

## **ABSTRACT**

JONES, LUCY DANIELLE. The Experiences of Teachers and Principals with the Concurrent Implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support. (Under the direction of Dr. Tamara V. Young).

Guided by systemic change theory, a conceptual framework posited by Roberto Joseph and Charles Reigeluth that involves the transformation of the current education paradigm into a new paradigm, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of middle school teachers and principals with the concurrent implementation of Response to Instruction (RTI) and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) in three middle schools in a rural North Carolina school district. Using data from individual interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and documents, this qualitative multiple case study explored factors that facilitated and impeded the concurrent implementation of these two comprehensive frameworks in three middle schools. The results indicate that the schools were only able to acquire narrow buy-in with few stakeholder groups and schools did not create a system that allowed for collaboration across the RTI and PBIS teams. Therefore, the schools were unable to create a new education paradigm, the goal of systemic change. The schools did, however, report experiencing positive changes regarding how teachers approach teaching and learning and viewed student discipline. While one school proved to be more resistant to change, there was still an understanding within all the schools that change must occur in order to successfully implement RTI and PBIS concurrently. Thus, the ability of the staff across the middle schools to obtain different levels of systems cognition and systems design facilitated the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. The results of this study also reveal that school leaders lack an understanding of the systemic change process and need more training and direction because obtaining systemic change in schools takes time and

skill, requiring school leaders to continuously plan and develop step-by-step processes to facilitate the change required to create a new paradigm of education.

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The Experiences of Teachers and Principals with the Concurrent Implementation of  
Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support

by  
Lucy Danielle Jones

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APPROVED BY:

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Dr. Tamara Young  
Committee Chair

---

Dr. Gregory Hicks  
Committee Member

---

Dr. Kevin Brady  
Committee Member

---

Dr. Lisa Bass  
Committee Member

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this to my husband, Carlton Jones. This journey would not have been possible without your love, support, and encouragement. I look forward to spending the rest of my life with you.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Middle school is the *Bermuda Triangle* of public education (Juvonen, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004). Sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students are different than their elementary and high school counterparts as they are experiencing cognitive, physical, and social changes related to early adolescence (Eccles et al., 1993). In addition, students transitioning from elementary to middle school have to adjust to their new environment—adhering to a more rigid schedule, navigating through a larger building, making new friends, and meeting the demands of multiple teachers—which stresses the already vulnerable students (Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013). While support from home is important during this transitional period, it is also important that students are supported in school and maintain positive peer and teacher relationships (Eccles et al., 1993). However, the nature of middle school makes forming positive supportive relationships difficult (Eccles, 2004). In comparison to elementary students, it is more difficult for middle school students to form positive relationships with their teachers because teachers are responsible for supervising a large number of students that are with them for short periods during the school day; resulting in, middle school teachers being less nurturing than their elementary colleagues and more controlling in order to carry out their instructional responsibilities (Ryan et al., 2013). This combination of the environmental, social, and physical changes that adolescences are experiencing along with a lack of positive student-teacher relationships and/or support at some largely explains why “middle schools are often blamed for the increase in behavioral

problems among young teens and cited as the cause of teens' alienation, disengagement from school, and low [academic] achievement" (Juvone et al., 2004, p. 1).

Indeed, according to the NCDPI (2014), only 56.8% of sixth grade students, 57.3% of seventh grade students, and 54.2% of eighth grade students in North Carolina were grade-level proficient on the reading end-of-grade exam, scoring a level III or above in the 2013–2014 school year (level III is the minimum required to show proficiency). The results in math were more dire. Only 46.8% of sixth grade students, 45.9% of seventh grade students, and 42.2% of eighth grade students were grade-level proficient in 2013–2014 (NCDPI, 2014). These data suggest that much progress still needs to be made to better address the academic challenges middle school students face often resulting from their physical and social changes and the middle school setting.

While academics takes priority in middle schools, there remains much concern about ensuring student safety and maintaining an orderly environment. NCDPI (2013) reported close to 85,000 suspensions involving middle school students during the 2012–2013 school year. There are also a considerably large number of violent acts at the middle school level. During the 2012–2013 school year, North Carolina middle schools reported 2,809 reportable offenses including 1,034 students in possession of a weapon, 1,095 incidents of the possession of a controlled substance, 266 possessions of alcohol, 257 assaults on school personnel, 25 assaults involving a weapon, and 24 sexual offenses. Given these startling statistics, local school districts and schools have sought to incorporate research-based

interventions to decrease problem behaviors and increase student academic achievement levels.

The literature suggests that when both organizational structures and systems are put into place, students become more successful and student achievement increases (Marzano, 2003). Two frameworks that have provided structure and systems in the K–12 environment are Responsiveness to Instruction (RTI), which is referred to as Response to Intervention in the broader literature, and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) (also denoted as Positive Behavior Support (PBS) in earlier literature). Both RTI and PBIS utilize a problem-solving model, which is a systematic approach that uncovers the strengths and weaknesses of students, provides students with research-based interventions, and requires frequent collection of data to monitor the progress of students in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions (NCDPI, 2014).

### **Responsiveness to Instruction**

RTI is “the practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying child response data to important educational decisions” (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 2). Designed to ensure the academic success of all students through the elimination of ineffective instructional methodologies and the supplementing of deficient curricula, RTI is a problem-solving model that focuses on whole school improvement (Feifer, 2008). RTI is a three-tiered framework that offers students interventions that become more and more intense and frequent as students move from Tier 1 to Tier 3 (NCDPI, 2014).

According to a survey conducted by the Special Education Leadership and Quality Teacher Initiative, every state is in the process of implementing RTI or using the framework's methods to improve student learning (Hoover, Baca, Wexler-Love, & Saenz, 2008). North Carolina adopted RTI as a way to provide students who are currently experiencing difficulties learning the curriculum with individualized instruction (NCDPI, 2014).

The implementation of RTI requires schools to find the best way to assess all students, implement research-based practices, monitor student progress, and make appropriate data-driven adjustments (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Searle, 2010). Successful implementation occurs when RTI is sustained through professional development, school-level administrators are committed, support is provided at the district level, the roles of support staff are not limited, the school's staff has an understanding of RTI and knows how to utilize it during daily instruction, and input from the staff is welcomed (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007).

Researchers such as Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) and Burns and Ysseldyke (2005) contend that when RTI is implemented skillfully and with fidelity, students that struggle academically begin to experience academic success. Simmons and her colleagues' (2008) study of RTI in the lower elementary grades showed that students identified early as at-risk of reading below grade level made significant growth after receiving research-based interventions. While there are noteworthy differences between elementary and middle school environments and the students themselves, such as the number of teachers a student will see throughout the day, the students' schedule, social settings, and the physical and emotional

changes of early adolescence, researchers contend that students at the middle school level can benefit from research-based interventions implemented through the RTI framework (Edmonds et al., 2009; Scammacca et al., 2007). Faggella-Luby and Wardwell (2011) for example, conducted a study in an urban Connecticut middle school with 68% of the students receiving free and reduced lunch. Eighty-one fifth and sixth graders who read below grade level received a research-based intervention for 30 minutes two to three times per week for 18 weeks. The students showed improvement in reading comprehension, which demonstrated that RTI Tier 2 interventions can help middle school students. Printy and Williams (2014) conducted a study to explore six middle school principals experience regarding their implementation of RTI at their respective schools. The authors concluded that when teachers, school leaders, and district level personnel are in agreement, RTI can lead to an increase in student achievement and the implementation process is more successful. Also, principals that see RTI as valuable are able to implement RTI more effectively because they “challenge and motivate their staffs toward a new paradigm of assessment, intervention, and instruction embedded in the practices of RTI” (p. 24). In contrast, principals that did not see RTI as an effective method to improve student achievement were unable to incorporate the necessary changes to the school environment to implement RTI effectively at the middle school level.

### **Positive Behavior Intervention and Support**

PBIS is a framework designed to allow K–12 educators the ability to create processes and procedures that will allow for teaching school-wide behavioral expectations (Bradshaw et al., 2012). During the initial implementation, school leaders are encouraged to develop a

system of rewards for students exhibiting positive behaviors and utilize data when making decisions (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009; Horner et al., 2009).

PBIS is a school-wide improvement model aimed at creating a positive environment through positive changes in both students and staff members (Bradshaw et al., 2009). In order for schools to achieve successful implementation of PBIS there must be:

1. A committed team leading all PBIS efforts,
2. Positively stated school-wide behavior expectations and rules,
3. A method for identifying current problems through on-going self-assessment,
4. Lesson plans to teach expected behaviors,
5. Procedures for encouraging expected behaviors,
6. Procedures for discouraging violations of school-wide expectations and rules, and a plan for monitoring implementation and effectiveness. (George, Kincaid, & Pollard-Sage, 2009, p. 198)

PBIS is a multi-tiered framework with three tiers of support. Tier 1, also known as primary prevention, includes universal support for the entire student body (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). Tier 2 provides an additional layer of support, and Tier 3 provides intensive support to students that are unresponsive to Tiers 1 and 2 (Horner et al., 2010). An important step of PBIS implementation is data collection. Decisions regarding the program's implementation and student movement through each tier of support should be guided by data (Horner et al., 2010). Finally, because schools must ensure staff buy-in to sustain PBIS,

training should be provided to every staff member, and schools must obtain a minimum of 80% buy-in from staff.

Schools have experienced positive behavioral and academic results upon implementing PBIS (Reynolds, 2011). When students are taught behavioral expectations, they spend more time in the classroom instead of out of school because of suspensions and thus are able to receive the academic instruction they need (Horner et al., 2004; Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; Sailor, Stowe, Turnbull, & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2007). North Carolina began implementing PBIS as a requirement of a federally-funded grant focused on school improvement in 2000 and started with a behavioral support center in a Durham elementary school. After the first year of implementation, the elementary school reported a significant decrease in the number of suspensions (Irwin & Algozzine, 2005). Similar results have been reported in middle schools (Caldarella, Shatzer, Gray, & Young, 2011; Shah, 2012; Zehr, 2011).

By 2009, 93% of the counties in North Carolina began implementing PBIS (Reynolds, Irwin, & Algozzine, 2009). North Carolina's vision is that "all schools in North Carolina will implement Positive Behavior [Intervention] and Support as an effective and proactive process for improving social competence and academic achievement for all students" (NCDPI, 2014). When teachers and staff receive proper training and guidance when implementing PBIS interventions, any school can see positive results (Sprague et al., 2001). Currently, every school district in North Carolina has at least one school implementing PBIS (Reynolds et al., 2009).



## **Purpose of Study**

Although there is a plethora of literature about RTI and PBIS respectively, especially for elementary schools, we know very little about the concurrent implementation of both frameworks. While there are similarities in the approaches, such as following a problem-solving model, taking a preventative approach, and utilizing research-based interventions (Sandomierski, Kincaid, & Algozzine, 2007), the major difference is the primary focus of each framework; RTI focuses on academic achievement and PBIS focuses on student behavior. This difference can have a school's efforts to support one approach foster or undermine the efforts of the other approach. For example, a school may opt to emphasize one framework over the other when they are implementing them concurrently, resulting in diminishing the effectiveness of the other framework. Thus, the purpose of this case study is to understand the concurrent implementation of these pervasive frameworks. Indeed as Honig (2006) points out, schools typically have multiple education reforms enacted at the same time. Thus, a more complex and accurate view of implementation of educational initiatives in school settings requires us to consider what reforms are being implemented simultaneously and how concurrent implementation facilitates or impedes the fidelity of the implementation of the reforms. In particular, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are middle school teachers' and principals' experiences with the concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?

2. What factors facilitate successful concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?
3. What factors impede successful concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework driving this study is systemic change because both RTI and PBIS are designed to create new structures and systems within education. Systemic change is grounded in systems theory and entails the transformation of an education paradigm into a completely new paradigm (Reigeluth, 1994; Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Joseph and Reigeluth (2010) list six core features of successful systemic change:

1. broad stakeholder ownership
2. systems view of education,
3. evolving mindsets about education,
4. understanding the systemic change process,
5. systems design, and
6. learning community. (p. 7)

All of the above elements are driven by the actions of the stakeholders. Joseph and Reigeluth (2010) suggest that stakeholders from diverse backgrounds must engage in continuous collaboration for systemic change to occur. Furthermore, the stakeholders must have a clear understanding of the current state of education and how the systemic change process works so that mindsets regarding education can evolve to allow for the creation of a new system

where the school becomes a learning community. This framework can be used as a “lens through which to review important educational change efforts and school change” (Joseph and Reigeluth, 2010, p. 98). Systemic change is an appropriate framework to guide this inquiry because RTI and PBIS do not merely require simple adjustments to the current paradigm, rather they require changing paradigms—a fundamental change in how teachers and administrators think and go about identifying and addressing students behavior and low achievement.

### **Overview of Research Design**

According to Creswell (2007), “qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). Because I seek to understand the experiences of middle school teachers and principals with the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS, I conducted a qualitative study. Qualitative research is used to produce an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of an event, complex issue, or phenomenon in its real-life context through the participant’s point of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I utilized a multiple case study approach to examine the real life experiences of educators in three different middle schools within one school district. The site selected was a small school district in rural North Carolina. The school district has eight elementary schools, four middle schools, and four high schools. Middle schools were chosen because of the lack of literature regarding the implementation of RTI and PBIS at the middle school level and growing concerns about how to effectively improve student achievement and behavior in middle school.

To create a rich, thick description of the phenomenon, I utilized multiple methods and sources of information (Creswell, 2007). The primary source of data were semi-structured interviews. Interviewees included principals, the RTI team leader, one RTI team member, the PBIS team leader, and one PBIS team member from each school. In addition, teacher participants were invited to participate in a focus group and/or questionnaire to express their perceptions of the implementation of RTI and PBIS at their respective school. Achievement and discipline data, RTI and PBIS implementation guidelines and plans when available, and other related documents were collected as well. Data analysis involved open coding to identify emergent themes within each case and across cases. To begin the process of coding the data multiple readings of the data were conducted, and notes were written in the margins to begin identifying trends and patterns (Stake, 2000; Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Themes were derived from the six key components of Joseph and Reigeluth's systemic change conceptual framework and trends identified within the data.

### **Significance of the Study**

#### **Practical Significance**

RTI and PBIS are popular frameworks that have been implemented in many schools around the country as school leaders are under a great deal of pressure to increase student achievement with limited resources and time (Brimm, 1983). The results from this study can be used directly by the participants to refine their current strategies for implementing RTI and PBIS so that they will ultimately increase the effectiveness of both approaches. In addition, school districts could use insights from this study to design professional

development activities that address concurrent adoption of RTI and PBIS. The findings can also be used to help district level administrators decide whether or not to implement two complementary, yet potentially competing, frameworks concurrently.

Additionally, it has been found that students that exhibit behavior problems often struggle academically. Thus, RTI and PBIS, in some instances, are targeting the same students. If concurrent implementation of both approaches undermines the effectiveness of one or both approaches, then the most at-risk students may not gain the full benefits of the programs. Insights from this study will provide school leaders information to make informed decisions about improving the fidelity of implementing both programs, ensuring that the behavioral and academic needs of at-risk students are being met.

### **Theoretical Significance**

This study will contribute to the knowledge of both RTI and PBIS implementation research at the middle school level, as the majority of the current research focuses on implementation in elementary schools. Further, this study will add to the literature regarding systemic change, in general, and, specifically, systemic change in regards to the implementation of RTI and PBIS. In addition, this study will advance our understanding of systemic change in the concurrent implementation of two comprehensive frameworks.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This multiple case study is based on data from a single school district in rural North Carolina and includes only three middle schools, limiting the transferability of the findings of

this study to other educational settings. However, every effort was made to enhance transferability by providing a thick, rich description of the contexts, assumptions, and findings so that researchers and practitioners can discern which insights can be transferred to their settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Krathwohl, 1998).

Also, this study relies largely on self-reported data. Consequently, the data may not truly reflect what is actually occurring. According to Ryan and Bernard (2010) when people agree to be interviewed they feel obligated to attempt to answer every question asked, even if they do not know the answer. In addition, when interviewing, people will tend to present themselves in a more positive and socially accepted manner. To limit this potential bias, I triangulated the data. Triangulation of data sources and cross-case analysis should overcome these potential biases. Further, both the PBIS and the RTI frameworks are district initiatives and are expected to be implemented at each school—they are top-down reforms. So, some participants may be hesitant to fully disclose challenges. However, efforts to maintain confidentiality, and in some instances anonymity (i.e., questionnaire data), gain the support of district leadership for the study, and communicate to participants that this is a formative study that aims to improve implementation likely improved participants' willingness to be candid.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

*Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS)* – is a framework based on the problem-solving model that focuses on reducing and preventing inappropriate behavior and increasing social and behavioral success through teaching and reinforcing appropriate behaviors (Sugai, Hagan-Burke, & Lewis-Palmer, 2004; Sugai & Horner, 2006).

*Responsiveness to Instruction/Intervention (RTI)* – is the practice of providing students with high quality instruction and using data to provide students with interventions that meet their individual educational needs (Kurns & Tilly, 2008).

*Systemic Change* – involves transforming a current education paradigm into a new paradigm (Reigeluth, 1994).

### **Chapter Summary and Overview of Study**

An overview of this study which included a synopsis of the problem and a brief summary of the RTI and PBIS frameworks was provided in Chapter 1. Then, a description of the purpose of the study, the research questions, an overview of the research methods that were used to conduct this study, and the study's practical and theoretical significance were described. Chapter 1 concluded with the study's limitations and definitions of key terms. Chapter 2 discusses RTI and PBIS in greater detail by outlining the goals and core features of each framework, best practices for implementation, and the effectiveness of each framework. Additionally, similarities and differences of RTI and PBIS frameworks are explored. An overview of the systemic change process conceptual framework is also discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 specifies the research design, sample and site selection, and procedures for data collection. Chapter 3 also includes a description of the processes for analyzing data, reliability and trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the researcher's statement of subjectivity. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study as they relate to the research questions. Chapter 5 summarizes key findings, describes the implications from the findings for practice and theory, and details recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter describes RTI and PBIS, two popular frameworks utilized by schools to improve student achievement and behavior respectively. In addition, the core features, implementation practices, and effectiveness of both RTI and PBIS are discussed, with an emphasis on implementation at the middle school level. Furthermore, similarities and differences of RTI and PBIS will be outlined. This chapter concludes with an overview of the systemic change process and how this theory applies to the implementation of RTI and PBIS in middle schools.

#### **The Responsiveness to Instruction Framework**

##### **Overview**

RTI is a framework designed to use research-based interventions to ensure that all students receive high quality instruction and appropriate interventions when needed (Batsche et al., 2006). According to data received from the National Center for Education Statistics in 2013, 64% of eighth grade students were at basic or below level in math and 64% of eighth grade students performed at basic or below level in reading. Given these outcomes and heightened pressure resulting from accountability mandates, school districts across the U.S. have been searching for a panacea for students that continue to struggle academically. While there is not a one-size-fits-all practice for improving academic achievement for all students, RTI is being implemented in many schools across the nation to better meet the individual needs of all students (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012).



## Core Features

The core features of RTI are to assess all students, utilize research-based interventions, monitor student progress, and make adjustments based on data (Fuchs et al., 2003; Searle, 2010). Before the first intervention can be implemented, a school-wide screening of the entire student body must be conducted during the first month of school to identify students struggling with the general curriculum (Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006). The results of these assessments allow teachers and other school personnel to identify those students that are significantly below their peers academically. Teachers and specialists then place identified students into appropriate tiers of RTI.

Once students are identified, the goal of RTI is to provide them with additional support through the implementation of various interventions to help them meet their appropriate grade level standards (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The ultimate goal of RTI is to have more students on grade level and increase overall student achievement. RTI uses a multi-tiered approach to implement interventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Instruction becomes more intense and frequent with each tier (Carney & Stiefel, 2008; Fuchs, 2003). This intensity is obtained through more individualized teacher-centered and direct instruction as students move through the three tiers into groups populated with fewer students at each tier (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Also, specialists and more experienced teachers lead instruction of the targeted groups in the higher level tiers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

**Tier 1.** The school's foundational core instructional practices is the focus of Tier 1. "Under tiered models of service delivery, 80% to 85% of the general population should be

successful at the first tier of intervention with no need of further intervention if instruction is effective” (Johnson & Smith, 2008, p. 47). To determine whether instructional practices are meeting the needs of 80% to 85% of students, Mellard and Johnson (2008) suggest that assessments such as universal screeners are administered throughout the school year to provide data on students’ academic progress. Schools must analyze data to determine if at least 80% of their students are proficient in each grade level. If an area does not meet the 80% requirement, teachers must begin to problem solve to identify problem areas and develop strategies to strengthen those areas within the core instructional practices. This can be accomplished through professional development within the school. Data from assessments provide important information to guide decisions regarding obtaining resources and professional development to improve instructional practices (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). When inadequacies within the school’s foundational core have been addressed students with learning difficulties are accurately identified (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007).

**Tier 2.** Students who have demonstrated an academic deficiency are the focus of Tier 2. Students in this tier receive the foundational core curriculum and individualized support based on their needs. Tier 2 provides an increase in instruction and more frequent individualized instruction in small targeted groups (Martson, 2003; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Fuchs, Fuchs, and Vaughn (2014) suggest that each group of students share similar strengths and weaknesses and meet a minimum of three days per week for at least 20 to 40 minutes. Interventions should last between eight and twelve weeks with regular monitoring of progress (Vaughn, 2003). Approximately 15% of the school’s student population should fall into this tier (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007).

