

A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Educator Perceptions Regarding Tier-One Instruction for All  
Elementary Students

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by  
BLAINE C. BRODERICK  
Dr. Pilar Mendoza, Dissertation Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

A QUALITATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS REGARDING  
TIER-ONE INSTRUCTION FOR ALL ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

Presented by Blaine C. Broderick,

a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. Pilar Mendoza

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Dr. Casandra Harper Morris

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Dr. Lydia Bentley

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Dr. Reesha Adamson

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study explores the challenges, concerns, and recommendations of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals regarding the safeguarding of tier-one instruction for all students. Emphasizing the critical importance of maintaining uninterrupted grade-level learning, participants highlighted the necessity of protecting core instructional time from being pulled for interventions or other support services outside the classroom during this time. Grounded in the framework of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), the research underscores the vital role of team collaboration, data analysis, and targeted interventions within Response to Intervention (RTI) models. Findings reveal a shared commitment among educators to prioritize equitable access to grade-level instruction and to foster effective communication and collaboration from all individuals working with those students. The study concludes that PLCs should be intentionally structured not only to analyze student data and identify intervention needs but also to safeguard instructional time, ensuring students do not miss essential new skills. Protecting this foundational time is essential to support student learning and achievement at the core of effective educational practices.

### **Section I: Introduction to the Dissertation in Practice**

*What should we do when students don't understand the material? More importantly, why are they struggling to grasp the grade-level content I'm teaching?* These questions often arise throughout the school year. One thing remains clear: action is needed, and we must seek a deeper understanding of the underlying issues. When considering how to support students who aren't mastering grade-level content, Response to Intervention (RTI) offers a valuable framework. Originally developed in response to the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) in 2004 and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, RTI provides a structured approach to addressing learning challenges early and effectively. This instructional framework surfaced as an approach for improving the outcomes for all students by using proactive, scientifically based instructional practices (Cummings, Atkins, Allison & Cole, 2008). Since the RTI framework's initial implementation over twenty years ago, it has evolved and become widely researched, accepted, and implemented throughout the U.S as a systematic framework to proactively support students needing academic interventions through multi-tiered levels of support (Cummings et al., 2008, p.24). Research supports that schools nationwide have practiced some form of RTI for many years (Mellard, Frey & Woods, 2012). While RTI continues to serve as a proactive framework for schools when determining students who might need additional academic supports for mastering tier-one grade-level instruction, what remains unclear and serves as the problem of practice for this dissertation is that there are a majority of students needing additional supports, both academic and non-academic who are pulled out of class by specialized support professionals (individuals who provide services beyond the realm of classroom teachers) *during* tier-one instruction. The problem escalates due to educators inadvertently causing them to miss core instruction. Grade-level, tier-one instruction refers to the

delivery of state standard curriculum provided by a classroom teacher to all students who are expected to know and understand that grade-level content by the end of the year.

Currently in public education, specifically in elementary schools that serve students in grades kindergarten through fifth, one frequent problem exists: students who qualify for additional support services are often pulled out of class to receive additional supports *during* whole-group tier-one instruction rather than *in addition* to tier-one instruction. Numerous barriers exist that interfere with every student's exposure and opportunity to learn tier-one academic instruction, including but not limited to pull-out special education services, related services such as speech, language, and occupational therapy, tier-two and tier-three intervention support by academic interventionists, counseling, medical needs, behavioral supports, chronic absenteeism, and various other critical needs that impede full access to tier-one instruction. One major problem which exists that is often overlooked by educators is when students deemed necessary for benefitting from additional supports are pulled from tier-one instruction by specialized support professionals, often resulting in a high frequency of missing out on the opportunity to receive tier-one grade-level instruction which serves as the core delivery method of teaching and learning that all students are expected to master by the end of the school year. With that notion, the goal of this study is to gain insight by diving deeper to strategically provide support services and/or tier-two and three intervention supports *in addition* to tier-one instruction rather than *in place of* tier-one instruction.

Once all students receive tier-one, grade-level instruction, the guiding principle for a classroom teacher's next steps are centered around varying forms of assessment to determine which students mastered the content and which students need additional, differentiated supports to understand the content. Based on the RTI framework, the answer to that guiding principle in

terms of academic instruction serves as a focal point for educators through data-based decision making to determine which students need tier-two intervention (same grade-level standard skill in a differentiated, smaller group setting). Based on the three-tiered model of those individuals needing tier-two supports, a small percentage of students will still need more intensive one on one instruction, which transitions to the third and final level within a three-tiered system: tier-three intervention. Tier three intervention includes both intensified instruction on grade-level standards not met, as well as any gaps in knowledge from previous grade levels that are contributing to the disconnect in mastering grade-level standards. This dissertation examines the various insights from a variety of individuals including classroom teachers responsible for delivering tier-one instruction, specialized support professionals who provide pull-out support services that are inadvertently causing students to miss tier-one instruction, and elementary principals who are put into the leadership position of managing and overseeing the entire process. The overall purpose of obtaining these perceptions and experiences from these stakeholders is to dive deeper in gaining authentic insight in order to analyze and deduce proactive strategies which have been implemented in the past to protect tier-one instruction for all elementary students in the future.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative thematic analysis aims to investigate the perceptions of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary school principals regarding their experiences, concerns, and recommendations regarding strategies and implementation efforts to safeguard high-quality tier-one instruction for all students, despite the current and rarely discussed practice of removing students from the classroom for various interventions and services. This is not to say that students do not need those interventions and services, but rather

builds on the foundation that those services should be in *addition to*, not *in place of*, tier-one instruction. Currently, there is no policy in place that prohibits students from being pulled from tier-one instruction. Contradictory to that notion, there are policies in place that prohibit students from receiving the support services put into place. By exploring the insights and expertise of the participants who have actively taught, provided services to, or led in their field for years, this research seeks to thematically construct knowledge and meaning around the narrative experiences to provide recommendations and implications to systematically and pragmatically protect tier-one instruction for all students while providing additional intervention support services needed to be successful.

### **Research Question**

The following research question guided this qualitative thematic analysis:

**RQ1:** What are the challenges and opportunities that educators (classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals) have experienced, created, or recommend to provide high-quality, uninterrupted tier-one grade-level instruction to students who need specialized supports throughout the school day?

### **Significance**

This study holds significant implications for the field of education, specifically in elementary grades, by addressing the critical issue of systematically safeguarding tier-one instruction for all students. By examining the narrative experiences of multiple classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary building principals, this research aimed to shed light on these stakeholders' years of educational experiences centered around potential student outcomes. The insights and recommendations these educators provide can inform practical strategies to ensure students receive high-quality tier-one instruction while

simultaneously meeting their diverse needs for intervention and support services deemed necessary for academic and behavioral success. Because there is no one-size-fits-all solution to this problem, thematic analysis construction will serve as a guiding force to provide more strategic outcomes for all students. This study contributes to promoting educational equity, guiding professional development initiatives, influencing educational policies, and inspiring future research opportunities to enhance educational practices and outcomes for all students.

### **Impact on Student Learning**

Once a student is removed from grade-level tier-one instruction for any reason, oftentimes an added responsibility for the classroom teacher then becomes to ensure the student is provided the opportunity to access any missed tier-one instruction at some point throughout the school day. In logical theory, failure to provide that opportunity could potentially lead to a knowledge gap in that specific skill or standard if they were not exposed to the lesson on that skill during tier-one instruction. The question then exists, *how can we, as educators, expect students to demonstrate mastery on grade-level standards if they don't receive tier-one instruction on that standard in the first place?* While some might argue that students performing below grade-level in certain academic areas need lower-level, “watered down” instruction to be successful, research supports that if the ultimate goal of a learning-focused school is to ensure every student ends each year having acquired the essential skills, knowledge, and behaviors required to be successful at the next grade level, then all students must have access to essential grade-level curriculum as part of their core instruction (Buffum et al., 2018).

According to research centered around the tiered pyramid model, tier-one instruction is the core instruction that 80% of students in the general education classroom should master by the end of the unit. When less than that 80% threshold is met, teachers are responsible for adjusting

and differentiating to meet the needs of all students not yet presenting mastery (Hoover, 2011). Based on decades of research surrounding the RTI model, the instructional components to effective tier-one instruction must collectively include “a) research-based curriculum, b) evidence-based interventions, c) differentiated strategies, and d) sufficient opportunities to learn (i.e. 80% or more achieve at benchmark” (Hoover, 2011). Specific to the problem of practice examined in this study, specifically in relation to the fourth component listed above by Hoover, it could be theorized that students who are pulled from high-quality, tier-one grade level instruction are provided fewer opportunities to learn than their grade-level peers, which could potentially place them at a significant disadvantage according to the four-component model.

### **Professional Perspectives**

One significance of this study is that it lends itself to the perceptions of practitioners in the field of education who have experienced this problem of practice firsthand. By examining the narrative experiences through the lens of three different educational professionals (classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary building principals), this study examines the problem of practice from three different perspectives, all of which have valuable insight based on their professional expertise. By cross-examining the narratives shared by grade-level, tier-one instruction providers (classroom teachers) with that of professionals providing services that create the need to pull students out of general education instruction, mixed in with the birds-eye-view that building principals have of the daily operations within a school building, a more comprehensive set of recommendations and implications can be considered. This approach involving multiple views of key stakeholders has the potential to offer a wider range of informed decision-making at the school and district level to better support staff and students who need additional services while preserving tier-one instruction and learning.

### **Implications for Professional Development**

Building principals, teachers, and support professionals engage in professional development throughout the year, provided both internally and externally across school districts. One critical significance of this study's findings could potentially lead to more intentional professional learning centered around the protection of tier-one instruction and how to ensure all students are provided the opportunity to access it. Better equipping professionals with strategies for balancing tier-one instruction with targeted interventions can increase grade-level learning for all students while meeting their individual needs.

### **Implications for Policy**

As stated above, there currently exists no explicit policies in place protecting students from being removed from grade-level tier-one instruction in order to receive support services. When new policies are implemented, it is both the principal and the teachers that play a major part in its success. According to Hope (2002), the primary step in implementing a policy in a school setting is to develop a conceptual understanding of the policy, which stems from the principal creating and disseminating a vision that supports it (Hope, 2002). As for teachers, the main implementers of educational policy, they are more likely to resist change when they do not understand the policies implications, possess a lack of rationale behind the policy, and are not equipped with the skills necessary to implement it (Hope, 2002). Recommendations and implications from this study could provide better insight for both principals, teachers, and specialized support professionals when it comes to full inclusion, educating all students, with or without the need for additional support services within the general education classroom to the maximum extent possible.

Safeguarding opportunities for elementary student exposure to tier-one instructional time is essential to ensuring their academic success and preventing them from falling behind. Educators must emphasize the significance of missing critical moments during an academic lesson, regardless of the quantity of time that is. The decisions made by building principals, classroom teachers, and support professionals regarding students' schedules can significantly impact their learning outcomes and overall educational experience. By prioritizing uninterrupted access to crucial academic content during tier-one instructional time (especially when acquiring new foundational knowledge and exposure to essential standards), educators can prevent students from needing additional academic support later in their academic journey. Public education stakeholders must recognize the importance of effectively protecting this instructional time to support students' learning and academic progress.

## **Section II: Review of Literature**

The following review of literature discusses the historical context of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) with a focus on Response to Intervention (RTI). It explores the development and key components of RTI, common models, and Hattie's research on its academic impact. The review briefly touches on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a guide for data-based decision-making, emphasizing their integration into RTI and addressing controversies around RTI implementation. It also examines the importance of tier-one core instruction and advocates for educational equity. This review aims to enhance understanding of these topics and identify gaps in the literature affecting grade-level instruction barriers.

### **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)**

The term "Multi-tiered System of Support" (MTSS) emerged in 2007 in Kansas, consolidating two similar educational frameworks recognized by the state's Department of

Education (Choi et al., 2022). MTSS is a structured approach that incorporates a range of system-wide resources, strategies, structures, and practices to provide a thorough and adaptable framework for effectively addressing obstacles to student learning. This tiered-level approach offers a proactive model to address students needing additional support in both behavior and academics (Rinaldi, 2013). Research by VanCamp et al. (2020) highlights the effectiveness of MTSS in enhancing academics, behavior, social competencies, peer relationships, well-being, and teaching effectiveness. Under MTSS, two primary frameworks exist. The first framework, School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (SW-PBIS), also known as PBIS, originated in the 1980s to address the need for improved behavioral interventions for students with behavior disorders (Gresham, 1991; Sugai & Horner, 1999; Walker et al., 1996).

