RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION THROUGH A SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK: AN INQUIRY OF PRINCIPAL'S BELIEFS AND EFFECT ON CLASSROOM PRACTICE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The achievement gap between white and black students has been studied extensively, but little has been done to design policies and implement practices to challenge the inequitable structures that have created this gap in achievement. Educational reforms for the last 15 years have focused on the achievement of all students, yet the gap still persists. Education policy during the past decade emphasized systems of increased accountability, expectations and punitive measures for schools and/or districts not succeeding in bringing all students to grade level achievement. Response to Intervention (RtI), an outgrowth of several policies, aims at raising the achievement of all students by identifying, early on, those students who struggle with learning and engaging in varying levels of intervention to prevent academic failure. RtI represents a systems approach to support struggling learners. A broader concern for RtI is the context within that the instructional system operates. In this study, social justice will be used as the lens for examining RtI systems. Social justice is recognized as a framework for creating equal access for all students. The identification of barriers in the form of policies, attitudes and perceptions that do not ensure the full and equal participation of all students in the educational experience is a major component of social justice. These contextual barriers serve to perpetuate the marginalization of minority students. This study examines the beliefs and understandings of principals who demonstrate a social justice leadership framework in their practice and how a system of RtI is implemented and operationalized through the tenets of this framework.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

As a result of factors outside of their control, marginalization of students occurred in schools throughout the U.S. The underachievement of marginalized students in which a majority are minoritized based on race can be attributed to a variety of contextual factors. One such factor, living in poverty, can be associated with inadequate nutrition, health care, a lack of pre-school experiences, and a literacy poor environment. Students contending with these factors are reasoned to be at risk for academic failure and face significant challenges in the classroom. However, some researchers have shown that factors exist within schools that also serve to perpetuate marginalization (Condron, Tope, Steidl, & Freeman, 2013; Williams, 2011; Goodwin, 2000; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Welner, 2001). These internal factors, such as policies, procedures, attitudes and beliefs of the dominant culture have limited and marginalized minority students for decades (Condron et al., 2013; Williams, 2011; Goodwin, 2000).

Causes of marginalization, while multifaceted, have the same resulting outcome for students, academic failure. Academic failure for these students ultimately leads to limited life choices. The achievement gap between black and white students is deeply rooted in education. The achievement gap examined the difference in average achievement scores between black and white students. The first in depth look at the achievement gap began with the Coleman report that sought to understand the difference between black and white student achievement (Rothstein, 2004). The conclusions drawn from the Coleman Report indicated that social class and social standing had a more powerful influence on achievement than did schooling (Moynihan, 1968). Invariably the conclusion was often mistaken to suggest that schools have limited influence on school success. However, it should be recognized that many of the
assertions made by Coleman’s report failed to examine some of the larger social justice considerations and perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Contemporary social justice work identifies considerations of the larger sociopolitical structures that have continued to marginalize racial minority students. Ladson-Billings (2006) brought a different perspective to the achievement gap and reenvisioned this phenomenon as the education debt. The education debt is characterized as the debt owed to minority students from decades of social and political policies that have sustained marginalization of minorities. The “...inequalities in health, early childhood experiences, out-of-school experiences, and economic security are also contributory and cumulative and make it near-impossible for us to reify the achievement gap as the source and cause of social inequality (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.10).” In a similar vein, Milner (2012) also recognized how a focus on the “achievement gap” has ignored more important and compounding issues for minority students identified as “the opportunity gap.” Achievement gap, educational debt or opportunity gap, while all bring different perspectives to the marginalization of minority students, all recognize the crisis in the underachievement of minority students.

What has been a response for dealing with the underachievement in minority education? One of the more traditional forms of support offered to support minority students achievement focused on remedial classes or special education services. The low achievement of minority students persists while students experience lost opportunities at accessing the general education curriculum. For example, minorities have a long history of being overrepresented in special education and, in many cases, limited full and equal access to the general curriculum (Condron et al., 2013; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Minority students in special education receive the regular curriculum with modifications, but some students in special education find limited access to
rigorous and academically challenging curriculum that opens doors to postsecondary education (Williams, 2011; Losen & Welner, 2001).

Researchers and policy makers recognition of the achievement gap for minority students, and narrowing this gap, became the focus of national school reform efforts addressed first through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, then through the Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA] in 2015. A requirement of the NCLB was an annual academic assessments and annual benchmarks established for schools and subgroup populations (NCLB, 2002). While the notion of increasing expectations over time was well intentioned, NCLB lacked clarity in how schools could achieve annual benchmarks and imposed punitive sanctions on schools for not achieving benchmarks (NCLB, 2002). While states gave some autonomy for determining what constituted “meeting standards,” NCLB established that each state must ensure standards were met by 2014 for all students, including those in each subgroup (NCLB, 2002). As established NCLB timelines expired, the federal government issued waivers to states that committed to federal requirements around changes in teacher evaluations and common core state standards adoption. With the adoption of ESSA, accountability changed to include multiple indicators of school quality and student success including an indicator of student growth. ESSA no longer requires escalating annual benchmarks for schools and students, but instead relies on evidence-based interventions selected by states to support failing schools. An introduction of RtI during the initial implementation of NCLB was a method to support failing students prior to being referred for special education. RtI relied on educators to use evidence based interventions that helped students respond to instruction and narrow the achievement gap.

Issues surrounding the achievement gap seem to be even more compelling when examining census data over time. Between 2000 and 2010, the census pointed towards an
increasingly diverse U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Data demonstrated that the Hispanic population alone accounted for over 50% of the growth in the overall population, while the non-Hispanic white population grew at just over 1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Pairing these significant changes in the diversity of the U.S. population with a persistence in the achievement gap translates to a national crisis. The Council on Foreign Relations suggests as much in their report entitled *U.S. Educational Reform and National Security* concluding that continuance of the achievement gap as a threat to national security and U.S. competition globally (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012). The Foreign Council (2012), chaired by Joel I. Klein, former head of New York City public schools, and Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. Secretary of State, pointed to the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results that show the U.S. fourteenth in reading, twenty-fifth in math, and seventeenth in science compared to students in other industrialized countries. The Foreign Council (2012) also identifies the achievement gap as cause for concern particularly as it relates to global competitiveness. The country “will not be able to keep pace—much less lead—globally unless it moves to fix the problems it has allowed to fester for too long” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012, p. 12). RtI is one of the methods highlighted in NCLB and described through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). For the past fifteen years RtI, in the educational spotlight focused on the identification of students who are struggling academically and intervening early to prevent school failure. Often, early identification, a critical component of RtI, found itself as a criticism of past policy and practice when struggling learners languished academically in classrooms because of inadequate supports. Through RtI students are identified through multiple forms of assessment and provided with research-based interventions. Research-based interventions are foundational instructional supports provided in the general education classroom.
(Tier I) as well as the more intensive levels of instruction provided to students with greater needs (Tier II and III). All students are monitored on an ongoing basis to determine their response to the interventions and student success is measured by examining progress toward their goals. Students who struggle and do not respond to the intervention are provided different and/or exceedingly more intense interventions as needed. The intensity of an intervention is a reflection of an increase in time for instruction in that content, a reduction in the teacher to student ratio, and the use of intensive modifications or alternative curricula. Students who continue to fail to respond may be deemed eligible for special education services. RtI provides early identification and intervention to all students and provides support to students early in their schooling so that special education support may not be required (Batsche, Elliott, Graden, Grimes, Kovaleski, Prasse, Reschly, Schrag, & Tilly, 2005).

While the RtI framework addresses the academic challenges of students by intervening before a student experiences academic failure to provide a strong foundation for future academic success, it is not without criticism. With a goal of helping to increase student achievement using a more scientific approach, academia critiqued RtI for its lack of cultural recognition (Artiles, Bal & Thorius, 2010). While RtI attempts to address students’ academic concerns through a more systematic process, it is also critical that we examine potential underlying causes for academic failure. Systemic issues related to the achievement gap are not easily resolved despite the good intentions of policy and reform efforts such as RtI. The need to understand the systemic issues at a much deeper level speaks to a need to understand factors beyond student assessment that contribute to and reinforce the marginalization of students in schools.

The importance of addressing the needs of diverse populations of students is the focus of one reform effort aimed at using Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to provide Response
to Intervention (RtI). A current reform effort that encompasses RtI is the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) model. The MTSS model has a broader focus on both academics and behavior. MTSS focuses on problem solving throughout the system and not just at the individual student level. The MTSS system has foundations in RtI, but is also closely associated with the tenets of professional learning communities (PLC) (Jimerson, Burns & Van DerHeyden, 2016). Dufour (2004) identifies three big ideas that define PLC’s. The first big idea encompasses a clear focus on student learning detailing how students can achieve successful learning and be provided ample opportunity to master the learning. The second big idea entails a culture of collaboration that establishes working norms for teachers to work collaboratively to ensure student learning. The focus of collaboration is on how to ensure student learning for all students. The third and final big idea involves a focus on student results to reinforce student learning. PLC’s use student results to continually reflect and improve on classroom instruction. The focus of this study will be centered on the academic or RtI features of MTSS.

Examining the Achievement Gap Through a Social Justice Lens

Complexities underlying the achievement gap and the subsequent marginalization of minority students in today’s schools can be examined through a social justice framework. Adams, Bell, & Griffin (2007) note that:

The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure (p. 1).

A social justice framework helps to identify barriers and factors that contribute to the marginalization of minorities. Understanding the achievement gap through the lens of
educational policy can often lead to assumptions that may not be recognized regarding the equal and full participation of all students in the educational process. By using a social justice lens, dimensions of race and culture offer a different view of educational opportunities and achievement of minority students. A social justice lens helps to frame problems with an emphasis on culture and stresses the important role it plays in the educational process (Artiles et al., 2010; Artiles et al., 2011; Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher & Ortiz, 2010; Drame & Xu, 2008; Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Social justice leadership extends the concept of social justice through a commitment and dedication by administrators and teachers to pursue social justice for all students (Theoharis, 2009). A commitment to social justice leadership by principals requires an understanding of the schools contextual barriers both internal and external, but moreover requires commitment to action for transformation of the school environment so it can become inclusive and equal for all students. Social justice leadership will be important in understanding how RtI may be operationalized when social justice is actively attended to in the school.

**Rationale**

It could be argued that in no time in recent history has the accountability on public education been higher than in the current educational climate. The previous federal policy under NCLB (2003) altered the way public schools were made accountable for the achievement of all students. The primary objective of NCLB was the elimination of the achievement gap, but with little progress as seen by the NAEP progress reports (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). While ESSA has afforded greater flexibility in meeting accountability measures, policy continues to be short on solutions to address the achievement gap. NCLB and its counterpart in special education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), have been important reforms that help create the foundation for Response to Intervention (RtI).
In 2002, NCLB identified a need for research-based instruction in the classroom and the use of assessments to identify students in need of academic supports. IDEA legislation initially introduced the concept of examining students’ ability to respond to the use of research-based interventions as an option for qualifying students for specific learning disabilities. What grew out of these reform efforts was Response to Intervention in which the philosophy was no longer a “wait to fail” approach for determining discrepancies in student academic achievement (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007). An important component of 2004 IDEA reauthorization that helped solidify RtI practices was designation of IDEA funds for the express purpose of providing early intervening services to students in Kindergarten through third grade who needed additional supports (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). The nation has progressively moved towards RtI implementation and an early survey found that 48 of 50 states described RtI implementation in various forms (Berkeley, Bender, Gregg, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009) but now all 50 states have identified RtI implementation in their state statutes (Jimerson et al., 2016). Illinois, the state context for this dissertation, also took steps to ensure that the RtI was implemented in all school districts, with districts required to submit plans for implementation of RtI by January, 2009 (ILL. ADMIN. CODE, 2007). However with RtI implementation surging forward, can such practices prevent the failure of minority students? Can RtI assist in providing minority students with meaningful access to the general education curriculum? Some critics contend that RtI is based on the same foundations as special education and that minorities will face the same barriers under a new name (Artiles et al., 2011). Some important questions to consider; Can RtI/MTSS be used as a framework to lend minority students appropriate levels of support to increase their achievement? How does social justice fit into the implementation of RtI procedures and processes? Current models of RtI lack a social
justice context and for that reason critics argue that RtI is destined to achieve the same types of outcomes as previous iterations of special education.

… learning seems to be shaped by two types of factors, within-child and contextual (i.e., instructional) variables; the latter is often operationalized as teacher use of teaching strategies. This categorical lens to conceptualize learning leaves out the semiotic, socio-emotional, and cultural processes that also constitute RtI instruction (Artiles et al., 2011, p. 253).

**Problem Statement & Purpose**

For decades, persistence of the achievement gap for minority students continues despite efforts to reform education. RtI provides educators with an approach that is focused on early identification and early intervening services to support the academic needs of all students. Addressing minority achievement, however, RtI alone may not be enough to improve the achievement for minority students. The social justice framework provides a perspective that sheds light on internal factors that continue to marginalize minority populations in schools (Condron et al., 2013; Goodwin, 2000; Williams, 2011). Social justice can transform RtI so that it is less informed by the traditions of special education and include a perspective that recognizes culture. RtI informed by social justice should reflect an expanded view of education that includes the semiotic, socio-emotional and cultural processes that provide full and equal access for minorities.