**Tier 3.** Students that need more intensive and supplemental support in addition to foundational core instruction are in Tier 3. This should be approximately 5% of the school's student population and involves providing the students interventions with increased intensity and frequency. These interventions resemble special education services because they include a special education teacher delivering specialized instruction that makes modifications to the content based on individual student needs (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Brozo, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

**Data.** One of the most critical aspects of the RTI framework is data use. Assessment data are used to ensure students have been properly matched with an appropriate intervention, demonstrate the effectiveness of an intervention, and inform decisions related to moving students to a tier (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008). Data that monitors student progress also provide teachers with immediate feedback about each student's progress, helping teachers recognize when to make changes to their instructional methods (Moore & Whitfield, 2009). As educators examine data, informed decisions can be made at the school, classroom, and individual level as to whether or not a student is progressing (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Schools must ensure that teachers are actually utilizing these data to drive their instruction; a systematic process for progress monitoring is the heart of RTI and should be maintained at all tiers (Marzano, 2003).

### **Implementation**

All of the core features of RTI are equally important and valuable to increasing the academic success of students (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008). Thus, success comes when

schools are able to create a balance and include all of the core features of RTI in a manner that best fits their students and school community. Since there are no predetermined protocols for implementing RTI, administrators are faced with creating their own structures for the framework based on the needs of their students. Administrators, teachers, and parents must work together to meet the needs of individual students. Successful implementation is dependent upon a variety of factors. Fuchs and Deshler (2007) describe successful implementation as having:

1. Significant and sustained professional development that provides staff with specific skills required to implement RtI.
2. Administrators that are engaged and committed to setting expectations for success and providing the necessary resources to ensure the fidelity of the implementation.
3. District support that allows for the hiring of specific, high quality staff who embrace the initiative.
4. Redefining of traditional roles of teaching and ancillary staff (e.g., school psychologist) to support effective implementation.
5. Allowing staff the time to develop their understanding of RtI and incorporate it into their instructional practices.
6. Allowing staff to have input from the beginning of the process to ensure that their thoughts and beliefs are considered. (p. 131)

To ensure successful implementation of RTI, Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) recommend that school leaders ensure each teacher is providing their students with high-quality

instruction, school-wide assessments are utilized to screen students, progress monitoring is frequent so student performance is documented, all tiers include research-based interventions, and fidelity checks are conducted throughout the implementation process. Commitment to RTI and staff buy-in are also critical to implementation success. Tilly (2006) gives three general guidelines of an RTI framework.

1. It is a logical structure for allocating precious instructional resources efficiently and targeting them specifically to student needs—all student needs.
2. It is a commitment to use the best findings from our current and emerging knowledge-base (scientific research) as we go about our instruction.
3. It is a commitment to use a logical, decision-making framework to guide our instruction (data-based decision-making or the problem-solving method). (p. 3-4)

**Logic Model.** To elucidate how RTI works, Table 1 depicts the basic logic model for RTI. Table 1 describes the resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes that are associated with implementing RTI with fidelity. Resources needed to successfully implement RTI include trained teachers, teaching tools and resources, flexible schedule, test data, common assessments, and processes to identify students that are failing to meet grade level standards. Activities related to RTI implementation consist of providing students with research-based interventions, collaborating between teachers and support staff, and assessing students. Once identified students receive the appropriate interventions, the expected outcomes are an increase in the number of students on grade level, an overall increase in student achievement, an increase in literacy and math skills, and a reduction in the achievement gap. Outcomes

also include a decrease in students being retained in a grade, an increase in high school graduation rates, and an increase in college acceptance.

Table 1.

*RTI Logic Model*

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short – Mid-Term Outcomes	Impact Long-Term Outcomes
RTI team (Team Leader)	RTI is a framework that identifies at-risk students in math and reading and provide them with interventions to support them in meeting grade level goals	At risk students receive interventions needed to be successful.	Increase the number of students on grade level.	Decrease students being retained in a grade
Teachers				
Flexible schedule	Collaborate to create assessments, analyze data, and group students for interventions		Increase student achievement	Increase high school graduation rate
Teaching tools/resources				
Test data	Assess students a minimum of 4 times per year		Increase literacy and math skills	
Professional development for teachers				
Identify/develop common assessments	Provide interventions a minimum of 4 times per week for 9 weeks		Reduce achievement gap	Increase student acceptance into college
Instrument/process to identify at-risk students				

## **Implementation in Middle Schools**

While there is extensive research on RTI implementation in elementary schools, (e.g., White, Polly, & Audette, 2012; Simons et al., 2008; Gersten et al., 2009; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010), this literature is not detailed here because the middle school environment is distinctly different than elementary, such as the number of teachers a student will see throughout the day, the students' schedule, and social settings (Ryan et al., 2013). In addition, middle school students have different needs as they are going through the physical and emotional changes of early adolescence (Eccles et al., 1993).

Researchers contend that students at the middle school level can benefit from research-based interventions implemented through the RTI framework (Edmonds et al., 2009; Scammacca et al., 2007). However, researchers have noted challenges with implementing RTI at the middle school level, such as the lack of teacher training in remedial strategies, the lack of student motivation, and scheduling students for interventions (Brozo, 2009). In a recent study Vaughn and Fletcher (2012) examined the effectiveness of RTI at a middle school and compared the instructional approaches implemented in the middle school level to those at the elementary level. Vaughn and Fletcher recognized that, "a major issue for screening and progress monitoring in middle school is the reliability and validity of the measures" due to the lack of research on reliable and valid measures in reading at the middle school level; however, the researchers contend that "oral reading fluency and maze assessments are reliable and valid" (p. 246).



**Tier 1.** “Tier 1 instruction at the secondary level is conceptually similar but practically more complicated” (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012, p. 247) because of the need to focus on reading across content areas such as math, science, and social studies. Vaughn and Fletcher focused on building vocabulary and comprehension within the content areas. Reports from teachers and reading coaches suggest positive results from incorporating vocabulary building and comprehension in the middle school setting.

**Tier 2.** In the elementary setting, Tier 2 is seen as a preventative, but by the time students reach middle school, “the intention of prevention is no longer really feasibly” (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012, p. 248). One thing that Vaughn and Fletcher noted was the fact that while the RTI framework recommends intervention groups of no more than 5, there was no significant difference among their groups of 5 and their groups of 10-14. Thus, having smaller intervention groups did not make a significant difference at the middle school level.

**Tier 3.** Vaughn and Fletcher (2012) found that there was no significant difference between middle school students who received individualized instruction based on their needs and students receiving standardized instruction.

Once students enter middle school, moving them through more intensive interventions sequentially, like in elementary schools, is less effective; students instead should be placed in interventions based on their current achievement scores (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010). Given these challenges and others, Fuchs et al., (2010) suggest that, “we

consider why differences between elementary and middle school settings may require an alternative conceptualization of RTI at the higher grades” (p. 23). “Thus, it is technically current performance and instructional need rather than “responsive to intervention” that places them [middle school students] in a secondary to tertiary intervention” (Vaughn and Fletcher, 2012, p. 252). This line of reasoning suggests that middle school students with the lowest achievement scores can be placed in the most intensive interventions without going through less intense interventions (Fuchs et al., 2010; Vaughn and Fletcher, 2012). To conclude, there is a need to better understand RTI implementation at the middle school level, as middle school “represents a crucial point in a student’s academic career, laying the foundation for successful completion of high school” (Johnson & Smith, 2008, p. 46).

### **Effectiveness in Middle Schools**

While many researchers have examined the effectiveness of RTI at the elementary level, (e.g. Kamps et al., 2007; Howe, Roston, Sheu, & Hinojosa, 2013; Simons, et al., 2008), there are only a few studies that focus on the effectiveness of RTI at the middle school. There is also conflicting evidence about the effectiveness of RTI at the middle school level. King, Lemons, & Hill (2012), for example, conclude that RTI at the middle school level has not resulted in significant improvements in student achievement as reported at the elementary level. In contrast, Johnson and Smith (2008) and Vaughn et al. (2011) believe that RTI has the potential to meet the academic needs of middle school students. Graves and her colleagues’ (2011) study, for example, describes a significant statistical difference in oral reading fluency between the treatment and control groups placed in Tier 2 interventions. In

another study, students receiving Tier 2 interventions out-performed their peers in a comparison condition; however, their gains were small and the results were not statistically significant over the course of the school year (Vaughn et al., 2011).

Another study conducted at the middle school level revealed that when students receive reading interventions, students' comprehension level increased, demonstrating that middle school students identified as having a reading disability can benefit from interventions provided within the RTI framework (Edmonds et al., 2009; Scammacca et al. 2007). Faggella-Luby and Wardwell (2011) conducted a study in an urban Connecticut middle school with a population of 68% free and reduced lunch recipients. The researchers identified 81 fifth and sixth graders as below grade level in reading. These students received a research-based intervention for 30 minutes two to three times per week for 18 weeks. The students in the intervention were able to show an ability to learn reading comprehension skills. Faggella-Luby and Wardwell's study also revealed considerable problems with the implementation of RTI, such as a lack of professional development and district level support. In addition, because participating teachers were not willing to embrace new ideas associated with RTI, there was a lack of buy-in from the staff, and the Tier 2 interventions were not as intense as expected.

## **The Positive Behavior Intervention and Support Framework**

### **Overview**

Algozzine and Algozzine (2007) stated, "addressing increasing levels of disruptive behaviors is a national matter," because disruptive behavior severely affects the classroom (p.

29). Thus, in order for students to learn, the classroom must be free of negative interactions and distractions as disruptive behaviors interrupt instruction and have a detrimental effect on teaching and learning (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abott, & Hill, 1999). In addition, a recent study reported that some teachers spend less time working with disruptive students, which may impede the academic progress of these particular students (Sprague & Perkins, 2009).

Designed to allow K–12 educators the ability to create processes and procedures that allow for teaching school-wide behavioral expectations (Bradshaw et al., 2012), PBIS is a framework that allows educators to use research-based strategies in order to decrease disruptive behavior and promote and maintain an orderly and safe school.

### **Core Features**

PBIS is a preventative model designed to identify students exhibiting antisocial behaviors in order to provide them with the necessary support and interventions to establish appropriate replacement behaviors (Sailor et al., 2007). The goal of the PBIS framework is to create school-wide improvement by creating a positive environment through positive changes in both the students and the staff (Bradshaw et al., 2009). By implementing research-based behavioral science, multi-tiered interventions that offer more intensive support according to student needs, commitment to practical, long-term outcomes, and a system of support that allows for the sustainability of PBIS within a school, undesirable student behaviors diminish (Dunlap, Sailor, Horner, & Sugai (2009). George et al., (2009) have identified seven core features of PBIS:

1. A committed team leading all PBIS efforts,
2. Positively stated school-wide behavior expectations and rules,
3. A method for identifying current problems through on-going self-assessment,
4. Lesson plans to teach expected behaviors,
5. Procedures for encouraging expected behaviors,
6. Procedures for discouraging violations of school-wide expectations and rules, and
7. A plan for monitoring implementation and effectiveness. (p. 198)

Additionally, utilizing data to monitor the behavioral progress of students is an important aspect of the PBIS framework (Sugai & Horner, 2009).

## **Implementation**

The proper implementation of PBIS is determined by measuring the extent to which the school has incorporated the aforementioned core features (Bradshaw et al., 2009). PBIS has three tiers of support that are aimed at curtailing inappropriate behaviors (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). Tier 1 includes universal support for all students and is often identified as primary prevention (Horner et al., 2010). The last two tiers are to provide layered support for students that are nonresponsive to primary prevention layers, as such Tier 2 provides more targeted interventions and Tier 3 provides intensive supports (Horner et al., 2010).

**Tier 1.** Implementation of PBIS begins with Tier 1 and includes incorporating the core features of PBIS school-wide for the entire school day and targeting every student (Horner et al., 2010). The first step to implement PBIS Tier 1 is to develop a team, usually

consisting of a school level administrator, general education teachers, special education teachers, a school counselor or school psychologist, and teacher assistants or other instructional support personnel (George et al., 2009). The second step involves examining the school environment and determining how behavior expectations will be taught. PBIS emphasizes direct instruction of the school's behavioral expectations, with the understanding that students must first experience the interventions in order to benefit from them (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). According to McCurdy, Mannella, and Eldridge (2003), to decrease student behavior, schools must:

1. Ensure students have a clear understanding of the school's behavioral expectations,
2. Have rules,
3. Clearly state rules,
4. Consistently enforce rules, and
5. Not punish students when they do not understand the behavioral expectations.

In addition to setting behavioral expectations, there must be a reward system set up to acknowledge students who meet the expected behavior expectations (Horner et al., 2010).

The final steps in implementing Tier 1 include data collection and training. Step three of the Tier 1 implementation is to collect data to guide decision-making (Horner et al., 2010). Data collected should include the amount of rewards distributed to students for meeting set expectations, academic achievement, and the number of office discipline referrals (ODRs) (Lassen et al., 2006). Finally, the last and one of the most important steps is to provide training to all staff members and follow-up training each subsequent school

year. It is important to train the entire school staff, including teachers, office staff, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers and to have a minimum of 80% of the staff agree to support all Tier 1 practices (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010).

**Tier 2.** Students needing Tier 2 supports receive more structured behavioral interventions. These interventions are implemented in small groups and must include:

1. Year-long interventions that are available to all students and allow them to enter and exit as needed;
2. Interventions that are implemented the same for all students;
3. Interventions that entail little assessment of students before implementation;
4. Interventions that involve limited resources to implement;
5. Interventions that take no more than 10 minutes per day when implemented with students (Crone, Hawken, & Horner, 2010); and
6. Interventions that support multiple students with few resources, making them cost-effective (Crone et al., 2010; March & Horner, 2002; McIntosh, Campbell, Carter, & Dickey, 2009).

**Tier 3.** Tier 3 includes about 1% to 5% of the school's student population and includes students that are high risk for developing behavior problems. In this tier students receive interventions from both Tier 1 and Tier 2 in addition to outside community resources that often involve the entire family (Horner et al., 2009; Muscott et al., 2004; Tillery, Varjas, Meyers, & Collins, 2010). Students already identified as having emotional or behavioral

disabilities (EBD) or exhibit extreme behaviors and are at risk for developing EBD need not move through PBIS Tiers 1 and 2 to be placed in Tier 3 (Wagner et al., 2006).

About 10% to 15% of the school's student population is moved through tiers based on their individual risk level. Again, ODRs are reviewed to determine a student's risk level, as it has been determined as the most appropriate measure to determine risk level (McIntosh et al., 2009; Sugai et al., 2000). Sugai et al. (2000) points out that students who have received zero to one ODR are at a very low risk for behavioral problems, students receiving two to five ODRs are at moderate risk, and students receiving six or more ODRs are at high risk. In addition to looking at the number of ODRs a student has obtained, the student must have committed multiple types of behavioral violations.

**Logic Model.** Table 2 illustrates the logic model underlying the PBIS framework. Table 2 describes the resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes that are associated with implementing PBIS with fidelity. Resources needed to successfully implement PBIS include: providing professional development for teachers, teaching tools and resources, discipline data, processes to identify students not exhibiting prosocial behavior, and a PBIS team. Activities related to PBIS implementation consist of creating a safe orderly school environment, collaborating between teachers and support staff, and providing interventions daily. Once identified students receive the appropriate interventions, the expected outcomes are a decrease in in-school and out-of-school suspensions, an increase in student achievement, and an increase in positive student interactions. Outcomes also include a



decrease in students being retained in a grade, an increase in high school graduation rates, and an increase in college acceptance.

Table 2.

*PBIS Logic Model*

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short – Mid-Term Outcomes	Impact Long-Term Outcomes
PBIS team (Team Leader)	PBIS is a framework that identifies students with antisocial school behaviors and provide them with interventions to support them all while creating an orderly and safe school environment	At risk students receive interventions needed to be successful.	Decrease in student in-school and out-of-school suspensions.	Decrease students being retained in a grade
Teachers				
Teaching tools/resources			Increase student achievement	Increase high school graduation rate
Discipline data			Increase positive student interactions	Increase student acceptance into college
Professional development for teachers				
Instrument/process to identify at-risk students	Collaborate to analyze data, and group students for interventions			
	Provide year-long interventions daily to 15% – 20% of the student body			

Table 2 illustrates components of the PBIS framework to include the resources and activities needed and short-term and long-term outcomes that are associated with implementing PBIS. To produce the desired outcomes the activities and outputs must be implemented with fidelity.

### **Effectiveness**

The PBIS framework is designed to not only provide a safe and orderly environment, but to also teach students appropriate social skills required to be successful in a school setting. If the school staff focuses on teaching students replacement behaviors, fewer disruptions in the classroom should occur, which in turn increases learning in the classroom (Sailor et al., 2007). Further, because students that miss classroom instruction due to in-school or out-of-school suspensions because of behavior issues are still held accountable and are required to take the end-of-year exams, having students learn replacement behaviors allows them to receive the appropriate amount of instruction, which has a positive effect on individual and overall student academic achievement (Horner et al., 2004; Lessen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; Sailor et al., 2007).

### **PBIS in North Carolina**

Schools in North Carolina began implementing PBIS during the 2000–2001 school year as part of the North Carolina State Improvement Program after receiving a grant aimed at professional development of school personnel and system change. A behavioral support center was piloted in Durham Public Schools at Oak Grove Elementary, a school with

approximately 950 students who were predominantly African-American. During the first year of PBIS implementation, Oak Grove suspended 109 students for a total of 149 days (Irwin & Algozzine, 2005). According to Irwin and Algozzine (2005), Oak Grove's suspensions decreased to 51 students being suspended for 109 days, and the school experienced an approximate 30% decrease in ODRs at the conclusion of the second year of implementation.

Durham Public Schools adopted the PBIS program across their system at the start of the 2002–2003 school year, and in subsequent years many other school districts began to follow suit. By 2009, 93% of the counties in North Carolina began implementing PBIS (Reynolds et al., 2009). North Carolina's vision is that “all schools in North Carolina will implement Positive Behavior [Intervention] and Support as an effective and proactive process for improving social competence and academic achievement for all students” (NCDPI, 2014). According to NCDPI, currently 100% of the local education agencies have at least one school implementing PBIS (2014). North Carolina has lower ODRs and suspensions when compared to the national averages, and more PBIS schools across North Carolina had an above average performance on end-of-year exams when compared to the state averages (Reynolds, 2011).

### **PBIS in Middle Schools**

PBIS is a preventative framework aimed at identifying students early. If students are identified as having behavior problems and taught replacement behaviors in elementary school, then ideally students will be successful in middle school. However, this is not always

the case as middle school is a huge transition for students and “often blamed for the increase in behavioral problems among young teens and cited as the cause of teens’ alienation, disengagement from school, and low [academic] achievement” (Juvone et al., 2004, p. 1). NCDPI reported close to 85,000 suspensions involving middle school students during the 2012–2013 school year. In addition, North Carolina middle schools reported 2,809 reportable offenses including 1,034 students in possession of a weapon, 1,095 possessions of a controlled substance, 266 possessions of alcohol, 257 assaults on school personnel, 25 assaults involving a weapon, and 24 sexual offenses. Certainly, these data indicate a need for PBIS implementation at the middle school level.

A PBIS study conducted The University of Oregon Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior included a total of six middle schools, three treatment schools and three comparison schools (Sprague et al., 2001). The goal of the one year study was to assist the treatment schools with providing better behavioral education and supports to teach sixth to eighth grade students appropriate social skills in a school setting. On average the treatment schools had 595.33 students enrolled, with 6.97% identified as minorities and 39.87% receiving free and reduced lunch. The comparison schools averaged 695 students, with 14.9% identified as minorities and 37.27% receiving free and reduced lunch. This study included approximately 20 hours of formal PBIS training, 25 to 40 hours of planning and problem-solving assistance, and eight hours of training on the Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum. By the end of the year, the number of discipline referrals for the treatment schools decreased an average of 36% (ranging from -18% to -53%) and increased 82% in the comparison schools (ranging from -39% to +203%). Though there was a lack of

a true experimental control and complex measures, the results of this study show that with proper training and implementation of behavioral research-based interventions schools can make changes in school practices that will have a positive impact on student behaviors (Sprague et al., 2001). Other studies of PBIS in the middle school setting have shown similar successes, citing that once implemented, PBIS not only decreases antisocial behaviors, but transforms the overall school culture as well (Caldarella et al., 2011; Shah, 2012; Zehr, 2011).

Caldarella et al.'s (2011) study evaluated how school-wide PBIS would affect the overall school climate and student outcomes in a middle school setting. This was a quasi-experimental study that looked at two schools in the western United States. One school implemented PBIS for four years, while the other school (the control group) did not implement PBIS. Data from over 300 teachers and 10,000 middle school students showed a significant difference in the overall school climate of the treatment school. The school that implemented PBIS reported less office discipline referrals, an increase in student attendance, and positive reports regarding the overall school climate in the treatment school, while the control school remained the same or worsened.

Shah (2012) writes about Haut Middle School's implementation of PBIS. Haut Gap implemented PBIS in 2007 after failing to meet South Carolina's state standards regarding adequate yearly progress for several years. To implement PBIS, Haut Gap established their own set of student behavioral expectations based on their data and a process for rewarding students for positive behaviors. Students at Haut Gap were enrolled in a 40 minute nine to

eighteen week course to teach these expectations. After implementing PBIS, student achievement at Haut Gap increased, enrollment improved, and student discipline problems decreased. In fact, during the initial implementation of PBIS in 2007, Haut Gap reported 170 out-of-school suspensions with just 250 students in attendance. In 2011, four years later, Haut Gap reported less than 100 out-of-school suspensions and had close to 500 students enrolled.