The second framework within the MTSS framework is Response to Intervention (RTI), which is the primary focus of this study. RTI originated from the adoption of two significant education initiatives: the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2001). Unlike the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support framework, RTI emphasizes academic learning rather than student behavior, but by still employing a three-tiered proactive approach.

Response to Intervention has evolved since its inception, with various terms, definitions, and interpretations around the framework's research. Experts agree that RTI is a preventative model of multitiered instruction with a minimum of three tiers (Bradley et al., 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; National Center on Response to Intervention, NCRTI, 2010). In the RTI model, teachers assess the effectiveness of academic interventions through progress monitoring (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Gresham, 2002; NCRTI, 2010) and adjust the level of support based on students' response to the interventions provided (Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2015).

**Response to Intervention (RTI)**

Buffum et al. (2012) describe RTI as “a systematic process designed to ensure that every student receives the necessary time and support to achieve high levels of learning” by “providing targeted, timely, and systematic interventions to all students demonstrating a need for additional support” (p. xiii). In the RTI framework, students undergo academic screening to identify those who may benefit from tier-two interventions. Students scoring below a specific threshold or exhibiting learning gaps receive small-group, research-based interventions to address these gaps. Progress monitoring is then conducted to assess the student's responsiveness to the interventions (Mellard et al., 2009). During progress monitoring, formative assessments are used by instructors to collect and analyze data, guiding decisions on the next steps in instruction (Mellard & Johnson, 2007; Stecker et al., 2005). Students who do not show improvement after tier-two interventions are deemed unresponsive and require further support. Understanding the three-tiered levels of support helps guide professionals through early intervention, rather than waiting for students to fail. Through this systematic, early intervention process, classroom teachers can analyze data in an ongoing process to support students who struggled at the tier-one level by supplementing instruction on the standard at the tier-two level rather than replacing it, reassessing and providing intensive support if necessary. Through this layered approach, students needing additional supports are provided with multiple opportunities of exposure as opposed to a watered-down version of what is expected at the rigor of grade-level expectations.

The purpose of understanding the components of RTI impacts the need for early intervention by providing additional support to tier-one instruction rather than in place of tier-one instruction, a common problem in educational practice that serves as the focus of this study and

can be found across multiple research studies related to RTI implementation (Buffum et al., 2018).

### **Models of RTI Implementation**

Originally intended for identifying students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), research by Batsche (2005) and Fuchs & Fuchs (2006) has shown that Response to Intervention (RTI) has evolved into a framework implemented through three main models: the Problem-Solving Model, the Standard Treatment Model (Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2015), and the Outcomes-Driven Model (Cummings, Atkins, Allison, & Cole, 2008).

In the Problem-Solving RTI model, as explained by Fuchs & Fuchs (2006) and elaborated by Fuchs (2010), when a student does not exhibit sufficient progress at the first tier, the teacher collaborates with parents to develop a plan. This model involves identifying and analyzing the issue, devising an intervention, setting goals, implementing the intervention, monitoring progress, adjusting the intervention if necessary, evaluating effectiveness, and devising a new plan (Fuchs et al., 2010; Ikeda, Tilly, Stumme, Volmer, & Allison, 1996; Martson, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003; Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2015). The model emphasizes that with adequate tier-one instruction initially, the need for special education services is reduced.

The Standard Treatment model, as outlined by Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), differs from the Problem-Solving model by using a universal screener to determine tier-two eligibility for all students. Students scoring below a specified threshold receive more intensive, evidence-based instruction and are monitored for approximately five to eight weeks. If inadequate progress is observed, students are classified as "nonresponsive" and transition to Tier 3 (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs et al., 2010). This model emphasizes time sensitivity.

While both models are utilized in practice, current research on RTI effectiveness favors the Problem-Solving Model (Buffum, 2018). This model prioritizes high-quality tier-one instruction as the cornerstone for proactive intervention and offers targeted support for students. Cummings (2008) introduces the Outcomes-Driven Model as the third most utilized model in RTI implementation. This model emphasizes the integration of assessment with intervention, ensuring that assessments are formative and aligned with the curriculum. It extends the Problem-Solving Model and addresses key questions: what is the problem, why is it happening, what actions should be taken, and did the intervention yield positive outcomes (Tilly, 2008)? Cummings et al. (2008) outline the four educational decisions of the Outcomes-Driven Model as 1) identifying the need for support, 2) validating the need, 3) planning, implementing, evaluating, and modifying support, and 4) reviewing outcomes. This specific model serves as the bridge between RTI and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) when examining student data to inform decision-making regarding which students need additional support, and which students need enrichment.

According to Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2018), a common challenge in RTI implementation is the misuse of assessments because broad, overarching assessments that assess a student's overall knowledge on a subject provides a proficiency level but fails to pinpoint what exact standard and skill knowledge are lacking. Buffum (2018) highlights the differences among the three models in early assessment practices for identifying students requiring targeted interventions, emphasizing the importance of interventions tailored to individual student needs, cautioning against relying on broad indicators such as report card grades, state assessments, district benchmark results, or universal screening scores to guide interventions. The following literature reviews the academic impact that RTI has based on Hattie's meta-meta-analyses.

**Hattie's Research on RTI's Academic Effect Size**

In 2008, Dr. John Hattie published the book *Visible Learning*, which is a comprehensive analysis based on over 800 meta-analyses and more than 50,000 empirical research studies. The overall purpose of Hattie's book is to provide insight analysis on different factors that positively influence school learning, those that do not, and those that hinder successful learning. The factors Hattie analyzed were based on inspiration from Jacob Cohen's work on statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences. Goulet-Pelletiera and Cousineau (2018) elaborate on Cohen's research, explaining its utility in standardizing differences between means to compare treatment impacts across studies with varying measurement units. "A large Cohen  $d$  signifies a substantial difference between two means, with guidelines proposed by Cohen (1969) categorizing 0.2 as "small," 0.5 as "medium," and 0.8 as "large" (Cohen, 1969; Goulet-Pelletiera & Cousineau, 2018). Effect sizes vary from negatively impacting student learning outcomes, such as retention and suspension, to positively influencing student learning, like direct instruction and collective teacher efficacy, with effect sizes above 0.4. This range represents factors that have been shown to accelerate student learning. The effect size of 0.4 serves as the hinge point, described by Hattie as "the average of all effect sizes" (Hattie, 2008). Hattie (2023) discusses the significance of this hinge point regarding factors below it, emphasizing the need for understanding to enhance their impact (Hattie, 2023, p. 30)."

In 2012, Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2018) conducted an in-depth analysis of Hattie's research on Response to Intervention (RTI), highlighting RTI as one of the top three educational practices proven to significantly enhance student achievement. When effectively implemented, RTI demonstrates an impressive average yearly impact rate of 1.07 standard deviations (Hattie, 2012), with one standard deviation (1.0) increase typically correlating with improved student

achievement over a span of two to three years (Hattie, 2009; Hattie, 2012; Buffum et al., 2023, p.2).

In 2023, Hattie expanded his original 2008 work by incorporating data from over 2,313 meta-analyses in his book *Visible Learning: The Sequel* (Hattie, 2023, p.21). As educational approaches have advanced, so has the research on their effectiveness (Hattie, 2023, p.9). The Response to Intervention (RTI) framework has evolved over the last two decades, with Hattie's latest publication (2023) presenting updated research on RTI's effect sizes based on eight meta-analyses, 180 studies, 21,907 individuals, and 689 effects. Hattie notes that while RTI research has primarily focused on the efficacy of individual components rather than the integrated process, there is significant variation in outcomes, highlighting the need for more standardized interventions (Hattie, 2023, p. 365). Due to differing implementation methods, results have been mixed. After analyzing the components in Hattie's RTI research, the average effect size was determined to be 0.73, placing RTI within the range of desired effects (Hattie, 2023, p.365). Before Hattie's publication of the Visible Learning results, researchers delved into various aspects of the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. Moore-Brown et al. (2005) examined the framework's effects on preventing students from needing special education, its advantages for English Language Learners (ELLs), and its sustainability. The study revealed that out of 123 students initially identified as at risk for disabilities, 115 students did not progress to the special education referral stage. This study underscored the significance of early identification and proactive tiered support to prevent the misclassification of students with Learning Disabilities (LD) (Preston et al., 2015, p. 178).

### **Bridging the Gap Between Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and RTI**

Knowing that the RTI process serves as the proactive foundation for supporting students who need intervention, DuFour and Eaker (1998) focused on the process of how educators employ data-driven decisions within the RTI model to determine appropriate tiered interventions for students struggling to master core tier-one instruction. In their book "Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement" (1998), Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker introduced a guide for educators to engage in collaborative action research cycles to drive data-based decisions on student academic achievement (DuFour et al., 2024, p. 14). Through extensive research, DuFour and his team identified three key concepts that underpin the work of a Professional Learning Community (PLC): a focus on learning, a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility, and a commitment to achieving results. In a later publication (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010, p. 119), the authors outlined four essential questions that guide decision-making for collaborative PLC teams: 1) What do we want our students to learn? 2) How will we determine if each student has learned it? 3) How will we support students who have not learned it? 4) How can we further enrich the learning for students who have already mastered the content?

Diving into the first question which centers around *what* students must learn, Marzano (2003) introduced the concept of a guaranteed and viable curriculum, emphasizing that all students should receive access to grade-level core instruction and master the standards. Teachers, following the guidance of the first Professional Learning Team (PLT) question, continuously refine their understanding of what students should learn by transitioning from prioritizing and unwrapping standards to identifying specific learning targets (DuFour et al., 2024, p. 147). According to Dimich (2015), learning targets represent the essence or progressions within each

standard. When applied within the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, this initial question forms the basis for identifying areas where students may require intervention when answering the third question. The second PLT question focuses on the assessment aspect of learning, emphasizing the importance of analyzing student data from a level playing field, while the third question delves into the "I" in RTI—Intervention. The intervention piece of RTI is what drives the focus of this study. Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2018) highlight in their RTI framework that after each unit of study, some students may require extra time and support to master the essential grade-level or course-specific curriculum, indicating that not all students will demonstrate proficiency in the taught standard. In the context of the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, this stage corresponds to when students are provided with tier-two intervention support. The fourth question that guides Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) centers on extending and enriching the learning of students who exhibit proficiency in the essential standard taught. For further insights into how Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) steer the RTI process through Social Learning Theory (SLT), refer to Section 3: Theoretical Framework.

### **Controversy in RTI Research**

In 2015, the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance conducted a study called “Evaluation of Response to Intervention Practices for Elementary School Reading.” This study looked at the impact of the RTI framework on the reading progress of over 20,000 students in grades 1-3. The study found first-graders who received reading interventions performed worse than their peers who did not receive RTI support (Balu et al., 2015). Additionally, the study revealed that students in special education or older than average for their grade performed poorly when they received interventions (Sparks, 2015, p.1).

After the publication of the study on RTI practices, Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2018) critiqued the methods and findings, pointing out two key misconceptions. The first misconception, highlighted by the authors, was that 69% of schools in the study offered intervention services during Tier 1 core instruction (Buffum et al., 2018, p. 4). They argued that in these schools, intervention might have replaced valuable instruction time, potentially displacing small-group or other instructional services (Balu et al., 2015, p. ES-11). According to Buffum, Mattos, & Malone, this goes against the fundamental principle of RTI, which suggests that interventions should complement, not substitute, effective tier-one core instruction. They emphasized that when students miss crucial grade-level core curriculum for interventions, it hinders their progress by trading one step forward (improvement in a remedial skill) for one step back (missing a new essential grade-level skill; Buffum et al., 2018, p. 4).

A second misconception that came from the study is based on the notion by Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2018) that grade-level teachers differ in their expertise and success rates on teaching certain standards during tier-one instruction. They note that more often, teachers provide their students with the same pedagogies from core instruction, only in smaller groups. The misconception from the larger study by Balu found that only 37% of the first graders in the study received true RTI tier-two intervention, which includes differentiation at the tier-two level, not just adjusting the group size.