The purpose of this study was to examine how one principal’s beliefs and understandings of social justice influenced the policy, framework, and implementation of RtI in her school. Data gathering occurred through a case study approach. A principal identified through a defined selection process as a strong proponent of social justice was the primary participant in the study.
Additionally, interviews conducted with teachers from the same school examined if the principal's beliefs and understanding extended to practices into the classroom.

The primary research questions guiding this study were:

1) **What are one principal’s beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership?**

   How do those beliefs and understandings operationalize in the overall organization, structure, and implementation of RtI in their building?

2) **To what extent do these beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership impact the professional practice of teachers in reaching diverse populations of students?**

### Delimitation and Limitations

**Limitations.** The most significant inherent limitations result from the methodological design of this study. The conclusions and findings from this study are uniquely situated to the unit of analysis in this research which is one school, one principal and a small number of staff members. While conclusions and findings may be of significance the transference to other schools or other environments is limited by the unique dynamics at this particular research site during the time of the study.

Participant inclusion in this study was voluntary and compensation was not provided. The data collected in this study was of a qualitative nature and as such relied heavily on the expressed opinions of participants. Anonymity was important for participants, and it should be noted that the expression about the opinions of participant practice may be in a manner that reflected favorably on the practices noted. To help regulate this limitation member checking, and comparisons between data collected between teachers and principals, observations and document review helped to confirm or refute the practices. However, due to the nature of the research it would be difficult to entirely eliminate the possibility of exaggerated self-reported data.
Another limitation of the research that was inherent in the research design relied on the selection of candidates determined by asking superintendents, or their designee, to assess potential candidates using a social justice leadership survey. Administration of the social justice leadership survey was over the phone and gave examples of what these practices may look like to a superintendent. This survey did rely on superintendents observation of these factors to reliably determine the principal's beliefs and practices related to social justice leadership.

Another limiting factor was the selection of a site that implemented RtI with fidelity. The necessity of identifying such a site was reliant upon the superintendent or their designee’s ability to judge the school’s fidelity of implementation with a RtI Core practices checklist adapted from the SAPSI-S. The superintendent’s ability to adequately judge RtI core practices were limited to the superintendent's understanding of RtI Core practices and could influence the assessment provided by the researcher.

The final limitation in this qualitative study is that there was no student test data included in this study. The results relied on the qualitative data collected from interviews with principals and teachers, observations and review of documents, but no student data to further correlate the qualitative data.

**Delimitations.** The case study in this research centered on the selection of a principal who was a strong proponent of social justice leadership in a school setting recognized as implementing RtI with fidelity. The selection of the principal who was a strong proponent of social justice leadership was important to determine in what ways RtI influenced beliefs. The selection of a school that implemented RtI with fidelity was also an important consideration in this research project as it was important to look at the structures, and practices of this school in relation to the principal’s beliefs and understandings about social justice leadership.
The school was also delimited to include school populations with a minority population of at least 40%. The premise of this study focused on raising the achievement of minority students and as such a school with at least 40% racial minority was required.

**Significance of Study**

This research is significant in that it is designed to shed light on the processes of RtI through the lens of social justice, demonstrating how this can be operationalized at the school level. While RtI shows promise for providing early identification and intervention of students in need of additional supports, it has not necessarily been effectively designed to address the needs of minority students in a targeted way. In examining the process of RtI through the eyes of a principal who has a strong understanding of social justice, one can critically reflect on policies and practices. The researcher hypothesizes that the principal will use his/her convictions and beliefs about social justice to ensure that the organization, structure and implementation of RtI takes into account notions of how all students can realize their full and equal participation in the educational process. If this is the case, then analyzing what this looks like and how it alters the behavior and teaching practices of teachers who work within this system has important implications.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

During the past 15 years, Response to Intervention (RtI) and more recently, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) have been adopted into the lexicon of schools. A review of state websites indicated that RtI/MTSS is anchored into state educational policies for all 50 states (Berkley et al., 2009; Jimerson et al., 2016). Why has RtI/MTSS been so rapidly enacted into state policy and what is the purpose of this process? This chapter explores the foundations of RtI from policy origins in IDEA and NCLB to the more recent evolution to MTSS. Despite having national attention, RtI/MTSS has no standard for implementation across the country and is characterized as diverse and fragmented (Berkley et al., 2009; Jimerson et al., 2016). These differences in implementation often are related to disputes about the intended purpose of RtI and MTSS.

A significant focus of RtI is on early identification of learning problems and the provision of early intervening services to support struggling students. One of the fundamental goals of RtI is to raise the achievement levels of all students and enhance the distribution of educational resources and the identification procedures for special education service (Artiles et al., 2010). The traditional perspective on obtaining special education services has been labelled the ‘wait to fail’ approach and has been problematic on many levels. The national research council’s report, Minority students in Special and Gifted Education found that disproportionate number of minority students are found represented in the learning disabilities category and subsequent research has continued to demonstrate a disproportionately of minorities in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014). The identification of students for special education services, particularly students with learning disabilities, was
traditionally based on measuring a discrepancy between a student's academic performance and their cognitive abilities as measured through IQ testing. The introduction of RtI for special education identification through NCLB in 2002 and the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 has changed the paradigm and standards for delivery of instruction in general education classrooms. One perspective that may be helpful in understanding the changes that have come about from RtI’s implementation is the social justice framework.

Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) recognize that social justice is both a process and goal. The goal of social justice can be defined as “...the full and equal participation by all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 1). One measure for achieving the goal of full and equal participation is through the equitable distribution of resources for all members (Adams et al., 2007). Adams, Bell, & Griffin (2007) recognize that the process for achieving and enacting social justice is democratic and requires the inclusive participation by all members. The moral obligations of all participants in the process of social justice also require agency and social responsibility towards others and the broader society (Adams et al., 2007). The traditional approach to special education identification has been characterized by the overrepresentation of minority students into special education. In many instances this has resulted in the exclusion of minority students from full and equal participation in the regular education curriculum (Zhang et al., 2014).

RtI offers a different paradigm for distributing educational resources by attempting to ensure that instructional materials, teaching strategies and interventions are provided in a manner consistent with research (Artiles et al., 2010). RtI promises a different approach by ensuring that students are exposed to research based strategies and instruction while also improving the screening and monitoring tools for students with academic concerns. While this approach has
attempted to address the distribution of educational resources identified through social justice, RtI has failed to acknowledge the cultural differences among student populations. Through IDEA policy and research a framework for RtI implementation has been identified, but it falls short of addressing the cultural context of students. A failure to address culture plays a significant role in the continued marginalization of groups of students that RtI is designed to support. In this chapter, the importance of the cultural context and the intersectionality between RtI and social justice will be addressed. Further, I will also examine information about the important role of the principal in the implementation of RtI policy and how his or her views on social justice may potentially influence implementation of RtI.

Response to Intervention

The historical foundation. RtI in the vernacular of school terminology has become synonymous with the identification of and interventions for students who have the potential for early academic failure. Two seminal policies that have shaped educational practice at the national, state and local levels have had an important influence on the development of RtI, No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA), was arguably one of the most aggressive legislative measures taken to increase accountability within the public school system. NCLB was designed with the intent of building school capacity and addressing the achievement gap that exists for minority students who struggle academically compared with their non-minority counterparts. The persistence of the achievement gap has been well documented for decades and has been the subject of much debate (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012; Rothstein, 2004). NCLB
attempted to address the achievement gap by reforming educational accountability and expectations for minority students. NCLB policy set in motion benchmarks and expectations that schools would be required to support all students to achieve benchmarks identified as, adequate yearly progress, forced schools to act on the failure of students traditionally underserved by public education and to find ways to improve achievement or face accountability sanctions such as the loss of federal funding or school choice options for families.

The most recent reauthorization of ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act 2015, has seen a pendulum shift in the federal government's role in education offering states greater flexibility to establish their standards for accountability and monitoring. In a recent statement by Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, shares her philosophy on the role of the federal government through ESEA.

My philosophy is simple: I trust parents, I trust teachers, and I trust local school leaders to do what's right for the children they serve. ESSA was passed with broad bipartisan support to move power away from Washington, D.C., and into the hands of those who are closest to serving our nation's students. States, along with local educators and parents, are on the frontlines of ensuring every child has access to a quality education. The plans each state develops under the streamlined ESSA template will promote innovation, flexibility and accountability to ensure every child has a chance to learn and succeed. (U.S. Department of Education, March 13, 2017).

The flexibility provided to states regarding accountability remains to be seen, but it is evident from Secretary DeVos’s comments that the federal role in education will not be as far reaching as the federal role as it was in NCLB. Despite the shifting of accountability and monitoring of student achievement; students will still continue to be provided support through an
MTSS/RtI system. Schools will also continue to use MTSS/RtI as a means of qualifying students for special education services.

Bradley, Danielson, and Doolittle (2007) identified that the primary origin of RtI can be traced to the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Prior to the reauthorization of IDEA, the LD Initiative, a task force comprised of researchers, educators, and advocacy groups, were brought together to explore alternative ways of identifying students with learning disabilities (Bradley et al., 2007). The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities had formally requested to revise federal policy regarding the entitlement of students with learning disabilities in large part because the means for identification was neither accurate nor timely (Bradley et al., 2007). Prior to the reauthorization of IDEA of 2004, the primary means for diagnosing and entitling students for LD services was through what is known as the discrepancy model. This model examined the gap between a student's achievement and their intelligence quotient (IQ). If the discrepancy was significant then students were entitled to special education services. The discrepancy model has proven problematic because it requires a discrepancy, which often does not become significant until well into a child’s academic career. Consequently, the discrepancy model often has been referred to as the ‘wait to fail’ approach because students often can languish in their classroom until evaluation’s determine a discrepancy exists between achievement and potential. Furthermore students who failed to demonstrate a significant discrepancy often were identified as slow learners and remained in the classroom without additional support.

The language of the IDEA 2004 reauthorization explicitly permits states to use an alternative method for LD identification examining the response of students to scientifically based interventions (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010) and fundamentally shifted the perspective of
teachers who sought to support struggling students. The evidenced-based instruction could be characterized as being, “…more individualized than standardized; more flexible than formal; and as recursive as necessary to accelerate student learning, all of which makes replication of the RTI process and instruction impossible…” (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). The notion of using a method of identification in which student achievement is measured on a standard basis in response to how they are responding to evidence-based practices being used in the classroom, became a core component of RtI.

The focus on the quality of instructional practices implemented in classrooms has changed the paradigm shifting “blame” for low achievement away from the students and on instructional practices not meeting their needs (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2007). The onus for students not receiving adequate instruction fell on educators to find and implement the appropriate practices to ensure the core curriculum addressed student needs. RtI has forced teachers and administrators to reexamine the quality of instruction, if appropriate and consistent instruction fails to provide a student with academic progress then special education eligibility becomes a possibility. Research on RtI identifies the individualized nature of providing early intervening services with the intention of preventing school failure.

**A framework for RtI.** A review of research has established some of the essential elements deemed critical for any RtI framework which begin in the general classroom. Classroom instruction or Tier 1 instruction as it is often referred, represents the single most important element of the framework (Batsche et al., 2005; Berkeley et al., 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). Differentiation of instruction may provide students at Tier 1 the scaffolding and support required for their success. If students continue to struggle despite these instructional supports at Tier 1 then interventions that provide instruction to students in a small group setting with
specialized instruction for a set period of time can help students succeed. Students who fail to respond to the more intensive tiers of instruction then move towards a multidisciplinary evaluation for special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; 2007). While this may seem to be a sequential progression through tiers, the pathway through the RtI framework may be anything, but linear for many students and teachers. The framework of RtI begins with the premise that educators should differentiate between two explanations for a student’s low achievement and response instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005): is inadequate instruction being provided or does the student have a disability. In order to establish the difference between these two explanations a detailed framework must be understood.

**Tiers of instruction.** Tiers of instruction refer to the graduated intensity of instruction as students struggle with the Tier 1 curriculum (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; 2007). The multi-tiered model of service delivery (see Figure 1) is an essential component of any RtI framework and tiers of instruction ensure both an efficient and effective delivery of resources with intensifying instruction at higher tiers (Batsche, et al., 2005). While the number of tiers can vary a common recommendation suggest three tiers at minimal should exist within any framework for RtI (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). The first tier of instruction consists of typical differentiated instruction in the general education classroom. For students that continue to struggle in Tier 1, Tier 2 instruction is provided in a small targeted group with a higher intensity of instruction using evidence-based interventions. Tier 3 offers the most intensive interventions and is often individualized interventions. Although the flow through the tiers should be a simple process, the movement from Tier 3 to Tier 2 and to Tier 1 occur only once success is achieved. From this perspective, tiers are not designations for students, but rather supports that are timely and monitored on a regular basis.
The tiers of instruction are traditionally represented as a pyramid with classroom intervention defined as Tier 1 at the base of the pyramid. Tier 2 is identified as intervention support provided to students who are not being successful at Tier 1. Finally, Tier 3 is identified as the most intensive support for students who are not responding to Tier 2. Adapted from *Response to Intervention: Policy Considerations and Implementation* by Batsche et al., 2005.