Zehr's (2011) study focuses on a Washington area middle school that implemented a PBIS Tier 2 intervention for 20 students. Each day the students were rated on a scale of 0–2 (2 being the highest) in five different areas: promptness, preparedness, politeness, positive attitude, and productiveness. At the end of each day, the students reported to a staff member that recorded the data electronically. Teachers of these 20 students reported positive outcomes, stating that the students were making great improvements in their behaviors.

### **Alternatives to PBIS**

Alternatives to PBIS that have been implemented in schools across the country include Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) (Lane-Garon, Yergat, & Kralowec, 2012) and mediation (Wisner, Jones, & Gwin, 2010). CRE programs are implemented through direct instruction, peer mediation, and embedded curriculum (Garrard & Lipsey, 2007) and focus on teaching students to recognize conflict and utilize skills to manage conflict in a productive manner; an essential life skill (Jones, 2004). More specifically, CRE program objectives are to:

(a) make children aware of the different choices they have besides passivity or aggression for dealing with conflicts, (b) help children develop skills for making those choices real in their own lives, (c) encourage children's respect for their own culture and those of others, (d) teach children how to identify and stand against prejudice, and (e) make children aware of their role in creating a more peaceful world. (Aber, Brown, & Jones, p. 326)

The idea behind CRE is that when students become more aware and emotionally invested in each other's well-being, a positive and supportive school environment is established allowing for learning to take place, thus improving student academic achievement (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

Mediation is also used to create a positive school environment and improve student achievement. Meditation techniques such as relaxation response, mindfulness, and transcendental have been implemented in school-settings to decrease stress and anxiety and increase focus and academic performance among adolescents (Wisner et al., 2010). Mediation involves "stilling" the mind to allow students to concentrate and refocus when necessary, doing so allows students to gain control over their mind and bodies (Fisher, 2006).

While these models are popular, they do not require systematic change in a school setting because they are not comprehensive frameworks. While these models are effective, they are not the focus of this study which focuses on comprehensive frameworks that are increasingly pervasive. Also, because PBIS and RTI demand considerable resources (e.g. data systems and analysis, training, restructuring of the school day), we must understand how

to implement them effectively to ensure that school resources are being committed to effective programs.

### **Similarities and Differences of RTI and PBIS**

RTI and PBIS are both popular frameworks being implemented across the U.S. Though RTI has been widely used to address academic concerns, especially in reading, and PBIS is implemented to address behavioral concerns, the frameworks are similar in a number of ways. PBIS encompasses many features of RTI (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2010; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Fuchs et al., 2003; Kame'enui, 2007; Severson, Walker, Hope-Doolittle, Kratochwill, & Gresham, 2007; Sugai & Horner, 2006). Seven similarities are listed below. Sugai and Horner (2009) recognize six of the seven listed below:

1. Universal screening: Learner performance and progress should be reviewed on a regular basis and in a systematic manner to identify students who are (a) making adequate progress, (b) at some risk of failure if not provided extra assistance, or (c) at high risk of failure if not provided specialized supports (p. 2).
2. Data-based decision-making and problem-solving: Information that directly reflects student learning based on measurable and relevant learning criteria and outcomes should be used to guide decisions regarding instructional effectiveness, student responsiveness, and intervention adaptations and modifications (p. 2).



3. Continuous progress monitoring: Student progress should be assessed on a frequent and regular basis to identify adequate or inadequate growth trends and support timely instructional decisions (p. 2).
4. Student performance: Priority should be given to use an actual student performance on the instructional curriculum to guide decisions regarding teaching effectiveness and learning progress (p. 2).
5. Continuum of evidence-based interventions: An integrated and linked curriculum should be available such that:
  - a. A core curriculum is provided for all students,
  - b. A modification of its core is arranged for students who are identified as nonresponsive, and
  - c. A specialized and intensive curriculum is developed for students whose performance is deemed nonresponsive to the modified core. Elements of this continuum must have empirical evidence to support efficacy (intervention is linked to outcome), effectiveness (intervention outcomes are achievable and replicable in applied settings), relevant (intervention can be implemented by natural implementers and with high fidelity), and durable (intervention implementation is sustainable and student outcomes are durable). (p. 2)
6. Implementation fidelity: Team-based structures and procedures are in place to ensure and coordinate appropriate adoption, and accurate and sustained implementation of the full continuum of intervention practices (p. 2).

7. Problem-solving model: Both RTI and PBIS utilize a problem-solving model, which is a systematic approach that uncovers the strengths and weaknesses of students, provides students with research-based interventions, involves monitoring the progress of students using frequently collected data to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions (NCDPI, 2014; Fuchs et al., 2003; Searle, 2010). NCDPI has adopted the Team Initiated Problem-Solving Model (TIPS) developed by Steve Newton, Rob Horner, and Ann Todd of the University of Oregon and Bob Algozzine and Kate Algozzine of the University of North Carolina in Charlotte. According to Searle (2010), there are two advantages to using the TIPS model. First, educators have flexibility when implementing interventions; therefore, interventions are able to be adapted to meet the needs of individual students. Second, stronger staff buy-in is achieved as the model has a team approach, and teachers and staff have an opportunity to give direct input throughout the process.

Although RTI and PBIS share key features, they are not one and the same, as RTI allows educators to focus on how an individual student compares to peers and PBIS uses the entire school as the unit of analysis. However, the major difference is the primary focus of each framework, RTI focuses on academic achievement and PBIS focuses on decreasing undesirable student behavior.

### **Effectiveness of Concurrent Implementation of Academic and Behavior Programs**

We know very little about the concurrent implementation and effectiveness of academic and behavior reforms. Algozzine et al. (2012) conducted a study that explored the

effects of providing three-tiered behavior and reading interventions to students in kindergarten through third grade that were identified as below grade level in reading and difficult to teach. The selected schools had populations that varied from 400 to 800. The researchers introduced research-based interventions designed to increase reading ability and teach students appropriate social skills. School-wide workshops and continuous professional development were employed that focused on developing consistent classroom rules and taking a positive approach to managing student behaviors. The researchers “had a system in place that enabled project staff to regularly check levels of engagement in all classrooms in the school, support teacher efforts to teach behavior to all students, and connect outside resources with classroom needs” (Algozzine et al., 2012, p. 49). Reading interventions were assigned to students who were identified as below grade level. Students were moved through the tiers based on their individual needs. The data collected from schools at the beginning of the study showed that the number of students with behavioral and/or academic difficulties were above average; however, as time went on, the schools began implementing interventions with higher fidelity and as a result there were “positive system-level changes” (Algozzine, 2012, p. 58). There was a statistically significant decrease in the number of office discipline referrals, an overall increase in student reading scores on the third grade state test, and an improvement in the overall school climate. To ensure successful implementation, Algozzine et al. (2012) concur that “most researchers recommend that schools considering adoption of such activities should assess their “readiness for change” and stakeholder “buy-in” prior to embarking on the activities similar to those implemented in our project” (p. 60).

While the aforementioned study explored the implementation of concurrent academic and behavior interventions, which are aspects of RTI and PBIS respectively, the researchers did not state whether or not the schools participating in the study had implemented RTI and PBIS as a school-wide reform. In fact, it was stated that the unit of analyses in Algozzine et al.'s study were the students that were selected at random. As such, this study will be different in that it will explore schools that are currently implementing RTI and PBIS concurrently school-wide. In addition, this study's focus is on implementation at the middle school level.

### **Systemic Change**

Reigeluth (1994) define two types of educational change: (1) piecemeal change, which involves a change in the current education paradigm, and (2) systemic change, which involves transforming the current education paradigm into a new paradigm. RTI and other school-wide reforms, like PBIS, require a school to change the paradigm of education from solely teaching a group of students to meeting the needs of individual students. Tilly (2006) states that “[RTI] is more about evolution than it is about revolution” (p. 1). The problem school leaders face is how to go about a systemic change in education.

According to Reigeluth and Squire (2000), there are four different definitions of systemic change in education: statewide, districtwide, school-wide, and ecological. Statewide systemic change involves changing policies at the state level to create consistency throughout the state and thus improve the state's educational system. Districtwide systemic change entails ensuring that leaders within a school district have the same vision; therefore,

any change must be implemented throughout the entire district. Examples of districtwide programs, given by Reigeluth and Squire, are transportation, athletics, and child nutrition programs. School-wide systemic change includes changes that occur within the school building, such as scheduling and processes for assessing students. Ecological systemic changes involve understanding the culture of the stakeholders and the system's environment, as "ecological systems thinkers also believe that a system can be understood only by viewing it from multiple perspectives" (p. 145).

This study will focus on school-wide systemic change, as the implementation of both RTI and PBIS allow schools to develop systems to respond to their individual school context. School-wide systemic change can be compared to organizational change, as cited in Lewis (2011), Zorn et al. (1999) defined organizational change as "any alteration or modification of organizational structures or processes" (p. 26). Structures and processes that change because of the implementation of RTI and PBIS include providing continuous professional development, adjusting the school's schedule, implementing research-based interventions, placing students in appropriate tiers, monitoring student progress, and reviewing and analyzing data. Further, this study will be guided by Joseph and Reigeluth's (2010) systemic change framework.

Joseph and Reigeluth (2010) developed a conceptual framework of systemic change grounded in the literature on systems theory, specifically soft systems theory and critical systems theory. Soft systems thinking is an approach developed by system design scholars as a more effective way to solve problems found in social systems (Joseph & Reigeluth,

2010). Critical systems thinking allows a person to make comparisons of ideas, methods and theories of the systematic change process currently being implemented and “strives to build a sense of social awareness in a person, so as to enhance their understanding of the cultural and climate of the system that will most likely have an effect on the systemic change process” (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010, p. 6). According to Joseph and Reigeluth’s (2010) conceptual framework for systemic change, the six key features for any systemic change to be successful are:

1. broad stakeholder ownership,
2. systems view of education,
3. evolving mindsets about education,
4. understanding the systemic change process,
5. systems design, and
6. learning community. (p. 7)

### **Broad Stakeholder Ownership**

Stakeholders in a school community include school staff, students, parents, and community leaders. Broad stakeholder ownership stretches beyond the aforementioned group by including all persons within the community such as business leaders, members of local government, and everyday citizens, as educating children is important for the development of the entire community (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Every member of the

community should work to ensure that the children in their community receive the best education possible in order to better their community and society in general (Clinton, 1996; Goodlad, 2002). Furthermore, as cited in Joseph and Reigeluth (2010), Banathy (1996) states:

When it comes to the design of social and societal systems of all kinds, it is the users, the people in the system, who are the experts. Nobody has the right to design societal systems for someone else. It is unethical to design social systems for someone else. Design cannot be legislated, they should not be bought from the expert, and it should not be copied from the design of others. If the privilege of and the responsibility for design is “given away,” others will take charge of designing our lives and our systems. They will shape our future. (p. 228)

According to Joseph and Reigeluth (2010), it is imperative that stakeholders from diverse backgrounds collaborate in order for a systemic change to occur.

### **Systems View**

Educators have often used the piecemeal method of evaluating isolated elements such as student achievement data, parent involvement, and suspension rates to uncover why schools are failing to meet standards of adequate progress (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Instead, school leaders must learn to look at the system in its entirety. Banathy (1992) explains systems view and how it relates to the systemic change process: “the systems view helps us to understand the true nature of education as a complex, open, and dynamic human

activity system that operates in ever-changing multiple environments and interacts with a variety of societal systems” (p. 17). Developing a systems view of education requires studying a variety of systems and their inner workings and internalizing the system’s common concepts so they can be applied to everyday situations (Banathy, 1992).

Models have been developed to allow for easier interpretation and explanation of various systems such as education (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). The systems-environment model helps uncover existing and future relationships that the school has with its community; the functions/structure model examines the education system at any given point in time, and the process model analyzes the behaviors of a system over time (Banathy, 1992). Another way to aid stakeholder understanding of education systems is the use of metaphors, as metaphors can help evolve the thinking of others (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). “Helping educational stakeholders to acquire a systems view of education by helping them work with systems models and organizational metaphors facilitate the major work of the systems change process: evolving mindsets” (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010, p. 17).

### **Evolving Mindsets**

Something that everyone has in common is the United States is school (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Everyone has attended school at some point in their life. Therefore, people have an ingrained idea of what school is and how education should be facilitated. This mindset hinders the process of systemic change as the much needed paradigm shift in education cannot take place until the mindsets of individuals regarding education is changed (Senge, 2000). “As a society our minds are set in an educational system that is now



obsolete” (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010, p. 17). While changing someone else’s way of thinking seems impossible, it is critical in the process of systemic change (Caine & Caine, 1997; Jenlink, 1995 as cited in Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010).

### **Understanding the Systemic Change Process**

Before change in any system can occur, all involved stakeholders engaged in systemic change must have an understanding of what the systemic change process is and what it entails. Joseph and Reigeluth (2010) outline four important elements to understanding the systemic change process:

1. “The ultimate goal of any systemic change process is to invent an educational system where all teachers succeed at helping students succeed” (p. 18).
2. Changing an educational system involves changing the mindsets of others (Caine & Caine, 1997; Jenlink, 1995 as cited in Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010).
3. Small process teams (5–6 stakeholders) must be utilized to carry out the steps of systemic process change (Caine & Caine, 1997; Jenlink et al. 1998 as cited in Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010).
4. Communication and effective dialogue are key.

### **Systems Design**

Creating a systems design in schools means disregarding obsolete educational practices and replacing them with the ideal design (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). This entails:

1. Transcending the existing system and leaving it behind.

2. Envisioning an image of the system that we wish to create.
3. Designing the system, which, when implemented, transforms the existing state to the desired future state.
4. Presenting/displaying the model(s) of the system we design.
5. Planning for the implementation of the design. (Banathy, 1996, p. 61 as cited in Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010)

Banathy (1991) encourages the system design by stakeholders, remarking “systems design is most successful, it’s most viable and productive, and commitments to implementing the design are most binding, when it is directed by the users of the future system rather than by outside experts” (p. 166).

### **Learning Community**

A learning organization or community is what an organization strives to become and should utilize organizational learning to reach its goals, as organizational learning “focuses on developing common understandings, honesty, and trust through dialogue, sharing, and managing the inevitable conflict involved” (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010, p. 21). Becoming a learning organization is imperative to understanding the systems change process (Darling-Hammond, 1996; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 1993, 2001; Senge, 1990). Senge (1990) lists seven things that can keep an organization from becoming a learning organization or community:

1. I am my position: When people in organizations focus only on their position, they have little sense of responsibility for the results produced when all positions interact (p. 19).
2. The enemy is out there: There is in each of us a propensity to find someone or something outside ourselves to blame when things go wrong (p. 19).
3. The illusion of taking charge: All too often, “reactiveness” is reactivity in disguise. If we simply become more aggressive fighting the “enemy out there,” we are now reacting-regardless of what we call it. True reactivity comes from seeing how we contribute to our own problems (p. 21).
4. The fixation on events: Generative learning cannot be sustained in an organization if people’s thinking is dominated by short-term events. If we focus on events, the best we can ever do is predict an event before it happens so that we can react optimally. But we cannot learn to create (p. 22).
5. The parable of the boiled frog: Learning to see slow, gradual processes requires slowing down our frenetic pace and paying attention to the subtle as well as a dramatic (p. 23)
6. The delusion of learning from experience: Herein lies the core learning dilemma that confronts organizations: we learn best from experience but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions (p. 23).
7. The myth of the management team: All too often, teams and business tend to spend their time fighting for turf, avoiding anything that will make them look bad

personally, and pretending that everyone is behind the teams collective strategy-maintaining their appearance of a cohesive team (p. 24).

### **Systemic Change in Practice**

“Reform leadership in public education is tumultuous work that produces storms of various kinds. It’s probably not possible to lead from outside these storms” (Thompson, 2005, p. 8). Change, particularly in education is daunting. As Fullan (1985) explains:

Change takes place over time; the initial stages of any significant change always involve anxiety and uncertainty; ongoing technical assistance and psychological support assistance are crucial if the anxiety is to be coped with; change involves learning new skills through practice and feedback ...; the most fundamental breakthrough occurs when people can cognitively understand the underlying conception and rationale with respect to ‘why this new way works better’; organizational conditions within school make it more or less likely that the process will succeed and ... pressure through interaction with peers and their technical and administrative leaders. (p. 396)

In *Experiences in Systemic Change* Thompson (2006) describes the reculturing of Norfolk Public Schools between 1998 and 2005 that led to a substantial increase in student achievement and closing the achievement gap in the predominately African American district. The reculturing was achieved by changing the mindsets of stakeholders through implementing a “no excuses” philosophy, adopting a philosophy of teaching and learning for

all, developing trusting relationships that allow individuals to take risks, changing the role of central office from monitoring schools to supporting them, teaching data-driven decision making, launching a system of shared accountability, and positively engaging the business community (Thompson, 2006, p. 34). One example of the school district's success was the increase in third grade social studies achievement—the student passing rate went from 28% in 1998 to 82% in 2004.

In the aforementioned article, Richter and Reigeluth (2006) describe the systemic change that occurred in the Indianapolis Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township that resulted in a culture of collaboration and leadership that empowered stakeholders to lead. This district's systemic transformation began by developing a partnership with Indiana University in January 2001. The next phase of the transformation involved the development of a leadership team consisting of 25-30 well-regarded leaders from all stakeholder groups. Each stakeholder group was asked to appoint a leader to represent them on the *Starter Team*. This team consisted of the superintendent, a distinguished principal, a highly involved parent, the president of the teachers' association, and a school board member.

The goal of the *Starter Team* was to establish a “culture of shared leadership, stakeholder empowerment, consensus-building, trust and collaboration, and an understanding of systemic change, paradigm shift in society and the systemic change process in education” (p. 36). By January 2006, a framework of “information-age vision, mission and ideal beliefs about education,” was developed and an assessment team was organized to help each school assess their readiness to make the changes required to embody the school district's new

framework (p. 36). This framework was instrumental in changing the culture of this district to a learning-focused school district driven by providing individualized education for all students through the implementation of research-based principles.

It is important to note the commonalities of the two cases described above. First, support from stakeholders was solicited, including outside community leaders. Second, there was careful and strategic planning. Third, the change process included transforming the thinking or mindsets of stakeholders and key personnel. Finally, both school districts focused on creating a learning community through building trusting relationships that allowed all stakeholders to take risks and share their experiences throughout the transformation process. Systemic change takes skill to be able to continuously plan and develop step-by-step processes to facilitate change that may take years to produce results; however, the end result proved to be well worth the effort and time.

It is imperative that school leaders understand systemic change when implementing a comprehensive framework designed to change the school's culture, like RTI and PBIS. The present study explored the implementation of both RTI and PBIS in middle schools. The theory of systemic change will guide this study, as the theory provides guidelines for successfully changing the culture of an organization.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of RTI and PBIS, which included a discussion of each model's core features, best practices for implementation, logic model, and effectiveness. Similarities and differences of RTI and PBIS were also presented. The literature regarding

systemic change in education was presented in this chapter because it will guide this study, allowing us to discern the components of the process of systemic change that were present or absent as schools attempt to concurrently implement RTI and PBIS. The next chapter, Chapter 3, outlines the research design for this study. In particular, Chapter 3 provides details regarding the research design, including: the methodological approach guiding inquiry, site and participant selection, and procedures for data collection and analysis.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Overview**

The purpose of this study is to understand the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. Although there is a plethora of literature about RTI and PBIS individually, especially for elementary schools, we know very little about the concurrent implementation of both frameworks. By focusing on middle schools, this study will contribute to the literature regarding the implementation of these frameworks at the middle school level and expand our understanding of the factors facilitating and impeding the implementation of these two models concurrently.

Consequently, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are middle school teachers' and principals' experiences with the concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?
2. What factors facilitate successful concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?
3. What factors impede successful concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?

This chapter discusses the research methodology. It begins with a description of the research paradigm guiding this inquiry. Then, details about the procedures for selecting the



site and participants are presented. Next, data collection and data analysis procedures are described in detail to establish credibility. Also, explanations about how transferability, dependability, and conformability of the study were achieved are provided. This chapter concludes with the researcher's subjectivity statement, which allows for transparency, as the goal of the study is to report findings based on the data and not researcher bias.

### **Research Design**

According to Creswell (2007), "qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 37). Also, qualitative research is used to produce an in-depth multi-faceted understanding of an event, complex issue, or phenomenon in its real-life context through the participant's point of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Because I sought to understand the experiences of middle school teachers and principals with the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS and provide their view point, a qualitative study was most appropriate.

There are five main approaches that can be taken when conducting qualitative research: narrative study, phenomenology study, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell, 2007). Case study research "involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system" and utilizes "multiple sources of information" in order to achieve a rich description of the topic or problem being explored (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). While case studies have become popular in many of the social sciences, there is support for the use of case study research in the field of education (Creswell, 2007). In fact, Merriam

(1998) suggests that case study research has become quite useful for studying educational innovations. This study explores two widely used educational innovations, RTI and PBIS. RTI is a framework designed to meet the academic needs of all students by providing research-based interventions to them before they fail. PBIS is a framework designed to curtail disruptive behaviors in the school setting by teaching and modeling positive behaviors in schools. Both frameworks have become popular and have been widely implemented in schools throughout North Carolina.

Since the goal of a case study is to provide a comprehensive description of a program, organization, person, or event (Ryan & Bernard, 2010), the case study approach was most appropriate for this study because it describes the experiences of middle school teachers and principals concurrently implementing RTI and PBIS. Each participant described successes and failures of the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS from their perspectives. In addition, according to Yin (2013), case study research is appropriate for present-day issues where the research seeks to explore an in-depth understanding of a topic. Because school leaders are under a great deal of pressure to increase student achievement and decrease undesirable student behaviors, this is a current issue in the field of education.

