additional information.

Thank you for your time.

Paul Grady Walker
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Administration and Supervision
pgwalker@ncsu.edu
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: Supporting the Struggling Learner: How High School Principals’ Understanding of Response to Intervention and Special Education Eligibility Influences their Approach to Addressing Student Learning Needs

Principal Investigator: Mr. Paul Grady Walker
Faculty Sponsors: Dr. Susan C. Faircloth and Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to better understand the high school principal’s approach to struggling learners and how the extent of their understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI) and special education eligibility are factors in how they address the learning needs of those students.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed by the researcher. You will be asked questions about your experience with the struggling learner. The face-to-face interview will last approximately 90 minutes and will be audio-recorded. The recordings will be reviewed by the researcher following the interview. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up phone call similar to the face-to-face interview, which will last about 15 minutes.

Risks
There are no known risks to participating in this study. You are free to share your questions or concerns during the interview or to speak with the interviewer following the discussion. To keep this study anonymous, I have requested from the school system that I have dispensation regarding sharing this information. During the study, you have the right to
withdraw from the research project at any time without penalty and to ask questions throughout the process. You also have the right to be informed of any new finding(s) that may affect your willingness to continue in the study.

**Benefits**
The information gathered through this study may be helpful to high school principals as they work with the Individual Education Program (IEP) team to determine special education eligibility and support for struggling learners. In addition, the information gained from this study may help clarify how to respond when a student is found ineligible for special education. Answering the research questions might also help you to think about important issues related to your profession.

**Confidentiality**
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in a password protected computer. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide.

**Compensation**
There is no compensation for participating in this research study.

**What if you have questions about this study?**
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Paul Grady Walker at P.O. Box 1981, Cary, NC 27512 or 267-971-3208, pgwalker@ncsu.edu.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919-515-4514), debra_paxton@ncsu.edu.

**Consent to Participate**
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature_____________________________ Date ________________

Investigator's signature___________________________ Date ________________
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

1. High school principal participants were invited to the study by an email to their professional email address from my North Carolina State University-issued Gmail account.

2. Participants were provided the parameters of the study with the option of declining the invitation.

3. Participants were not be given a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview. For validity of results, the researcher did not want the principals to formulate preconceived responses.

4. Each participant was interviewed one time. The interview took place in their own school building, or another agreed upon location at the principal’s discretion.

5. The researcher had the option to request a follow-up phone call of about 15 minutes with participants, similar to the face-to-face interview.

6. The principal and the researcher were the only two individuals present during the interview process.

7. Interviews for each of the participants ran no more than 90 minutes.

8. The interview took place during a time of the day that was most convenient for the principal participant.

9. Barring unforeseen circumstances, the interview was completed within one session.

10. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed within 48 hours of the session.

11. Participants had an opportunity to review transcripts if desired.

12. The researcher coded the data for emergent themes.
Appendix D: Interview Script

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. This interview will take about 90 minutes to complete. The information from this interview will inform my dissertation within a graduate program at North Carolina State University. I am interested in learning more about the high school principal’s approach to struggling learners; specifically how the processes of Response to Intervention and determination of special education eligibility are factors. This interview will be used for this purpose only. Participants will remain anonymous as I will not identify participants by name in the dissertation or in any conversations with other people.

During the study, you have the right to withdraw from the research project at any time without penalty and to ask questions throughout the process. You also have the right to be informed of any new finding(s) that may affect your willingness to continue in the study. I will record our conversation, so that I am able to capture your responses accurately.

1. Please share with me background information about yourself:

   a. How long have you been working within this school?
   b. How long have you been working in education?
   c. What positions have you held during this time?

2. Responding to Struggling Learners: For this study, a struggling learner is defined as a student who is not performing well academically in school, based on one or more of these factors: lack of motivation; absenteeism; learning disabilities; difficulties learning English as a second language; stressful family life; poverty; low expectations from adults;
poorly trained teachers; ineffective instruction; disorganized schools; and lack of instructional resources (Scherer, 2006). There are also some quantitative indicators to determine whether a student is struggling (Fuchs & Mellard, 2003):

- Below proficiency score/benchmark on state exams;
- Rate of growth in an academic skill is slow as compared to peers; and
- Failing marks in classes.

a. Considering this definition, why do you believe your students fail?

b. Based on this definition, how do you meet the needs of the struggling learner?

c. What is your perception of the statement that “all students can learn?”

d. Please describe a typical experience with a student who struggles to meet academic success in your school.

e. How do you determine the factors that lead a student to fail a class?

f. How do you determine when a student is not learning?

3. Special Education Eligibility

a. In your experience, please describe how students are found eligible for special education services.

b. In your opinion, how are special education programs and services able to help students with disabilities?

c. What, if any, professional development have you participated in that may have helped you to grow in your understanding of special education procedures and policies?
d. From your experience, how effective is the process of developing an Individual Education Program (IEP) for a student?

4. Response to Intervention
   a. What is your understanding of RTI?
   b. What do you know about using Response to Intervention when dealing with struggling learner?
   c. What professional development have you had regarding the implementation of RTI?
   d. What is your response when students are failing and not learning in the classroom?

5. Are there any additional points that you believe need to be addressed?

Thank you for taking the time today to participate in this research study.