The effectiveness of instruction at Tier 1 is critical to reducing the number of students requiring interventions, reducing the number of students identified for special education and creating a more proportionate representation of minority students in special education (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Effective Tier 1 instruction requires teachers to differentiate their instruction based on the varying needs of their students. Researchers have suggested that if fewer than 80% of the general school populations are being successful at Tier 1 then changes to instruction are needed (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Hoover, 2011). Hoover (2011) also notes that Tier 1 is supplemented by Tier 2 instruction and conversely, Tier 2 instruction should not...
replace Tier 1 instruction. Tier 2 instruction is viewed as supplementary and with more intensity with a greater access to resources of curriculum and personnel that can provide students with the additional targeted instruction necessary to make gains. Tier 2 instruction often addresses between 15-20% of all learners at some point in time often between Tiers 1 and 2, 95% of all learners will have their learning needs addressed, but Tier 3 represents the greatest intensity of instruction and only 1-5% of students will benefit from this form of instruction (Hoover, 2011). Hoover and Love (2008) noted that the three-tiered model of instruction was the foundation for RtI in schools where successful implementation of RtI was evident.

The essential elements of RtI and specifically the instructional hierarchy suggested by the three tiers of instruction have been examined in high risk settings where considerably less than 80% of students were successful with Tier 1 instruction. Ball and Trammell (2011) found that while some unique challenges present themselves as it relates to student populations for high-risk populations, the research suggests that tiered levels of support were instrumental to providing the foundational curriculum. With high risk populations the goal of achieving an 80% success rate with Tier I instruction was not achievable given the increased risks and concerns of the student population, but that the need for laying a foundation for a Tier 1 curriculum with an explicit plan of skills and strategies for educators was critical in addressing learning needs (Ball and Trammel, 2011). These research findings are worth consideration when examining school populations that reflect increased risks and concerns. Identifying students for their placement in the Tiers is another critical element of the RtI framework and places a great reliance on educators to effectively screen, diagnose and monitor the progress of students who are struggling in their learning.
**Screening, Identification and Monitoring.** Establishing tiers of intervention is an important component in the RtI framework. However, the ability to accurately screen, identify and monitor student progress is essential to ensuring that student movement among the tiers is efficient and effective. This section addresses the importance of the screening and identification process for students at-risk for academic failure and the subsequent monitoring of their progress.

The screening process within a framework for RtI begins with the use of a benchmark assessment administered regularly throughout the school year on all students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). This assessment, often referred to as universal screening, provides educators with a quick assessment of student proficiency compared to a norm. The screening tool or screener provides a quick indication of a student's progress in a particular curricular area. Screeners provide educators with a measure of a student’s progress compared to national, district or local norms. For educators, cut scores are established with screeners and often those students achieving below the 25\(^{th}\) percentile at risk of academic failure and in need of intervention (Deno, Reschly, Lembke, Magnusson, Callender, Windram, & Stachel, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005, 2007; Lembke, Garman, Deno, & Stecker, 2010; Hoover, 2011; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016).

In addition to the screener, other assessment measures are used to determine a student's need for intervention. Another measure for consideration is the gap analysis (Hoover & Love, 2008; Hoover, 2011). The gap analysis examines the measure of the gap between a student’s performance on a standards-based assessment in relation to their peers. The size of the gap signals the need for further support in Tier 2 or 3. The gap analysis is often used to compare the national norms to local norms. The importance of the gap analysis becomes evident when looking at results in classrooms in which the majority of students fail to meet the criteria for the national norms.
The majority of students not meeting national norms for a cut score at the 25th percentile could indicate that a large number of students would be referred for interventions in Tier 2 and 3. However, the use of gap analysis data would suggest that immediate and necessary attention must be paid to Tier 1 classroom instruction prior to addressing students through Tier 2 or 3 interventions. This distinction is important to note as gap analysis can point to issues with the Tier 1 curriculum or instruction rather than student performance. Gap analysis also is useful for examining differences for subgroups of students. Unfortunately, the most common, well documented gaps are those that exist for minority groups. A gap analysis can be used for determining if student need prioritizes Tier 2 or 3 interventions compared to peers. The gap analysis differs from the cut score method with the use of local norms compared to national norms. Cut scores and gap analysis rely on screening measures at one point in time.

Another measure that takes into account the dynamic nature of instruction is the rate of improvement measure. Previous measures examined students’ abilities compared to national, district, local or gap measures at specific points in time. Rate of improvement measures consider the rate that students are growing, as compared to their peers, using curriculum based measures. Curriculum based measures (CBM) are brief samples of academic performance that can be measured more frequently (Batsche, et al., 2005). Rate of growth and cut score measures can be used in combination to track the progress of students and provide a clearer picture of the progress of students. Together, the static nature of cut score measures and the dynamic nature of rate of growth measure provides a more complete picture of student progress as compared to peers.

If students are identified through a screener to be at risk for academic failure and fall below the cut score, progress should be monitored on response to the Tier 1 curriculum and instruction. If the curriculum and instruction meet the students’ needs then the rate of
improvement will create a trajectory towards the 2nd target score (see Figure 2). In this scenario, the student is below the cut score, but with adequate instruction in Tier 1 curriculum, their rate of improvement demonstrates the ability to catch up with the trajectory of the remainder of the group. In this scenario, the student has been progress monitored for 6 times after the initial benchmark and as a result their progress on the CBM demonstrates a rate of growth indicating the student is getting on track. Progress monitoring using CBM’s is typically given on a weekly or bimonthly basis for students in a Tier 2 or 3 intervention (Batsche, et al., 2005). These data points collected from progress monitoring can be charted to give a representation of the student's’ rate of improvement over time. After the initial screening has been completed students below the cut score should be placed on monitor status for 6 to 8 data points rather than immediately providing intervention to students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Fuchs and colleagues indicate the reason for placing students on monitor status instead of immediately placing the Figure 2. A student with a greater rate of improvement than the group norm student into an intervention is two-fold. First, the student should be provided time and differentiated instruction in the Tier 1 curriculum which previously has been identified as a research-based curriculum and should be successful with 80% of students. The second reason is a matter of practicality in the school setting and relates to resource allocation. If all students identified through a cut score approach were provided with more intensive intervention services, rather than identifying through a requisite number of data points, it could become overwhelming to the system and inappropriate for many students. If the Tier 1 curriculum is research based, it should give students the ability to progress beyond the cut score given time, exposure, and differentiated instruction. For students remaining below the cut score after adequate time and exposure then more intensive interventions become the next step.
Figure 2. A student who has scored below the cut score initially on the first benchmark test demonstrates a greater rate of improvement than the group norm. In subsequent progress monitoring sessions the student continues to improve their scores and demonstrates a greater rate of improvement (red line) than the group norm rate of improvement (blue line). This student is making progress towards meeting group norms if their rate of improvement continues at the expected rate and will not be a candidate for intervention.

It is important to point out that giving students’ time to progress through Tier 1 in the RtI model is different from waiting for students to develop a significant discrepancy as used in the traditional model of the learning disability identification. Through RtI, students are provided research based curriculum and instruction through Tier 1. At the first benchmark screener, students below the initial cut scores are monitored at regular intervals to determine rate of growth and need for more intensive interventions (see Figure 3).

Recent Developments in RtI

RtI has continued to develop as educators have examined a confluence of systems (academic and behavioral) to continue to strengthen and improve outcomes for all students. In recent years, MTSS has been proposed as a means for describing the tiered systems of intervention in both areas. Much of the support work for social and behavioral outcomes in
Figure 3. A student with a lower rate of improvement than the group norm

Note. A student who has scored below the cut score initially on the first benchmark test demonstrates a lower rate of improvement than the group norm. In subsequent progress monitoring sessions the student continues to fall below the anticipated rate of improvement. The student’s scores demonstrate a lower rate of improvement (red line) than the group norm rate of improvement (blue line). This student is not making progress towards meeting group norms and would be a candidate for intervention support.

Schools over the past 15 years has paralleled the academic supports found in RtI (Jimerson et al., 2016). The social and behavioral supports have been broadly represented through a network called the Positive Behavioral Interventions Systems (PBIS) found in many schools throughout the country. PBIS includes the same elements of RtI including tiers of intervention, screening, identification and monitoring. Researchers have recognized that the coupling of PBIS and RtI systems through MTSS addresses the whole child (Burns, Jimerson, VanDerHeyden, & Deno, 2015; Jimerson et al., 2016; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Students who have social/behavioral issues often experience academic struggles. Developing interventions in social/behavior and
academic areas separately without recognizing the connections between the two can work at cross purposes. MTSS makes connections between PBIS and RtI to bring a more systematic and efficient approach at the school level.

Cultural Considerations in RtI

RtI represents progressive changes in the way that educators think about and respond to the failure of students. RtI embodies promising features that tackle pressing and longstanding equity issues in education, such as the representation of diverse learners in learning disabilities (Artiles et al., 2010). Multi-year studies of RtI efficacy has provided promise as the number of students referred for special education testing has decreased with a subsequent increase in accuracy of special education identification (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007). Despite some of these examples, the overrepresentation of minority students in special education persists at the national and state level (Zhang et al., 2014). Castro-Villareal, Villareal, and Sullivan (2016) found evidence that while RtI has improved the accuracy and identification of special education students there have been unintended consequences of RtI implementation regarding variability in decision making across schools, districts and states in terms of which students qualify for special education. Further variability exists in implementation of RtI across settings. Castro-Villareal et al., (2016) also recognized that fidelity of implementation was often overlooked when eligibility for special education services was being considered through the problem solving component of RtI.

Another consideration that is most often ignored are cultural considerations for diverse learners. The standard protocol is proposed to address the universal learner, but differences in culture, learning styles and needs are often ignored and protocols are not often normed with diverse populations (Castro-Villareal et al., 2016). A failure to address cultural context in
implementation continues to be echoed by proponents of social justice. The distributive paradigm of social justice by Rawls’ concludes that the unequal distribution of resources must occur, “...only to the extent that the weakest member of society benefits by that inequality” (as cited in Artiles et al., 2010). If RtI supports the distribution of academic resources to the neediest students then, “What forms of difference does RtI recognize? What kinds of opportunities does RtI afford to various forms of difference? How are views of social justice used in the implementation of RtI procedures and rules?” (Artiles et al., 2010)

Orosco and Klingner (2010) found that ELL students were recommended for RtI support without considerations for their linguistic or cultural diversity. The ELL backgrounds of students often were viewed as deficits to learning and a misalignment of assessment and student English language acquisition failed to be taken into account. “The evidence from this study suggests that teachers continued to develop an RTI model in isolation without also considering the cultural contexts in which they and their students functioned (Orosco & Klingner, 2010).” Reflecting on minority student achievement through Tier 1 curriculum, Klingner and Edwards (2006) questioned how well curriculum and assessments reflect the cultural values of minority students and found that often this is not a consideration. When a student fails to achieve a benchmark assessment an intervention may be prescribed for a time frame with progress monitoring. If there is a lack of academic progress is it possible to delineate whether the lack of progress was related to student learning deficits or if the instructional materials were not culturally responsive and/or normed with a diverse population. Klingner and Edwards (2006) recognized that benchmark assessments needed to consider norms for diverse populations because national norms often failed to recognize differences. Important considerations for RtI implementation with diverse students should include examining how curriculum and assessments embody or reflect the
culture of minority students. Framed another way, should socio-cultural factors become a part of the RtI process? Drame and Xu (2008) argue socio-cultural factors must be included in any RtI models.

“A strong rationale exists for the incorporating socio-cultural context factors in RtI models relating specifically to the potential in RtI models relating specifically to the potential of RtI to address the issues of overrepresentation of minority students in special education.” (Drame & Xu, 2008)

When examining student learning, Drame and Xu (2008) indicate that learning must encompass parents, family and community as these factors play a large role on student learning and success. The RtI process can incorporate contextual factors of culture, specifically community, and family cultures.

Drawing from the cultural context of learning, Hernandez Finch (2012) addressed many of the same concerns about RtI. If minority students are not meeting the academic benchmarks in Tier 1 is this attributed to individual students or systemic problems that fail to address culturally responsive teaching and differentiation practices? Again, the questions surrounding minority achievement identify limitations in Tier 1 research-based instruction from a cultural standpoint. What are the culturally responsive provisions that take place at Tier 1 and what kind of professional development is provided to teachers who work with diverse student populations? Are teachers provided professional development to help them understand and appreciate the cultural context of Tier 1 instruction such as second language acquisition, sociocultural influences on learning, or effective strategies for working with culturally and linguistically diverse parents? The evidence based practices that are inherent in RtI practice should be addressing the cultural context of the school population.
In Tier 2, interventions are provided to students who fail achievement benchmarks for Tier 1 curriculum. An important consideration when examining interventions is to look at what evidence there is to address systemic issues of Tier 1. Interventions that fail to address these systemic issues can be best described as random acts of intervention that do not align with or address the larger systemic issues. When students receiving Tier 2 interventions are progress monitored, are tools used with students normed to diverse populations? English Language Learners are an example of one group that of students that can be carefully monitored and measured by instruments that were normed without including English Language Learners as part of the normed population (Hernandez Finch, 2012). As educators consider the RtI process, it is evident from the social justice perspective, that the cultural context of minority students must be a consideration. The next portion of this chapter will examine the history of minority student underachievement and disproportionality in special education and identify causal factors through the lens of social justice.