This is a multiple case study as it sought to examine the real life experiences of educators in three different middle schools within one school district. A multiple case study was selected because multiple case studies are considered to be “more compelling, and they are more likely to lend themselves to valid generalizations” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p.

430). Yin (2003, 2009) agrees that multiple case study designs are stronger than single case studies because a cross-case analysis can be conducted.

### **Site Selection**

To conduct this study, I used both convenience and criteria sampling. Although convenience sampling is considered to be “the least rigorous technique” as it “involves the selection of the most assessable subjects” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523), this type of sampling was used because the school district was ideal for this study as the middle schools have been tasked to implement both RTI and PBIS and all middle schools are at various levels of the implementation process. Additionally, convenience sampling allowed for the school district, state, and national context to be constant, permitting the researcher to focus on school-level factors, such as stakeholder involvement in decision making, that facilitated or impeded concurrent implementation. In addition, as an employee of the district, I was able to take on an insider’s, or emic perspective. An advantage of being an insider is that I was able to gather information through natural conversation as I was able to connect with the participants (Morey & Luthans, 1984) and establish a level of trust more easily than an outsider. Criteria sampling was also used as each of the participating schools in this study were required to have implemented both RTI and PBIS frameworks.

### **Participants**

The school district is located in a rural area in North Carolina and consists of seventeen schools. Within the county there are eight elementary schools, four middle schools, three high schools, a small alternative school, and an early college high school.

There are currently 8,614 students enrolled in the district's schools. This study focused on three middle schools within the district that were charged with fully implementing both RTI and PBIS. During the 2013–2014 school year, NCDPI reports that the average middle school population within this school district was 518 students and an average student attendance rate of 95%, just one percentage point less than the state. The average number of middle school teachers in this district is 34, with 89% in the district being fully licensed. In 2013–2014, 23% of middle school teachers held advanced degrees and three had the title of National Board Certified Teachers. During the year the study was conducted, the state reports teacher turnover rate as 15%, this district exceeded that rate having 23% teacher turnover. Principals in the school district had a 7% turnover rate in 2013–2014, and 56% of the principals had 4 to 10 years of experience.

The most recent NCPDI School Report Card for this school district, the 2013–2014 school year, highlights both academic and behavioral standings. During the 2013–2014 school year, this district was lower than the state overall in both reading and math end-of-grade tests at the middle school level. The NCDPI School Report Card shows a significant difference between White students and their African American and Hispanic peers in academic achievement. NCDPI also issues reports regarding school safety which includes reportable acts of violence that occur on school grounds, at the bus stops, or at other school sponsored activities. As it relates to middle schools, there were, per 100 students, 0.78 violent acts in the district, but 0.85 offenses in the state. In addition, short-term suspensions in this district, per 100 students, were 14.45 and there were no expulsions.

Participants of this study were selected based on their involvement in the implementation of RTI and/or PBIS in their schools. Participants in this study include principals and other school personnel that have assumed a leadership role in implementing both RTI and/or PBIS at their schools. I conducted individual interviews with the principals of each school. I also conducted individual interviews with two members of the schools' RTI and PBIS teams, one being the chair/team leader; the other a team member. Three focus groups were conducted, one at each school, consisting of three to six teachers. Additionally, all middle school teachers at the participating schools were given the opportunity to take an anonymous questionnaire to express their experiences with implementing both RTI and PBIS. Each participant was given an informed consent statement to sign describing the study, the selection criteria, any risks and benefits, and an explanation of how confidentiality will be maintained.

### **Data Collection**

In order to obtain a thick, rich description of the phenomenon being studied, data were collected from various sources (principals, RTI and PBIS team members, and teachers), and through different methods (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and documents) (Creswell, 2007). In order to minimize the risk of participants reporting that their school failed to implement certain aspects of RTI and/or PBIS, it was important to maintain confidentiality throughout this study. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to each school and those participating in face-to-face interviews and the focus groups. In addition, password protected digital audio recordings were transcribed after each interview and transcripts were stored in North Carolina State University (NCSU) Google

Drive, which is deemed secure for data with this sensitivity level, to prevent unauthorized access. Questionnaires remained anonymous; however, data from the questionnaires were transferred and stored in NCSU Google Drive as well. Documents were also collected to provide background information for the district and each school and stored in a locked file cabinet in my office. Table 3 describes the sources of data and the instrument used to answer each research question.

Table 3.

*Data Collection*

Research Question	Source	Method
What are middle school teachers' and principals' experiences with the concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?	Principals	Individual Interviews
	RTI Team Leader	Individual Interviews
	RTI Team Member	Individual Interviews
	PBIS Team Leader	Individual Interviews
	PBIS Team Member	Individual Interviews
	Teachers	Focus Group and Questionnaire
What factors facilitate successful concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?	Principals	Individual Interviews
	RTI Team Leader	Individual Interviews
	RTI Team Member	Individual Interviews
	PBIS Team Leader	Individual Interviews
	PBIS Team Member	Individual Interviews
	Teachers	Focus Group and Questionnaire
	Documents	Document Collection
What factors impede successful concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?	Principals	Individual Interviews
	RTI Team Leader	Individual Interviews
	RTI Team Member	Individual Interviews
	PBIS Team Leader	Individual Interviews
	PBIS Team Member	Individual Interviews
	Teachers	Focus Group and Questionnaire
	Documents	Document Collection

**Individual Interviews**

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) were conducted. According to Ryan and Bernard (2010) semi-structured interviews are conducted by asking each participant a similar set of questions. The questions were based on the research questions

and Joseph and Reigeluth's systemic change theory. Prompts were open-ended to allow the interviewer to probe and ask clarifying questions (Ryan & Bernard, 2010; Gay & Airasian, 2003). Interviews were conducted using an interview protocol (Appendix A) to ensure consistency throughout the data collection process. Interview questions were provided to each interviewee in advance in order to allow for more thoughtful responses and all interviews, with the exception of one, were conducted at each individual's school, at a time convenient to them, to maximize the level of comfort of each participant. One interview was conducted off-site at the request of the participant. According to Patton (2002), interviews are conducted to allow the researcher obtain an understanding of the interviewee's perspective, thus it is imperative that the interviewer remain an active listener throughout the entire interview process. In order to guarantee an understanding of the questions being asked during the interviews, I conducted a trial interview with a principal that did not participate in this study. The interviews lasted an average of 31 minutes, the longest lasting 67 minutes and the shortest 20 minutes. Some interviewees were more prepared than others, having prewritten answers to the questions, which were sent three to five days in advance. Also, some questions were able to be skipped as the answers to those questions were addressed within the context of a question posed earlier. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher in preparation for analysis and to assist in data interpretation and ensure accuracy (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).



## **Focus Group**

A focus group is a group interview that relies on the interaction of the participants in order to obtain data that would be less accessible without a group interaction (Morgan, 1997). All teachers at the participating schools were invited to participate in a focus group interview (Appendix F) to discuss their experiences with the implementation of RTI and PBIS. A disadvantage of a focus group is that some participants may dominate the discussion while others simply agree and not fully express their thoughts and ideas (Ryan & Bernard, 2010). The focus groups lasted an average of nine minutes, the longest lasting 17 minutes and the shortest five minutes. Shorter responses were due to the participants not giving elaborate answers. For example, when asked about the frequency of training, one participant would respond, “rarely”, and another concur stating, “there’s just been so many changes”. Each focus group was recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim by the researcher in preparation for analysis and to assist in data interpretation and ensure accuracy (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

## **Questionnaires**

A questionnaire/survey “is a system for collecting information from or about people to describe, compare, or explain their knowledge, attitudes, and behavior” (Fink, 2003, p. 1). All teachers at participating schools were invited to complete a questionnaire (Appendix D) to document their experiences with implementing RTI and PBIS. There are both advantages and disadvantages of conducting questionnaires. One advantage of using questionnaires is that the ideas of a large population can be gathered very easily. The use of a questionnaire,

in this particular study, allowed information to be gathered from all the teachers in the school easily and in a short period of time. The ability to obtain numerous teacher responses allowed for a richer description of the data, necessary to capture true and accurate experiences of teachers. The major disadvantage of using a questionnaire is that some of the participants may not be able to relate to some of the questions asked. Using an open-ended questionnaire lets “respondents describe the world as they see it, rather than as the questioner does” (Fink, 2003, p. 17). The questionnaire was presented to the teachers at a team or staff meeting, depending on the preference of the school. It was made clear that participation in the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. Those participating were given a ticket that was entered into a drawing. As an incentive to participate, a number was drawn at each school for a \$10 Target® gift card.

## **Documents**

Documents related to the implementation of RTI and PBIS (such as PBIS School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET)) and student data were analyzed. In addition, I asked the RTI team to complete a RTI implementation rubric to help identify where their school was in regards to the implementation of RTI: emerging, developing, operationalizing, or optimizing (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). Document analysis included each schools current achievement and discipline data, reported by North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and other related artifacts. I also looked at past data, where available, in order to depict an accurate picture of whether or not the school has seen an increase in academic achievement or a decrease in behavioral issues as a result of implementing RTI and PBIS in order to provide contextual information.

## **Data Analysis**

Data collected from the participants and documents were all analyzed and used to articulate findings (Patton, 2002). According to Creswell (2007), data analysis in a case study begins with giving a thorough description of the case and the setting. Thus, analysis started by describing the schools and the approach each school has taken to implement both RTI and PBIS. Due to the size of the district, I approached this carefully to maintain confidentiality. Pseudonyms were also assigned to each school. I followed Creswell's (2003) six steps to analyze the data: 1) organize the data, 2) read through the data thoroughly in order to get a general idea, 3) code the data, 4) create a detailed description of the data, 5) convey the findings, and 6) interpret the data. Analysis was conducted for each case and then a cross-case analysis was performed.

To begin the process of coding the data, multiple readings through the data was conducted, writing notes in the margin to begin identifying trends and themes associated with the research questions (Stake, 2000; Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Guided by Joseph and Reigeluth's (2010) conceptual framework, themes were organized by aspects of the systemic change process:

1. broad stakeholder ownership,
2. systems view of education,
3. evolving mindsets about education,
4. understanding the systemic change process,

5. systems design, and
6. learning community. (p. 7)

For this study, I combined three elements together—a) systems view, b) evolving mindsets, and c) understanding the systemic change process to create the construct I am labeling as *systems cognition* because these aspects are closely related. Thus, resulting in the following themes:

1. Stakeholder/Broad Stakeholder Ownership: includes the school community (students, parents, teachers, administrators). Broad stakeholder ownership stretches beyond the school community by including all persons within the community such as business leaders, members of local government, and everyday citizens.
2. Systems Cognition: includes systems view, evolving mindsets, and understanding the systemic process. This theme captured the thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, and priorities of the participants regarding how RTI and PBIS fundamentally changed how their school operates.
3. Systems Design: includes creating a new system by creating and implementing processes and procedures. Also, includes planning for future stages of implementation.
4. Learning Community: includes ways in which the staff built trust, developed a system of sharing and collaborating, and established common goals, dialogue, and understandings to facilitate the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS.

Each interview, including the focus groups, was then recoded according to the major themes, and representative quotes of the themes were identified. Questionnaire data, once transferred into NCSU Google Drive, was analyzed in the same manner.

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Guba (1981), trustworthiness is established by addressing such features as credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. In this study, credibility is established through the use of well-recognized research methods. Multiple data sources, such as teachers, principals, and RTI and PBIS team members; and methods of collecting data, such as face-to-face interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and document collection, were utilized. This data triangulation validates research findings (Krathwohl, 1998). Upon completing the data analysis, an executive summary of the findings was made available to the interview participants for review. Providing participants the opportunity to provide feedback contributed to the study's credibility because each participant had an opportunity to review a summary of the findings and provide additional insights.

Transferability is achieved when the research findings can be applied to other settings or contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While I understand that total transferability in a qualitative study is not possible because of its contextual nature, the use of a thick description of the setting, participants, and research design allow for adequate comparisons to be made with other studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Krathwohl, 1998). That is, by giving a comprehensive description of the research, readers will be able to form conclusions that can be applied to other situations and areas.

Dependability of this study was established through the detailed description of data and the data collection and analysis process, which assists in understanding the study's methodology. Providing detailed documentation of the steps to collect and analyze the data gives the readers an opportunity to determine whether the conclusions drawn are reasonable (Krathwohl, 1998).

Finally, conformability is achieved through the researcher's reflexivity. According to Patton (2002), reflexivity is "understanding and depicting the world *authentically* in all its complexity while being self-analytical, politically aware, and reflexive in consciousness" (p. 494). To be as transparent as possible, any assumptions and biases were disclosed along with limitations throughout the study when appropriate. The next section will discuss my position as a researcher and clearly state efforts that were made to ensure the study's results are based on data, not researcher bias.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

I have ten years of experience in the public school system, the last four of those years as an assistant principal of a middle school. I am currently employed in the county where my research was conducted. That being said, I was determined to allow the data to drive the results of this study and not my own personal biases.

As an assistant principal in a middle school, I work closely with educational reforms, RTI and PBIS being two of them. Currently, I serve as the RTI team leader in my school and work to ensure that interventions are implemented with fidelity to all students in need. In addition, I work closely with teachers, providing them with necessary resources and

professional development. I have received training at the state and district levels and have worked in conjunction with my staff to implement RTI at my school. I am not as deeply involved with the implementation of PBIS. I have, however, received training on how to properly implement PBIS and serve on the PBIS team. I frequently utilize PBIS strategies such as the Check-in/Check-out program to help students learn to manage their own behaviors.

My goal is to ensure that teachers are making data-driven decisions to inform their teaching practices and accurately provide students with interventions. Whether students need academic or behavioral interventions or both depends on the child. But, I do firmly believe that all children are capable of academic growth and prosocial behavior. Teachers at my school have seen how consistently analyzing individual student data and utilizing the processes within the RTI and PBIS framework help their students grow and become better students. I believe that finding a balance to implement these two frameworks is a challenge and may discourage other schools from fully implementing both frameworks with fidelity. Thus, I became interested in studying the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS in order to highlight the experiences of teachers and principals implementing both RTI and PBIS and allow others to learn from what they view as their successes and failures.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter discussed the research design of this multiple case study. The study takes a qualitative approach to describe the experiences of teachers and principals who are currently implementing RTI and PBIS in three middle schools in a school district in North

Carolina. Convenience sampling was used because the researcher had access to any and all data relating to the schools and cooperation from district and school administration. Criteria sampling was also used as the three middle schools in this study were required to have implemented both RTI and PBIS. Participants of this study included the principals at each school, the RTI and PBIS team leaders, one additional RTI and PBIS team member, and teachers. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, a questionnaire, and documents. Major themes were derived from Joseph and Reigeluth's systemic change conceptual framework. The data from individual schools were analyzed to identify emergent trends related to the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS and then a cross-case analysis was conducted to discern similarities and differences across schools. Actions undertaken by the researcher to establish trustworthiness were explained. The strategies utilized to ensure the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability were presented in detail. Chapter 4 discusses the profile for each school and presents the findings of the study.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Study Overview**

RTI is a framework designed to meet the academic needs of all students by providing research-based interventions (Batsche et al., 2006). It is a three-tiered framework that offers students interventions that become more and more intense and frequent as students move from Tier 1 to Tier 3 (NCDPI, 2014). Also, intended to ensure the academic success of all students through the elimination of ineffective instructional methodologies and the supplementing of deficient curricula, RTI is a problem-solving model that focuses on whole school improvement (Feifer, 2008). PBIS is a framework designed to curtail disruptive behaviors in the school setting by teaching and modeling positive behaviors in schools. It is a framework designed to allow K–12 educators the ability to create processes and procedures that will allow for teaching school-wide behavioral expectations (Bradshaw et al., 2012). Both frameworks have become popular and have been widely implemented in schools throughout North Carolina. This study examines the concurrent implementation of these two widely used education frameworks.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer:

1. What are middle school teachers' and principals' experiences with the concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?

2. What factors facilitate successful concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?
3. What factors impede successful concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?

A qualitative, multiple case study research design was undertaken to answer these research questions. In order to obtain a thick, rich description of the phenomenon being studied, data were collected from various sources (principals, RTI and PBIS team members, and teachers) and through different methods (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and documents) (Creswell, 2007). I conducted individual interviews with the principals of each school and two members of the schools' RTI and PBIS teams, one being the chair/team leader and the other being a team member. Three focus groups, one at each school, consisting of three to six teachers were also conducted. In addition, all middle school teachers at the participating schools were given the opportunity to take an anonymous questionnaire to express their experiences with implementing both RTI and PBIS. In Easton Middle 19 out of 20 teachers participated in the questionnaire, which was a 95% response rate. In Melrose Middle 23 of 30 teachers participated which was a 77% response rate. Lastly, Riverdell Middle's response rate was 85%, with 34 out of 40 teachers participating.

Documents such as, NC School Report Card, PBIS SET (Horner et al., 2004), and RTI Implementation Rubric (Colorado Department of Education, 2014) were collected to provide background information for the district and each school. Digital audio recordings were transcribed after each interview and focus group session. Transcripts were stored in

NCSU Google Drive, as this was deemed secure for this level of data. Anonymous questionnaire data were transferred and stored on NCSU Google Drive as well. The data were reviewed multiple times to identify themes and patterns associated with research questions.

This study was guided by Joseph and Reigeluth's (2010) systemic change conceptual framework. Therefore, themes were organized by the aspects of the systemic change process:

1. broad stakeholder ownership,
2. systems view of education,
3. evolving mindsets about education,
4. understanding the systemic change process,
5. systems design, and
6. learning community. (p. 7)

All of the above elements are driven by the actions of the stakeholders. Joseph and Reigeluth (2010) suggest that stakeholders from diverse backgrounds must engage in continuous collaboration for systemic change to occur. Furthermore, the stakeholders must have a clear understanding of the current state of education and how the systemic change process works so that mindsets regarding education can evolve to allow for the creation of a new system where the school becomes a learning community. For this study, I combined three elements together—(a) systems view, (b) evolving mindsets, and (c) understanding the systemic

change process to create the construct I am labeling as *systems cognition* because these aspects are closely related. Thus, the findings are organized around four themes:

1. Stakeholder/Broad Stakeholder Ownership: includes the school community (students, parents, teachers, administrators). Broad stakeholder ownership stretches beyond the school community by including all persons within the community such as business leaders, members of local government, and everyday citizens.
2. Systems Cognition: includes systems view, evolving mindsets, and understanding the systemic process. This theme captured the thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, and priorities of the participants regarding how RTI and PBIS fundamentally changed how their school operates.
3. Systems Design: includes creating a new system by creating and implementing processes and procedures. Also, includes planning for future stages of implementation.
4. Learning Community: includes ways in which the staff built trust, developed a system of sharing and collaborating, and established common goals, dialogue, and understandings to facilitate the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS.

After generating a case study of each school, I conducted a cross-case analysis of the three schools to allow for a more accurate depiction of the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS in the middle school setting. This study will not only contribute to the literature regarding the implementation of these frameworks at the middle school level, but also

expand our understanding of the factors that facilitate and impede implementing these two models concurrently.

### **Context**

The school district in this study is located in a rural area in North Carolina and consists of seventeen schools. There are currently 8,614 students enrolled in this school district. Within the county there are eight elementary schools, four middle schools, three high schools, a small alternative school, and an early college high school. During the 2013–2014 school year, NCDPI reports that the average middle school population within this school district was 518 students and an average student attendance rate of 95%, just one percentage point less than the state. The average number of middle school teachers in this district is 34, with 89% in the district being fully licensed. In 2013–2014, 23% of middle school teachers held advanced degrees and three had the title of National Board Certified Teachers. During the year the study was conducted, the state reports teacher turnover rate as 15%, this district exceeded that rate having 23% teacher turnover. Principals in the school district had a 7% turnover rate in 2013–2014, and 56% of the principals had 4 to 10 years of experience.

The most recent NCPDI School Report Card for this school district, the 2013–2014 school year, highlights both academic and behavioral standings. During the 2013–2014 school year, this district was lower than the state overall in both reading and math end-of-grade tests at the middle school level. The NCDPI School Report Card shows a significant difference between White students and their African American and Hispanic peers in

academic achievement. NCDPI also issues reports regarding school safety which includes reportable acts of violence that occur on school grounds, at the bus stops, or at other school sponsored activities. As it relates to middle schools, there were, per 100 students, 0.78 violent acts in the district, but 0.85 offenses in the state. In addition, short-term suspensions in this district, per 100 students, were 14.45 and there were no expulsions.

This study focused on three middle schools within the district that were charged with implementing both RTI and PBIS, Easton Middle, Melrose Middle, and Riverdell Middle. Schools were responsible for designating a PBIS and RTI team leader. The team leaders in the participating schools also hold other positions, such as teacher or assistant principal.

PBIS was the first of the two initiatives to be implemented in this school district. The district implemented PBIS approximately seven years ago and in 2010 a district coordinator was hired to assist with training and giving schools continuous support. Of the three middle schools in this study, only one, Melrose Middle, has received recognition for their implementation of PBIS. While it is up to the schools to apply for recognition, there is an annual evaluation conducted by the district PBIS coordinator and the regional PBIS coordinator, using the School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET). This tool is used to assess current features of PBIS (expectations defined, expectations taught, reward system, consequence system, monitoring/evaluating, leadership, and district support) and allow schools to revise implementation plans as needed (Horner et al., 2004). In the most recent SET conducted, Melrose scored 80 out of 100 overall; their two lowest areas were expectations defined, 50, and reward system, also 50. Riverdell's overall score was a 77.