Karen K. Wixson, a prominent reading and literacy professor and dean emeritus of education at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, shared similar concerns raised by Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2015) regarding the study's findings. Wixson (2015) highlighted the blurred distinction between core instruction and intervention within the RTI framework. She emphasized that core instruction should encompass a broader range of essential skills rather than

singling out specific components for different treatment (as cited in Sparks, 2015). Combining these perspectives, I argue that RTI should not involve removing students from tier-one core instruction. Instead, tier-two intervention should complement, not replace, tier-one core instruction, catering to the individual learning needs of students requiring targeted support.

### **Core Instruction and The Tiered Pyramid**

As mentioned previously, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) refer to the systematic approach to proactively support students in behavior and academics. In this tiered approach, specific to RTI and academics, tier-one is the foundational tier that all students should have access to. Horner and Sugai (2015) stress the importance of tier-one in PBIS, highlighting that "Efficient and integrated tier-one practices are essential as all students benefit from them. The start of each school year begins by teaching and/or reviewing school-wide behavioral expectations before students have had the opportunity to make behavioral mistakes" (Horner & Sugai, 2015, p. 82). Similarly, in RTI, the first tier follows a similar approach. Instead of focusing on school-wide behavioral expectations, RTI places emphasis on teaching and/or reviewing grade-level, tier-one core instruction.

As per the RTI Action Network (2022), it is crucial that all students receive high-quality, evidence-based core instruction and undergo regular screenings for academic or behavioral challenges (RTI Action Network, 2022). The importance of high-quality tier-one instruction in education is a well-established concept. This study focuses on the critical aspect of ensuring that all students benefit from such instruction in practice. Referring to research from *Taking Action: A Handbook for RTI at Work* by Buffum, Mattos, & Malone (2018), an essential research piece to grasp is the concept of multi-tiered levels of support depicted in a tiered pyramid structure that illustrates different support levels. Over the years, experts in MTSS, including PBIS and RTI,

have contributed to the evolution of this tiered pyramid framework. Regardless of whether the problem-solving, standard-treatment, or outcomes-driven RTI model is employed for classroom or school-wide implementation, the levels of support remain consistent.

### **Focusing on Essential Standards**

The quote, "If everything is important, then nothing is" (Lencioni, 2002, p. 106), has resonated in the field of education for decades. Marzano and Kendall (1998) delved into the history of educational standards, exploring how to effectively teach them within the traditional school schedule. They found that covering all knowledge outlined in the current core subject area standards could potentially require up to 22 years of schooling (Marzano & Kendall, 1998, p. 1). This realization led to the development of the idea in education that educators should prioritize "needs to know" over "nice to know" in their tier-one, grade-level instruction, as emphasized by Mattos (2018). Therefore, it becomes critically important to identify essential standards at the tier-one level. According to Reeves (2003), educators are guided in determining these essential standards through three lenses: 1) Endurance: Does the standard provide students with knowledge and skills that extend beyond a single test date? 2) Leverage: Does it offer knowledge and skills applicable in multiple disciplines? 3) Readiness: Does it equip students with knowledge and skills crucial for success in the next grade or level of instruction?

Focusing on essential standards at the tier-one level for all students is crucial for laying a strong academic foundation. These are the standards deemed most important that students must know to be successful in subsequent grades. To lay the foundation of this academic learning, students must be in class and given that opportunity. It is essential not to pull students during these lessons to avoid disrupting their learning and causing further gaps in their understanding.

### **Educational Equity for All Students**

Removing students from tier-one instruction for support services can harm their education by disrupting their access to essential learning opportunities (Buffum, 2018). This practice can deepen educational inequities, as students miss out on foundational instruction, fall behind their peers, and struggle to catch up, often widening the achievement gap. In the past 70 years, efforts to promote equity in education have been marked by significant milestones. For example, the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) challenged the idea that segregating students based on race was acceptable, highlighting the principle that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Subsequently, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 aimed to bridge the academic divide between low-income students in urban or rural areas and their middle-class counterparts in suburban schools. This legislation sought to address disparities in reading, writing, and math skills.

Another crucial development occurred with the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975 under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA). This law was a turning point as it ensured that children with disabilities were no longer denied access to education and learning opportunities. Prior to this, only a small fraction of children with disabilities were receiving an education in U.S. schools, with many states even excluding specific groups such as deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or intellectually disabled children (IDEA, 2004).

In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) replaced the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) focusing on supporting children with disabilities. Subsequently, IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 to align with the goals of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. This reauthorization emphasized the need for early intervention services to help children requiring additional academic and behavioral support succeed in a

general education setting. It also aimed to enhance accountability, improve educational outcomes, and establish higher standards for special education instructors.

In 2015, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was revamped into the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), marking a shift towards ensuring that all students across America are taught to rigorous academic standards to prepare them for success in both college and careers. Over the years, as equity-focused educational laws have evolved and been reauthorized, the overarching objective has remained consistent: striving for equitable access to high-quality education for all students, not just a select few.

One subgroup of students impacted most by pulling students out of tier-one grade-level instruction are those receiving special education services. In Chapter 8 of "Visible Learning: The Sequel," Hattie (2023) delves into his meta-analysis of classroom effects, categorizing them into three specific domains: class composition, classroom management, and class climate. In examining classroom composition, Hattie's research shows that mainstreaming/inclusion, among nine factors studied, yields the highest effect size of 0.52 standard deviation, aligning with desired outcomes (Hattie, 2023, p. 192).

Understanding the educational milestones of equity over the past 70 years is essential for ensuring all students receive a high-quality education today, especially in safeguarding tier-one instruction for all students. Learning from past successes and challenges helps create a more equitable education system that prioritizes every student's needs and access to quality instruction.

### **Gap in Literature**

While extensive research has explored the history and academic impact of Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI), there remains a gap in the

literature regarding how to strategically overcome the problem of pulling students from tier-one instruction to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn grade-level instruction from their classroom teacher. It is clear that there are negative consequences of removing students from tier-one instruction. While some studies have highlighted both positive and conflicting outcomes of RTI, little attention has been given to guide teachers in making up grade-level instruction when several of their students miss core instruction for various reasons. Qualitative data from this particular study aims to offer insights into the experiences, concerns, and recommendations for preserving tier-one instruction for all students. Despite the importance of safeguarding tier-one instruction, there is a lack of educational policies that prevent students from being removed during this essential period. Research on RTI best practices emphasizes the necessity of providing tier-two and tier-three support in addition to—rather than instead of—tier-one instruction, as highlighted by Buffum, Mattos, and Malone's critique of the 2015 RTI Report (Balu et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the common practice of withdrawing students during tier-one instruction to accommodate adult convenience persists as a significant yet overlooked issue in education today.

### **Summary**

This literature review provides an in-depth exploration of the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) known as Response to Intervention (RTI), followed by the critical understanding of educational equity and the historical context in which public education has evolved to ensure equal access to quality education for all students. While gaps in literature exist, this study aims to understand the perceptions of educational practitioners on safeguarding tier-one instruction for all students. The review emphasizes the importance of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in data-driven decision-making and advocates for equitable tier-one core

instruction. In addressing ongoing controversies in RTI implementation, further research is needed to enhance educational practices and support the academic success of all students.

### **Section III: Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework guiding this study is grounded in the principles of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which emphasize collaborative learning and continuous improvement among educational practitioners. As defined by DuFour and colleagues (2024), PLCs are "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (DuFour et al., 2024, p. 14).

By integrating the PLC framework, this analysis explores how educators leverage collaborative learning processes within the PLC cycle to design and implement tiered support interventions for students who do not respond to tier-one instruction within the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. As Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2018) emphasize, no single teacher possesses all the knowledge and skills necessary to meet every student's needs; therefore, collaboration and shared expertise are essential (Buffum et al., 2018, p. 59).

Through the collective expertise and shared responsibility of educators within PLCs (DuFour et al., 2024, p. 206), the teaching, sharing, and modeling of best practices can be employed to address individual student needs, particularly when focusing on the intervention phase of supporting students who did not learn the instruction the first time (DuFour et al., 2024, p. 199). This framework guides the notion that the collaborative culture fostered by PLCs can enhance the effectiveness of tiered interventions by promoting continuous improvement, shared accountability, and professional growth among educators.

By examining how these processes unfold within the RTI context, this study aims to provide insights into the perceptions of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals regarding their experiences, concerns, and recommendations for safeguarding tier-one instruction through collaborative, data-based decision-making.

### **Connection to the Study**

The PLC framework emphasizes the importance of ongoing collaborative inquiry, data analysis, and reflective practice. The cycle begins with identifying the essential standards of tier-one instruction to ensure a solid foundation for all students. This initial stage is crucial because it directly influences students' likelihood of requiring additional support at the tier-two level.

When analyzing student data from common formative assessments, teachers, support professionals, and principals observe and share effective instructional strategies and interventions. This collaborative observation enables teams to determine the most appropriate interventions for students who did not master the initial instruction. According to DuFour et al. (2024), this step involves either assigning staff to intervene based on expertise or sharing best practices through modeling differentiated instructional strategies proven to work.

Once interventions are selected, team members observe the implementation, providing opportunities for peer modeling and feedback. This process aligns with the PLC cycle's emphasis on continuous reflection and improvement. The collaborative observation and feedback loop allow educators to adapt and refine interventions, ensuring they meet the diverse needs of students.

This study underscores that the PLC framework fosters a culture of shared responsibility, ongoing learning, and professional development. By working together through structured cycles

of inquiry, educators can strengthen tier-one instruction, effectively address students' needs with tiered interventions, and ultimately promote greater academic success for all learners.

As Figure 1 below shows, within the PLC framework, the initial stage of the cycle revolves around identifying the essential standards of tier-one instruction for students to learn. This tier-one instruction is the focal point of this DIP because it is the essential component students are being pulled from that can often inadvertently cause students to need intervention at the tier-two level.

**Figure 1. *The Professional Learning Community Cycle***



#### **Section IV: Methodology**

Creswell (2007) explains that “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). He furthers his explanation through the process of qualitative research, stating that “to study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Rather than quantifying the effects of the problem that exists, qualitative insight from experienced professionals in the field of education was deemed more likely to shed light on the recommendations and implications in

improving best practice towards ensuring all elementary students are provided the conditions to learn at high levels.

The research question developed led to the selection of a qualitative approach by incorporating several key components of social constructivism. This approach was chosen to delve deeply into the experiences, concerns, and recommendations of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals. Through in-depth interviews with participants regarding the problem of protecting tier-one instruction for all students, this qualitative study provided guiding recommendations and implications for best practices in protecting tier-one instruction.

### **Positionality**

As the principal of an elementary school with a background in teaching and educational leadership, my positionality impacted the approach I brought to this study based on the direct correlation between the overarching topic and my impact as a leader. From experiencing two years as a special education teacher, four years as a regular education teacher, two years as an assistant principal, and three years as an elementary principal, I have continuously experienced and gained a broader understanding of various challenges in public educational settings from different viewpoints. Having held various roles within the education system, I have had the privilege of diverse experiences which have helped shape my appreciation of the diverse perspectives of different stakeholders involved in student achievement, which relates to the dynamics of various participant selection for this study. My position as a current elementary principal enabled me to engage with the participants of this study from a place of shared experience that can not only understand the experiences and concerns, but also pragmatically use the outcomes of this study to implement future decisions as a building leader. Through this

qualitative thematic analysis, I sought to incorporate my position as both a researcher and a practitioner to explore and understand the stories of those directly involved in student achievement and opportunities. By centering on the perspectives of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals, I aimed to construct knowledge that will improve future decision-making from a leadership position.

Throughout my career as a special education teacher providing support services, a classroom teacher delivering tier-one grade level instruction, and as a principal overseeing the systems in place, protecting tier-one instruction has been an ongoing challenge that remains to this day. Ensuring that students legally meet the requirements of the support services deemed necessary while also ensuring that they have the maximum exposure to tier-one instruction has and can be very difficult for various reasons.