**Issues in Addressing Minority Student Need: A Cultural Perspective**

The underachievement of minority students and their overrepresentation in special education is well documented from decades of research (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Klinger et al., 2005; Losen & Welner, 2001; Rothstein, 2004; Zhang, et al., 2014). The national research council has studied the issue of underachievement and overrepresentation of minorities in special education through two different national panels spanning the past two decades (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Zhang et al. (2014) recognized that despite changes to policy and practice the overrepresentation of minority students continues to persist in special education. What factors contribute to the underachievement of minority students compared to their white counterparts? The most commonly cited factors for this phenomenon point to the fact that the majority of
minority students come from backgrounds of poverty which include a host of risk factors (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Zhang et al., 2014). Some of the risk factors associated with poverty include a lack of adequate health care, nutrition and pre-school experiences that negatively impact school success. Researchers have found that schools with higher concentrations of minority students from poverty are less likely to have experienced teachers while also having fewer resources allocated per pupil (Artiles, et al., 2010; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Zhang et al., 2014). Researchers have also recognized that schools in which minority students are the majority have much lower quality of schooling when compared to predominantly White middle class schools and are much less likely to receive effective classroom instruction (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Kozol, 1991; Losen & Welner, 2001). Disproportionality of instruction is a reality for students of color who are taught in high poverty schools that lack many necessary resources with teachers who are underprepared for culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The result is often inadequate instruction for minority students and failure in the classroom. For many of these students the next step for support in this broken system is a referral for special education.

Research of underachievement of minority students has traditionally identified poverty as one of the root causes (Artiles et al., 2010). Poverty is the common denominator between Black and Hispanic children overrepresented in special education. It disposes children to inadequate pre-school opportunities, poor nutrition, lack of adequate health care and difficult environments which are associated with increased risks of academic failure. One theory suggests the underachievement of minority students should be anticipated given the cumulative risk factors associated with poverty.
However, recent research on poverty has challenged this theory and in many cases research has demonstrated that poverty is an inconsistent predictor of academic failure while special education overidentification is consistently associated with minority students (Artiles et al., 2010). Artiles and colleagues (2010) noted that another important consideration is that many of the models that focus on poverty as the causal factor have identified ‘normal’ development from a white middle class perspective without consideration of culture or race. They propose that by including culture and race in the developmental model, poverty is not consistently identified as a causal factor for student failure. The poverty hypothesis while certainly an important component to address should not be the essential characteristic in determining needs of minority students. Artiles et al. (2010) suggests that the impact of poverty is often presented as a set of biological factors, but using this as a causal factor only “...serves to ossify the assumption that the outcome of living under particular conditions is the inherent defining feature of these groups” Poverty can frame the issue as an explanation that is intrinsic to students while failing to account for system wide issues (Klinger, et al., 2005). Further,

…there is nothing about poverty in and of itself that places poor children at academic risk but, rather, it is how structures of opportunity and constraint come to bear on their likelihood for achieving competitive educational outcomes (Blanchett, et al., 2006). Defining minority students through poverty creates a conscious bias that predetermines a course of action for supporting student achievement including referral and identification for special education.

**Examining Achievement Through the Social Justice Lens**

While RtI originated through IDEA as a more accurate mechanism for SLD identification, the intent through NCLB was that it would address larger issues of student
achievement. It is important to examine achievement and expectations through a social justice lens to come to a better understanding of RtI implementation in schools.

The current issues of underachievement of minorities is in sharp contrast to the perspectives present in segregated schools of the South prior to desegregation. Siddle Walker (1996) noted that the historical descriptions of segregated schools often depicted as neglected facilities that were overcrowded, underfunded, with a lack of resources. What Siddle Walker (1996) discovered through her historical ethnography was a vibrant school culture where parents entrusted their children to the care of teachers and administrators. “Failure to learn was unacceptable to teachers, family, peers, and the community. The choice was how much one would learn, and what subjects would be mastered” (Siddle Walker, 1996). Segregated schools met the deeper psychological and social needs of their students. Through interviews with former teachers, students and administrators, Siddle Walker (1996) offered descriptions of segregated schools as a collective commitment to student education from an understanding of and connection to culture that few desegregated schools could ever offer.

Foster (1997) painted similar pictures of segregated schools through the collective voices of black teachers. While the teachers from Fosters’ research shared similar stories about dilapidated schools and limited resources of segregated schools, the narratives of pushing students to succeed in spite of these resources was similar. Another common theme that emerged from teachers as desegregation was beginning was the concern for a loss of identity, cultural connections, apathy directed towards black students and lack of high expectations.

Improving minority student achievement in education has been a focus of policies to stimulate reform in practice through NCLB, ESSA, and IDEA. However, using social justice lens reveals a number of important factors that are often ignored by policy. Klinger et al. (2005)
recognized that changes in policy and practice that place contextual issues of culture, language, and heritage at the heart of an educational system are more likely to impact student achievement. In a similar vein, Ladson-Billings (2006) examined the persistence of the achievement gap for minority students and characterized it as an ‘educational debt’ stemming from years of systemic issues of power and hegemony.

Power and hegemony are part of a larger narrative defined by researchers as a basic assumption about race. The norms of the white middle class serve as the lens through which minority students are often evaluated on many different levels (Klinger et al., 2005). The focus of current reform efforts have recognized the issues of minority achievement, but have failed to address the core of past mistakes. “These hegemonic processes are further complicated by the fact that current educational reforms accept substantial inequality in practice as a baseline that actually serves to perpetuate the status quo” (Klingner, Artiles, Kozleski, Harry, Zion, Tate, Duran, & Riley, 2005).

In looking at minority underachievement from a societal perspective requires a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. The ‘technical issues’ associated with poverty including the environment, health, and nutrition of students in poverty falls short of examining policies that may exacerbate the effects of poverty on students. High poverty schools in the United States fail to receive the same levels of funding, resources, and teaching expertise as more affluent schools. Reasons behind the inequality in funding can be traced to the funding policies for public education that rely on local property taxes. Affluent communities provide larger tax revenues for their school districts while poor communities are unable to raise adequate revenue for their school district based on their property tax levels (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The inequality in funding represents one of the major contributing factors to the inequality in minority education.
The focus on the technical issues of poverty that stem from circumstance and parental influence have become the larger narrative rather than focusing on the policies that magnify the effects of poverty on student achievement and serve to widen the gap.

Schools and districts that place a high value on race, class, culture and language through their policies and practices have adapted culturally responsive educational practices. The successful incorporation of culturally responsive practices requires a social justice framework at the building and district level. The allocation of resources should also be based upon decisions related to equity. Newer iterations of IDEA, NCLB and ESSA policy refer to the importance of evidence-based practices and interventions. The importance of such practices reflects the need to base instructional decisions on empirically based methods that have been verified through research. The culturally responsive approach does not preclude these methods, but in fact implores educators to ask even more questions regarding the empirical evidence of such methods. Are the evidence based instructional strategies and interventions effective for diverse populations and in diverse settings or have these strategies only been verified for white affluent populations? These are important questions as educators move towards a culturally responsive and evidence based education (Klingner et al., 2005).

Social Justice Leadership

While a host of external factors are out of the control of school leaders, the internal policies and structures in schools that are socially unjust must be challenged. The societal assumptions about race that serve to create disequilibrium of power and hegemony must also be challenged. A principal’s leadership for social justice can help to challenge societal assumptions and beliefs about race and can also lead to changes in policies and practices.
As the leader at the school site, principals exert tremendous influence over hiring practices, the assignment of teachers to classes, whether students are grouped by ability level or heterogeneously across classrooms, discipline policies, student retention policies, class size and scheduling decisions, whether paraprofessionals are hired and how they are utilized, visitor policies, the extent to which interruptions to instructional time are allowed, whether students are permitted to take school books and other materials home, how resources are allocated, and curricular decisions. (Klingner et al., 2005)

Klingner and colleagues (2005) assert that the principal is in a critical position to support social justice within their school. What is social justice leadership and in what ways can principals pursue social justice within their schools to support the needs of all students. A review of the literature on social justice leadership reveals a number of important factors that contribute to creating an educational environment that supports social justice. One facet in social justice leadership is a focus on equity for students that are marginalized by existing policies and/or school structures (Capper & Young, 2014; DeMatthews, 2015; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011).

A focus on equity is often linked with the distributive facet of social justice that is concerned with the distribution of resources (DeMatthews, Carrola, & Mungal, 2015; Furman, 2012). The equitable distribution of resources may not result in equity. The division of resources should be done to ensure that the most vulnerable students receive equal opportunity for resources which may require the unequal distribution of resources to ensure equity (DeMatthews, et al., 2016; Furman, 2012). Principals can promulgate socially just practices by taking action against inequity, an essential facet of social justice leadership (Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007). Principals with heightened social and critical awareness are also more likely to identify inequity and take action to make change. “Critical consciousness” represents what
principals must believe, know and do to address equity and is a necessary component of social justice leadership (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006). The focus on equity is commonly addressed by reexamining the structure of schooling through inclusion.

Frattura and Capper (2006; 2007) presented the comprehensive service delivery model to restructure services for students through a full inclusion model. The traditional approach to support students with academic failure has been through special education. Frattura and Capper (2006) recognized that special education services often segregated students from their peers and resulted in a failure to improve academic outcomes (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Welner, 2001). The full inclusion of students in the classroom environment represents an important step to ensure all students are provided with rigorous curriculum and instruction. The importance of inclusion becomes evident when examining the demographics of students most often removed for instruction. Students of color, English Language Learners (ELL), and low income students are most likely to be represented in special education classrooms compared to their white middle class peers (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Welner, 2001). Another important consideration when examining the traditional approach to special education services is the fragmented experience students face on a daily basis as they are pulled for ‘specialized’ instruction instead of being fully included in the classroom experience. More importantly, the comprehensive service delivery model has demonstrated academic success for students in a heterogeneous classroom environment (Frattura & Capper, 2006; Theoharis, 2009). The importance of inclusion is underscored by its prevalence in the literature on social justice leadership (Brooks et al., 2007; Capper et al., 2006; Capper & Young, 2014; McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez, Fierro, Capper, Dantley, Luisa González, Cambron-McCabe, & Scheurich, 2008; Theoharis, 2009; Theoharis &
O’Toole, 2011). Ultimately the restructuring of schools through full inclusion should be to improve the achievement for all students and particularly marginalized students.

Literature on social justice leadership identifies the importance of addressing student achievement to further equity for marginalized students (Capper & Young, 2014; Frattura & Capper, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2009). The pervasiveness of the achievement gap discussed earlier in this chapter, and the prominence of the achievement gap in public policy (ESEA and NCLB) has brought national attention to the issues of underachievement for marginalized students. While standardized tests have been openly criticized by social justice proponents for cultural bias, researchers also recognize that academic achievement on standardized tests is the common currency identified by those outside of the educational arena as a measure of success. Researchers also recognize that improving academic achievement is critical for providing students with future opportunities (Frattura & Capper, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2009). Another component of social justice leadership that has been broadly recognized is the importance of building and maintaining relationships with students and parents.

Scheurich (1998) provided a set of core beliefs that were prominent in schools that supported the successful academic achievement of minority and low-income students. One of these core beliefs found in these schools was that “...all children must be treated with love, appreciation, care, and respect - no exceptions allowed.” What Scheurich identified was the importance that relationships play in supporting the academic success of all students. Researchers to follow have also recognized the importance of building safe environments where relationships and respect for all students is the norm (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2009). As an extension of the importance of relationships with students, DeMatthews, Edwards, & Rincones (2016) provided a case study example of the importance of relationship building and engaging
parents in the educational process. DeMatthews and colleagues (2016) found that parent engagement can also extend to the larger community to grow social justice practices within and outside the school environment.

Much of the literature on social justice leadership has centered on developing preparation programs for aspiring administrators (Furman, 2012; McKenzie et al., 2008; Capper et al., 2006). Developing programs for new administrators is important for future social justice leadership; however, practicing principals are also in need of support. Theoharis (2009) has developed a framework for social justice leadership (SJL) that has provided a practical guide for practitioners who are currently in the role or aspiring to be principals. For this reason, I chose to use this framework in my study.