Their two lowest areas were reward system, 67, and leadership, 69. Both schools scored a 100 for district support. Due to Easton Middle recently opening, the PBIS district coordinator has not yet evaluated their school.

RTI has been implemented for approximately four years in this district; currently, there is not a district level coordinator or coach. However, up until this year, there were two individuals at the district level that aided schools with RTI implementation and provided opportunities for district and state level training for RTI. Both of those individuals resigned this school year, and the district has yet to name an individual responsible for the implementation of RTI at the district level. In addition, there is no tool to evaluate RTI. Therefore, I asked the RTI team at each school to complete a school-level implementation rubric developed by the Colorado Department of Education. Like SET, this rubric, serves as a resource for schools to assist them in creating a plan of action to implement/sustain RTI at their school. This rubric permits schools to assess where they fall (emerging, developing, operationalizing, or optimizing) in the areas of leadership, problem-solving, curriculum and instruction, assessment, positive school climate, and family and community partnering. While Easton Middle was either emerging or developing in all areas, Melrose and Riverdell were able to confirm being in the operationalizing stage in some of the areas of positive school climate. Each school is at different levels of implementation with both RTI and PBIS. This variability will allow us to understand teachers and administrators experiences with different phases of implementation. Basic school profiles, with pseudonyms for school names and principals, are presented in Table 4 and discussed in more detail in the next section.

Table 4.

*School Profiles*

Easton Middle	Melrose Middle	Riverdell Middle
310 students	457 students	720 students
Grades 6–8	Grades 6–8	Grades 6–8
Ms. Henderson – principal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Second principal since RTI/PBIS implementation</li> <li>• First-year principal</li> </ul>	Mr. Rhodes – principal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Second principal since RTI/PBIS implementation</li> <li>• Experienced principal</li> </ul>	Mr. Cox – principal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only principal since RTI/PBIS implementation</li> <li>• Experienced principal</li> </ul>
RTI team leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assistant principal</li> <li>• 17 years in education</li> </ul>	RTI team leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assistant principal</li> <li>• 17 years in education</li> </ul>	RTI team leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assistant principal</li> <li>• Ten years in education</li> </ul>
PBIS team leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher</li> <li>• 16 years in education</li> </ul>	PBIS team leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher</li> <li>• 11 years in education</li> </ul>	PBIS team leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher</li> <li>• Seven years in education</li> </ul>
1 assistant principal	2 assistant principals	2 assistant principals

**Easton Middle**

**School Profile**

Easton Middle school is located in the downtown section of a small town in North Carolina and has approximately 310 students, about 43% identified as African American, 45% White, and 12% Hispanic. The majority of students come from low to middle income



families. That being said, roughly 68% of the students at Easton Middle are considered economically disadvantaged. While all students may not technically qualify for free and/or reduced lunch, all students at Easton Middle receive free lunch and breakfast because of the high number of students qualifying for the free lunch program.

Approximately 38% of teachers at Easton Middle have ten or more years of experience and 38% have three or less years of experience. While teacher turnover was not reported on the most recent 2013–2014 NC School Report Card, it should be noted that 11 teachers resigned and the principal was moved out of his position at the end of that school year. This is the school’s second year of operation. There are two administrators, one principal and one assistant principal. Academically, the NC School Report Card shows that in 2013–2014, 46% of students were at or above grade level in reading and 30% of the students were at or above grade level in math. New this year are school performance grades. Eighty percent of these grades are based on school achievement and 20% on academic growth. Easton’s school performance grade was a ‘D’ for the 2013–2014 school year. In regards to school safety, Easton Middle reported ten acts of violence during the 2013–2014 school year.

While Easton Middle is considered the newest middle school, the building itself has been standing since 1923, when it contained grades K–12. Prior to becoming a middle school, it was Easton High School, occupied by approximately 900 students. Four separate buildings make up the entire school, making it a fairly large building in comparison to the

other middle schools, and substantially large for the 310 students that currently occupy the space.

Walking through the building made me feel as though I went back in time, as the building still has a historic look. The building was clean, but drafty and while students were working quietly in the majority of the classes, some teachers struggled to get their classes to settle down. I could hear teachers yelling, “quiet down,” while I walked through the building. Class changes were chaotic; students were running through the hallways, screaming and play fighting. Only a few staff members were visible during this time, which seemed to last forever.

Although the school is only in its second year of operation, it has a new principal this year, Ms. Henderson. Ms. Henderson has been an educator for 22 years and is a first year principal. She has experience with PBIS at both the elementary and high school levels. Ms. Henderson feels as though PBIS works much better at the elementary level and has mixed feelings regarding the framework overall, “I think PBIS is pretty good, but it’s too much about tracking kids’ behavior. Sometimes teachers, if you’re not careful, and administrators, can turn it into a negative.” As far as RTI is concerned, this is her first experience with implementing it. The RTI and PBIS team leaders at Easton Middle have been at the school since it opened last year. While they are fairly new in their leadership positions, they both are experienced educators. The RTI team leader has been an educator for 17 years and the PBIS team leader has been an educator for 16 years.

When schools implement new reforms they must achieve stakeholder ownership (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Stakeholder ownership occurs when all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community leaders) involved understand and believe in the reform or reforms being implemented. During the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS, Easton Middle School experienced a change in principals. This turnover in leadership had a direct impact on achieving stakeholder ownership; thus impeding the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. However, teachers at Easton Middle were able to obtain systems cognition. Systems cognition involves stakeholders communicating more about the nature of education and obtaining an understanding of the change that needs to occur. This understanding leads to evolving mindsets (cf. Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010) which gives way for a new education paradigm to be created. Systems cognition facilitated the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS as the staff welcomed the idea of change and expressed a desire to implement both RTI and PBIS. Easton Middle also experienced an uneven emphasis on RTI and PBIS as RTI was emphasized more than PBIS. Greater emphasis on RTI may be why Easton Middle reported success with RTI and not with PBIS.

In order to experience success with both frameworks schools must see the relationship between the two frameworks and design a system that connects them. System design also includes a plan for implementing future stages of the frameworks (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Systems design both facilitated and impeded the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS at Easton Middle. Systems design facilitated concurrent implementation because Easton had committed teams for both RTI and PBIS. The concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS was impeded, however, because Easton middle

did not have an implementation plan. Therefore, teachers reported inconsistencies with implementation, a lack of resources, and feelings of being overwhelmed.

### **Research Question 1: Experiences with Concurrent Implementation**

The next few sections describe Easton's experience with the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS.

**Stakeholder Ownership.** While components of RTI and PBIS were implemented one year ago when the school initially opened under different leadership, the staff views this year as the first year of implementation for both RTI and PBIS. Thus, RTI and PBIS are considered, by the staff, to still be in the initial stage of implementation. As the principal was not familiar with implementing RTI and PBIS and did not know enough about RTI and PBIS to have immediate buy-in, the change in leadership caused the school to basically start over. Regarding starting over one PBIS team member shared, "we have a new principal this year, so we kind of started over again this fall with a lot of new policies and procedures." With these new policies and procedures came a different vision, and PBIS was not made a priority during the start of the school year. A teacher and former member of the PBIS team thinks that PBIS is "more in an exploration stage at this time" because "some of the PBIS conversations were put on the backseat." This has caused the staff to be somewhat frustrated with the principal and the implementation process in general. One current member of the PBIS team shared, "the principal came in and it just changed everything because this is how she wants it to be done. She had a vision and that's fine, but that just shut down the agenda

books [planners to keep students organized] we bought.” Overall, PBIS implementation is currently at a standstill.

**Systems Cognition.** Without a doubt, changing the culture of a school is difficult. To begin changing the culture of the school, leaders must change how individuals within their school community view school and education as a whole. While changing someone else’s way of thinking seems impossible, it is critical in the process of systemic change (Caine & Caine, 1997; Jenlink, 1995 as cited in Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). The RTI team leader at Easton Middle noticed a minor shift in the way the staff views teaching and learning because of the implementation of RTI. She explained:

I will say that [RTI] has gotten teachers to the point where they are actually thinking about the implementation. So, they are actually looking at the individual needs of students, looking at their test scores, looking at benchmarks, and looking at classroom assessments.

The overall feeling at Easton Middle is that RTI is successful in its current stage of implementation. Ms. Henderson sees RTI as successful “because the teachers are receptive and willing to take the next step” toward the implementation process. While PBIS may not be viewed as successful by the staff, there have been some minor changes in how the school operates. Of these changes one teacher noted:

There has been a change of perspective as far as PBIS goes. It has reduced the number of write-ups. So, I think that it has changed the way that discipline is viewed.

Teachers look at other things [consequences] that can be done before sending students to the office.

**Systems Design.** Currently, more emphasis is put on implementing RTI. According to one teacher and RTI team member, “we have taken more time to really look at academic data than discipline data.” When Ms. Henderson discovered that the schools in this district used the RTI framework, she began to research the topic because of her limited experience with the implementation process. Additionally, she facilitated an initial professional development for RTI in November as a way to get her staff “thinking about it.” Staff members agree that RTI is emphasized more than PBIS as the school has, according to one teacher, “been doing a lot to strengthen the core [instruction] this particular semester.” Ms. Henderson has also been collecting lesson plans from all teachers and providing feedback throughout the first semester. She has also made it a point to visit classrooms because she feels that will allow her to see practices that are not research-based and therefore, needing to be abandoned.

The success of frameworks like RTI and PBIS can only be defined in terms of their specific individual goals and objectives (Smith, 2003). Thus, success comes when schools are able to create a balance and include all of the core features of RTI and PBIS in a manner that best fits their students and their school community. The core features of RTI are to assess all students, utilize research-based interventions, monitor student progress, and make adjustments based on data (Fuchs et al., 2003; Searle, 2010).

As far as RTI is concerned, the staff is beginning to learn more about it this year along with Ms. Henderson, who, again, began researching the framework in the fall. A new team leader and team were put into place as the school began to implement some of the research-based strategies designed to meet the academic needs of students. In a sense, the school is learning together. Ms. Henderson recognizes the fact that the school is just getting started with RTI and expressed, “we’re all growing together, which I like.” The members of the RTI team recently attended a training session offered by the district office which gave tips on implementing RTI at the secondary level. The team was able to give the staff members at Easton a fresh look at RTI and present ideas on how it will be implemented moving forward. The RTI team has also looked at students’ EOG scores from the previous year and district level benchmark data to create flexible groups where teachers can utilize research-based interventions. In addition, based on the need for improving academics within the school, Easton Middle has revised their schedule to incorporate a thirty-minute block of time for remediation. According to the RTI team leader, a schedule change will take effect during the second semester to include ample “time for remediation.” This, according to the RTI implementation rubric, shows that leadership is beginning to build an infrastructure needed to meet the needs of students.

PBIS, on the other hand is not viewed by the staff as being successful. Again, success comes when schools are able to create a balance and include all of the core features in a manner that best fits their students and their school community. George, Kincaid, & Pollard-Sage (2009) have identified the seven core features of PBIS:

1. A committed team leading all PBIS efforts,
2. Positively stated school-wide behavior expectations and rules,
3. A method for identifying current problems through on-going self-assessment,
4. Lesson plans to teach expected behaviors,
5. Procedures for encouraging expected behaviors,
6. Procedures for discouraging violations of school-wide expectations and rules, and
7. A plan for monitoring implementation and effectiveness. (p. 198)

While there is a PBIS team in place, a lot of teachers expressed negative feelings regarding the implementation school-wide, as one staff member stated, “I don’t feel like it’s [PBIS] being implemented effectively at the present time. I feel like people are doing their own thing in their classrooms, but it’s not being used school-wide.” The PBIS team leader concurred relating, “I don’t think we are on the same page” with PBIS. There are neither school-wide behavior expectations nor procedures for encouraging expected behavior. This lack of expectations and procedures in student behavior was evident during my visit. Students were displaying inappropriate and borderline unsafe behaviors, such as pushing each other, play fighting, and running through the halls, without being redirected by staff members.

### **Research Question 2: Factors Facilitating Concurrent Implementation**

Although PBIS may not be considered successful as a school-wide initiative by the staff at Easton Middle, there was success seen in individual teacher classrooms and minor changes in the school’s culture were noted regarding the implementation of PBIS. Thus,



there is some level of teacher buy-in for both frameworks. As shown from the principal and RTI and PBIS team members and leaders responses during the interview, the staff buy-in for PBIS is roughly 50% and 80% for RTI. Two factors facilitated buy-in and thus aided in the implementation of both RTI and PBIS: systems cognition and systems design.

**Systems Cognition.** Understanding systems means understanding that at some point change must occur (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). The staff at Easton Middle not only welcomed change, but expressed a desire for their school to implement both RTI and PBIS. One teacher with over 10 years of experience in the classroom stated, “we are in the process of implementing these [RTI and PBIS] now, my thoughts are that we need them.” Another teacher shared: “there needs to be a huge focus on getting RTI and PBIS running.” Overall, the teachers see a need for successfully implementing both RTI and PBIS. One teacher stated that if given the choice, she would implement both RTI and PBIS because she “thinks that one is going to help the other.” When dealing with students exhibiting extreme disruptive behaviors and needing academic support, teachers attempt to address the behavior first by contacting parents and trying strategies within their classroom before sending a student to the office. The teachers see that behaviors impede learning and affect the overall school environment and therefore are looking for guidance to change how they currently do things at their school. As one teacher explained how she sought out support, “I have looked at PBISworld.com” to obtain research-based interventions.

Ms. Henderson and both the RTI and PBIS team leaders believe that change, while difficult, is possible. The RTI team leader believes that change needs to occur “when we are

not meeting the needs of students,” but that change is difficult because “people are used to doing things the same way, business as usual for many years.” The PBIS team leader concurs, but added that, “everyone has to buy into the vision and mission; teachers, the community, and parents.” Both the RTI and PBIS team members want to see change and understand that it takes time to build trusting relationships, develop a shared vision, and create a solid plan to change the culture of a school. However, they both believe that it can be done, which is what consistently brings their teams back to the table to revise and create new systems to facilitate the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS.

**Systems Design.** Leading and providing guidance for the implementation of RTI and PBIS is tasked to the principal. The principals appoint RTI and PBIS team leaders to implement the respective frameworks. Both leaders have different levels of experience and training with RTI and PBIS; however, both have the responsibility of creating a team and designing a plan to develop and incorporate new practices that fall under RTI and PBIS for Easton Middle. The RTI team leader at Easton Middle had only recently attended a district level training for RTI and her experience with the framework is limited, as she expressed having “a basic understanding of RTI” prior to beginning the implementation process.” Nevertheless, the RTI team is dedicated to successfully implementing RTI by attending trainings, seeking help from others, and making sure the staff understands the processes and procedures being implemented. She stated that her team is currently working, “with the teachers to show them ways that they can use it [RTI] effectively.” According to the RTI implementation rubric, Easton Middle’s RTI team is developing an infrastructure by “creating momentum for implementation” (Colorado Department of Education, 2014).

The PBIS team leader, on the other hand, had experience and received training with the implementation of both RTI and PBIS at her previous school. Her team has made suggestions to respond to some of the inconsistencies she has seen throughout the school with PBIS. She expounded:

I suggested that our team leaders [on each grade level] consistently remind teachers of PBIS. I also think that when we have staff meetings that bringing in that data showing where PBIS has helped as far as discipline referrals would encourage others to get on board.

### **Research Question 3: Factors Impeding Concurrent Implementation**

The next sections discuss factors that impeded the successful concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS: stakeholder ownership and systems design.

**Stakeholder Ownership.** Although Ms. Henderson is viewed as an “instructional leader” by one teacher, she has shown no support for the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. In fact, she openly admits to only supporting the implementation of RTI, sharing: “I’m really focused right now on instruction. First, I don’t like it [PBIS], so I haven’t pushed it as much as I would if I really loved it.” Ms. Henderson has, however, chosen to support the implementation of RTI by initiating conversations at the beginning of the school year regarding the student failure rate at Easton Middle, leading mini professional development activities with teachers, and providing feedback to teachers regarding best practices for

instruction. Regarding RTI, Ms. Henderson stated, “I explained it to them and showed them the process and all the kids that are failing.”

The majority of teachers, 63%, believe that RTI is emphasized overall in their building. However, teachers indicated that when both academics and behavior are a concern with a student that teachers “focus more on discipline.” Regarding this uneven emphasis, one PBIS team member stated, “I don’t think our administration is on the same page with the teachers” and another teacher concurred, remarking: “our principal is against the values of PBIS.” As one teacher explained, RTI is emphasized more than PBIS because, “the principal has other ideas about the school.” The lack of support for both initiatives, especially when teachers see a need, has not only impeded the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS, but has also caused tension among the staff.

While RTI is seen as successful and PBIS is being utilized in individual teacher classrooms, Easton Middle has not obtained buy-in from the school community for both initiatives, including the principal, some teachers, parents, and the local community. In order for systemic change to occur schools must obtain broad stakeholder ownership, which extends beyond the school community (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). This is not yet possible at Easton Middle as not all teachers, nor the principal, believe in the PBIS philosophy. One teacher feels that “as teachers, we need to have a better attitude about PBIS and what it can do to help our students and school overall.” In addition, the school has not held any forums for parents and the community to explain what RTI and PBIS entail and how they are utilized to help their children succeed. Discussions about RTI and PBIS have been restricted to

individuals within the walls of the school with the exception of two parents that serve on the school improvement team. When inquiring about the school's communication with the community, the RTI team leader clarified, "there's been more communication among the staff and the school improvement team, but it has not gone outside of the school. There has not been any information sent to the community, no letters or workshops for parents."

One element that has hindered Easton's ability to obtain broad stakeholder ownership is change in staff. Coming into the second year of operation, Easton Middle experienced high turnover of key staff members and teachers. Of this turnover one PBIS team member indicated, "we lost 11 teachers last year and the principal. We lost the CRT [curriculum resource teacher] who was a real support for the teachers." The CRT, who accepted a teaching position in another county, had taken the lead in the implementation of RTI last year. The current team members have very limited experience with RTI and were even unsure of the location of files that were created the previous year by the CRT. Another key staff member that left Easton Middle over the summer was the principal. With regards to PBIS, one teacher blames the failure to implement it fully in their school on the timing of the new principal's arrival over the summer:

Our current administration started school at the beginning of the school year with us. I believe, as an administrator, having that summer to plan some things and kind of get things established is important. She [the principal] didn't have the opportunity to do that because of the timing of which she came aboard.

**Systems Design.** Easton has not successfully followed an implementation plan for RTI or PBIS, which has led to inconsistencies in implementation, limited resources, and the teachers feeling overwhelmed. Teachers and staff at Easton Middle reported a great deal of frustration with the inconsistencies regarding the implementation of these two frameworks. One teacher shared views regarding time scheduled for direct instruction based on student needs to support the implementation of RTI, “we really don’t get to complete one idea before stopping to try something else. We just started EAST core [intervention time] and then stopped. Now we’re starting it again.” Another teacher concurs:

The implementation this year for PBIS started off well. There was a team. We met at the start of the year with goals and ideas. As the year progressed, I saw a decrease in PBIS—many goals have not been met and many teachers do not participate. Like PBIS, our RTI started off with goals, but the implementation was not thought out. RTI was cut out by our principal in September because she didn’t see the ‘positive effect’ of it. We are supposed to restart second semester, but again I worry that the plan is not well thought out.

Frustration also stems from meetings that were scheduled to take place being canceled and not rescheduled. In addition, when representatives from the school would attend trainings and meetings, they failed to present the information to the staff. The forms from the district office for RTI have constantly changed as well. Many of the changes were not well-communicated and therefore the school has lacked consistency with the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS.

Easton Middle has approximately 310 students and therefore, only employs roughly 20 teachers. Currently, the school has one exceptional children teacher, whose role is to offer interventions for students needing academic and behavioral support. One PBIS member explained, “things get very complicated because we have very little resources and few teachers to work with struggling students.” Other than staffing issues, “teachers don’t feel like they have adequate resources,” explained the RTI team leader. In regards to PBIS, one teacher stated, “we’ve even tried to implement PBIS by buying our own tickets or class bucks when the school didn’t supply them.” In an attempt to support the implementation of PBIS, the PBIS team leader has made suggestions to move forward such as, printing and displaying posters, having school-wide events, and purchasing tickets for all teachers, but was denied because of the lack of funding.

According to one teacher, regarding the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS, there are “general feelings of being overwhelmed and [teachers] saying, on my gosh, this is one more thing that we have to do.” A PBIS team member shared that although “teachers are pretty much doing these things in their classroom...I think it’s still overwhelming.” Most teachers find the paperwork associated with RTI intimidating, but have yet to experience moving students beyond the first tier. The leaders are also feeling overwhelmed as having to implement both “is a new experience” for them. The RTI team leader expressed that “it’s hard to ask teachers to do one more thing, [such as] attend a meeting or complete this [RTI] paperwork, when they already work so hard.”

## **Melrose Middle**

### **School Profile**

Melrose Middle has approximately 457 students, approximately 42% White, 36% African American, 17% Hispanic, 4% Multi-Racial and 1% Asian. The majority of students come from low to middle income families. Economically disadvantaged students make up roughly 68% of the school's population. While all students may not qualify for free and/or reduced lunch, all students at Melrose Middle receive free lunch and breakfast because of the high number of students qualifying for the free lunch program. Of the 457 students at Melrose Middle, 14% have disabilities. Approximately 49% of teachers at Melrose Middle have ten or more years of experience and 9% have three years of experience or less. According to the most recent 2013–2014 NC School Report Card data, teacher turnover at Melrose Middle is 18%, which is lower than the district's 23% turnover rate.