As an active administrator with a background in teaching and educational leadership, I prioritize supporting all students learning at high levels, starting with safeguarding tier-one instruction. I believe in systematic, tiered interventions to support students needing additional learning regarding both grade-level instruction and any knowledge gaps that might exist at a lower level. Through my experience, I approached interviews with openness to diverse perspectives and aim to establish collaborative relationships based on open communication and mutual respect. With a focus on improving student achievement, I engaged with various school stakeholders, including teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals, to gain insights that informed the thematic analysis process. Drawing from my education experience in both rural and urban settings in Missouri, I sought a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the Springfield-Metro region to enhance future outcomes.

*Paradigmatic Lens.* In this qualitative study centered on stakeholder perceptions on safeguarding tier-one instruction for all students, a unique dual paradigmatic approach emerged, blending the principles of social constructivism and pragmatism. Drawing inspiration from Josselson's (2011) emphasis on narrative analysis for holistic understanding and Patton (1990) and Creswell's (2003) perspectives on social constructivism and pragmatism, this study aimed to construct knowledge that not only comprehensively addressed the issue at hand but also informed future implications.

Through the lens of social constructivism, insights were provided from the experiences of key stakeholders such as classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals. Their perspectives were synthesized to form a comprehensive understanding, laying the groundwork for effective solutions in safeguarding tier-one instruction. As an elementary principal, the knowledge constructed served as a practical tool for implementing positive change within the school environment, benefiting both educators and students alike. Embracing the tenets of pragmatic philosophy, which acknowledges the influence of past experiences and beliefs on decision-making, the study aimed to address the identified challenges effectively by applying the constructed knowledge in practice. By integrating elements of both social constructivism to gather knowledge from various sources and pragmatism to guide future actions, the goal was to bridge the gap between theoretical insights and practical implementation in educational leadership.

### **Research Design**

The design of this study was an interview-based qualitative research (Levy, 2017) in which the data collection consisted of in-depth and open-ended interviews. Merriam (2002) explains the tenants of this design as when “the researcher is interested in understanding how

participants make meaning of a situation, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6-7). Aligned with Merriam’s description of a basic qualitative study, this design was selected due to its format of allowing for consistency and flexibility in that all participants will be presented with open-ended questions while allowing the researcher to ask any clarifying questions for further insight related to the topic (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2022). Consistent with this design, Creswell (2014) defines thematic analysis as the process of analyzing and categorizing specific statements into coded data to represent themes regarding the context of the research questions, which fit within the scope of this study.

### **Participants**

The participants selected for this qualitative study were chosen based on purposeful sampling. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define purposeful sampling on the notion that “the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 96). Purposeful sampling was chosen by the researcher for this qualitative study to choose participants who provided in-depth information about the research question developed. The classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals chosen for this study possessed the characteristics, experiences, and knowledge that aligned with the safeguarding of tier-one instruction for all students which provided comprehensive, diverse insight for the research study’s outcomes. I aimed to recruit two classroom teachers, two specialized support professionals, and two elementary principals from the Springfield Metro area public elementary school system in Missouri based on providing insight from two different individuals with the same role within the school across three different roles who impacted the focus of this study.

To be included in this qualitative study as a classroom teacher participant, specialized support professional participant, or an elementary principal participant, the two individuals within each category met the following selection criteria found in Table 1:

**Table 1**

*Participant Selection Criteria*

Category	Certification Criteria	Employment Criteria	Experience Criteria
Classroom Teacher	Hold an active teaching certificate in elementary education and has acquired tenured status	Currently employed at an elementary public school within the Springfield-Metro region	Has served as a regular education teacher for at least the past 10 years
Specialized Support Professional	Holds an active certificate in the field of expertise for which they would provide supports to students ( <i>E.g., special education, reading/math intervention specialist, speech/language/occupational/physical therapy, social/emotional services</i> )	Currently employed either with an elementary public school within the Springfield-Metro region and/or be contracted through another agency that partners with that elementary public school	Has served elementary students in this role for at least the last five years
Elementary Principal	Holds an active elementary administration certificate	Currently employed at an elementary public school within the Springfield-Metro region.	Has at least five years of teaching experience in either a regular or special education classroom

**Recruitment Procedures**

I first obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Then, I obtained necessary approvals from the school district where these participants were employed to identify potential participants by leveraging professional networks and school district contacts to find qualified participants. I then contacted them through

personalized recruitment emails approved by IRB, explaining the study's purpose, benefits, and rights of each participant. Once participants were identified, I scheduled interviews with flexibility and convenience for participants between the approval date and December 20th, 2024. Once informed consent was obtained from each participant, I conducted interviews via Zoom in a secure setting using semi-structured interview questions to encourage participants to share their narratives, experiences, concerns, and recommendations related to the study.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were the sole form of data collection for this qualitative study. Jones et al. (2022) attests that of the types of qualitative interviews conducted, semi-structured interviews are built upon flexible open-ended questions which are pre-established, yield broad narrative data from all participants, and provide the researcher with the ability to ask any follow-up or clarifying questions to elicit any deeper knowledge centered around a particular experience, concern, or recommendation (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2022, p. 169). One of the main advantages of utilizing semi-structured interviews was that it was successful in enabling reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Galletta 2012).

Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and took place via Zoom. Based on the recommendations of qualitative research experts in the field, each interview included an introductory rapport-building question, followed by a series of pre-determined main theme questions (Kallio et al., 2016), and one closing question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Seidman, 2019). In relation to the pre-determined, main theme questions, I determined that any follow-up questions deemed necessary in context throughout the interview would be spontaneous based on the participant's answers (Whiting, 2008), which allowed myself to ask participants to either (1) expand on any particular point that came up by asking for more information (Whiting, 2008) or

(2) to provide an example of the issue (Dearnley, 2005). I used spontaneous probing for this study due to the need to use three distinct categories of participants. Each category of participants had its own set of questions that were unique to that participant's role in the education process.

With the participant's consent, each interview occurred via Zoom and was electronically recorded using a password-protected device via Otter.ai technology. The researcher's premium-purchased subscription to this tool specialized as an artificial intelligence platform that transcribed spoken words into written text in real-time, recognized and differentiated transcription from both the researcher and the participant, and was accessible to the researcher while the interview took place, as well as after the interview was conducted. Once the interview was completed, the researcher coded the transcription with the title, downloaded, organized, safeguarded through password protection, and reviewed the transcription for clarity and accuracy before moving on to the stages of data analysis. Once the transcription was reviewed for clarity and accuracy, I offered the participant a copy of the transcript. I waited until all interviews had been conducted with the selected participants before analyzing the data.

### **Data Analysis**

Although there are numerous approaches to analyzing qualitative data, research supports the notion that two critical components include adequate depth of data and justification behind the ability to identify findings from the study (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 149). Upon completion of participant interviews, I stored data using password-protected technology. Data analysis refers to the processes put into place that allow the researcher to integrate all the beginning stages of this study that led to data collection to form conclusions and make sense of the data collected regarding the questions guiding the study (Bhattacharya, 2017, pp. 149-150).

For this qualitative study, I used inductive thematic analysis to analyze the data collected. While thematic analysis is broadly defined and synthesized as the process of identifying patterns or themes to address the research or say something about an issue (Braun & Clarke, 2006), doing so inductively involved “working up from the data,” which meant looking at the data, chunking the data into codes, clustering similar analytical units into categories, and identifying themes (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). The thematic data analysis steps implemented are detailed in Table 2. By adopting a reflexive systematic method that considers the researcher’s personal biases, choices, understandings, and knowledge formation during data analysis (Braun & Clark, 2020), I employed Braun and Clark’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework to examine participant interview data. This process was completed non-linearly, allowing the flexibility to fluctuate between phases during the analysis. The steps were as follows:

**Table 2***Braun & Clarke's Six-Step Framework for Doing a Thematic Analysis*

Step Number	Step Title	Step Procedure
1	Familiarizing	Involves reading and re-reading transcriptions to become familiar with all data collected before proceeding to the next phase.
2	Generating	Involves organizing data in a meaningful and systematic way by developing initial codes.
3	Searching	Involves developing an awareness of any themes, which include any patterns that capture something significant or interesting about the data and/or research question.
4	Reviewing	Involves reviewing, modifying, adding, or subtracting preliminary themes identified in Step 3. Based on initially coded supports from Step 2, this phase involves determining if all individual themes are coherent and independent from other themes.
5	Defining	Involves refining the themes established to identify the essence of what each theme is about. This involves analyzing what the themes are saying about the study and about one another.
6	Writing	Involves the process of writing the data analyses in reference to the study's purpose, results, recommendations, and implications.

*Note:* Adapted from Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3) p.3304-3314.

### **Trustworthiness**

In the realm of qualitative research history, issues of quality and trustworthiness regarding qualitative studies have led to reluctant criticism that I addressed and considered (Shelton, 2004, p. 63). For this study, I adhered to four major components of trustworthiness which included 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability, and 4) confirmability.

When it comes to credibility, I engaged in two strategies during my research: prolonged engagement and reflexivity. By engaging in prolonged engagement, I built trust and rapport with each participant to capture rich data about their experiences and beliefs. This engagement began during the recruitment phase at the onset of initial communication with each participant.

Building trust and rapport early on lent itself to open and honest dialogue regarding the interview questions that were asked. By implementing reflexivity, I remained aware of my own biases and preconceptions regarding the problem of practice being studied, therefore, I developed questions that were open-ended without the subjectivity of a specific answer that may have aligned with my own perceptions.

The second component of trustworthiness I adhered to emphasized transferability through the strategy of sample explanation. Outlined in this study is a very articulate description of the specific criteria that each potential participant must meet, as well as the recruitment procedures that took place. The overall purpose of this transferability component was to provide relevance and potential insights to elementary schools experiencing similar problems of practice.

The third component of trustworthiness that I adhered to was dependability by implementing the strategy of methodological documentation. Throughout the study, I outlined the procedures with specific details that I followed and documented any changes made so that full transparency was communicated. This strategy not only lended itself to future opportunities of similar studies but allowed others to assess the dependability of the findings and understand the rationale behind any decisions made.

The fourth component of trustworthiness, confirmability, was implemented using one key strategy: member checking. By implementing the strategy of member checking, I provided my thematic analysis findings to each participant with the opportunity to review and confirm the

accuracy of their viewpoints and experiences shared during each interview. Each participant was given the chance to validate or offer any corrections to interpretations prior to the final data analysis process. After offering each of the findings, zero of the six participants had any disagreements or alternative perceptions captured.

### **Limitations**

While this qualitative study sought to socially construct knowledge from the experiences, concerns, and recommendations of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals to systematically safeguard tier-one instruction for all students, I recognized several limitations. These limitations included potential challenges related to selection bias, social desirability bias, and theoretical framework constraints. The following limitations were as follows:

1. **Selection Bias:** By using professional networking and personal connections to reach out to participants, there was a risk of selection bias. The participants that the researcher recruited may have shared similar perspectives or experiences, which could have limited the diversity of viewpoints represented in this study. The criteria for participant eligibility may have also inadvertently excluded individuals with valuable insights. In reflection, I needed to consider whether these criteria were too restrictive or too loose, which may have limited the diversity of perspectives in the study.
2. **Potential for Social Desirability Bias:** Participants may have provided responses that they believed were socially acceptable or aligned with what they thought the researcher wanted to hear, especially if they had a professional relationship with the researcher. This desirability bias could have impacted the validity of the data collected.

3. **Theoretical Framework Limitations:** While social learning theory and its implications on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to provide targeted interventions when students do not learn the essential standard during tier-one instruction provided a theoretical foundation for this study, this may have not fully captured the complexities of the experiences, concerns, and recommendations provided by the participants. There could have been other relevant theories or frameworks that could have offered additional insights into the topic.