The SJL framework provides several keys to examining the work and practices of the principal. The framework for SJL is divided into 4 areas that comprise of 7 keys. Table 1 outlines the 4 areas and the 7 keys of the SJL framework. The principal is at the core of the SJL framework and keys 1 and 2 define the work of a principal that is actively pursuing SJL work in their school. Social justice consciousness is defined as recognizing the importance of providing access to all students and is an important part of the first key. Another key to the work of the SJL principal is their core leadership traits. Core leadership traits include pairing a social justice consciousness with the knowledge and skills that represents a tenacious commitment to justice. The heart of the SJL framework comprises of challenging injustices in its’ many facets in school. Advancing inclusion, access and opportunity for all students is one key to challenging injustices. Segregation and separation of students from the regular classroom can reduce educational opportunities that may not be afforded in the more exclusionary environments. The
Table 1

Seven Keys of Social Justice Leadership (Theoharis, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components of SJL</th>
<th>Keys</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Social Justice Leader:</td>
<td><strong>Key 1:</strong> Acquires broad, reconceptualized consciousness/knowledge/skill base</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Key 2:</strong> Possess core leadership traits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenging Injustice:</td>
<td><strong>Key 3:</strong> Advance inclusion, access, and opportunity.</td>
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<td><strong>Key 4:</strong> Improve the core learning context</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Key 5:</strong> Create a climate of belonging.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Key 6:</strong> Raise student achievement. Avoid quick fixes, but instead rely on a combination of proven strategies to address student achievement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing Resilience:</td>
<td><strong>Key 7:</strong> Sustain oneself professionally and personally.</td>
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</table>

SJL framework does not propose to eliminate specialized or tiered instruction for Special Education or English as a Second Language students, but rather ensuring that these practices are inclusive and meaningfully connected to classroom instruction. The core learning context comprises of the curriculum and teaching and improving the core learning context is another key in the SJL framework. SJL principals recognize that to reach all students, the deprofessionalization of teachers needs to be reversed and teachers should also be provided a voice as it relates to the educational decisions of students. SJL principals recognize that perspectives and teaching practices that are not inclusive must be challenged through a social justice vision. Curriculum materials that do not adequately address the cultural characteristics of the student population should also be challenged to meet the needs of a diverse student body.
A culture of acceptance and a climate of belonging is another key that SJL principals must strive to develop. Developing and fostering relationships with all factions of the school community is an important way for SJL principals to accomplish this key. It is also critical for SJL principals to intentionally reach out to marginalized families and the community.

One of the major goals of schools are to increase the academic achievement of students and by paying attention to narrowing the achievement gap of marginalized students of color. SJL principals do not rely on the ‘quick fix’ strategies that aim to elevate the achievement of students on the ‘bubble’ of success/failure, but rather focus on the entire student body by addressing the areas previously identified through the framework.

Finally, a key for SJL principals is to reexamine and sustain oneself professionally and personally. The importance of resilience in this difficult work is characterized by the final key of the SJL framework.

**Combining SJL and RtI**

The systems and processes of RtI while implemented through policy are also an extension of the larger system. RtI can be recognized as an organic system completely connected to the current system and one that can substantially change student learning if conceptualized in a manner that addresses equity through social justice leadership.

RtI implementation requires that principals understand the underlying precepts of RtI, engage the equity concerns that undergird RtI policy, and lead the instructional and cultural changes that are required to install and sustain RtI models. (Kozleski & Huber, 2010)

The importance of social justice leadership in addressing the fundamental shifts that RtI can represent in teaching and learning for minority students must address systemic change. The
framework for social justice leadership contains a number of traits that are instrumental in identifying and challenging injustices in the current systems. A principal that has these traits as well as the resiliency to continue this often difficult work is necessary to support systemic change. The implementation of RtI through social justice leadership requires an understanding of the larger cultural contexts at work in a school and how such policies can positively impact the lives of minority students.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study focuses on one important analytical tool for better understanding both the beliefs and understandings of the principal relative to RtI and the current practices of the teachers. The main analytical tool that is paramount to this study was the Social Justice Leadership framework from Theoharis (2009) that helps situate the principal’s understandings of SJL in relation to the existing practices at the school and examined the elements and guidelines of RtI at the study site.

**Summary**

RtI/MTSS have been nationally recognized as an effort to support the identification of special education students or acting as a tool for school reform. This literature review identified the historical roots of RtI in both, IDEA and NCLB, which has presented two different approaches to RtI. This in part has played into the fragmented implementation of RtI across the nation (Jimerson, et al., 2016; Berkley, et al., 2009). Despite the uneven implementation of RtI, research has helped to identify a framework for RtI that includes several core components that help to define RtI. Tiers of instruction are recognized as the foundation for the continuum of instruction beginning with Tier 1 as the classroom instruction that uses evidence based curriculum and practices (Batsche et al., 2005; Berkeley et al., 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). The
intensity of resources (personnel and curriculum) increases as students’ access Tier 2 and Tier which is identified as Special Education in some models. The other core components of an RtI framework include the routine use of benchmark assessments to provide screening to the general student population (Deno et al., 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; 2007; Hoover, 2011; Lembke et al., 2010; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Upon the completion of screening, the regular monitoring of progress of students falling below a set cut score (often below the 10th percentile) is used to help observe student growth and the possible movement of students to a higher tier. If interventions continue to be monitored with little to no student success, the case can be made for special education identification from a lack of response by the student to increased tiers of instruction.

While research has identified a framework for RtI, criticism abound that recognize that the RtI framework fails to address culture (Artiles et al., 2010). Critics argue that cultural considerations must be a part of the RtI process otherwise it perpetuates the disparities that exist and disproportionality is an outcome. (Artiles et al., 2010). The history of public education has identified disproportionate academic outcomes for minority students since the beginning of desegregation. To understand the reasons for these disproportionate academic outcomes, segregated schools provide an understanding regarding the importance of culturally relevant practices when parents, teacher and administrators worked together to hold students to high and rigorous standards (Siddle Walker, 1996; 2009). The identity of African American students during the era of segregated schools was assured in schools while Foster (1997) recognized that black teachers saw the loss of identity for African American students take place after desegregation. While attitudes have evolved regarding desegregation, practices still exist in public schools that act to continue to perpetuate disproportionate outcomes. In many cases public policies have helped to perpetuate disproportional outcomes for minority students such as school
funding policies, discipline policies, and a lack of culturally relevant curriculum and culturally responsive practices (Ladson Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012; Rothstein, 2004). The importance of the principal to support minority students to ensure equity and access while understanding barriers for minority students is recognized through the Social Justice Leadership framework (Theoharis, 2009). The cultural consciousness of principals is imperative to providing a school environment that is consistent with social justice practices.

Finally, the theoretical lens for examining the data and results of this study focuses on the use of the social justice leadership framework and the opportunity explanatory gap framework to understand and examine the practices, policies and procedures at Lakemont elementary school. The next section will examine the methodology of the case study.
Chapter 3

Methodology

A principal holds the most important leadership positions in any school. From an organizational standpoint they evaluate teachers, monitor the academic progress of students and help to establish the climate and culture of the building. However, the principal’s role in implementing policies that transform teaching practice and student learning may not always be transparent. The purpose of this study was to examine how one principal’s beliefs and understandings of social justice influenced the policy, framework, and implementation of RtI in her school. The researcher gathered data using a case study approach. A principal identified through a defined selection process as a strong proponent of social justice was the primary participant in the study. Additionally, teachers from the same school were interviewed to determine if the principal’s beliefs and understanding extended to practices into the classroom.

The following research questions were addressed using case study methodology:

1) What are one principal’s beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership? How do those beliefs and understandings operationalize in the overall organization, structure, and implementation of RtI in their building?

2) To what extent do these beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership impact the professional practice of teachers in reaching diverse populations of students?

To address the questions most effectively, it was crucial that site and participant selection criteria be clear. In setting criteria for selecting the target site, a checklist of key components for successful RtI implementation was used to ensure that the school had implemented RtI with fidelity. The key participant was an elementary principal who served in a school building for at least three years and was identified as a strong proponent of social justice leadership. In this
chapter a description of the case study design is provided including descriptions of the site, the participants, the data collection and analysis, and the measures taken to assure validity.

**Paradigmatic Context**

Prior to describing the research methods, it is important to provide a paradigmatic context which will make the selection of case study methodology more apparent. In reflecting on the four assumptions of research outlined by Burrell & Morgan (1979), a stance in the areas of ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology may be delineated. The first of these assumptions is the ontology or assumptions about RtI as a research topic. In examining the literature on RtI, there are clearly defined guidelines for RtI implementation based on research and policy. However, the nature of RtI implementation is most often guided by the internal reality of a principal’s conceptions of RtI that may or may not be informed by a principal’s understanding of social justice leadership. This conception of ontology is in line with nominalism and strongly suggests a more subjective, internal approach to understanding the actions of individuals based on their knowledge of RtI and their personal experiences and understanding of social justice leadership.

The assumptions related to the epistemology within this research favors an anti-positivist approach that recognizes the personal nature, subjective understanding (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) and knowledge of RtI. Student academic failure may be viewed through a true or false dichotomy; however, the nature of failure and the barriers that are identified through a social justice leadership framework are subjective and rely to a large degree on an individual leaders’ knowledge and their actions. I postulate that through the principal’s understanding and beliefs regarding social justice leadership, the resulting actions, and the culture established by the principal, favor an anti-positivist approach. Qualitative methods are best suited to recognize,
study, and interpret the interactions within the school setting as policy implementation plays out within the framework of social justice leadership. While the technical components of RtI may suggest an objective approach to student learning, a component that is hypothesized to be absent from traditional interpretations of RtI is the larger context expressed through the social justice leadership framework. The potential benefit that RtI has for the achievement of minority students is connected to the ability to identify and act to remove the internal barriers that exist while applying social justice leadership framework.

The third set of assumptions relate to human nature and in particular, “the relationship between human beings and their environment” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Although future success or failure of students is strongly influenced by background, socioeconomics does not determine their educational future. Principals who come from a social justice leadership framework also believe that RtI can be implemented in a manner that would provide all students with access to appropriate interventions to achieve academic and behavioral success. More importantly, principals with strong alignment with a social justice leadership framework recognize the importance of addressing the barriers and inequities for minority students through the structures and practices of RtI.

As I review these assumptions regarding the nature of my research I further recognize that the methodology I approach with this topic is ideographic (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The ideographic approach is consistent with the subject of inquiry into how RtI and its implementation is shaped by a principal’s understandings of social justice leadership.
**Methodological Design**

**Case Study**

The primary method selected for data collection is a qualitative approach in the form of a case study. The merits of a case study research design are instrumental for exploring the research questions in their entirety. Case study represents a valuable tool for answering questions of “how,” and for examining “operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence” (Yin, 2009, p. 9). The case study research design is appropriate when variables are embedded into the context of the situation (Merriam, 2009). The selection of the case study is also appropriate when insight, discovery and interpretation of the variables in context are required in answering the research questions (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the case study design was selected because examining complexities of RtI implementation in a school through the eyes of the principal and teachers requires a descriptive analysis of evidence gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Furthermore, the research questions for this study suggest that operational links, if present, should be examined from principal to teachers. The case study as the methodological design is superior to other methods in gathering data required to address these questions because it provides a ‘thick’ description of RtI implementation with detailed descriptions of variables identified by subjects through a series of interviews, observations and document analysis.

**Unit of Analysis**

Merriam (2009) defines the case study as “…an in depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). The unit of analysis addressing the initial research questions and is directly related to the bounded system (Yin, 2009). In this study, the unit of analysis was the
Figure 4. Model of Research Design

Note. Illustrates the model of research and units of analysis with the principal in the role of the primary participant. The model explores RtI implementation through the lens of social justice leadership and how the beliefs and actions of the principal potentially influence the professional practice of teachers, the organization and the structure of RtI.

collective school unit that included the principal and teachers. The person central to this case study was the principal, with a focus on understanding how her beliefs and notions of social justice leadership interacted with RtI implementation. Social justice leadership served as the theoretical lens to analyze RtI implementation particularly as it unfolded at the classroom level, namely if the principal’s beliefs and understanding of social justice leadership impacts teachers’
Site and Participant Selection

Three levels of screening were used in the selection of sites and the principal participant. Careful selection of participant and site was required to achieve the goals of the research.

First level of screening. The first level of screening began with the identification of school districts within a 90-mile radius from the University of Illinois. This distance was selected due to the frequency with which the researcher would be engaged in collecting data. The districts within a 90-mile radius were identified using the website, http://www.freemaptools.com/radius-around-point.htm. Identification of school districts with a minority populations of greater than 40%, was determined by analyzing the Illinois interactive report card (http://illinoisreportcard.com/Default.aspx). In the first level of screening, six school districts were identified within a 90 mile radius from the University that had a minority population greater than 40% (see Figure 6).

Second level of screening. The second level of screening involved determining which of the six schools identified in the first level of screening, were implementing RtI core practices with fidelity. The researcher consulted the I-RtI Network to meet this criterion. In addition, when examining potential sites it was also important to examine the principal’s length of service. It was determined that principals should have served in their leadership role within their building for at least three years. The I-RtI network is funded through the state of Illinois and works to provide technical and personnel support to schools in their RtI implementation efforts by working with the regional offices of education. The specific focus of the I-RtI network is “...to improve the learning and performance of all students by building the capacity of Illinois schools to develop, use and sustain a multi-tiered system of research-
based curricula, instruction, intervention, and assessment. This work involves the delivery of high quality professional development consisting of training, technical assistance, and coaching” (Illinois State Personnel Development Grant, n.d.). The I-RtI network has served schools in Illinois since its inception in 2011.