Melrose Middle is unique in that it has Day Treatment and New Directions, programs designed to give students with extreme behavior issues the support needed to function in a school environment. Melrose Middle had a pleasant atmosphere overall. While I was there, the school was quiet during class changes; teachers were visible and redirecting students when appropriate, and the staff was very friendly. Regarding discipline, the overall number of short-term suspensions has been sustained over the last three school years averaging, 19.95 suspensions per 100 students, which has remained lower than the district. This is a significant drop from the suspension rate reported for the 2009–2010 school year, when 31 short-term suspensions were reported per 100 students. In addition, Melrose Middle has



more recently seen a drop in the number of violent acts reported to the state. From 2009–2012 the number of reportable violent acts were on average 11 for each year, in 2013 the number of violent acts reported were reduced to four, a 64% decrease. Academically, Melrose Middle was reportedly below the state and district in math and reading overall. The 2013–2014 NC School Report Card shows only 40% of Melrose Middle students scoring at or above grade level in reading and 27% of their students scoring at or above grade level in math. Melrose Middle school performance grade for 2013—2014 school year was a ‘D’.

Melrose Middle also has a new principal this school year, Mr. Rhodes. His predecessor was the principal of Melrose Middle for over 20 years and was a staple in the school community. While the previous principal was not directly involved in the implementation of RTI and PBIS, she was very supportive of the leaders that she charged with implementing the frameworks. Mr. Rhodes has experience with both RTI and PBIS; however, his experience is limited. The RTI team leader is also new to Melrose Middle, but does have experience with the implementation process at the elementary level and has been an educator for 17 years. The current RTI team leader works closely with the school’s initial RTI team leader. The PBIS team leader who has been at Melrose for ten years and has led the implementation of PBIS for the last five stated that she has “been involved [with the implementation] from the beginning to the end.” Since the implementation of PBIS, Melrose Middle has been recognized by the state as a Model school in 2013 and a Green Ribbon school in 2014.

Systems cognition involves stakeholders communicating more about the nature of education and obtaining an understanding of the change that needs to occur (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). This understanding leads to evolving mindsets, which gives way for a new education paradigm to be created. The staff at Melrose Middle experienced systems cognition as they viewed RTI and PBIS as being successful in their respective stages of implementation, but also expressed some uncertainty with the implementation of RTI. While the staffs' understanding of RTI and PBIS has facilitated the concurrent implementation of both frameworks, their way of thinking has also impeded the concurrent implementation as multiple teachers expressed that change for the teachers in this school has always been difficult. In order to experience success with both RTI and PBIS concurrently, schools must see the relationship between the two frameworks and design a system that allows them to work together. Also included in system design is a plan for implementing future stages of implementing the frameworks.

Melrose Middle experienced changes in their overall school culture as a result of implementing PBIS and began employing different teaching methods as a result of implementing RTI. However, systems design both facilitated and impeded the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS at Melrose Middle. Their systems design facilitated concurrent implementation because Melrose established procedures to utilize the different types of support available to them and to increase stakeholder ownership. The concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS was impeded due to systems design as teachers expressed concerns regarding ineffective PBIS incentives, a lack of professional development for RTI, and frequent changes to RTI implementation. This may explain why Melrose Middle

experienced an uneven emphasis on RTI and PBIS, sharing that PBIS was emphasized more than RTI at their school.

Another element that impeded the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS was the lack of broad stakeholder ownership. When schools implement new reforms they must achieve stakeholder ownership (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Stakeholder ownership occurs when all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community leaders) involved understand and believe in the reform or reforms being implemented. While there was some support from a few local businesses, there was not an earnest attempt made to obtain broad stakeholder buy-in.

### **Research Question 1: Experiences with Concurrent Implementation**

The subsequent sections will further discuss Melrose's experience with the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS.

**Systems Cognition.** Currently, both RTI and PBIS are viewed as being successful in their current stage of implementation; PBIS is in the sustaining stage, whereas RTI is in between initial and full operation. Teachers view PBIS as easier to implement than RTI, expressing that RTI is complicated and that more direction is needed. According to one teacher, "PBIS...has been used longer and [the] staff is more comfortable with its ideas. RTI still has many questions that have yet to be answered and since it has been introduced, it [RTI] has changed a few times." Therefore, many staff members expressed a need to learn

more about RTI and how it can be used to increase student engagement and student achievement.

**Systems Design.** Although changing the culture of the school is difficult, the staff at Melrose Middle has experienced a shift in the way they look at discipline and student behavior as a result of implementing PBIS. Principal Rhodes has noticed, in his short time at Melrose, that PBIS is simply “what the school does.” He also stated that, “it [PBIS] is very much a part of the culture of the school.” The students and parents are aware of PBIS and wait in anticipation for upcoming events. Also, students have exceeded the set behavior expectations. Of course, there are still issues with discipline, just like any middle school, but Melrose has seen a drop in office discipline referrals since implementing PBIS.

Melrose has also seen a shift in how the staff views teaching and learning because of the implementation of RTI, as differentiating instruction and sharing lessons and strategies have become more common at Melrose. The RTI team leader explained that “the teachers look more at their lessons as far as what they are actually doing. There’s more group work and a lot less lecture. There are more hands-on activities with students. More differentiated instruction.” Teachers have also noticed this change as they recognize the importance of meeting the needs of individual students.

Over 60% of the teachers perceive PBIS as being emphasized more than RTI at Melrose. One PBIS member feels that this may be a result of them having “some severe behaviors” in the past. Therefore, the PBIS team has designed a system where they meet the needs of their students. It is more than fun incentives, students are able to purchase things

like, socks, gloves, school supplies, and other items using PBIS tickets. These are items that students may not be able to get at home. In addition, PBIS data and goals are shared with the staff, and RTI data and goals are not. The PBIS team leader indicated:

We go over things like [office discipline] referrals and suspensions and we compare it, and we make comparisons to previous years. Our goal has been to decrease [office discipline] referrals from previous years. As far as RTI, I haven't really seen any data.

In addition to looking at data, communication is a necessity during the implementation process. While there are frequent reminders sent to staff members to give out tickets and for upcoming PBIS events, there is not as much communication about RTI. The RTI chair explained, "because of the new administration, we've put things on the back burner, because we have been spending time on other things. Evaluating RTI will be part of our plan for next year." According to teachers, RTI communication was lacking before the change in administration, as long-time teachers at the school expressed concerns as well. Of this lack of communication, one teacher that has taught at Melrose for 20 years shared, "very few [RTI] workshops have been done here...there needs to be more instruction in the RTI process here."

## **Research Question 2: Factors Facilitating Concurrent Implementation**

Factors facilitating the successful concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS are systems cognition and systems design and are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

**Systems Cognition.** Teachers at Melrose Middle understand that PBIS specifically targets behavior and RTI looks at instruction and student learning. They have also had experiences where a student needs both academic and behavioral support and each time they have chosen to provide support for behavior over academics. However, they see RTI and PBIS as working hand-in-hand if they are going to meet the needs of the whole child. The PBIS team leader remarked of addressing the whole child:

If a child is having learning difficulties, they act out or they don't do anything, which is acting out in itself, and if their behavior is negative they can't learn. So you have to figure out the balance in order to make them [the student] successful.

**Systems Design.** Melrose Middle has put processes in place to utilize all available support and increase stakeholder ownership in order to facilitate the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. Because Melrose has programs like Day Treatment and New Directions, they have access to educators that specialize in managing student behaviors by teaching students replacement behaviors and coping skills to ensure the success of individual students at their school. In fact, when other area middle schools have exhausted

all avenues and their students continue to engage in extreme inappropriate behaviors, students are sent to Melrose for additional support. According to a RTI team member,

We have New Directions here at our school which is for students in the exceptional children's program that are having trouble in the regular school setting... We also have Day Treatment. That program works with regular [education] students and students in the exceptional children's program that are having major trouble with behaviors.

This, in addition to support provided by the district, through RTI and PBIS trainings, has aided in the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. Of the trainings offered, the RTI team leader describes the RTI and PBIS training he received as "extensive" and shared, "while I am new to Melrose, I am confident in my team's ability to provide teachers support throughout the implementation of RTI."

Other practices have been implemented in order to obtain more stakeholder buy-in to successfully implement RTI and PBIS. Melrose recognizes that communicating to various stakeholders increases support and buy-in for the school. Therefore, Melrose has communicated with stakeholders on different levels. The PBIS chair explained that they "talk to the kids...about what is expected." Teachers explain to students that "they're supposed to tell when something is wrong [because] ...in school we have to be safe." Communication is also taking place with parents. The RTI team leader stated that, "teachers are talking to the parents. They're sharing information with them as far as the whole RTI process, letting them know that their child is in Tier 2 and what that means." Mr. Rhodes is

currently planning a parent night to communicate more about RTI and PBIS in their school. He believes that RTI is still in the initial stages of implementation because, “there’s still some clarification that needs to be done” and “not everyone fully understands it.” His goal is to communicate more to teachers, parents, and the community to facilitate the implementation of RTI and PBIS.

Specifically with PBIS, the team had a difficult time convincing teachers that rewarding students for small things would help them build a positive relationship. “Teacher buy-in was the biggest challenge...but our team just tried to encourage them to try and do something different.” They explained to other teachers that, in time, teaching students how to behave appropriately in a school setting will decrease disorderly conduct. Another challenge that many teachers at Melrose had to overcome was the paperwork associated with RTI. Of this paperwork, one teacher explained how the initial RTI team leader worked with teachers to show them how similar the new RTI paperwork was to the old way of documenting interventions for students and this helped some teachers get over their fears of not completing the paperwork correctly. The paperwork became less intimidating, according to one teacher, “once we kind of got a handle on it and there was one person from each grade that had kind of done one.” Once this happened, teachers began seeking help from each other to complete the paperwork properly.



### **Research Question 3: Factors Impeding Concurrent Implementation**

Factors that impeded the successful concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS include: broad stakeholder ownership, systems cognition, and systems design. These factors are discussed in more detail in the next few sections.

**Broad Stakeholder Ownership.** Most involvement in the implementation of RTI and PBIS comes from within the school walls. According to Mr. Rhodes, “there is some local support. The vendors from the community do support us and help us in certain ways.” However, the extent of the support has been donations for rewards that students have earned through PBIS; there has not been an earnest effort to involve the community in the implementation of RTI or PBIS. Parents and students are involved in PBIS when school-wide events are scheduled and teachers are meeting with parents once their child is moved into the second and third tiers of RTI, but there has not been an attempt to obtain broad stakeholder buy-in from within the community. A PBIS team member stated that for PBIS, in previous years, that the school had a parent night “to make parents aware of what it is and how it works... The kids understand it.” In addition, RTI has been explained to parents at Parent Teacher Student Organization (PTSO) meetings where parents were able to ask questions and give input.

**Systems Cognition.** A PBIS team member expressed that, “people are used to what they are used to and nobody likes change because they are comfortable.” Melrose recently went through a major change, with the arrival of a new principal in August and teachers already see a difference in leadership styles, which “has been very difficult” according to one

teacher. It's not just that their previous principal was there for over twenty years, but another teacher described this change in leadership as, "losing the matriarch of the family." Needless to say, this staff is like a second family to many of the teachers. Although the staff at Melrose has made strides in the implementation of RTI and PBIS and has experienced some change in how they do things, change in staff has always been a challenge and will be even more a challenge with new leadership. Long time teacher at Melrose explained that change there is difficult because the way in which they have always done things are "almost ingrained in the walls, it's ingrained."

**Systems Design.** Teachers freely expressed concerns with the implementation of both RTI and PBIS. One teacher remarked, "PBIS could be more effective. The incentives (PBIS store, PBIS games) are inconsistent and 'worthless' to the students." There were also reports of inconsistent or a lack of professional development and/or training for both RTI and PBIS. That accompanied by a number of changes made by the district regarding RTI has caused some frustration among the staff. Regarding these changes, one teacher stated, "every time we seem to learn it, [RTI] it changes again... and no matter who you ask, you get different answers." Thus, there has been some confusion on how to properly and effectively implement RTI at the middle school level. The RTI team leader at Melrose stated, "I think there's a lot more we can do with the [RTI] process...in the middle schools it has been difficult to fully implement it because RTI, to me, seems easier to implement at the elementary level."

Many teachers were initially intimidated by the paperwork associated with RTI, and those that did complete the paperwork expressed feelings of frustration regarding the time consuming process. One teacher stated, “I think the current RTI process discourages teachers from beginning the process because of paperwork.” According to Mr. Rhodes, schools are being asked to do more with less and teachers are overworked and underpaid. Teachers at Melrose are intimidated by the amount of documentation and paperwork that goes along with RTI. According to the lead exceptional children’s teacher, RTI is a long process that teachers try to avoid. However, teachers must use the RTI process before recommending students for exceptional children services which causes teachers to feel overwhelmed. One teacher reported that the old way of referring students for exceptional children services was simpler, “when we used to take the student support team approach and refer students that need more support academically the process was easier.” Now that teachers have to show documentation of the strategies implemented to help each student and submit data to support their findings, teachers try to avoid the process all together. Implementing both RTI and PBIS concurrently only adds to the duties and responsibilities of teachers, and thus it can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed, especially when there is no system in place to address concerns and aid in the implementation process.

## **Riverdell Middle**

### **School Profile**

Riverdell Middle has approximately 720 students, 55% White, 27% African American, 14% Hispanic, and 4% Multi-Racial. Riverdell is different from the other two

schools in this study because all of their students do not receive free lunch and breakfast, but 61% of the students at Riverdell are considered economically disadvantaged. In addition, students with disabilities make up 11% of the school's population. Roughly 41% of teachers at Riverdell Middle have ten or more years of experience and 31% have three years of experience or less. According to the most recent NC School Report card, 2013–2014, Riverdell's teacher turnover rate is lower than the district, but higher than the state at 20%. Academically, in 2013–2014, the students at Riverdell reportedly scored below the district and the state in reading and math. The NC School Report Card shows that in 2013–2014, 52% of students were at or above grade level in reading, which was slightly below the district, and 30% of the students were at or above grade level in math. Riverdell's school performance grade was a 'D' for the 2013–2014 school year.

Riverdell Middle's principal, Mr. Cox, has been in his current position for eight years. He has 37 years of experience in education, all of which have been spent in this district. Riverdell is in the center of a rural community and has a warm and inviting atmosphere. Upon entering the building, someone greeted me right away with a smile. Teachers and staff were friendly and the school was quiet throughout the day. The state level discipline report shows Riverdell as fluctuating in regards to short-term suspensions and violent acts. In 2010 there were three acts of violence reported and in 2011 there were two acts of violence reported. However, in 2012 there were seven acts reported and three in 2013. Concerning short-term suspensions, there were 35 suspensions per 100 students reported in 2010, 24 in 2011, 29 in 2012, and 31 in 2013. So, while there was a decrease from 2010 to 2011, after 2011 the number of short-term suspensions has increased steadily.

Mr. Cox has been principal of Riverdell since the implementation of both RTI and PBIS; he has been very supportive of those he tasked to oversee the implementation process. The RTI team leader has been at Riverdell for two years, but came with limited RTI experience. She formerly worked as a teacher and assistant principal in a high school and has been in education for ten years. She has had no training for implementing RTI, as she has only recently taken over as the RTI team leader. The PBIS team leader is currently in her second year at Riverdell as well, and has been a teacher for seven years. Although she has not received any formal PBIS training, she is familiar with it, as her previous school was heavily involved with PBIS.

Turnover at Riverdell Middle had a direct impact on both stakeholder ownership and systems design during the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. When schools implement new reforms they must achieve stakeholder ownership (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Stakeholder ownership occurs when all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community leaders) involved understand and believe in the reform or reforms being implemented. Stakeholder ownership has impeded the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. That said, stakeholder ownership has been difficult for Riverdell to achieve because they have not had consistent RTI and PBIS leadership. This turnover has also led to the school starting the RTI implementation process from the beginning and developing a new systems design, further impeding concurrent implementation.

Systems design entails creating a plan for implementing school reform. The newly appointed RTI leader recently created a plan to successfully implement RTI and just recently began communicating expectations and goals to teachers in order to successfully implement RTI. In order to experience success with both RTI and PBIS concurrently, schools must see the relationship between the two frameworks and design a system that allows them to work together. However, the systems design at Riverdell has left the staff feeling an uneven emphasis on RTI and PBIS, PBIS being emphasized more than RTI. Teachers attribute the emphasis being placed on PBIS to having had more training and more communication about PBIS. This has led teachers to express a need for more guidance and communication in regards to implementing RTI, which is another factor impeding the successful concurrent implementation.

Despite the aforementioned impeding factors, the leaders at Riverdell are optimistic and are ready to move forward with implementing RTI and PBIS and change the culture of their school. Both the PBIS and RTI team leaders have designed systems to respond to the challenges mentioned above; turnover and stakeholder ownership. Riverdell responding to these obstacles, in addition to systems cognition, facilitated the successful concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. Systems cognition involves stakeholders communicating about the nature of education and obtaining an understanding of the change that needs to occur. This understanding leads to evolving mindsets, which gives way for a new education paradigm to be created.

## **Research Question 1: Experiences with Concurrent Implementation**

The next few sections describe Riverdell's experiences with the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS.

**Systems Design.** According to the RTI team leader, "this year the entire [RTI] process is being revised from what we have been doing." To fully implement RTI, Riverdell Middle has communicated expectations and goals for this school year. There have been some discussions in meetings, and teachers have been asked to document where their students are performing academically and any interventions provided to support them. According to the PBIS team leader, the team has worked hard this school year to be more consistent with rewards for students and with tracking and analyzing data. One staff member stated that last year, "there were a lot of great things in place, but no follow through" with the implementation of both RTI and PBIS.

RTI is in the initial stages of implementation. According to the RTI team leader, teachers are providing students with interventions and meeting with parents, but not documenting it on the appropriate paperwork. She disclosed, "we [the teachers and I] just discussed where the students are [academically] and I asked the teachers to document the interventions they are using to help students be successful." She has provided teachers with information about what RTI entails and has worked more closely with one grade level in particular this school year. Those teachers are beginning to ask more questions and are beginning to utilize different teaching styles. In addition, they have asked to adjust their schedule to allow for a remediation period during the school day. According to teachers,

there has been more of a shift in culture as a result of PBIS. Of this shift in culture, one staff member voiced, “I do see a lot of cooperation on the days we have incentives [for students]. I think the staff is even more chipper...it’s [PBIS] sinking in.” Mr. Cox has not only seen a decline in discipline, but there also has been an increase in student attendance and, overall, he sees his students beginning to “transform” and exhibit more positive, school appropriate behaviors.

Of Riverdell’s teachers, 100% believe that PBIS is emphasized more than RTI. One teacher believes this to be the case because PBIS is “more tangible.” Another teacher feels that it is due to having “had more training, implementation, and a team leading the way” for PBIS. The PBIS team is communicating more with the staff in comparison to RTI and have monthly activities planned for students. There is a school motto that is consistently repeated on the announcements, “being prepared, unified spirit, nurturing behavior, neat and orderly school,” and students know the behavior expectations. However, regarding RTI, there have been little to no discussions according to teachers.

## **Research Question 2: Factors Facilitating Concurrent Implementation**

Factors facilitating the successful concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS at Riverdell Middle are described in the following sections.

**Systems Cognition.** In spite of the turnover in staff and other challenges faced by Riverdell Middle, they have enthusiastic and positive leaders in place who believe that they are on the right track to successfully implement RTI and PBIS. Additionally, the principal, Mr. Cox, believes that change is possible stating, “it’s difficult, but doable. It will take two



to three years for us to get where we want to be with RTI.” In addition, one teacher feels that teachers at Riverdell want “to make sure that the students are successful, so they are finding innovative ways to try to help all students be successful.” The RTI team leader conveyed about the change process, “we are in our third, my second, year of implementation [of RTI] and I still feel like we’re at the beginning, but I believe we have a solid plan in place to see improvements from here on out.”

**Systems Design.** Implementing RTI and PBIS at Riverdell has been a struggle because of the lack of buy-in from the staff and turnover. However, the current leaders charged with implementing RTI and PBIS responded to those challenges by establishing procedures to overcome them. Buy-in from teachers was a struggle initially for PBIS. The PBIS leader explained that “going personally to those teachers that you know are struggling with it and showing them the data” have helped to obtain buy-in. For RTI, only 20% of the staff is currently on board. To combat this, the team has recently begun communicating more about RTI and working closely with one grade level to fully implement RTI. Her plan is to have that particular grade level implement all elements of RTI and have them share their experiences and, hopefully, successes, with other teachers. Another challenge that Mr. Cox had to respond to was turnover. He explained that they, “went looking for people within the staff and new hires, because I was interviewing at the time,” who had experience with RTI and PBIS. He wanted to find leaders that actually wanted to lead the implementation of RTI and PBIS because he felt they would be more apt to succeed. His hope is to retain those that are currently in place.

### **Research Question 3: Factors Impeding Concurrent Implementation**

The next sections discuss factors that impeded the successful concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS: stakeholder ownership and systems design.

**Stakeholder Ownership.** Although this is only the third year of implementation for RTI, Riverdell is on its third team leader. Like every middle school in the district, Riverdell lost their CRT, who was overseeing the implementation process at Riverdell. Curriculum resource teachers at the middle school level were taken out of the schools at the beginning of this school year. Mr. Cox felt that the loss of their CRT caused the school to “take a hard hit” with regards to implementing RTI. The current RTI team leader stated,

I have taken over the responsibility for [RTI] this year. So, Ms. Robinson (pseudonym) and I have decided to keep it together. Our CRT from last year, Mr. Winslow (pseudonym) was taken and moved to central office and he kind of had it running while he was here.