With over six years of teaching experience, two years as an assistant principal, and now entering my third year as an elementary principal in Missouri's largest school district, my experiences brought insight as both a practitioner and a researcher to this study. In relation to the qualitative aspects of the study, bias could have skewed how (a) participants were selected, (b) data collection tools were created, (c) data were examined and coded, and (d) outcome spaces were defined (Tight, 2016). As the principal practitioner and researcher of this study, the utilization of bracketing was implemented, which involved setting aside one's own personal beliefs on a particular topic (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

In this qualitative study framed within the dual lens of social constructivism and pragmatism, the exploration of the experiences, concerns, and recommendations of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals aimed to provide valuable insights into protecting and safeguarding tier-one instruction for all students. Through the application of a social learning theory framework within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), particularly in addressing the question of how to respond to and support students who did not learn the grade-level essential standard during tier-one instruction, educational providers

of all sorts have the opportunity to collaboratively analyze student data and share best practices for implementing tiered interventions. By fostering a culture of shared learning and continuous improvement within PLCs, this study aimed to contribute to constructing knowledge and offer practical solutions to address the inequitable educational problem of students not receiving tier-one, grade-level, essential standard instruction. Moving forward, leveraging the strengths of social constructivism and pragmatism in educational research can further enhance professional development and instructional practices to support student learning outcomes in diverse educational settings.

### **Section V: Findings**

This study involved six semi-structured interviews conducted with two classroom teachers, two specialized support professionals, and two elementary principals to explore the authentic and broad insights to both the challenges and opportunities when it comes to delivering high-quality, uninterrupted tier-one instruction for all students. The findings from these interviews revealed three overarching themes centered around answering the following research question:

**RQ1:** What are the challenges and opportunities that educators (classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals) have experienced, created, or recommend to provide high-quality, uninterrupted tier-one grade-level instruction to students who need specialized supports throughout the school day?

In the following findings, pseudonyms are utilized to protect the identities of educator participants interviewed as well as to demonstrate specific quotes and perspectives from the various types of educators chosen. Specifically: Classroom Teacher 1 will be referred to as CT1,

Classroom Teacher 2 as CT2, Specialized Support Professional 1 as SSP1, Specialized Support Professional 2 as SSP2, and the elementary principals as P1 and P2.

After analyzing the data, three key themes emerged, each theme including several subthemes. The first theme focused on the overall concept of tier-one instruction, with two subthemes: 1) a universal understanding of tier-one instruction and its components, and 2) the perceptions around what conditions must be in place to successfully allow for high-quality tier-one instruction. The second theme discovered addressed various obstacles and barriers which led to three subthemes: 1) the overall role and requirements of specialized support professionals in providing additional support services outside of the general education classroom, 2) the overall rise in student behaviors causing disruption of learning for both that individual student as well as their grade-level peers, and 3) adult skillsets which include challenges in curriculum use with fidelity, foundational classroom management, and educator preparedness to maintain the necessary rigor for high-quality tier-one instruction. The third theme surfaced as a pragmatic solution-based approach centered around different recommendations and opportunities for future actions and strategies, featuring three subthemes: 1) the critical importance of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) through team meetings, collaboration around next-step instruction based on student data, and the time set aside to offer opportunities to learn from one another, 2) the intentionality and systematic strategic planning when developing both the master schedule and teacher schedules, and 3) a systematic, data-based RTI process to ensure students receive necessary intervention supports in addition to rather than in place of tier-one instruction.

### **Theme 1: Tier-one Instruction and Its Impact on Student Achievement**

#### *Theme 1.1: Conceptual Understanding of Tier-One Instruction*

Participants universally recognized tier-one instruction as the foundational teaching provided to all students at grade level, encompassing both whole-group and differentiated small-group instruction. All six participants emphasized that tier-one instruction must align with “grade-level standards,” with CT2, SSP1, and P1 referring to it as applicable to “all students.” CT2 and SSP2 stressed the importance of “differentiated instruction,” indicating that students should have multiple instructional methods to access tier-one learning. SSP1 and CT1 elaborated on this by discussing differentiated instruction in both whole group and small group contexts, as mentioned by SSP1, “To me, tier-one is a group activity that you're usually working together, whether it's a whole group or small groups, cooperative groups, things like that, but you're working towards a goal together.” CT1 provided specific examples, stating that

“it is given to every single student in whole group, then we give the cool down.

We get a number score I can use to finesse the small group instruction later. It could be where I'm still working on the same standard for third grade, just in a different leveled text.”

Furthermore, CT1 and SSP2 highlighted the necessity of collecting data after delivering tier-one instruction to tailor it according to student needs.

### *Theme 1.2: Perceptions on Conditions That Contribute to High-Quality Tier-One Instruction*

The interviews revealed the significance of high-quality tier-one instruction and the collaborative efforts of educators to achieve it. Participants shared several key strategies aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of this instruction.

Four of the six participants expressed their commitment to the district-provided curriculum. CT1 stated, “I always use it [the curriculum] with fidelity,” while CT2 remarked, “I will break my neck trying to make sure that I do that [follow the curriculum].” Both principals

emphasized the importance of teaching to essential grade-level standards. CT1, P1, and SSP2 noted that high-quality tier-one instruction can only occur when there is high engagement and proficient classroom management. To protect tier-one instruction, both principals stressed, “Students can’t be pulled from class during tier-one instruction.”

Overall, these insights reflect a strong commitment among educators to enhance tier-one instruction, despite various challenges. Their structured approaches demonstrate an understanding of how quality instruction influences student success.

## **Theme 2: Challenges and Barriers**

### *Theme 2.1: Specialized Support Services*

A significant challenge in delivering high-quality tier-one instruction is the disruption caused by specialized support services, which can hinder students' access to uninterrupted learning. Multiple participants pointed out key issues related to this.

Educators, including CT1 and CT2, noted that while essential services like special education, speech and occupational therapy are necessary for meeting IEP goals, they often require pulling students from the classroom. Both expressed that, although these services benefit the students, they can create academic skill gaps when students miss vital tier-one instruction. P2 elaborated on this challenge, stating, “Then it does become cumbersome to meet all of their minutes.”

Three participants—CT2, SSP1, and SSP2— expressed concerns that special education departments are overwhelmed due to high caseloads (CT2), a lack of personnel (SSP1), and insufficient time to accommodate all students (SSP2). This high demand for services leads to scheduling conflicts and inconsistent support, resulting in circumstances where some students' needs are prioritized over others. Specifically, SSP 1 stated, “If you had more special education

teachers, then you would be able to pull kids and separate them and have them in small groups, and you wouldn't have to be pulling them at different times. SSP 2 speaks on behalf of the high demand claiming that “Time is always an issue when scheduling these groups and just being able to meet with who needs to be met with. So you know, as a title one reading interventionist. I'm required to meet with eight groups a day, but I have never met with less than nine.

Scheduling challenges emerged as a key theme, with participants like SSP2 and P1 voicing frustrations about coordinating support services without disrupting tier-one instruction. SSP1 offered up her experience that “scheduling conflicts do cause me to have back-to-back groups with no time for travel, and sometimes that that has me running a little bit late between groups. Time is always an issue when scheduling these groups and just being able to meet with who needs to be met with.” P1 spoke specifically on prioritization with scheduling, claiming that “If they're [students] not able to be pulled from related arts and they're not able to be pulled from direct instruction of mathematics and ELA grade level content, then it does become cumbersome to meet all of their minutes.”

The need to meet service minutes often leads to overscheduling, compromising instructional quality. Both principals emphasized the importance of protecting tier-one instructional time from interruptions, particularly during critical ELA and math lessons.

Overall, while specialized support services are vital for addressing individual needs, they pose significant challenges to maintaining consistent, high-quality tier-one instruction for all students. Participants highlighted the need for better integrated scheduling and resource management to enable uninterrupted learning experiences.

*Theme 2.2: Student Behavior*

A significant challenge identified by four of the six participants centered around student behavior, which impacts tier-one instruction in several ways. Educators discussed the relationship between student needs and the classroom environment, revealing key themes. CT1, CT2, SSP2, and P1 noted that disruptive behavior, particularly from students with significant learning gaps, creates challenges for both the individual and their peers. CT1 specifically mentioned that “struggling students may act out,” while P1 emphasized that such behavior “stops the learning of others,” raising questions about balancing individual needs with a conducive learning environment. SSP2 focused on the negative impact on individual students, claiming that “students frequently pulled out for support services often feel disconnected, which can worsen behavioral issues.

While four of the six participants referred to students exhibiting inappropriate and disruptive behavior, P2 classified student behavior in terms of attendance, noting that “attendance concerns contribute to behavioral problems.” This suggests that inconsistent attendance can lead to disengagement and further disruptive behavior.

Overall, these insights reveal that student behavior poses significant challenges to maintaining high-quality tier-one instruction from the perspectives of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and principals alike.

### *Theme 2.3: Adult Efficacy, Capacity, and Effectiveness*

The impact of adult skillsets and ability to implement high-quality tier one instruction emerged as a significant concern among participants, revealing how these behaviors can inadvertently affect student learning and classroom dynamics. This concern centered around three key concepts including classroom teacher effectiveness at the tier-one level, leadership expectations and protocols, and dynamic educator expertise that is broader than a singular role.

SS1 and SS2, who pull students from different classes throughout the day and have insight into teacher practices across the building, noted that the quality of classroom teachers is a notable concern. SS1 stated on two occasions that there are "great teachers, good teachers, and bad teachers," impacting student learning. They also mentioned, "It's really difficult when you have kids in a classroom that... aren't getting proper tier-one instruction... it looks like nothing is happening [in terms of principal action]." SS2 supported this concern by stating, "[When] the teacher struggles with classroom management and structure, [as well as] tier-one instruction, those students are making progress at a slower rate than others."

CT2 highlighted concerns regarding adult behavior from a leadership and district standpoint, noting that pressure from new curriculum requirements can lead teachers to focus on compliance rather than addressing individual student needs. They expressed concern that time constraints and the need to cover specific components hinder the effectiveness of delivering tier-one instruction, suggesting that adult behaviors driven by external expectations can negatively impact teaching quality.

Both principals mentioned similar concerns regarding the actions of adults, specifically among specialized support professionals. P1 stated that "[We need to] help our special education teachers understand grade-level content and the importance of students being exposed to and taught to grade-level standards." P2 added that "Academically, it would be nice to have interventionists that are well-versed and can serve all students in need." This reflects a broader concern that adult attitudes toward expectations significantly influence student learning outcomes.

In summary, participants indicated that adult behaviors—ranging from teaching quality and curriculum adherence to classroom management and expectations—significantly impact tier-one instruction.

### **Theme 3: Opportunities and Recommendations**

#### *Theme 3.1: Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and Collaboration*

Despite the challenges identified by the six participants regarding safeguarding tier-one instruction, several key opportunities and recommendations emerged. One of these emphasized the importance of collaboration among educators, especially through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and team meetings, which enhance instructional practices.

CT1, CT2, and SSP2 highlighted the significance of weekly team meetings for analyzing instructional practices and discussing student progress at both the classroom and specialized support professional levels. These participants noted that such a collaborative environment encourages sharing ideas, trying new strategies, and learning from one another. Expanding upon weekly meetings, CT1 stated:

“Planning tier-one instruction is about meeting, first of all, just at the grade level by having our weekly team meetings. Whether it be TST or whether it be with a learning coach, we engage in deeper diving, and some of those things such as fine-tuning a bigger picture, or maybe smaller, but whichever way, sharing together that lead, looking at it, whether it's all of third grade, whether it's individual students who are selected into different groups, etc.”

SS2 focused specifically on the importance of weekly planning in terms of layered intervention:

“The collaboration between the classroom teachers and myself, I feel is very vital. It's something that sometimes is missed between support specialist staff members.

I feel like sometimes that can be some people can try to be islands, like, well, you're doing your thing and I'm doing my thing, and I think that's really detrimental to the learning process, as I stated before, because we are layering interventions, and so we should constantly be working together to decipher what needs the students meet, and collecting data and using that data to drive our instruction.”

CT2 reinforced this by emphasizing the importance of reflecting on effective strategies, while SSP2 pointed out the need to avoid working in isolation, stating, “We should constantly be working together to decipher what needs the students meet.” SSP1 and SSP2 both stressed the necessity of collaboration between classroom teachers and specialized support professionals. Although they recognized communication as a challenge, they noted that effective dialogue is vital for addressing student needs and improving outcomes. For instance, SSP2 mentioned the importance of analyzing data together to inform instruction, emphasizing that collaboration should extend beyond classroom walls. SSP1 explicitly stated, “[We must] make sure that special education is part of that [student data] conversation.”

A significant recommendation centered around learning from others through discussions of best practices and being open to trying new strategies followed by reflection. SS2 mentioned that, due to concerns about classroom teacher quality, she “spends a lot of time walking into different classrooms and offers support, [which then results in] getting a great idea of what supports [she] can offer.” CT1 described collaboration as a “judgment-free zone,” where educators can meet to discuss what worked and what didn’t.