The former director of the I-RtI Network for the region encompassing the aforementioned school districts, was contacted by the researcher. This person then reached out to current coaches working with schools in the area to gather recommendations for specific schools that met the criteria for effective high fidelity implementation of RtI. I-RtI Network coaches identified four schools (see Figure 6). The researcher reviewed information on each school via the Illinois interactive report card and determined that because Hillside elementary school in the Brooks school district had a new principal, it had to be eliminated as a possible research site. The three remaining schools were: Middleton, Denton and Humboldt. All three were elementary schools.

**Third level of screening.** The next level of securing a candidate site was to confirm the effective implementation of RtI in each of these schools by directly discussing specific criteria with the superintendent or a designee from each district. The criteria examined the effectiveness of RtI implementation. A tool, based on the Self Assessment of Problem Solving Implementation (SAPSI)*, found on the I-RtI network website at:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Level</th>
<th>2nd Level</th>
<th>3rd Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Candidate School Districts</strong></td>
<td><strong>RtI Network Recommendations of Schools in districts with RtI Fidelity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Superintendent Check of RtI Fidelity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merritt SD</td>
<td>Lakemont - Merritt SD</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39 miles ✓</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burridge SD</td>
<td>Denton ✓ Merritt SD</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 miles ✓</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooks SD</td>
<td>Humboldt ✓ Burridge SD</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81 miles ✓</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton SD</td>
<td>Middleton ✓ Merritt SD</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 miles ✓</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valleyview SD</td>
<td>Hillside ✓ Brooks SD</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 miles ✓</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derwent SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 miles ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Level</th>
<th>2nd Level</th>
<th>3rd Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Candidate School Districts</strong></td>
<td><strong>Principal Tenure &gt; 3 years</strong></td>
<td><strong>Superintendent Check of Social Justice Leadership</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merritt SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90 mile radius</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;40% Minority</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burridge SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooks SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valleyview SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derwent SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.** Participant and site screening process

*Note.* Participant and site screening process with the 3 levels of screening for the identification of the site and the primary participant.
(Appendix C), was put to use. The SAPSI tool was based on the foundational components of RtI. An introductory letter (see Appendix A) was sent to superintendents in the candidate school districts asking if they would be willing to complete an RtI implementation checklist.

The identification of a research site was also dependent upon qualities of the principal. A second screening instrument was used to determine whether the principal demonstrated an understanding of the key elements of social justice leadership practices (see Appendix C). This screening tool was developed by the researcher and was based on the superintendent’s (or their designee) knowledge of principal implementation of the key elements of social justice leadership as informed by the research of Theoharis (2009). In a discussion with the superintendent (or their designee), the researcher provided a description of the key elements of the social justice leadership framework.

Follow up telephone calls were conducted with superintendents to allow them to respond to both the RtI core practices checklist (SAPSI tool) for the candidate schools and the social justice leadership screening tool. The researcher contacted the Merritt public school district superintendent regarding two candidate schools, Middleton Elementary and Denton Elementary. The superintendent's office recommended that the Director of Special Education, who was responsible for the district's implementation of RtI, would be the most appropriate person to provide information. The Director of Special Education was asked to assess the two schools recommended by the I-Rtl network for their efforts implementing RtI with fidelity. The Director concurred that Denton Elementary School met criteria, but did not recommend proceeding further with Middleton Elementary school because of a lack of RtI fidelity. The director suggested another possible candidate school, Lakemont Elementary school. In her stated opinion,
Lakemont exemplified RtI implementation at the highest levels. She recognized that while Lakemont had one of the neediest populations in the district, the current principal had encouraged and advocated for her teachers to provide implementation of Tier 1 curriculum with fidelity.

The Director completed the RtI assessment survey (see Appendix B) over the phone for both, Denton and Lakemont Elementary. The results were recorded on the survey and according to the RtI screening tool, both schools appeared to be implementing RtI with fidelity and included the critical components of RtI. Next, the researcher asked the Director to respond to the survey on social justice leadership screener for the principals at Denton and Lakemont Elementary schools. Then responses were recorded on the survey. According to the Director, both principals demonstrated strong social justice leadership beliefs and understandings as assessed through the social justice leadership screener.

The last candidate school, Humboldt Elementary in Burridge was also reviewed. The superintendent for Burridge school district agreed to take the SAPSI over the phone and results were recorded on the survey. The results of the survey indicated that Humboldt demonstrated effective implementation of RtI practices. The superintendent then responded to the social justice leadership screener regarding the Humboldt principal and responses were recorded on the survey. Although the principal demonstrated strong social justice leadership beliefs and understandings, it was determined that an acknowledged personal relationship with the superintendent of Burridge district may present complications. The researcher wanted to avoid perceptions of bias in data collection and interpretation (see Figure 6).
Site visits and interviews. The final step at the third level of screening required the researcher to visit each school, talk with the principal, and tour the campus. The researcher contacted the principals at each school and both expressed interest in being a part of the research project and both were willing to have visits to their schools. The researcher arranged to visit both schools on the same day given that they were in the Merritt district.

The first school visited was Denton Elementary, where Mr. Alan Griffin served as principal for six years. He described that he had worked with staff to establish strong RtI practices and shared RtI schedules and some data gathered by his teachers. He indicated that the district had recently pulled back from RtI and stopped supporting the use of a universal benchmark assessment. This move made it challenging to determine students’ needs and compare performance to national norms given that they were developed locally by teachers. Mr. Griffin met with teachers to review the progress of each student. He sat on the school problem solving team which met on a regular basis during the school day and substitutes were provided to allow teachers to attend. Mr. Griffin described an intervention block provided to all students (Kindergarten through 6th grade). During the intervention block, staff, including the specials teachers (PE, Music, and Art), classroom teachers, parent liaisons, and community members worked with students. Results of interventions were monitored or assessed on a quarterly basis and he shared evidence of student growth for all students. Mr. Griffin did not discuss practices that were identified in the social justice leadership survey.

The second school visited that same day was Lakemont Elementary. Principal Jody Ryan shared that she served in this role for the past three years. Prior to stepping into the principalship, she was the Director of Curriculum for the district for one year, but decided to
return to the building. Ms. Ryan shared concerns about the district pulling back on RtI implementation and that it was less structured. Universal screeners were no longer being used as they had in the past. As a result of budgetary concerns. Like her counterpart at Denton Elementary, she shared that the district had put forward the expectation that teachers would develop common assessments based off the Tier 1 curriculum published by McGraw Hill. Ms. Ryan shared that at the start of her three years at Lakemont she used an intervention block similar to other schools, but then recognized that students being seen for interventions during this time rarely made progress following interventions. Ms. Ryan indicated that as she looked at the achievement outcomes for students in the Tier 1 curriculum, fewer than 80% of students were being successful. She identified Tier 1 as an area of greatest need for building supports for students and teachers. She also recognized that the district was unable to provide the needed additional support and worked with a local community agency to secure a grant to purchase curriculum materials to support the core curriculum. She also worked with a local University to provide additional expertise to support her teachers through professional development. She focused this support on K-2 instruction offering professional development to increase knowledge of effective Tier 1 instructions. To this end, 97% of her students (K-2) made gains in their instructional level while only 3% (4 students) showed no or little growth and were being referred to the problem solving team for further support and intervention. Ms. Ryan indicated that Lakemont Elementary had the highest needs of any elementary school in the district and with these significant needs she recognized the impetus to change Rtl systems in her school to better address the needs of her students. From the interview with Principal
Ryan it was evident that she exemplified practices that were strongly aligned with those indicators on the social justice leadership screening.

Following the site visits, a closer analysis was conducted of the two schools using information gathered from the Illinois interactive report card. This analysis revealed other differences between the schools (Table 1). While both schools exceeded (< 40% minority population) Lakemont had a larger minority population (64%) and a greater percentage of students from low income families with 94% qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Another point of comparison between the schools was the achievement gap between black and white students. The achievement gap data are presented on the Illinois interactive report card, based on the percentage of students who met and exceeded standards on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT exam) and comparing performance of white and black students. At Lakemont, white students scoring an average of 11.5% higher than black students.

Further reviewing the notes from meeting with both principals it was evident from the actions of Principal Ryan that she strongly exemplified many of the practices and beliefs found in the social justice leadership screener that would make her the ideal primary participant for the research project. Specifically, Ms. Ryan described an active plan to advance the academic achievement of her students by improving the core learning practices and curriculum at her school. It was also evident from our interview that she did not wait for district support, but built a coalition of support from within the community to help acquire the needed resources for her school. Principal Ryan agreed to be a part of the study and to have Lakemont participate as well. After much consideration in reviewing all data, it was determined that the most appropriate site for research was Lakemont Elementary. The final
decision was made based on the population served, the implementation of RtI and the manner with which the Principal at Lakemont chose to address the significant needs of her students.

Table 2

*Comparison of Candidate Sites*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Achievement Gap (Black/White)</th>
<th>Minority</th>
<th>Low Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denton</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakemont</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Secondary participants.** Once the site and/principal were selected, a group of teacher participants from the site were identified based on principal recommendations of their understanding of core RtI practices. With permission from the principal, a recruitment letter (see Appendix D) was sent out to the staff. The principal helped to promote the research study through her weekly memo and personally approached several teachers about participating in this study. Four teachers agreed to be part of the research study. All participants were assured that their participation was voluntary, their identity was confidential, and that any data collected would have identifying features removed. Classroom teachers from kindergarten, second, and fourth grades agreed to participate along with the instructional coach for the building.

**Data collection**

Data were gathered through interviews with the principal and teacher participants, archival documents, and observations of classrooms and school RtI meetings. The data collection matrix in Table 3 illustrates the alignment of the research questions with the data collection methods employed through the case study including the primary and supplementary data sources.
Table 3

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>2nd Grade</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>4th Grade</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anni</td>
<td>Instructional Coach</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacquelin</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jody Ryan</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interviews.** The primary source of data collection was interviews with the principal and the four teachers from Lakemont (Table 4). The principal was interviewed using three separate semi-structured protocols (Creswell, 2007) comprised of formal and informal open-ended questions (see Appendix E). The first interview (45 minutes), focused on Principal Ryan’s understandings and beliefs around social justice leadership, was developed based on key concepts from Theoharis’ (2009) framework for social justice leadership (Appendix C). Seven questions on this interview explored beliefs about equity and access. An additional four questions focused on perceptions of and experiences with parent engagement. Two questions focused on school climate and explored beliefs about equity and discipline. The last area of focus was core instruction and inclusion; four questions explored beliefs about equitable core instructional practices.

A second interview (see Appendix E), conducted with Principal Ryan (50 minutes), examined the implementation of RtI at Lakemont. Seven questions focused on how staff gathered, analyzed, and used assessment data to support instruction. Nine questions explored the RtI procedures and processes at Lakemont and examined issues related to core instruction. As an extension of the exploration regarding core instruction, four questions focused on the issues of
core instruction for marginalized students at Lakemont. These four questions also explored how teachers engaged in problem solving to address the learning and behavior needs of minority students to assure full inclusion into classroom instruction. The final seven questions addressed the involvement of parents and engaged in the RtI process.

After the completion of the first and second interviews with the principal, a review of the transcripts revealed topics for further exploration. The third and final interview (55 minutes) addressed specific RtI practices and followed up on some of the ongoing work at Lakemont School. Four questions investigated RtI practices at Lakemont and their relationship to classroom instruction. One question explored cultural responsiveness as part of the ongoing professional development at Lakemont. Finally, five questions addressed the issues of equity and barriers to equity at Lakemont.