The loss of the PBIS team leader this past summer also left Mr. Cox having to fill another critical position in his school. So, a new PBIS team was appointed at the beginning of this year. Mr. Cox expressed how fortunate he was to have good leaders in place, but recognizes that turnover has caused there to be some inconsistencies within the school in regards to RTI and PBIS. The high level of turnover has also halted attempts to obtain buy-in from stakeholders.

After three years of implementing RTI and four years of implementing PBIS, Riverdell has yet to obtain an appropriate level of buy-in to successfully navigate the implementation process. They have achieved only 20% buy-in for RTI and 70% buy-in for PBIS. According to the RTI team leader, “they [teachers] feel like it’s just one more thing to do. It’s more paperwork for me to keep up with as opposed to it actually being a working tool.” While PBIS is currently the more promising of the two frameworks, there are still members of the staff that do not believe in the philosophy of PBIS. The PBIS team leader reports,

I think it [implementing RTI and PBIS] has been a struggle only because you have to have everyone on board to make something successful... We’re getting the resistance, but we do have teachers that are saying wow this [PBIS] made a difference.

While the PBIS team is making great efforts to obtain buy-in for PBIS, there has not been an attempt to include the parents or the community in the implementation process.

**Systems Design.** Teachers expressed a need for guidance and more communication. They feel that it is difficult for new teachers to come into Riverdell and know what is required unless another teacher in the building gives them support. One teacher stated and others agreed that “guidelines or a handbook would be beneficial.” On a positive note, one teacher remarked that, “PBIS is a whole lot better than we ever had because we now at least have a guideline of what’s going on throughout the year.” However, their frustrations with the lack of guidance is shared with the RTI team leader, who stated that implementing RTI and PBIS concurrently “has been somewhat challenging because I don’t feel that I have

always had the pieces that I needed to provide the teachers.” As the district has also had some turnover, including the two individuals that led RTI workshops for the last three years; there has been a disconnect with RTI between the district office and the schools this year.

### **Cross-case Analysis**

According to Yin (2003, 2009) multiple case study designs are stronger than single case studies because a cross-case analysis can be conducted. Conducting a cross-case analysis allowed for a more accurate depiction of the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS in middle schools.

This section is organized by themes that emerged across the research questions. Themes in this study include stakeholder ownership, systems cognition, systems design, and learning community. Stakeholder ownership occurs when all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community leaders) involved understand and believe in the reform or reforms being implemented (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Obtaining stakeholder ownership is imperative when schools are tasked with implementing school reforms. The schools in this study have only acquired narrow buy-in, which has impeded the successful concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. These schools have few stakeholder groups and have failed to obtain 80% buy-in within those groups. Another factor that impeded concurrent implementation was the isolation of RTI and PBIS, as the schools did not create a system that allowed for collaboration across the RTI and PBIS teams.

In contrast, systems cognition, specifically, credence in the approaches as part of evolving mindsets has facilitated concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. Systems

cognition involves stakeholders communicating about the nature of education and obtaining an understanding of the change that needs to occur (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). The understanding of systems leads to evolving mindsets, which gives way for a new education paradigm to be created. Teachers at each school developed an understanding of both frameworks and a belief in how both work together to benefit students. While one school proved to be more resistant to change, there was still an understanding that change must occur in order to implement RTI and PBIS.

As a result of gaining understanding and systems design, each school experienced some change in school culture. Systems design entails creating a plan for implementing school reform (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Teachers were considering the academic needs of individual students by differentiating instruction and implementing research-based strategies. Teachers were also taking a different approach to discipline by implementing PBIS within their classrooms and school-wide. This piecemeal action has facilitated the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS, as processes and procedures have been established to respond to challenges and increase stakeholder ownership within the respective frameworks.

While systems design has facilitated implementation, it has also impeded implementation across all three schools. RTI and PBIS are viewed as isolated reforms by these schools. In order to experience success with both RTI and PBIS concurrently, schools must understand the relationship between the two frameworks and design a system that allows them to work together. None of the three schools developed a comprehensive plan leading to overall school improvement through the successful concurrent implementation of

RTI and PBIS. This may be one reason each participating school placed uneven emphasis on RTI and PBIS and why neither school reached the ultimate goal of systemic change; becoming a learning community. A learning community, in these particular middle schools, would entail systems within RTI and PBIS working collectively to increase student achievement and decrease inappropriate behaviors throughout the school. According to leaders within each school, this has not yet been achieved.

The following section further details the findings revealed as a result of a cross-case analysis of Easton Middle, Melrose Middle, and Riverdell Middle. The findings are organized by theme across the research questions.

**Stakeholder Ownership: Narrow Buy-In.** The three middle schools, Easton Middle, Melrose Middle, and Riverdell Middle, have failed to secure the level of buy-in needed to implement RTI and PBIS in their schools. Neither school has held forums to communicate to parents and the local community the philosophies behind RTI and PBIS nor how they are being utilized to help children succeed. While Melrose Middle and Riverdell Middle have spoken to local businesses about donating items to support the schools efforts with PBIS, there has not been an earnest effort to involve the community in the implementation of RTI or PBIS. Mr. Rhodes, principal of Melrose explains, “there is some local support. The vendors from the community do support us and help us in certain ways.” The support Mr. Rhodes speaks of is in the form of donations for PBIS rewards. Parents and students are only involved in PBIS when school-wide events are scheduled and parent involvement in RTI has been limited to contacting the parents of those students being moved

through the tiers of support. The RTI team leader at Easton stated that “there has not been any information sent to the community, no letters or workshops for parents.”

**Systems Cognition: Credence in Approaches as Part of Evolving Mindsets.**

Systems cognition includes systems views, evolving mindsets, and understanding the systemic change process. Each middle school in this study has an understanding of what RTI and PBIS entail and each have experienced some level of evolving mindsets regarding the education system. Although RTI and PBIS are viewed separately by all the schools, they understand that implementing both will benefit the students they serve on a daily basis.

While the teachers at Melrose have been more reluctant to change than Easton and Riverdell, every school in this study understands that change, while difficult, is necessary if RTI and PBIS are to be fully implemented. One teacher at Melrose shared that learning about RTI has made her more, “open to the fact that other kids do have these [learning] problems, even if they don’t have a [disability] label.” She also described other teachers at her school as more “open-minded” to change because they are able to see positive academic effects on their students as a result of implementing research-based interventions in their classrooms. A teacher at Riverdell concurred stating:

I think that most teachers are ready to find more ways to get the kids learning academically...asking more questions...[thinking] maybe I need to change my teaching style...I think they’re [teachers] starting to open up their eyes a little bit more and say, hey, maybe it’s not the child, [maybe] it’s me.

**Systems Design: Some Change in School Culture.** Although changing the culture of a school is difficult, all three middle schools have experienced some change in their culture as a result of creating procedures to implement RTI and PBIS. The RTI team leaders at each school have noticed changes in the way teachers respond to students with academic needs. Teachers at Easton Middle are “actually looking at the individual needs of students, looking at their test scores, looking at benchmarks, and looking at classroom assessments.” The RTI team leader at Melrose believes teachers have begun to differentiate their instruction and change their teaching styles as a result of implementing RTI. One teacher at Melrose understands that they,

have to make adjustments all the way through to make sure that they [students] are successful and if it means going through the whole [RTI] process and them [students] becoming an EC, [exceptional children’s] student, then that’s what we do.

Although Riverdell is still in the initial implementation stages, they have experienced slight cultural changes as well. Their RTI team leader explained that the teachers that she has been working with more closely on the RTI processes have been asking more questions and beginning to implement some of the research-based strategies that she has been discussing. Those teachers have also been looking at the academic progress of individual students and have asked about making adjustments to their grade level schedule to incorporate a common time to implement research-based strategies designed to remediate students.



All schools have also noticed varying shifts regarding how teachers handle discipline in their classrooms and in the school. Teachers at Easton Middle are beginning to find ways to implement PBIS in their classrooms to curtail some of the discipline issues they have faced. One PBIS member explains, “we are just getting started with that [PBIS], we’re really not doing anything for that child [needing academic and behavior support]... Teachers are doing certain things in their classrooms, but school-wide, I don’t think it’s happening.” There have been more significant changes noticed in Melrose Middle and Riverdell Middle. The PBIS program at Melrose was described by the principal as “very much a part of the culture of the school.” The PBIS team leader stated, “our incidents are lower. In the past five years we’ve seen a drastic drop in write-ups and in what we write-up.” The principal at Riverdell, Mr. Cox, attributes the work done to implement PBIS throughout the school to “transforming” his students’ behavior and increasing the attendance of students. Melrose and Riverdell have also established and communicated school-wide behavior expectations for students. Both schools involve parents when providing school-wide incentives like dances and student-teacher basketball games.

**Systems Design: Uneven Emphasis.** All three middle schools have created systems that have emphasized one framework over the other. While Melrose Middle and Riverdell Middle both placed disproportionate emphasis on PBIS, Easton Middle put emphasis on RTI. At Easton, teachers recognized that the focus was on improving instruction and not student behavior. Of this focus, one teacher’s reasoning behind to school’s emphasis on RTI is that their “principal is against the values of PBIS.” The principal, Ms. Henderson, definitely expressed her thoughts regarding PBIS to her staff and showed more support for RTI stating,

“I’m really focused right now on instruction.” Therefore, there was more thought and planning devoted to the implementation of RTI. Easton Middle spent time collecting and reviewing academic data and had recently made changes to the school’s schedule to allow teachers time to provide students with additional academic support.

In contrast, 100% of Riverdell’s teachers and 60% of Melrose Middle’s teachers believe that PBIS is emphasized more than RTI. Both schools have shared data for in-school-suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and office discipline referral data with the staff. There is also more communication about upcoming PBIS events and an effort to obtain 100% buy-in for PBIS at both schools. Melrose sees PBIS as a way to provide for their student’s needs. For example, students are able to use earned PBIS tickets to purchase school supplies, gloves and socks, which are items that some of their students would otherwise go without. Riverdell has activities and monthly celebrations for students, and students recite the school’s PBIS motto daily. A RTI member stated, “we definitely do a lot more data tracking as far as with PBIS. There is more for PBIS than for RTI. I think PBIS is an easier route to take” Both Riverdell and Melrose teachers reported less training and communication with RTI. In regards to training, one teacher at Riverdell simply said that for RTI they, “need more training.” Another teacher at Riverdell feels as though “RTI has been pushed under the rug.” A teacher at Melrose concurred stating that PBIS is emphasized more than RTI “simply because it is talked about more.”

**Systems Design: Piecemeal Action.** Easton, Melrose, and Riverdell have all put systems, processes, and procedures in place to facilitate the concurrent implementation of

RTI and PBIS. Each school has RTI and PBIS team leaders that were appointed by their respective principals. These leaders have been tasked to design and implement a plan to change how the school operates so that the academic and social needs of each student can be met. The schools have also responded to challenges such as turnover, inconsistencies in implementation, and teacher and community buy-in to implement both RTI and PBIS. Both Easton and Riverdell have addressed the issue of not having a remediation time for by allowing changes to be made in the school and/or grade level schedules. The principal of Easton instructed her teachers to:

Take their entire grade level, since they're so small, and split the kids up into their proficiency levels, one through five, based on last year's EOG [end-of-grade state exam], first nine-week grade, and current grade to see where those kids would fall. Those will be their [remediation] groups when we go back to EAST core [remediation period].

While Melrose has not made an attempt to change the school's or an individual grade level's schedule, they have established a plan to increase stakeholder ownership, especially among their parents. A parent night is currently being planned to communicate to parents what RTI and PBIS entail and how processes and procedures associated with these frameworks can help students become more successful in school.

**Systems Design: Viewed as Isolated Activities.** The schools could not produce a comprehensive plan that incorporated the implementation of both RTI and PBIS. Each school has kept RTI and PBIS completely separate, not discerning the potential relationship

between the approaches. While there may be teachers on both the RTI and PBIS teams, the teams are not working together to create a plan for overall school improvement. Further, the schools in this study have had inconsistencies in the implementation process and staff members have expressed differing levels of frustration as a result. One teacher at Easton Middle reported, “like PBIS, our RTI started off with goals, but the implementation was not thought out...we are suppose to restart second semester, but again I worry that the plan is not well thought out.” Teachers at Melrose Middle also reported inconsistencies with professional development regarding both RTI and PBIS. The RTI team leader at Riverdell concurred, “I don’t feel that I have always had the pieces that I needed to provide the teachers” guidance to implement RTI with fidelity. That is, the schools and district did not thoughtfully address how activities within the different levels of RTI and PBIS related to each other in order to create a system where RTI and PBIS work together to meet the needs of all students.

**Learning Community.** The schools in this study did not design a comprehensive plan to implement RTI and PBIS concurrently. This led to inconsistencies and some feelings of frustration by the staff at each school, which further led to the inability of the schools to create a learning community, the ultimate goal of systemic change. The schools failed to make connections and merge systems and processes that were developed to implement RTI and PBIS separately. The principal of Easton Middle does not believe that her school has obtained the degree of collaboration necessary to be a learning community. Mr. Cox, principal of Riverdell Middle concurred, sharing the resistance he experienced from various teachers with collaborating and sharing ideas: “Corey (pseudonym) was a phenomenal

teacher in the classroom, a phenomenal data person, but he held it, he kept it all in the classroom.” A learning community empowers all stakeholders to continuously learn and improve their current systems through the development of common understandings, trust, and conflict resolution (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). The principal of Melrose, Mr. Rhodes does not believe that his school is a learning community. He stated, “we have not yet learned here how to let go of old instruction and let students explore and learn as a cooperative team.”

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 4 began with a review of the purpose of the study and the methods used to collect and analyze data. The school profiles for each participating school, Easton Middle, Melrose Middle, and Riverdell Middle, were presented. Organized from the six key components of Joseph and Reigeluth’s (2010) systemic change conceptual framework; the findings were described for each research question. Findings revealed systems cognition as facilitating concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS and stakeholder ownership as impeding concurrent implementation. In addition, factors within systems design both facilitated and impeded concurrent implementation. Also, none of the schools participating in this study were able to establish a learning community related to RTI and PBIS. The next chapter, Chapter 5, includes a review of the purpose of the study, along with further discussion of the results and theoretical and practical implications. Recommendations, limitations of the study, and directions for future research are also presented in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of the study.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter reviews the purpose of the study and gives a summary of the key findings. Both theoretical and practical implications are presented along with the study's limitations. This chapter concludes with giving directions for future research and a summary of the study.

#### **Review of the Purpose of the Study**

Although there is a plethora of literature about RTI and PBIS respectively, especially for elementary schools, we know very little about the concurrent implementation of both frameworks. While there are similarities in the approaches, such as following a problem-solving model, taking a preventative approach, and utilizing research-based interventions (Sandomierski et al., 2007), the major difference is the primary focus of each framework, RTI focuses on academic achievement, and PBIS focuses on student behavior. This difference can have a school's efforts to support one approach foster or undermine the efforts of the other approach. For example, a school may opt to emphasize one framework over the other when they are implementing them concurrently, resulting in diminishing the effectiveness of the other framework. The purpose of this case study was to understand the concurrent implementation of these comprehensive frameworks. Therefore, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are middle school teachers' and principals' experiences with the concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?
2. What factors facilitate successful concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?
3. What factors impede successful concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?

A qualitative, multiple case study research design was undertaken to answer these research questions. In order to obtain a thick, rich description of the phenomenon being studied, data were collected from various sources (principals, RTI and PBIS team members, and teachers) and through different methods (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and documents) (Creswell, 2007). The data were reviewed multiple times to identify themes and patterns. After generating a case study of each school, I conducted a cross-case analysis of the three schools to allow for a more accurate depiction of the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS in the middle school setting. Themes were derived from the systemic framework that guided this study and included; broad stakeholder ownership, systems cognition, systems design, and learning community.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

According to Reigeluth (1994), there are two types of educational change; piecemeal change, which entails transforming the current education paradigm, and systemic change, which involves transforming the current education paradigm into a new paradigm.

Comprehensive frameworks, like RTI and PBIS, require schools to go through a systemic change because teachers must go from focusing on whole group to looking at the individual needs of students. This study was guided by the systemic change conceptual framework. Designed by Joseph and Reigeluth (2010), the framework lists six key features for any systemic change to be successful:

1. broad stakeholder ownership,
2. systems view of education,
3. evolving mindsets about education,
4. understanding the systemic change process,
5. systems design, and
6. learning community. (p. 7)

The three middle schools in this study were all very different as it relates to their student population, experience levels of teachers, and overall needs of the school. Therefore, each school had a very different experience with the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. The first research question asked; what are middle school teachers' and principals' experiences with the concurrent implementation of Responsiveness to Instruction and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support?

Teachers at the middle schools in this study have changed how they approach teaching and learning and how they look at student behaviors. The RTI team leader at



Easton middle stated that teachers are “actually looking at the individual needs of students” and that individual teachers are implementing PBIS within their classrooms to lessen classroom disruptions and create a more positive environment.” Melrose Middle’s RTI team leader reported more differentiated lessons in the classrooms and the use of multiple teaching styles. As far as PBIS is concerned, Melrose has been awarded Green Ribbon and Model school status by the state and Melrose’s principal believes that PBIS is “very much a part of the culture of the school.” Even Riverdell, who was lagging behind the others in the implementation process with RTI, have teachers that were beginning to research and use effective strategies. These teachers also requested changes to their current schedule in order to meet the academic needs of individual students by implementing research-based interventions associated with RTI.

While there has not been a complete paradigm shift in the three schools in this study, the participants described different levels of systems cognition and systems design as facilitating concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS, which are also important steps toward systemic change. Everyone has their own views of education and while changing someone’s views may seem impossible, it is critical in the process of systemic change (Caine & Caine, 1997; Jenlink, 1995 as cited in Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). Senge (2000) believes that the systemic change process is hindered if the mindsets of individuals within the school are not changed. Systems cognition, which includes beliefs about change, facilitated the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS in the middle schools in this study. Teachers at Easton Middle saw a need for PBIS because of some of the discipline issues within the school and the majority of the teachers believed that PBIS would improve their school

overall, which is why individual teachers implemented PBIS in their classrooms when their principal did not support the program. While Melrose was more resistant to change, those teachers became more “open-minded” regarding change after seeing how their interventions helped their students. The RTI team leader and teachers at Riverdell wanted to implement RTI and PBIS concurrently, but turnover and the lack of guidance hindered their attempts. However, having an understanding of this new view of educating children has brought the RTI and PBIS teams at the middle schools in this study back to the table to design systems such as changing schedules, providing professional development, and addressing challenges to facilitate the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS.

Not being able to obtain broad stakeholder ownership and create a comprehensive design to implement both RTI and PBIS concurrently impeded the concurrent implementation of these two frameworks. According to Joseph and Reigeluth (2010), the first step to systemic change is obtaining broad stakeholder buy-in. The middle schools have not been able to achieve at least 80% buy-in from teachers and staff for both RTI and PBIS. Additionally, none of the schools have held forums to communicate to parents and the local community the philosophies behind RTI and PBIS nor have they shared how they are being utilized to help children succeed. This hinders the school’s ability to reach a high level of buy-in from broad stakeholders, as broad stakeholder buy-in goes beyond the school community by including local business leaders, members of local government, and everyday citizens. While Melrose Middle and Riverdell Middle have spoken to local businesses about donating items to support the schools efforts with PBIS, there has not been an earnest effort to involve the business community in the implementation of RTI or PBIS. Parents and

students are only involved in PBIS when school-wide events are scheduled and parent involvement in RTI has been limited to contacting the parents of students being moved through the tiers of support. In addition, the schools in this study did not design a comprehensive plan to implement RTI and PBIS concurrently. This led to inconsistencies and some feelings of frustration by the staff at each school. This further led to the inability of the schools to create a learning community, the ultimate goal of systemic change, as the schools failed to make connections and merge systems and processes that were developed to implement RTI and PBIS separately.

### **Theoretical Implications**

RTI and PBIS are comprehensive frameworks that require schools to make major systemic changes in order to successfully implement both. Fullan (1985) states:

Change takes place over time; the initial stages of any significant change always involve anxiety and uncertainty; ongoing technical assistance and psychological support assistance are crucial if the anxiety is to be coped with; change involves learning new skills through practice and feedback ...; the most fundamental breakthrough occurs when people can cognitively understand the underlying conception and rationale with respect to ‘why this new way works better’; organizational conditions within school make it more or less likely that the process will succeed and ... pressure through interaction with peers and their technical and administrative leaders. (p. 396)

Changing the culture of a school begins with leadership, yet there is no discussion regarding the role of leaders within the systemic change framework. As in the case of Easton Middle, where the principal showed little to no support for the implementation of PBIS, the school's implementation of PBIS was at a standstill. Conversely, with RTI, the school obtained a higher level of buy-in and designed systems to implement core features of RTI. Thus, Joseph and Reigeluth's (2010) systemic change framework does not give sufficient guidance regarding how leadership impacts the systemic change process. In addition, school districts need to obtain a certain level of buy-in from principals if they are expected to implement top-down initiatives with fidelity.