Both principals emphasized the importance of setting high expectations. P1 stated the need to “up our expectations and not drop so far away from grade level... [instead] work on our

accommodations, modifications, supports, and strategies.” P1 also noted her expectation for all grade levels to meet weekly, while P2 expanded on this by stating, “Grade level teams are expected to collaborate together once a week for PLT work and once a week for collaborative planning time.”

Overall, participant insights highlight the critical role of PLCs and collaborative practices in creating a supportive educational environment. By prioritizing teamwork and shared learning, educators can enhance their instructional effectiveness and better meet the diverse needs of their students through ongoing collaboration and mutual support.

### *Theme 3.2: Scheduling with Intentionality & Strategy*

Within the realm of recommendations and opportunities, all participants discussed successes related to intentional scheduling. Responses regarding intentional scheduling highlighted their experiences with protecting tier-one instruction. Participants stressed the importance of strategic planning to maximize instructional time and minimize disruptions. CT1 noted the necessity of aligning pull-out services delivered by specialized support professionals with classroom instruction, stating that matching schedules significantly benefits student learning. CT2 suggested that specialized support professionals pull students during non-core subjects like science or social studies to avoid interrupting tier-one instruction.

P1 introduced a system called “Red Zones,” defined by both her and SSP2 as times when students cannot be pulled from class unless for rare, specific reasons. P1 explained,

“When the master schedule is made, I try very hard to let the dog wag the tail instead of the opposite. Right now, we're fortunate to do that, meaning we can meet the goals of the schedule instead of the schedule dictating the goals.”

-SS2, who also follows the red zone practice, stated, “Our master schedule includes red zones for tier-one instruction, so I do not pull students during that time unless it is a specific, individualized case.” Although P2 did not use the term “red zone,” she alluded to the concept by stating, “The master schedule must protect learning time for tier-one; no one is pulled out during this time frame, ensuring instructional minutes align with state expectations and district resources are used for teaching standards.” SS1 discussed this concept, mentioning that “[Our] principal made schedules for general education classrooms while ensuring that special education could pull different students without overlapping tier-one instruction.”

Two participants consistently highlighted the need to reduce interruptions during instruction. CT2 pointed out that fewer disruptions from assemblies and intercom announcements this year have positively impacted her ability to focus on tier-one teaching. Principal 1 emphasized minimizing transitions between activities to maximize instructional time, stating, “I try to close minutes that get lost in the gap... I try very hard to minimize transitions.” P1 also recommended intentional scheduling of external events, saying, “I try never to have assemblies scheduled during ELA time and aim to minimize field trips and assemblies, which can be tricky with mandatory events.”

Examining scheduling from a different standpoint, the delivery of instruction, P2 stressed using district pacing guides to cover all standards before end-of-year assessments. This structured approach helps educators stay on track while allowing adjustments based on student needs and performance data.

Overall, participant insights emphasized that intentional scheduling is vital for maximizing tier-one instruction. By aligning schedules with instructional goals, minimizing

disruptions, and fostering collaboration, educators can create a more effective learning environment that supports all students.

*Theme 3.3: Systematic, Data-Based Intervention Supports Layered Upon Tier-One Instruction*

The importance of intentional intervention systems emerged as a critical theme among participants, highlighting how systematic support can be provided to students during non-tier-one instruction times. Key commonalities emphasized collaboration and data-driven decision-making.

CT2 stressed the necessity of trust and camaraderie among teachers when implementing flexible grouping or "flexing," stating, "If you're going to make a flexing move... you have to have trust and camaraderie with the teacher that you're working with." She provided a specific example of this practice, which involves analyzing student data and splitting classes based on academic needs. SS2 further supported this form of collaboration, stating, "If the classroom teacher and the support specialist are not communicating, I check in with them to know which anchor charts they might be using." Providing layered interventions as an extension, rather than a replacement, is key, according to SS2. SSP1 pointed out the importance of shared lesson plans and consistent instructional strategies between classroom teachers and specialists. Aligning interventions with the core curriculum offers students a cohesive learning experience, preventing gaps in essential concepts and language.

SSP2 and P1 emphasized the role of data cycles in identifying students needing additional support. This structured approach enables educators to flag students during Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) and implement targeted interventions during Response to Intervention (RTI) times. P1 noted that having certified staff available for RTI enhances the ability to provide focused support based on student needs. P2 highlighted her building-wide RTI

process, which uses flexible grouping for tier two and three academic interventions. She explained that this systematic approach allows teachers to address varying student needs while tailoring interventions to individual learning profiles, as well as embedding time for students to receive specialized support services.

Participant responses consistently emphasized the importance of effective communication between classroom teachers and specialists, which is vital for successful intervention strategies. When educators work in silos (or “islands,” as noted by SS2), students may miss critical connections in their learning. Regular check-ins, shared resources, and collaborative planning are essential to keep all staff aligned and facilitate social learning, where educators can learn from one another's practices.

In summary, the insights from participants illustrate that being intentional with intervention systems through collaboration, data-driven strategies, and effective communication can significantly enhance the support provided to students during non-tier-one instruction times.

### **Summary of Findings**

With tier-one instruction serving as the educational focus topic, the narratives from these experts in their context of education revealed findings from six interviews centered on the challenges and opportunities in delivering high-quality instruction for students needing specialized support. Through thematic analysis, three main themes emerged: the first emphasized the universal understanding and essential factors of effective tier-one instruction; the second identified obstacles, including the role of specialized support professionals, increasing disruptive student behaviors, and adult behaviors affecting curriculum and classroom management.

The third theme presented recommendations for future actions, highlighting the significance of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), intentional scheduling, and a

systematic Response to Intervention (RTI) process to ensure students received necessary support without sacrificing tier-one instruction. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities while illustrating key contributions.

## **Section VI: Discussion**

### **Rationale and Research Question**

Through the lens of various educator perceptions captured through interviews with classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and principals, this study concluded that both challenges and opportunities exist for balancing individualized supports with maintaining opportunities for students to experience uninterrupted tier-one instruction. The guiding research question was:

**RQ1.** What are the challenges and opportunities that educators (classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary principals) have experienced, created, or recommend to provide high-quality, uninterrupted tier-one grade-level instruction to students who need specialized supports throughout the school day?

As detailed in Section 2, there has been extensive research on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), a framework for addressing academic and behavioral barriers to student learning (Rinaldi, 2013). The findings of this study aligned with this research, which identified academics and student behavior as primary barriers to uninterrupted tier-one instruction. All participants demonstrated a clear understanding of Response to Intervention (RTI) as a key part of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). They recognized tier-one as the foundational level, involving high-quality, grade-level instruction delivered to all students through whole- and small-group lessons. Students needing additional support on grade-level standards would receive targeted tier-two interventions, while those with significant skill gaps would receive tier-one,

tier-two, and, if necessary, tier three, which involves more intensive, individualized instruction. This highlights their understanding of the layered support structure within RTI.

Building on the research of Outcomes-Driven RTI framework, responses from both classroom teachers and support professionals suggested that collecting data to inform targeted actions for students who struggle is essential. Participants emphasized that supports should supplement, not replace, tier-one instruction—indicating a conclusion that differentiation within core lessons remains a critical strategy for meeting diverse student needs. It can then be suggested that a layered approach vs. a replacement approach is highly favorable. Additional supporting research to this discovery comes from the prior research by the National Center for Education Evaluation, later critiqued by Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2018), which highlighted one of the major the pitfalls from the study stating that RTI is harmful to students is that approximately 69% of schools in the study substituted tier-one instruction with support or teaching the same lesson differently without differentiation. Participant responses reflect these findings, emphasizing support that enhances the whole-group lesson through appropriate differentiation rather than replacing it.

A recurring theme across the study was the importance of collaboration among educators, particularly through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) through team meetings. The majority of participants highlighted the value of these weekly meetings for analyzing instruction and student progress. This notion is heavily supported by the research of DuFour (2010) who identified key elements of effective collaboration: a focus on learning, a culture of shared responsibility, and a commitment to results. Educators emphasized that collaborative data analysis should include special education and support staff and extend beyond individual classrooms to inform instruction more broadly.

From a leadership perspective, principals underscored the importance of regular, structured collaboration. Both principals reported expectations for weekly meetings across grade levels, guided by DuFour et al. (2010), who outlined essential questions about student learning, assessment, support, and enrichment. These structured discussions are crucial for ensuring educators have the necessary data to make informed decisions.

While much of the existing research aligned with these findings, a notable concern arose which included the strategic scheduling of supports within the school day to meet students' needs without disrupting access to grade-level instruction. Participants offered multiple recommendations rooted in their experiences, emphasizing the importance of systematic, intentional scheduling. Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution to scheduling, participants highlighted practices such as aligning pull-out services with non-core subjects or establishing “red zones” when students cannot be pulled from class unless for specific reasons. While both the literature and research on existing policy lacks support on this mandated requirement, it served as a strong recommendation by a majority of the participants. As one principal explained, “When the master schedule is made, I try very hard to let the dog wag the tail instead of the opposite,” prioritizing schedules that support learning. Another added, “The master schedule must protect learning time for tier-one,” ensuring instructional minutes align with standards and district resources.

Another aspect discovered emphasized minimizing interruptions—such as reducing assembly times and transitions—and scheduling external events through a critically analysis of each grade level's tier-one instruction time (e.g., avoiding assemblies during tier-one instructional blocks).

These insights suggested that deliberate, intentional scheduling was one of many key strategies for safeguarding instructional time and maintaining high-quality tier-one instruction. While more research is needed on best practices for master scheduling that supports equitable access to tier-one instruction and minimal disruptions, these findings offered practical guidance based on educators' lived experiences.

### **Implications for Future Practice and Policy**

The findings of this study highlighted several critical implications for future educational practice and policy. Based on the themes of this study, one key implication pertains to the importance of visionary leadership. For elementary principals, a fundamental priority is to promote high academic achievement for every student. Effective leadership starts with a clear vision that emphasizes tier-one instruction as the foundation for student success. School leaders should establish systems and routines that support teachers in delivering high-quality, differentiated instruction within the classroom. Ensuring all students have access to rigorous, grade-level work that meets proficiency requirements is fundamental. When students engage in authentic, grade-appropriate learning experiences, they are more likely to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for long-term success. This mindset shift must not only be adopted by leaders but also practiced and enforced to create a shared understanding among teachers, support professionals, and all other stakeholders that high-quality tier-one instruction for all students is non-negotiable.

In addition, based on my professional practice, policies and practices should align with systems that minimize unnecessary pull-out services or remediation sessions during tier-one instructional time, preventing disruptions to student learning. This aligns with the study's results, which indicated that scheduling decisions significantly impact whether students are pulled from

core instruction. Elementary principals should prioritize schedules that allocate sufficient, uninterrupted time for grade-level teaching. Models such as block scheduling or protected "no-pull" periods can reduce unnecessary pull-outs and enhance achievement in core content areas such as math and English Language Arts (ELA). From the results, it can be theorized that these "red zones" not only safeguard access to tier-one instruction but also reinforce the leadership emphasis on its importance.

Implementing designated "red zones" or periods for core instruction is crucial for fostering consistent, high-quality teaching. Based on the themes of this study, this naturally extends into the next implication: fostering increased collaboration among educators. Clear communication and coordination between classroom teachers and specialized support staff are essential to ensure interventions complement rather than disrupt core learning. Future practice should focus on designing schedules that facilitate seamless collaboration, protect instructional time, and promote equitable access to grade-level instruction. As evidenced by participant interviews, this collaboration is supported through a Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework that systematically provides dedicated time for collective planning and data analysis.

In addition, based on my professional practice, active participation in PLCs is vital for elementary educators. A strong PLC framework ensures principals, teachers, and support staff work collaboratively to meet diverse student needs. As noted by one of the principals, requiring scheduled PLC meetings creates a protected, mandatory space for analyzing student data, discussing progress, and making informed decisions about layered interventions within RTI.

Drawing on the conceptual framework of this study, which centers on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), based on the themes of this study, fostering professional growth through collaboration is essential. When educators observe effective strategies, engage in

discussions about student work, and problem-solve together, they develop a shared understanding of best practices that benefits student learning.