All principal interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. After each interview, the researcher conducted a member check with the principal to confirm statements and validate the data collected. However, as Stake (1995) aptly describes in his book, The Art of the Case Study, “getting the exact words of the respondent is usually not very important, it is what they mean that is important” (p. 66). It is the dilemma of capturing every word but then refining what the interviewee is meaning that was most important. Stake suggest that in order to accurately represent what interviewee’s mean that “…it is better to listen, take a few notes, ask for clarification.” The researcher set aside time immediately after the interviews to discern the major themes and interview commentary, while the interview was still fresh rather than waiting for transcription. At a later point the compilation of the interview commentary was reviewed against the interview transcripts, which was helpful in corroborating the major themes identified by
### Table 4

**Data Collection Matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Primary data source</th>
<th>Supplementary data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are one principal’s beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership?</td>
<td>● Interviews with principal (3 interviews/ 45 minutes each)</td>
<td>● Minutes of RtI team meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Faculty meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do these beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership impact the professional practice of teachers in reaching diverse populations of students?</td>
<td>● Interviews with principal (3 interviews/ 45 minutes each)</td>
<td>● Professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Interviews with a minimum of 5 teachers (1 interview/45 minutes each)</td>
<td>● PTA meeting minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Observation of RtI problem solving meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Principal Ryan. At the end of the data collection, Principal Ryan was provided with a gift certificate for dinner at a local restaurant as an appreciation for her participation in the study. Teacher interviews were arranged concurrently with the principal interviews (see Table 4). The first interview was scheduled with the kindergarten (Jacquelin) and fourth grade (Sophie) teachers together. A second interview was scheduled with the second grade teacher (Sue) and a third interview was scheduled with the instructional coach (Anni). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and followed a semi-structured format (see teacher interview questions in Appendix F). The purpose of the teacher interviews was to examine the RtI implementation and the principal’s influence on processes, practices, and perceptions. The first set of questions on the teacher protocol explored the teacher’s use of assessment data and data analysis at the classroom level (six questions). Four questions focused on core instruction and RtI practices at Lakemont School and the role of the principal in the RtI process. Five questions investigated the teachers’ implementation of RtI with marginalized students at Lakemont School and the principal’s role in RtI implementation. Finally, the researcher asked teachers about parent engagement and involvement at Lakemont through four questions. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. The researcher contacted teachers to verify information gathered as a form of member checking to ensure the validity of the interview and clarify statements. The teachers who agreed to be interviewed were provided with a gift certificate for dinner at a local restaurant for their participation in the study. To protect their identity, the researcher gave a pseudonym to all participants. The researcher saved the pseudonyms and real identities to a password protected file and kept them on a different server from the interview data to further avoid any ability to determine identities.
The interviews recordings were permanently erased after transcription completion and verification. The researcher saved the transcription documents to an encrypted and password protected University of Illinois server. The data files will be kept for three years after the conclusion of the study at which time they will be permanently erased.

Table 5

*Principal and Teacher Interview Focus*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PI₁</td>
<td>4/10/15</td>
<td>Social justice leadership perspectives on equity, access, core instruction and inclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI₂</td>
<td>4/24/15</td>
<td>Social justice leadership perspectives on climate and culture, professional development, data analysis, parent engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI₃</td>
<td>9/24/15</td>
<td>RTI practices, revisited perspectives on equity, access and core instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TI₁&amp;₂</td>
<td>4/24/15</td>
<td>Assessment/Data analysis, Core/RTI Processes, RTI and marginalized student populations and the principal’s role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TI₃</td>
<td>10/2/15</td>
<td>Assessment/Data analysis, Core/RTI Processes, RTI and marginalized student populations and the principal’s role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TI₄</td>
<td>10/2/15</td>
<td>Assessment/Data analysis, Core/RTI Processes, RTI and marginalized student populations and the principal’s role</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P= Principal, T=Teacher, I=Interview

**Observations.** In addition to the interview data collected from principal and teacher interviews, the researcher conducted an observation of a school RTI team meeting (Table 5). The purpose of the observations were to examine the organization and structure of RTI and professional practice of teachers. Observations of the RTI team meeting involved the researcher taking notes of dialogue during the problem solving process for individual students in the school. In addition to the RTI team meeting observation, observations were also done in three classrooms. The observations took place during instruction and the researcher took notes about classroom instruction, student interactions and classroom environment.
Table 6

*Observation Data at Lakemont School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CO(_1)</td>
<td>Classroom 1 Observation - 2nd Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO(_2)</td>
<td>Classroom 2 Observation - Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO(_3)</td>
<td>Classroom 3 Observation - 4th Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO(_4)</td>
<td>RtI Team Meeting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CO = Classroom Observation  TO = Team Observation

**Documents.** Additionally, a review was conducted of archival documents from the school provided by the principal (Table 6) to examine the organization and structure of RtI and to review the professional practice of teachers. These documents included faculty meeting minutes, grade level meetings, leadership meetings, and professional learning community agendas. Documents were analyzed to provide evidence to support or refute the themes evident in interviews.

Table 7

*Document Sources from Lakemont School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1D</td>
<td>Professional Learning Community Agendas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2D</td>
<td>Grade Level Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3D</td>
<td>Leadership Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4D</td>
<td>Faculty Meetings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD = School Documents
Data Analysis

Data analysis in a case study requires the researcher to think carefully about how research questions align with data collection (see Table 3); ultimately analysis provides meaning to the case study context. “Analysis is matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations” (Stake, 1995, p. 71). The analysis of the data collected through interviews, artifacts and observation will provide the researcher with the opportunity to use both categorical aggregations and direct interpretations. In the case of categorical aggregations, the researcher examines the data and ascribes a category to individual events in the data collection process. As the data are analyzed, building categories through the analysis process helps to ascribe meaning to this event within the case study (Stake, 1995).

Stake (1995) further describes the data analysis process by noting that “the search for meaning often is a search for patterns, for consistency, for consistency within certain conditions, which we call ‘correspondence”’ (Stake, 1995, p. 78). In the data collection process, the researcher interprets patterns and identifies and categorizes aggregations as he or she attempts to derive meaning within the context of the case.

Upon completion of the transcriptions of the principal and teacher interviews, the researcher loaded all transcripts into a secure password protected online program, Dedoose, to assist in identifying and tracking themes from the source material. The researcher also looked across transcriptions, observations and materials for themes that were common or unique. The coding of data from interviews initially used the social justice framework to examine the principals’ beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership. The coding of subsequent interviews related to RtI implementation were guided by the social justice leadership framework. Other themes also emerged from coding that were separate from the theoretical framework.
**Triangulation**

The quality of a case study and the assertions and conclusions drawn from an investigation rely to a large degree on demonstrating the researcher’s thoroughness in showing that he or she has attended to all of the evidence (Yin, 2009, p. 160). Stake (1995) asserts that, “…we have ethical obligations to minimize representation and misunderstanding.” The importance of examining data from a variety of sources is critical to validating claims presented in a study.

The protocol identified in the study for triangulation of the data follows a methodological triangulation (Stake, 1995), relying on a number of sources and methods to confirm claims. The main data source were interviews conducted with the principal to reveal their understanding and beliefs around social justice leadership, and their implementation of RtI. Teacher interviews conducted with the four teachers confirmed or refuted the evidence put forth by the principal. Additionally, the researcher used observations and artifacts to further confirm or refute claims made by both teachers and the principal.

The researcher validated results throughout the study by using the process of member checking. The principal and teachers interviewed were presented with a script and researcher interpretations to validate the data collected. In producing a case study that is trustworthy, it is important to continually triangulate the data by examining all interpretations from a variety of angles.

**Reflexivity**

As a researcher, I recognize that I bring biases to the research based on my personal experiences and perspectives as an educator. My personal position has been shaped by my experiences working in public education with the majority of my career spent as a principal in a
small urban setting in a highly diverse school. I recognized early in my career that I felt drawn to issues of social justice particularly for marginalized students. In my earliest experiences, I worked with the indigenous populations in Canada on Indian reservations where poverty, substance abuse, and academic failure were common barriers that students faced. As I moved into my current setting, the student populations changed, but the issues were similar with the marginalized populations being African American students from low income households. During my tenure as principal in this urban setting, my district operated under a federal consent decree aimed at improving the outcomes for our African American population in the areas of academic achievement, attendance and discipline. As principal at this elementary school, I confronted many of the issues and barriers that our marginalized students faced and recognized that some of these barriers intentionally or not, were related to policies or practices long established and continually marginalize these students. During my tenure, I implemented RtI in my school during its infancy; and recognized that many of the issues faced by our marginalized populations such as over identification for special education and academic failure, were areas that could be addressed through an RtI framework by taking an early intervening approach.
Chapter 4

Results: Principal Interviews

Introduction

The results from this case study, presented in the next two chapters, reflect the model of research presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides results from three interviews conducted with the principal which identify the ways in which one principal’s notions of social justice leadership are reflected in RtI practices and in teaching practices. The first interview explored the beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership on issues of equity and access, parent engagement, climate in the building, core instruction and inclusion, RtI with marginalized populations, and parent involvement. The second interview explored the principal’s understanding and implementation of RtI that included: assessment and data analysis; core instruction/RtI processes; RtI and marginalized student populations; and parent involvement. The third and final interview covered topics related to both social justice leadership and RtI. A second set of results are presented in Chapter 5, which examines the organizational structure of RtI at Lakemont and the professional practice of teachers. These results are based on data collected from teacher interviews, classroom observations and document analysis. The theoretical framework used to analyze interview data from the principal interviews was the framework for social justice leadership from Theoharis (2009) and was previously described in Chapter 2.

Context of Lakemont School

Principal Ryan spent some time describing the general context and issues of Lakemont School relative to other schools in the Merritt School District and the community itself. Initially
she identified as problematic the surrounding area in which Lakemont is situated in the community.

And just on the news the other day, they were talking about this area – about how it’s the most crime... in Merritt. My [students] live there. They get the most calls from the police [along with] Washington Crossing … that’s where a lot of my kids come from, in that area where there’s a lot of crime (PI1).

The high levels of crime surrounding Lakemont for the children who attend that school is symptomatic of high levels of poverty. Principal Ryan recognizes the needs of her students living in poverty and the struggles that they face on a daily basis. Principal Ryan describes the following: “I see a lot of the kids here who are raising their brothers and sisters in single family homes. Somebody’s having to work, and a lot of kids talk about the jail time of their parents in prison and things like that”(PI1). The challenges of Lakemont school in both its location and the burdens placed on students is evident to the community at large. Principal Ryan acknowledges this as she points out the desirability of Lakemont in the context of the school district, “So, my school is ... the lowest preferred public school. So it’s not always the ... school having the largest number of kids in a classroom, because maybe parents don’t want to be here, ... a lot of times when kids move in, kids come here”(PI1). She recognizes that as the least preferred school, seats are most often available and as a mobile student population moves into the community, the first offering to parents in Merritt is often at Lakemont School. Principal Ryan has pointed out that Lakemont school has the ‘high priority school’ designation by the state of Illinois because the school has failed to make AYP from the vestiges of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal policy. This ‘high priority school’ designation provides parents with the opportunity to opt out of attending a failing school. Lakemont’s ‘high priority’ status from the state presents challenges
for the school within the community. The community tends to view the school for its ‘high priority’ label, failing according to the principal, to recognize the many good things happening at Lakemont. However, Principal Ryan states that when students and parents attend Lakemont they are often satisfied and choose to remain in this community.

Given the complexity of high needs that students face at Lakemont School, Principal Ryan acknowledges the importance of her role in advocating for her students. She explains her commitment to equality in education at Lakemont. The challenges for students at Lakemont are not necessarily unique to students in the Merritt School District, but she perceives that inequities in the district do impact the students and staff at Lakemont directly and are worthy of exploring further.

**Perceptions of Supports and Difficulties in Merritt School District**

Principal Ryan discussed Merritt School District and several issues she has been dealing with in the district. There was a change in leadership with a new superintendent and central office team. She perceived that the change in leadership has offered promising changes in processes to address some of the inequities in the district. Principal Ryan recognized that, with a change in leadership, there have also been several areas not addressed that have proven difficult for Lakemont. She noted that the level of support for RtI and the resources provided to schools in the district were concerning. Changes in leadership have also afforded principals more flexibility in selecting curriculum, professional development, and changes in budgeting procedures.

**Acknowledging inequities.** Principal Ryan noted that while her students are among some of the districts neediest, based on family income and other risk factors, inherent disparity exist between schools. She described a recent instance in which the district failed to follow through on their promise of providing iPads to her students.
One of the things we were supposed to have was iPads for every single student. We don’t have them yet, but we’ve asked for them. Sometimes in our district, Middleton Elementary School and other elementary schools get different opportunities – their students have more experiences than ... our students (PI1).

Principal Ryan recognized that in order for equity to exist for her students, additional supports were needed:

If the district is offering something for one building, I think it should be equal that all buildings should be able to have that same privilege. So even like when grants are offered, specifically to Middleton Elementary building or to Lakemont Elementary . . . and no other buildings get that grant. I know there’s only so much money, but you see something working . . . how do we share that information with everybody else (PI1).

Principal Ryan recognized that as the district received grants or additional funding, these opportunities should be provided equally to all buildings, to provide a foundational level. While she advocated for equal funding and opportunities presented by the district she also recognized the need to secure additional resources and support for her building through her own efforts.

Principal Ryan also acknowledges inequities in the buildings themselves. She is working with staff and parents to make Lakemont more inviting both inside and out. She has indicated that her efforts to improve the environment surrounding the building has been met with resistance from the district and union. She developed a plan with some staff members to improve the premises of Lakemont, “we should be in stage two because we’ve written grants and they’ve given us the money, but because [of] the unions with the District ... they [district maintenance] won’t remove the asphalt and the concrete, so we can’t move the project to the next stage or level.” (PI3). Principal Ryan identified the bureaucracy associated with the district building and
maintenance unions as a barrier to moving forward in improving the outside environment of her school despite her efforts to get grant funds to make these changes. In other ways, district level leadership has provided support to the changes that Principal Ryan is making at Lakemont.

**Outcomes of leadership changes.** Principal Ryan spoke about what the recent changes in district leadership with a new superintendent and restructured central office team have meant for schools with regard to textbook adoptions.

we’re kind of moving away from textbooks and curriculum and tools and really moving into creating our own and finding what works best for our kids, so we have this ... series for reading, but it’s going away next year, and now what are we going to use – there’s not going to be something prescribed (PI1).