RTI and PBIS have very distinctive goals. The goal of the PBIS framework is to create school-wide improvement by creating a positive environment through positive changes in both the students and the staff (Bradshaw et al., 2009). The ultimate goal of RTI is to have more students on grade level and increase overall student achievement by taking a multi-tiered approach to implement research-based interventions to students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Since there are no pre-determined protocols for implementing RTI, administrators are faced with creating their own structures for the framework based on the needs of their students. However, some reforms are easier to implement within the education system. The schools in this study viewed the implementation of PBIS as "easier." In fact, when faced with implementing RTI and PBIS, two out of the three schools emphasized behavior over academics. The emphasis on PBIS could be attributed to the complexity of RTI and nature of change necessary to implement RTI. Whereas PBIS was viewed as less complex than RTI. In addition, PBIS was not seen as more work for teachers, which is how teachers

viewed RTI. RTI also allows for too much choice as it does not come with set protocols for implementation. Therefore, it may be easier to apply the systemic change framework to reforms that themselves have more structure, like PBIS.

The successful concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS requires an understanding of a school-wide systemic change. According to Reigeluth and Squire (2000), school-wide systemic change includes changes that occur within the school building, such as scheduling and processes for accessing students. Joseph and Reigeluth (2010) developed a conceptual framework for systemic change that lists six core features, the first and most important of which is obtaining broad stakeholder ownership. All of the middle schools in this study failed to obtain 80% buy-in for both RTI and PBIS within their schools. In order for systemic change to take place, it is imperative that stakeholders from diverse backgrounds collaborate. In fact, all of the elements of systemic change: developing a systems view, evolving mindsets, understanding the systemic change process and systems design are driven by the actions of the stakeholders. Therefore, systemic change cannot occur without broad stakeholder ownership.

One factor that hindered stakeholder ownership was turnover. This occurred within all three of the middle schools and at the district level. Turnover clearly interrupts the systemic change process, as the new leaders within the schools, including principals and RTI team leaders, lacked the training needed to continue the implementation of the frameworks. In addition, turnover at the district level attributed to impeding the RTI implementation at Riverdell Middle. The RTI team leader there did not know who to turn to for guidance to

successfully implement RTI, and therefore was unable to provide her teachers with much needed support.

The schools in this study did not experience a complete paradigm shift. Instead, the schools implemented pieces of the RTI and PBIS frameworks without obtaining the broad stakeholder ownership needed to make full implementation successful. While there was some change in school culture, school leaders in this study failed to transform their schools by creating a new paradigm where systems and procedures work together to increase academic achievement and decrease inappropriate behaviors. Thus, there is a lack of understanding of the systemic change process where, according to Joseph and Reigeluth (2010), a new system is developed and embraced to create a learning community. The schools in this study have yet to create a learning community with a focus on RTI and PBIS. The principal of Melrose, Mr. Rhodes, does not believe that his school is a learning community, sharing: “we have not yet learned here how to let go of old instruction and let students explore and learn as a cooperative team.”

### **Practical Implications**

“As a society our minds are set in an educational system that is now obsolete” (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010, p.17). Therefore, systemic change in schools takes skill to be able to continuously plan and develop step-by-step processes to facilitate change that may take years to show results. The middle schools in this study were charged with implementing both RTI and PBIS by the district. However, the school district does not seem to have a vested interest in the successful implementation of RTI and PBIS. Since 2010, there has

been a district PBIS coordinator. She also serves as the lead school psychologist in the county. She provides support for every school by conducting district trainings and working with individual schools to provide refresher courses and professional development.

However, this is not true for RTI. Currently, there is no one at the district level responsible for implementing RTI. Recently, there has been a RTI training conducted by one of the county's curriculum resource teachers; but, that has been the extent of the district's training in over a year. When top-down reforms begin at the district level, there needs to be a support system for schools and a process for getting buy-in from principals to ensure that school leaders will provide their teachers with the support needed to implement reforms with fidelity.

Additionally, there seems to be a lack of knowledge from the schools in this study regarding the systemic change process. While principals and RTI and PBIS team leaders have had different levels of training and exposure to the frameworks themselves, there is an unspoken assumption that these individuals understand the processes of systemic change. The training sessions and professional development activities associated with RTI and PBIS give the goals, essential components, and best practices of the frameworks, but do not give practical directions on how individual schools should achieve them. For example, a requirement of both frameworks is to get 80% buy-in, but how do school leaders do accomplish this? More importantly, how do schools get broad stakeholder ownership, which is an essential component of the systemic change process?

Schools will always experience turnover; therefore, schools need to be prepared for this to occur. If losing one member of your school results in the loss of a program or having to start the implementation process from the beginning then, there is something definitely wrong with the implementation at the school. A prime example, in this study, is Riverdell Middle, which was forced to find a new RTI team leader. The RTI team leader started the RTI implementation process from the beginning. If there was an understanding of the systemic change process then this would not have occurred. One important element of the systemic change process is having small process teams (5–6 stakeholders) who are responsible for carrying out the steps of systemic change (Caine & Caine, 1997; Jenlink et al., 1998 as cited in Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). If there are teams of diverse stakeholders in place the implementation of frameworks, like RTI and PBIS should not crumble as a result of turnover.

When implementing both RTI and PBIS concurrently, there may be emphasis placed on one or the other. Emphasis is dependent on the school's current situation, as the implementation of RTI and PBIS depend on the context of the school. Melrose Middle, according to one PBIS member, "has had some severe behaviors," which may have contributed to Melrose emphasizing PBIS more than RTI. When implementing RTI and PBIS concurrently, more emphasis may be placed on one because of the belief system of the principal, as was the case with Easton Middle.



## **Recommendations**

When implementing school reforms that require systemic change, based on the findings of this study and drawing from Joseph and Reigeluth's (2010) article entitled, *The Systemic Change Process in Education: A Conceptual Framework*, I recommend school and school districts:

1. Train principals and other school-based leaders how to identify diverse members of the community and recruit them to partner with the school in meeting the needs of students.
2. Train principals on when it is appropriate to conduct forums and, more importantly, how to conduct community forums to obtain broad stakeholder ownership.
3. Train principals on learning communities and best practices to achieve them (i.e. holding community forums with small discussion groups working toward improving the frameworks).
4. Use technology to record the implementation processes. This will allow schools to be better prepared to continue implementation when faced with turnover, as resources will be available to everyone. The use of emerging technology will also allow for an easy sharing of ideas within a learning community.
5. Train principals and school leaders on the systemic change process and provide guidance when planning and conducting professional development activities.

6. Make presentations about RTI and PBIS to help change mindsets. Describe, in detail, the similarities and difference between a tiered system and the current approach. Presentations should also outline how a tiered system benefits students.
7. Conduct workshops on systems view theory to allow stakeholders to gain an understanding that education is not static by using metaphors to examine the education system.
8. Envision and create a plan for implementing the newly designed education system that includes all aspects of the systemic change theory. This plan should give details regarding how broad stakeholder ownership will be obtained, how metaphors and what metaphors will be used to gain a systems view of education, the processes that will be taken to evolve mindsets about education and gain an understanding of the systemic change process. In addition, the systems design should be outlined along with school leaders' expectations of a learning community.
9. Ensure school leaders understand that providing quality professional development is just as important, if not more important as the content of the professional development. Thus, school leaders need to be trained to identify quality professional development.
10. Provide ongoing professional development and allow for continuous analysis of data once systemic change has been achieved. This will prevent the school from returning to the previous paradigm, especially when faced with turnover.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This multiple case study is based on data from a single school district in rural North Carolina and includes only three middle schools; therefore, limiting the transferability of the findings of this study to other educational settings. However, every effort was made to enhance transferability by providing a thick, rich description of the contexts, assumptions, and findings so that researchers and practitioners can discern which insights can be transferred to their settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Krathwohl, 1998).

Also, this study relies largely on self-reported data. Therefore, one limitation is that the data may not truly reflect what is actually occurring. According to Ryan and Bernard (2010) when people agree to be interviewed they feel obligated to attempt to answer every question asked, even if they do not know the answer. In addition, when interviewing, people will tend to present themselves in a more positive and socially accepted manner. At each site, the principal and two members of the RTI and PBIS team were interviewed. That, along with the focus group and questionnaire data, allowed for triangulation of data sources to overcome any potential biases. The cross-case analysis also allowed for an accurate depiction of the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS in a middle school setting.

Further, both PBIS and RTI frameworks are district initiatives and are expected to be implemented at each school—they are top-down reforms. So, some participants may be hesitant to fully disclose challenges. However, efforts to maintain confidentiality, and in some instances anonymity, gain the support of district leadership for the study, and communicate to participants that this is a formative study that aims to improve

implementation improved participants' willingness to be candid. Overall, I feel as though the participants were extremely honest in their responses.

Finally, another limitation of the study was turnover. Each school in the study experienced turnover; the principal, CRT, and several teachers at Easton Middle, the principal at Melrose Middle, and the RTI team leader at Riverdell Middle. However, a complete picture of the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS was able to be obtained because all participating schools were still in the exploration to initial stage of implementation with one or both of the frameworks.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This study focused on the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS in middle schools. Future research needs to explore the thoughts and actions of school leaders who have successfully implemented RTI and PBIS concurrently, as this study showed varying levels of success of the implementation of the two frameworks. Additionally, more research is needed to explore what is done at the district level before reforms like RTI and PBIS are expected to be implemented at the school level. More specifically, is there a plan in place to provide schools with ample support in order to sustain top-down reforms? Since, a mandate alone does not ensure successful implementation of programs.

Another area needing future research is the study of the systemic change framework itself. It would be interesting to see the steps a school takes to obtain broad stakeholder ownership and develop a system that ultimately creates a learning community, even with

turnover of key staff members. Much can be gained from this research as the schools in this study were unable to fully implement both RTI and PBIS.

The literature regarding systemic change would benefit if a similar study were conducted at the elementary level. Elementary schools have had far more success with the implementation of both RTI and PBIS concurrently. Researchers have noted challenges with implementing RTI at the middle school level, such as the lack of teacher training in remedial strategies, the lack of student motivation, and scheduling students for interventions (Brozo, 2009). This may be due to the distinct differences between elementary and middle school, such as the number of teachers a student will see throughout the day, the students' schedule, and social settings (Ryan et al., 2013). Taking away these variables will allow for a closer look at the systemic change framework. Additionally, discovering what factors facilitate and impede the successful concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS could prove useful to both elementary and middle schools and add to the systemic change literature in general.

Systemic change does not occur overnight. In fact, school districts that have experienced successful systemic change have reported it being a seven year process, as seen in the reculturing of Norfolk Public Schools (Thompson, 2006). Therefore, another recommendation for future research would be conducting a longitudinal study over the course of five to six years to see if middle schools are able to successfully achieve systemic change. This will not only add to the literature regarding systemic change, but to the RTI and PBIS literature as well.

Finally, it would be worthwhile to inquire about and understand the steps taken by a middle school who has successfully created an established learning community where, according to Joseph & Reigeluth (2010), the school “focuses on developing common understandings, honesty, and trust through dialogue, sharing, and managing the inevitable conflict involved” (p. 21). Future research should note the extent to which the development of a learning community correlates with high academic student achievement and lower than average behavior incidents.

### **Summary**

Guided by systemic change theory, a conceptual framework posited by Roberto Joseph and Charles Reigeluth that involves the transformation of the current education paradigm into a new paradigm, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of middle school teachers and principals with the concurrent implementation of Response to Instruction (RTI) and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) in three middle schools in a rural North Carolina school district. Using data from individual interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and documents, this qualitative multiple case study explored factors that facilitated and impeded the concurrent implementation of these two comprehensive frameworks in three middle schools. The results indicate that the schools were only able to acquire narrow buy-in with few stakeholder groups and schools did not create a system that allowed for collaboration across the RTI and PBIS teams. Therefore, the schools were unable to create a new education paradigm, the goal of systemic change. The schools did, however, report experiencing positive changes regarding how teachers approach teaching and learning and viewed student discipline. While one school proved to be more

resistant to change, there was still an understanding within all the schools that change must occur in order to successfully implement RTI and PBIS concurrently. Thus, the ability of the staff across the middle schools to obtain different levels of systems cognition and systems design facilitated the concurrent implementation of RTI and PBIS. The results of this study also reveal that school leaders lack an understanding of the systemic change process and need more training and direction because obtaining systemic change in schools takes time and skill, requiring school leaders to continuously plan and develop step-by-step processes to facilitate the change required to create a new paradigm of education.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Protocol

At the beginning of the session, the participant will be given the informed consent form, its contents will be described, and written permission will be obtained. It will be made clear that the participant could stop the interview at any time for any reason with no penalty. It will also be made clear that completing the interview is *completely* voluntary, that responses will be confidential, and that any identifying information will be changed or removed from data during transcription of the interview recording. In addition, it will be made clear that I will remove any identifying information about the participants and the school in the write-up. It will also be made clear that participating in the research is not a requirement of their job or position.

#### **Begin Script:**

The purpose of our interview today is to talk about RTI and PBIS implementation here at \_\_\_\_\_. My interview with you is one of a series planned that will explore your experiences with implementing RTI and PBIS concurrently. The format of our interview today is semi-structured which means that I will ask you some questions and make some notes while we talk.

I will record our interview on my tablet using Smart Voice, a recording program. I anticipate that our interview will take between 30 – 45 minutes, and no longer than 60 minutes.

I want to reassure you about confidentiality in this process as well. Our interview will be recorded and transcribed after collection. I will change the names of all the participants in my write up, and any identifying information will be removed or changed to protect your confidentiality. All data will be stored in NCSU Google Drive.

Again, your participation is totally voluntary, and we can stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable. Do you have any questions before we get started?

#### **End Script**

Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

Participants may be asked to review an electronic copy of the transcription. Participants will be sent a transcript that is stripped of any identifying information and the e-mail

containing the transcript will be generic with no information about the participant.  
Example e-mail statement: This is the transcript we discussed for your review.

Upon completion of the data analysis, an executive summary of the findings will be made available to the participants to view. Participants will be allowed to provide feedback and/or additional insights.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview**

1. What is your role at the school? (administrator, PBIS team leader, RTI team leader)
2. How long have you been an educator?
3. How long have you worked at this school?
4. What do you know about PBIS or RTI prior to working at your current school?
5. What type of training have you receive for implementing RTI and/or PBIS?
6. What phase of implementation is your school in? Circle one:

#### **RTI**

Exploration/Adoption    Initial Implementation    Full Operation  
Innovation/Sustainability

Explain your selection.

#### **PBIS**

Exploration/Adoption    Initial Implementation    Full Operation  
Innovation/Sustainability

Explain your selection.

7. Tell me about your school.
8. What is your view of education and how school works?  
Do you think that the school community (teachers, parents) shares your views on education?
9. From your perspective as a \_\_\_\_\_, what are the major challenges in education?
10. If you want to successfully change something in a school, what must you understand about schools?  
Create a metaphor to explain how a school operates: schools are \_\_\_\_\_.  
Explain.
11. What is your definition of a learning community?  
Would you describe your school as a learning community?  
Why or why not
12. Tell me about PBIS in your school?  
How long has it been implemented?  
What has your role been in the implementation process?  
What type of training have you received?  
Is PBIS successful?  
How do you know?
13. Tell me about RTI in your school?  
How long has it been implemented?  
What has your role been in the implementation process?  
What type of training have you received?  
Is RTI successful?  
How do you know?
14. Describe your experience with having to implement both PBIS and RTI concurrently.  
How do you utilize RTI and PBIS to handle a student exhibiting extreme disruptive behaviors and needing academic support?
15. What factors do you believe to be important to the successful implementation of both PBIS and RTI?  
What processes are necessary to make both RTI and PBIS effective in your school?
16. What challenges were there to implementation of both PBIS and RTI?

- How did you respond to these challenges?
17. How does your school use data from RTI and PBIS to inform revisions to RTI and PBIS? (feedback from stakeholders)  
What revisions have you made to RTI and PBIS since the initial implementation?  
What led you to make the revisions? (external factors, internal factors)
  18. Select one: No Change/Minor Change/Moderate Change/Significant Change  
How has RTI and PBIS changed how you teach?  
Explain.  
How have RTI and PBIS changed how the school operates?  
Explain
  19. To what extent do you agree with the following statements:  
Strongly Disagree/Moderately Disagree/Moderately Agree/ Strongly Agree  
Implementing RTI has led to disregarding useless educational practices and replacing them with a more effective approach.  
Implementing PBIS has led to disregarding useless educational practices and replacing them with a more effective approach.
  20. Do you think that one program (RTI or PBIS) has been more successful?  
If yes, why?  
Is one emphasized more than the other?
  21. If you were in charge, would you implement both RTI and PBIS or choose to only implement RTI or PBIS?  
Why?
  22. What percent of the staff do you think is “on board” with RTI?  
With PBIS?  
Was it difficult to obtain staff buy-in RTI?  
For PBIS?  
If yes, what were the major obstacles?  
If no, what do you attribute to obtaining buy-in?
  23. What stakeholders are actively involved in RTI? (students, district leaders, parents, community)  
In PBIS?  
Is there buy-in from the different stakeholders for RTI?  
Explain.  
For PBIS?



Explain.

How are the stakeholders involved? (decision to adopt, design for your school, implementation, evaluation)

Have any stakeholders shared concerns about the implementation of RTI or PBIS?

Have you had any forums for each stakeholder group?

24. What has your school done to develop common understanding, dialogue, and handling conflict related to implementing RTI? (community forum, parent newsletters, blogs, workshops, professional development)

What has your school done to develop common understanding, dialogue, and handling conflict related to implementing RTI?

25. Have you noticed a shift in the way your staff views teaching and learning because of the implementation of RTI and PBIS?

If so, what type of changes have you noticed?

Why do you think this change occurred?

26. When do you think it is necessary to make major systemic changes in the way a school operates?

Do you think it is difficult to change the culture of a school?

Why or Why not?

What would you do first to begin the change process?

Why?

27. Is there anything else you would like to share?

## APPENDIX C

### Questionnaire Protocol

At the beginning of the session, the participants will be given the informed consent form, its contents will be described, and written permission will be obtained. It will also be made clear that completing the questionnaire is *completely* voluntary and that responses will be anonymous.

#### **Begin Script:**

The purpose of this questionnaire today is to talk about RTI and PBIS implementation here at \_\_\_\_\_. This questionnaire will explore teachers' experiences with implementing RTI and PBIS concurrently.

The questionnaire will take 5 – 10 minutes to complete. Once you have completed the questionnaire, turn it into me and I will give you a ticket that will be entered into a drawing. At the end of this session a ticket will be drawn and the winner will receive a \$10 Target® gift card.

All questionnaires will remain anonymous, so please do not put any identifying information on the questionnaire. Questionnaires will be turned into this box faced down upon completion.

Again, your participation is totally voluntary. Participation in this research is not a requirement of your job or position. Do you have any questions before we get started?

#### **End Script**

The gift card will be presented to the winner at the end of each session.

## APPENDIX D

### Questionnaire

1. How many years of experience have you had as an educator?  
1 – 3 years                      4 – 6 years                      7 – 9 years                      10 + years
2. How long have you been at your current school?  
1 – 3 years                      4 – 6 years                      7 – 9 years                      10 + years
3. What are your thoughts regarding the implementation of RTI and PBIS at your school?
4. In your opinion, has your school done a better job implementing PBIS or RTI? Why?
5. What is your level of involvement in the implementation of RTI and PBIS in your school?  
RTI:                      1 – None                      2 – Little                      3 – Moderate                      4 – High  
Why did you select that?  
  
PBIS:                      1 – None                      2 – Little                      3 – Moderate                      4 – High  
Why did you select that?
6. In your opinion, which do you think is emphasized more, RTI or PBIS? Why?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share?

**APPENDIX E**  
**Focus Group Protocol**

At the beginning of the session, the participants will be given the informed consent form, its contents will be described, and written permission will be obtained. It will be made clear that any of the participants could leave the session at any time for any reason with no penalty. It will also be made clear that completing the focus group is *completely* voluntary, that responses will be confidential, and that any identifying information will be changed or removed from data during transcription of the interview recording. In addition, it will be made clear that I will remove any identifying information about the participants and the school in the write-up.

**Begin Script:**

The purpose of our focus group today is to talk about RTI and PBIS implementation here at \_\_\_\_\_. My focus group with you will explore your experiences with implementing RTI and PBIS concurrently. The format of our session today is semi-structured which means that I will ask you some questions and make some notes while we talk.

I will record our focus group on my tablet using Smart Voice, a recording program. I anticipate that our interview will take between 15 – 20 minutes, and no longer than 30 minutes.

I want to reassure you about confidentiality in this process as well. Our session will be recorded and transcribed after collection. I will change the names of all the participants in my write up, and any identifying information will be removed or changed to protect your confidentiality. Please respect the participants in this group by not discussing the comments made in this session. All data will be stored in NCSU Google Drive.

Again, your participation is totally voluntary, and we can stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable. Do you have any questions before we get started?

**End Script**

The focus group will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

Upon completion of the data analysis, an executive summary of the findings will be made available to the participants to view. Participants will be allowed to provide feedback and/or additional insights.

Participants may be asked to review an electronic copy of the transcription. Participants will be sent a transcript that is stripped of any identifying information and the e-mail containing the transcript will be generic with no information about the participant. Example e-mail statement: This is the transcript we discussed for your review.

## **APPENDIX F**

### **Focus Group Interview Questions**

1. How long have you been an educator?
2. How long have you worked at this school?
3. Describe your experience with having to implement both PBIS and RTI concurrently.
4. What type of training or trainings have you received for implementing RTI and/or PBIS at your school?
5. How often do you receive trainings for implementing RTI and/or PBIS?
6. Do you think teachers that are new to your school or beginning teachers receive adequate trainings for implementing RTI and/or PBIS?
7. How do you handle a student exhibiting extreme disruptive behaviors and needing academic support?
8. Do you think all teachers implement RTI and/or PBIS in their classrooms? As a grade level? (Please respond in general terms. Do not mention names or specific grade levels.)
9. Is there anything else you would like to share?