In addition, based on my professional practice, these meetings should focus on aligning instruction with specific standards, learning targets, examining student progressions (foundational skills necessary to master a new skill), and planning appropriate interventions to meet those elements. A well-structured PLC not only helps prevent unnecessary pull-outs from tier-one instruction by ensuring that targeted interventions support, rather than replace, essential grade-level learning, it also strengthens a grade-level team's ability to focus on high-quality tier-one instruction. Strategic scheduling of support staff such as interventionists or Title I personnel is crucial to providing targeted, timely assistance without disrupting high-quality instruction. Regular collaboration around data and planning during Professional Learning Team (PLT) meetings creates a cohesive approach that maximizes learning while minimizing disruption. Grounded in the PLC framework, this ongoing collaboration is vital for maintaining tier-one as the primary instructional focus, with targeted interventions serving to strengthen core instruction.

Finally, based on the themes of this study, an overarching implication is the need to safeguard the quality and delivery of tier-one instruction for all students. If educators are pre-determining outcomes and looking ahead to tier-two and tier-three supports, it suggests a tier-one issue. In other words, if tier-one delivery is done so with high-quality and intentional differentiation, there shouldn't be such a need for tier-two and three support. Instead, educators should collaborate through PLTs to examine proficiency scales that determine true mastery of standards and identify critical concepts and misconceptions early, so that students do not require additional supports after tier-one instruction.

As a current educational leader, I recommend that district leaders and elementary principals must work together to provide ongoing professional development focused on differentiation. This should include pre-planning strategies, anticipating student needs, and adjusting lessons for instructional agility. Equipping teachers with effective differentiation strategies tailored to diverse learners increases the likelihood that tier-one instruction will meet the needs of all students, ultimately reducing the need for intensified supports and addressing the problem of students being removed from core instruction as identified in this study.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Based on the study's findings and implications for future practice and policy, several research topics surfaced that could guide several decision-making processes when it comes to protecting tier-one instruction for all elementary students.

One theme that surfaced from the study centered around the critical importance and awareness of prioritizing tier-one instruction starting at the district leadership level, down to principals, then implemented by educators working with students. Through a combination of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods longitudinal studies focused on multiple years of district-wide emphasized and mandated "red-zones," the results of these studies could potentially yield outcomes in accordance to the following:

1. Quantitative: A longitudinal quantitative study could analyze the number of minutes students receiving support services are pulled from core instruction over multiple years. It could also measure student achievement, growth, attendance, and engagement to see if districts with prioritized "red-zone" policies experience improved outcomes, especially for students with IEPs, related services, and other support services causing them to be pulled from the general education classroom for any reason.

2. **Qualitative:** Qualitative research could explore educators' perceptions and experiences with district initiatives emphasizing tier-one instruction. Interviews and observations could reveal how these policies are implemented, challenges faced, and strategies used to maintain high-quality instruction. From a longitudinal standpoint, this research would focus on comparing years in which the district did not emphasize or mandate it versus years of high emphasis and prioritization.
3. **Mixed Methods:** A mixed-methods approach could combine quantitative data on pull-out times and student achievement with qualitative insights from educator interviews. This would provide a broader understanding and insight into how district priorities influence classroom practices and student success.

Another valuable area for future research would be to explore students' perceptions of being pulled from tier-one instruction. Given that students are the ones experiencing the disruptions to their learning, qualitative interviews with students who have been pulled for support services could provide critical insights into how these pull-outs affect their engagement, understanding, and feelings about learning. Understanding students' perspectives can inform more student-centered approaches and help districts develop policies that better address their needs and experiences. This research could also provide insights to the challenges that students potentially face when it comes to being expected to know and understand new grade-level tier-one instruction but not having the instruction presented to them due to being pulled out of class.

Another important avenue for advancing the understanding and practice of safeguarding tier-one instruction involves examining the foundational framework of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). While PLCs are not a new concept in educator collaboration, future research could explore how involving all stakeholders, including specialized support

professionals, can enhance the effectiveness of these communities. Specifically, studies could investigate how collaboration time is allocated, emphasizing that such time should focus on layer-specific interventions rather than replacing tier-one instruction.

Given that limited collaboration time was identified as a significant barrier, future research could test the impact of mandating weekly collaboration sessions to prioritize this practice. Longitudinal qualitative studies might compare districts or schools where specialized support professionals are consistently included in PLC meetings versus those where their participation is sporadic or absent, providing insights into the influence of inclusive collaboration on protecting tier-one instruction.

Another promising area for future research involves examining how targeted professional development in differentiation can increase teachers' capacity to support students academically and behaviorally within tier-one instruction. Many challenges cited by participants, such as students' academic struggles and behavioral issues, often lead to students being pulled from core instruction. While this isn't the only case for pulling students, it is one level of intervention that tends to replace core instruction.

Future studies could investigate the implementation and impact of professional development centered on differentiation strategies, specifically addressing two key questions: (1) What actions should teachers take when students exhibit certain behaviors? and (2) How should teachers respond when students do not demonstrate mastery of standards despite interventions?

A mixed-methods approach could be employed, collecting data on:

- A) Changes in student mastery of grade-level standards following professional development,
- B) Classroom teachers' perceptions of their ability to support struggling students in behavior and academics post-training,

- C) Comparative analyses between grade-level teams that received differentiation training and those that did not, using metrics such as office discipline referrals, minor behavior documentation, and growth measures from the beginning to the end of the year. Additionally, examining teachers' perceptions of differentiation before and after professional development would provide valuable insights into the training's effectiveness.

### **Implications to Theory**

The study's findings align closely with the principles of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which emphasize learning through social interactions, collaboration, data sharing, and reflection. Participants described weekly PLC meetings, data analysis, and peer observations as key mechanisms through which educators learn from one another. These practices exemplify the core processes of collaborative inquiry and shared responsibility that underpin effective PLCs, fostering ongoing adult development.

Themes around collaboration, data-driven decision-making, and reflective dialogue highlight the importance of social interaction in shaping adult behaviors and instructional practices. Observing peers' strategies and engaging in reflective conversations reinforce the value of modeling and feedback in promoting professional growth. The culture of shared accountability and continuous improvement within PLCs further supports the notion that collective goals and collaborative efforts enhance teacher expertise and effectiveness. However, there are some areas for growth. The findings do not explicitly detail how the specific processes of collaboration, reflection, and data use operate during these interactions to drive change. Clarifying these mechanisms could strengthen the theoretical application of the PLC framework. Additionally, systemic barriers such as scheduling conflicts and external pressures

limit opportunities for authentic collaboration and professional learning. Leadership support and organizational structures play a crucial role in facilitating or hindering these processes, underscoring the importance of considering broader systemic factors within the PLC framework.

In summary, the findings support the PLC framework as a valuable lens for understanding adult learning in schools. To maximize its impact, future efforts should focus on explicitly articulating the processes within PLCs and addressing systemic barriers, creating an environment conducive to sustained collaborative learning and professional growth.

### **Section VII: Scholarly Practitioner Reflection**

When I began the EdD program at the University of Missouri, I had just transitioned from an elementary assistant principal role to a head elementary principal with Springfield Public Schools. This new position brought increased responsibilities, especially in instructional leadership. Early in the program, a district-wide initiative emerged and served as a predominant focus for principal leadership: to prioritize tier-one grade-level instruction and prevent students from missing this foundational learning. This involved strategies such as improved master scheduling, discouraging support professionals from pulling students during core instruction, and enhancing understanding of high-quality tier-one instruction through research-based training on Marzano Compendiums and the Basic Elements of Highly Effective Teaching Practices. As both an enforcer and evaluator of these practices, my interest in the topic deepened, especially around the perceptions of various stakeholders. My hope was that this research would provide insights to help me, and others implement the best practices to support this critical initiative effectively.

The research process significantly influenced my professional identity and approach. It heightened my awareness of how often students are pulled from tier-one instruction and how limited collaboration and communication among staff can hinder instructional quality. I noticed

students returning to class after lessons struggling to grasp new material, which prompted me to focus on protecting that foundational learning. Through my dual roles as principal and researcher, I increased my leadership capacity by not only refining tier-one instruction but also actively safeguarding it for students.

While much of my practice improved alongside this journey, I recognized that the study's findings and implications depended on my leadership reflection and subsequent actions. The insights gained from participant interviews and coded analysis prompted me to implement strategies for future practice, reinforcing the importance of continuous reflection and growth. The results of this study have not only informed my decision-making but also serve as a guiding framework for other principals and aspiring leaders. Protecting tier-one instruction impacts all educational stakeholders: students, teachers, specialized support professionals, administrators, district leaders, families, and the community. Improving academic and behavioral success for students hinges on the collective effort of all involved.

Throughout the research process, I encountered several challenges, particularly in establishing a theoretical framework aligned with my topic. The topic's broad scope, covering student and staff learning, collaborative practices, and professional development, made it complex to narrow down. I ultimately chose social learning theory (SLT) through the lens of professional learning communities (PLCs), as they are closely related to the collaborative practices I aimed to explore. Another challenge was focusing my literature review on studies relevant to my research stage (prior to implementation and findings) by considering the broader context and future implications, which helped me stay aligned with the big picture.

This journey has strengthened my leadership as a principal and district-level leader. It has provided me with research-based tools and reinforced the importance of grounding decisions in

proven practices. Too often, we rely on intuition or what feels right in the moment, but this process has rekindled my commitment to leading with evidence and research, ultimately benefiting student success.

The most meaningful aspect of this experience was choosing a topic with direct relevance and significant impact on student achievement and teacher efficacy. Exploring interconnected components—RTI, PLCs, social learning theory, and best practices in tier-one instruction—expanded my knowledge across these areas and helped me develop a cohesive vision for my school's future.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear [Recipient's Name],

My name is Blaine C. Broderick, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program at the University of Missouri-Columbia. I am inviting you to participate in my dissertation study investigating the narrative perceptions of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals (those who provide additional services to students beyond classroom instruction), and elementary building principals regarding their experiences, concerns, and recommendations for ensuring tier-one instruction for all students. By exploring your insights and expertise as a [INSERT POSITION], this research seeks to construct knowledge and meaning around your narrative experiences to provide recommendations and implications for systematically and pragmatically protecting tier-one instruction for all students.

Below are the criteria deemed necessary for your participation in this study:

[ONLY INCLUDE THIS SPECIFIC PERSON'S SECTION]

### **Elementary Classroom Teacher Requirements:**

- Hold an active teaching certificate in elementary education and has acquired tenured status
- Currently employed at an elementary public school within the Springfield-Metro region
- Has served as a regular education teacher for at least the past 10 years

### **Specialized Support Professional Requirements:**

- Holds an active certificate in the field of expertise for which they would provide supports to students (E.g., special education, reading/math intervention specialist, speech/language/occupational/physical therapy, social/emotional services)
- Currently employed either with an elementary public school within the Springfield-Metro region and/or be contracted through another agency that partners with that elementary public school
- Has served elementary students in this role for at least the last five years

### **Elementary Principal Requirements:**

- Holds an active elementary administration certificate
- Currently employed at an elementary public school within the Springfield-Metro region.
- Has at least five years of teaching experience in either a regular or special education classroom

**Timeframe:** Interviews will be conducted throughout the upcoming month of November. Each interview is expected to last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will work with you to schedule a convenient time.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please respond to this email or contact me at 316-519-7411, or at [bcbroderick@spsmail.org](mailto:bcbroderick@spsmail.org).

Your participation would greatly enhance the quality of this research, and I would be sincerely grateful for your insights.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Warm regards,

Blaine C. Broderick

## Appendix B: Written Consent Forms

### *Classroom Teacher*

Project Title: A QUALITATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS REGARDING TIER-ONE INSTRUCTION FOR ALL ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

Principal Investigator/Researcher: BLAINE C. BRODERICK  
IRB Reference Number: 2122625

You are invited to take part in a dissertation research project. You must be 18 years of age or older. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time. The purpose of this research project is to investigate the perceptions of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary building principals regarding their experiences, concerns, and recommendations regarding safeguarding tier-one instruction for all students. By exploring the insights and expertise of practicing educators, this research seeks to construct knowledge and meaning around narrative experiences to provide recommendations and implications to systematically and pragmatically protect tier-one instruction for all students.

As an elementary classroom teacher, you are being asked to provide in-depth information regarding your experiences regarding the challenges and opportunities you experience or create to provide high-quality, uninterrupted tier-one grade-level instruction to students who need specialized support throughout the school day. The topic of research involves work related to your regular work place activities, which include providing tier-one grade-level instruction to elementary students.

Classroom Teacher Participation Criteria:

- Must hold an active teaching certificate in elementary education and has acquired tenured status.
- Must currently be employed at an elementary public school within the Springfield-Metro region.
- Must have served as a regular education teacher for past 10 years or greater.

Your participation involves a recorded 45-60 minute interview. For your time and effort, I will be offering compensation in the amount of \$25 through an Amazon Gift Card. The information you provide will be kept confidential and only the research team will have access to the responses, all of which do not contain directly identifiable information.

An employee's decision about research participation will not affect (favorably or unfavorably) performance evaluations, career advancement, or other employment-related decisions made by peers or supervisors.

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri researcher at 316-519-7411 or [BCBRODERICK@SPSMAIL.ORG](mailto:BCBRODERICK@SPSMAIL.ORG). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or [muresearchchirb@missouri.edu](mailto:muresearchchirb@missouri.edu). The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

You can ask the researcher to provide you with a copy of this consent for your records, or you can save a copy of this consent if it has already been provided to you. We appreciate your consideration to participate in this study.

*Specialized Support Professional*

Project Title: A QUALITATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS REGARDING TIER-ONE INSTRUCTION FOR ALL ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

Principal Investigator/Researcher: BLAINE C. BRODERICK

IRB Reference Number: 2122625

You are invited to take part in a dissertation research project. You must be 18 years of age or older. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time. The purpose of this research project is to investigate the perceptions of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary building principals regarding their experiences, concerns, and recommendations regarding safeguarding tier-one instruction for all students. By exploring the insights and expertise of practicing educators, this research seeks to construct knowledge and meaning around narrative experiences to provide recommendations and implications to systematically and pragmatically protect tier-one instruction for all students.

As an elementary specialized support professional, you are being asked to provide in-depth information regarding your experiences regarding the challenges and opportunities you experience or create to provide high-quality, uninterrupted tier-one grade-level instruction to students who need specialized support throughout the school day. The topic of research involves work related to your regular workplace activities, which include providing specialized support services to students outside of their general education classroom.

Specialized Support Professional Participation Criteria:

- Must hold an active certificate in the field of expertise for which they would provide support to students (E.g., special education, reading/math intervention specialist, speech/language/occupational/physical therapy, social/emotional services)
- Must currently be employed either with an elementary public school within the Springfield-Metro region and/or be contracted through another agency that partners with that elementary public school
- Must have served elementary students in this role for the last five years or greater.

Your participation involves a recorded 45-60 minute interview. For your time and effort, I will be offering compensation in the amount of \$25 through an Amazon Gift Card. The information you provide will be kept confidential and only the research team will have access to the responses, all of which do not contain directly identifiable information.

An employee's decision about research participation will not affect (favorably or unfavorably) performance evaluations, career advancement, or other employment-related decisions made by peers or supervisors.

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri researcher at 316-519-7411 or [BCBRODERICK@SPSMAIL.ORG](mailto:BCBRODERICK@SPSMAIL.ORG). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or [muresearchirb@missouri.edu](mailto:muresearchirb@missouri.edu). The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

You can ask the researcher to provide you with a copy of this consent for your records, or you can save a copy of this consent if it has already been provided to you. We appreciate your consideration to participate in this study.

*Elementary Principal*

Project Title: A QUALITATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS REGARDING TIER-ONE INSTRUCTION FOR ALL ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

Principal Investigator/Researcher: BLAINE C. BRODERICK

IRB Reference Number: 2122625

You are invited to take part in a dissertation research project. You must be 18 years of age or older. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time. The purpose of this research project is to investigate the perceptions of classroom teachers, specialized support professionals, and elementary building principals regarding their experiences, concerns, and recommendations regarding safeguarding tier-one instruction for all students. By exploring the insights and expertise of practicing educators, this research seeks to construct knowledge and meaning around narrative experiences to provide recommendations and implications to systematically and pragmatically protect tier-one instruction for all students.

As an elementary principal, you are being asked to provide in-depth information regarding your experiences regarding the challenges and opportunities you experience or create to provide high-quality, uninterrupted tier-one grade-level instruction to students who need specialized support throughout the school day. The topic of research involves work related to your regular workplace activities, which includes the supervision of staff providing tier-one grade level instruction, staff providing specialized support services, and the oversight of academic systems within your school building.

Elementary Principal Participation Criteria:

- Must hold an active elementary administration certificate,
- Must currently be employed at an elementary public school within the Springfield-Metro region.
- Must have at least five years of teaching experience in either a regular or special education classroom.

Your participation involves a recorded 45-60 minute interview. For your time and effort, I will be offering compensation in the amount of \$25 through an Amazon Gift Card. The information you provide will be kept confidential and only the research team will have access to the responses, all of which do not contain directly identifiable information.

An employee's decision about research participation will not affect (favorably or unfavorably) performance evaluations, career advancement, or other employment-related decisions made by peers or supervisors.

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri researcher at 316-519-7411 or [BCBRODERICK@SPSMAIL.ORG](mailto:BCBRODERICK@SPSMAIL.ORG). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or [muresearchirb@missouri.edu](mailto:muresearchirb@missouri.edu). The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

You can ask the researcher to provide you with a copy of this consent for your records, or you can save a copy of this consent if it has already been provided to you. We appreciate your consideration to participate in this study.

**Appendix C: Interview Protocol for Classroom Teachers**

1. Briefly describe your educational background and the path that led you to being a classroom teacher.
  - a. Follow-Up: What classroom teaching positions have you held and where?
2. When thinking about whole-group instruction, please describe what tier-one grade-level instruction means to you.
  - a. How is it currently implemented in your classroom/school.
  - b. Describe the process of how you know that your tier-one instruction is implemented with fidelity and student learning outcomes are being met.
  - c. What does your current instructional evaluation model look like when it comes to improving your teaching craft?
3. When you think of collaboration and team decision-making, who do you consider to be a part of that team?
  - a. Describe what that team collaboration looks like when planning tier-one instruction.
  - b. Describe what that team collaboration looks like when looking at data to determine which students need additional support to be successful with tier-one instruction.
  - c. Describe what that team collaboration looks like when it comes to sharing best practices and learning from one another to best support students' academic needs.
4. As a classroom teacher, think about a time you noticed that one or more of your students were missing out on your tier-one grade level instruction for any number of reasons (excluding being absent for the day).

- a. Explain some of those reasons why those students missed out on your tier-one instruction.
  - b. Can you tell me about a time when certain students missed tier-one instruction and that ended up being beneficial for that student?
  - c. Can you tell me about a time when certain students missed tier-one instruction and that was harmful for that student?
  - d. Throughout your teaching career, what district-level efforts can you recall to ensure that tier-one grade level instruction was provided to all your students to the maximum extent possible?
    - i. What about school-level efforts?
    - ii. What about efforts within your classroom?
  - e. Describe your overall stance on protecting tier-one grade level instruction for all students.
5. When you think about student needs, can you describe what comes to mind.
- a. Do you feel that certain needs outweigh others, and if so, how might you rank them and why?
6. Based on the previous questions regarding student needs, can you tell me about a time when the needs of students were not being met properly?
- a. What policies or procedures were in place prohibiting certain needs to be met?
  - b. What, if any, actions were taken by you or other staff members when this concern was discovered?
7. What recommendations might you expand on when it comes to ensuring that students are accessing tier-one grade-level instruction to the maximum extent possible?

- a. Expand: what recommendations might you provide in ensuring that those students also receive additional supports deemed necessary for that child to be successful?
8. What other comments or contributions might you provide regarding any of the questions asked throughout this interview?

**Appendix D: Interview Protocol for Specialized Support Professionals**

1. Briefly describe your educational background and the path that led you to being a specialized support professional.
  - a. Follow-Up: What positions within education have you held and where?
2. When thinking about instruction, please describe what tier-one grade-level instruction means to you at the classroom level.
3. Based on your role as a specialized support professional, explain the processes in place you follow in determining support needed for students beyond the general education classroom setting.
4. Describe your experiences collaborating with classroom teachers and any other service providers regarding communication of student needs/supports that you will be providing to them.
  - a. Within the context of collaboration, describe your process for scheduling those services you will be providing to your caseload of students.
  - b. Can you tell me about a time when scheduling those services resulted in being a significant challenge in providing your support services? If so, explain the challenges you faced.
  - c. Describe what collaboration looks like when it comes to sharing best practices and learning from one another to best support students' academic needs.
5. What challenges do you face in terms of resources or time when trying to provide effective support while ensuring access to tier-one instruction?
6. When you think about student needs, list and explain what comes to mind.

- a. Do you feel that certain needs outweigh others, and if so, how might you rank them and why?
7. Based on the previous questions regarding student needs, can you tell me about a time when the needs of students were not being met properly?
  - a. What policies or procedures were in place prohibiting certain needs to be met?
  - b. What, if any, actions were taken by you or other staff members when this concern was discovered?
8. As a specialized support professional, think of a time you may have recognized that one or more of the students you provide support services to were pulled during tier-one grade-level instruction.
  - a. What, if any, were any positive outcomes once that realization was made?
  - b. What, if any, were any negative outcomes once that realization was made?
9. What recommendations might you suggest related to balancing tier-one grade-level instruction with also providing additional support services?

**Appendix E: Interview Protocol for Elementary Principals**

1. Briefly describe your educational background and the path that led you to being an elementary principal.
  - a. Follow-Up: What positions within education have you held and where?
2. When thinking about classroom instruction, describe what tier-one grade-level instruction means to you as a principal.
  - a. From an evaluator standpoint, list and describe the key elements of high-quality tier-one instruction that you look for when conducting evaluations.
  - b. What policies and practices do you currently have in your building related to tier-one instruction?
3. When it comes to overseeing team collaboration and development within your building, describe the process you use for determining which staff members are included on certain teams when it comes to academic instruction.
  - a. Through the lens of team collaboration, describe your building's process for scheduling these collaborations.
  - b. Tell me about your team collaboration process regarding planning tier-one instruction implementation.
  - c. Tell me about your team collaboration process regarding analyzing student data.
  - d. Describe your school's collaborative processes in place for determining tiered levels of academic intervention for students needing additional support.
4. Describe the efforts you have in place regarding maximizing student learning time throughout your building.
  - a. Follow-Up:

- i. Master Scheduling
  - ii. Instructional Lesson Pacing
  - iii. Providing tier-two and tier-three academic intervention
  - iv. Providing students with specialized support services
  - v. Ensuring that students receive tier-one grade level instruction to the maximum extent possible.
5. When you think about student needs, list and explain what comes to mind.
  - a. Do you feel that certain needs outweigh others, and if so, how might you rank them and why?
6. Based on the previous questions regarding student needs, can you tell me about a time when the needs of students were not being met properly?
  - a. What policies or procedures were in place prohibiting certain needs to be met?
  - b. What, if any, actions were taken by you or other staff members when this concern was discovered?
7. As a building principal, think about a time you noticed that one or more of the students in your building were missing out on your tier-one grade level instruction for any number of reasons (excluding being absent for the day).
  - a. Explain some of those reasons why those students missed out on classroom tier-one instruction.
  - b. Can you tell me about a time when certain students missed tier-one instruction which ended up being beneficial for that student?
  - c. Can you tell me about a time when certain students missed tier-one instruction which ended up being harmful for that student?

- d. Throughout your administrative career, what efforts can you recall have been made, at the district level to ensure that tier-one grade level instruction is provided to all your students to the maximum extent possible?
  - i. What about at the school level?
  - ii. What about at your specific classroom?
8. Describe your overall stance on protecting tier-one grade level instruction for all students.
9. What recommendations might you expand on when it comes to ensuring that students in your building are accessing tier-one grade-level instruction to the maximum extent possible, while also receiving additional supports deemed necessary for that child to be successful?