She stated that the district has afforded buildings the opportunity to advocate for the needs of their students in ways that promote risk taking. She perceives that for the principals, in the Merritt school district, this change in practice has enabled and empowered schools to try new ideas to best meet the needs of their students. As Principal Ryan noted, previous leadership in Merritt did not allow for or account for the differences in schools and students.

This year in particular, we are able to design our programs and our needs for our individual students. That’s never happened in the district since I’ve been here ... it’s always ... been led from top down. This year, we’re able to say, ‘These are some ideas that we would like to try to implement and this is what our needs are for our particular students so this is what we would like to see happen.’ So with that aspect, it gives us an opportunity to really meet the needs of our kids rather than it being looked at district-wide – ‘Everybody has to do this’ (PI1).
Principal Ryan has recognized from her experiences in Merritt that using the same approach at each of the schools did not yield equal results, but rather described how having the opportunity to fail and try different programs or ideas does offer this possibility.

So I think that is helping to make sure that our students’ needs are being met and it’s not the same cookie cutter program for everybody in our whole entire district because we do look much different from other schools. So with that, I think as the years go down if we can keep going that direction and really use our data to help decide what programs and needs our students have, I think we will be able to be more equal (PI1).

While the promise of providing differentiated core instruction at each school is vital to meeting the needs of different populations, it is also relevant to consider differences in professional development. Principal Ryan identified that in the past, professional development at the district level also followed a one size fits all approach with little differentiation. Now there is an opportunity to differentiate the needs of professional development by school as well.

I guess district-wide, we all have PLC [Professional Learning Community] time; however, we’re allowed to do what we need to do. It used to be last year, all the elementary kindergarten might go this room, while all first grade might go to this room, then second grade. And they all focused on math last year. So everybody’s hearing the same thing. Now this year, we have control over our agenda (PI1).

While curriculum and professional development are differentiated, the new leadership in Merritt has proposed significant changes in budgeting practices at schools.

Principal Ryan further noted that, in years past, school budgets have typically gone towards standard schools expenses, but this year the budget would be expanded to include Tier 1 resource purchases. “We’re going to have our own budget, and then within our own budget, we
get to decide what we’re going to purchase. That’s never happened in the district since I’ve been here 21 years” (PI1). These changes in support at the district level represent fundamental changes in the way that the district has previously operated and provides voice and choice for schools. With all of these changes there remains uncertainty in areas such as assessment. While each school has the opportunity for implementing different programs and ideas there is a necessity in being able to compare the successes and failures of each of these different programs relative to the other schools within the district. This is particularly evident as Principal Ryan has described the potential pitfalls with these changes.

When Principal Ryan was asked about the assessments that are used at the district level to track student progress, she identified that with the transition within the district there has been a new focus on assessment tools. “I don’t know what’s been put in place, because with new leadership, we’ve made a lot of changes with assessments (PI1).” With the many changes in assessments and the choices afforded to each school making fair comparisons between the schools can be difficult. The public standard for comparison will be to gravitate towards the standardized State test, but these summative measures of comparison do not always lend themselves to provide immediate feedback for instruction. The Merritt district leadership continues to explore ways to provide measurable feedback for instruction while also measuring the learning of students. While the anticipated changes in curriculum and assessments have provided some promise for the Merritt School District, the transition has had important implications for the district’s support of RtI practices.

**District Support of RtI**

Principal Ryan shared that as a result of the changes noted above, there have been a number of changes in district RtI procedures. Prior to the change in leadership, Principal Ryan
described how assessment data was provided for schools: “We would get back information district-wide, so I could look at my third grade students and compare them to third graders in other schools ... based on each standard” (PI1). These data provided important information to understanding how students measured up against other schools in the district. Sharing comparative data was particularly important for schools when assessments were implemented that did not provide national or state normed comparisons.

District comparative data was helpful as student problem solving teams understood the magnitude of discrepancies in individual student data had compared to district norms. The recent change in leadership resulted in a temporary loss of comparative data for schools. “This year, we were told we didn’t have to do quarterly assessments in math. It’s up to us – it’s a choice. Right now, I don’t know what the district is using to see if we are showing growth” (PI1). While this shift was problematic for understanding the achievement of students in comparison to the district, it also presented a problem with school accountability. While Principal Ryan’s primary concern was the achievement of students at Lakemont, she also recognized the importance of district oversight in providing an additional measure of accountability. She expressed her concerns:

> Last year our classroom universal data forms were turned in to the district. They were looking at our universal forms. Now those are not required ... the psychologist...visits four other schools, she said nobody in our other schools are being held accountable - nobody’s looking at them (PI1).

Principal Ryan described concerns with the lack of direction from the district. She recognized that a new direction from the district has the potential to disrupt the systems currently set up at Lakemont: “We’re waiting for [an assessment plan] - I don’t want them [teachers] to start
something and then they move on to something else” (PI3). She feels that changes in the district’s direction on RtI processes has hindered the progress of Lakemont in improving Tier 1 instruction. Principal Ryan acknowledged that the new direction for RtI has been much anticipated. “Last year they [the district] didn’t have anything. It’s been in process for about four years” (PI3). While curriculum and assessment resources and RtI procedures represent ways that the district supports schools, Principal Ryan also acknowledges policies (federal, state and local) that have hindered equity at Lakemont School.

Policies that impact equity. Another challenge at Lakemont is the mobility of the Lakemont school population. Principal Ryan notes that some of the mobility in her student population was the result of federal policy affording parents the right to opt out of failing schools such as Lakemont.

How do we get people wanting to come to this school? We get a lot of negative feedback because we’re in the middle of the city and our test scores are low. So we’re trying to build that piece up too. And parents have the option of writing and saying they don’t want to attend this school, and I would like the support [from the district] for them [students] to stay so that we have some consistency (PI1).

Principal Ryan feels that keeping her student population consistent and reducing mobility between buildings in the district would help maintain the school population to a greater extent and provide her students the needed time and support for their success.

We have this movement every year – we have over 25% of students moving back and forth between buildings. Being able to keep our kids and having them grow from kindergarten through sixth grade is important, so that we have time to really build that growth and keep going with what we are working on (PI1).
Another unintended consequence of the high mobility rate at Lakemont is the demand on busing for her students. Lakemont serves neighborhoods that go to one of three elementary schools designated as a pod. However, because Lakemont has the highest mobility within the pod of three schools and frequent open seats students are routinely placed at Lakemont. These students come from a variety of neighborhoods and this is evident from all the buses that serve Lakemont. Lakemont is also designated as a school for County students with special needs who come from many different neighborhoods.

Because of those pods, we just always have kids coming [to] our door – all the time. So we have two buses of pods, and then everybody else in the county for the special needs students come here too. So we have ... fourteen buses for those kids (PI2).

While Lakemont served the direct neighborhood surrounding the school, several buses serving Lakemont has students also coming from the far reaches of the geographical area of the pod. This can be problematic for students who ride buses for long periods of time prior to coming to school and being ready to learn.

Social Justice Leadership

Examining the results of interviews with Principal Ryan, it is evident that she has addressed three areas from Theoharis’ framework of social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2009): key 3) advancing inclusion, access and opportunity, Key 4) improving the core learning context which includes improving teaching practices and curriculum, Key 5) creating a climate of belonging and Key 6) raising student achievement at Lakemont school. The first of these areas addressed equity and access and her commitment to advancing access and opportunity for her students.
Principal’s Perceptions of Equity and Access

During the first interview, Principal Ryan discussed her thoughts on social justice specifically as they related to equity and access to educational resources for students at Lakemont. The initial interview began by having her define equity and access. Principal Ryan then described internal and external barriers as well as inequities in the district that limited access to instructional resources. It was evident in the interviews that she was an advocate for students and staff members, and she worked to provide additional resources in her building through external grants.

**Defining equity and access.** Initially, Principal Ryan defined equity in terms of what her students did not have in comparison to other schools in the district. She defined equity as, “All of the students having the same opportunities and the same abilities to be able to grow, academically and socially-emotionally” (PI3). Principal Ryan recognized that in other schools students were afforded extra-curricular experiences, provided by parents that were not available to students at Lakemont. She recognized that bringing equity to students at Lakemont would require funding for similar types of experiences.

She noted that her staff had much to do in order to increase equity for their students. “We’re not there [equitable in each classroom] by any means, because it’s different for each classroom” (PI3). Equitable instruction, she notes, addresses the most academically challenged students while also providing for students at the highest level: “I think not to just always teach here in the middle and then break things down lower – we have to also make sure we’re meeting the kids’ needs at the higher level” (PI3). Unfortunately, she felt that at this point very few staff, could differentiate instruction well enough to address all needs.
Understanding barriers to equity and access. Principal Ryan identified various barriers that prevented her students from achieving equity in their education. These barriers came in many forms, but could be characterized as either internal barriers within the school or external barriers that existed outside Lakemont. In examining her comments, internal barriers appeared more prevalent, which included: contracts for staff members, teacher professional responsibilities, and issues with climate and culture. The external barriers for equity and access noted less frequently and included: family poverty, mobility and lack of experiences for her students.

Internal barriers to equity and access. When questioned about the most prominent barrier to providing equity and access to the students at Lakemont, Principal Ryan did not hesitate to discuss frustrations with the negotiated contracts for staff members as becoming a barrier to equity within the school.

Our contracts hold us back and make us try to be equal, but they’re really not, because our kids are different and our schools are different, but there’s a lot of things we have to do because our contract tells us we have to do it that way. So that, I think, pulls us apart (PI1).

She noted that in order to provide equitable opportunities for her students she needed flexibility to work differently with her staff, stating that not all schools are equal and that the needs at Lakemont are much greater than most schools: “… as a building leader to move us forward, sometimes the contracts … are holding us back because we can’t offer additional professional development without paying … so, to me, that holds us back (PI1). Principal Ryan further expanded upon her concerns regarding limitations posed within contracts by stating, “Take the contracts away … if I had my own school … I would want to take that away so that we could
design the programs to help meet the individual kids” (PI1). She described how flexibility should be afforded to a building leader to work with staff members and provide the time to better understand students and parent needs being of paramount importance.

In a similar area, Principal Ryan also described teacher professional responsibilities as another barrier that went beyond the contractual obligations of staff members. When talking about teacher professional responsibilities, Principal Ryan described how in one particular instance a teacher chose not to participate in voluntary professional development opportunities that she felt would significantly benefit students:

So then do my students have the same [education] if teachers are choosing not to go to the summer training, where over at the other school, their sixth grade teacher is going. [The district] adopt[ed] Springboard for sixth grade, my sixth grade teacher did not pilot it, did not go to the training, so my sixth grade students have not been exposed to it. They’re adopting it for next year … but I can’t force my sixth grade teacher to go, yet she’s going to have to implement that curriculum. So will my students in sixth grade have the same exposure that … a student at another school whose teacher piloted and implemented - has embraced it – where my teacher is fighting it. So how do you build that equity when [teachers] have a choice of going or not going (PI1)?

Principal Ryan recognizes that a lack of training will put her students at a disadvantage to those in other schools. Similarly, Principal Ryan also described how a voluntary summer book study that was put together by her 3rd, 4th and 5th grade teachers benefitted preparations for the upcoming school year. However, she notes that one of the teachers chose not to participate again putting students at a distinct disadvantage. “My third through fifth grade teachers came to that [summer book study], all but one. One didn’t come to anything. … she’s the furthest behind
compared to the other three.” (PI1) Principal Ryan recognizes that at some point professional responsibilities should supersede contractual language if student achievement is to be the end goal.

Principal Ryan also demonstrated that while some professional responsibilities may conflict with contractual obligations, in some cases teacher commitment and professional responsibilities for extending the content could be found in daily instruction. She provided an example of two teachers taking their classes on a field trip to Springfield, one teacher who thoroughly prepared her students, while the other did ‘no prep’ thereby resulting in students getting different experiences. The understanding that one classroom brings to a field trip where the classroom teacher has made intentional and explicit connections to the topic will be far more meaningful for those students than in one where no discussions have taken place. In recognizing the discrepancy in practices, Principal Ryan has continued to push the conversations with teachers about providing students with meaningful experiences.

According to Principal Ryan there are various external barriers that interfere with equity; one major barrier being the number of students and families who live in poverty. When asked about the major concerns of families at her school, Principal Ryan stated:

Money, finances, just learning how to survive, how to pay their bills, how to feed their children, how to clothe their children. I see a lot of the kids here who are raising their brothers and sisters in single family homes. Somebody’s having to work (PI2).

Further, the lack of exposure and background experiences for students at Lakemont school also presents a barrier. Many students come to Lakemont school without preschool experiences to help in their literacy and numeracy development, putting them at a disadvantage to their peers in
other schools. While she acknowledges that these barriers exist, she feels she cannot let this be a deterrent in pursuing opportunities for her students:

If we’re also talking about the experiences that our students have, they might not have some of the same opportunities as other children, so giving them additional field trips – there’s not money for those things, so we have to ask for grants … we have to go out and ask for those things, we have to pursue those things. Nobody’s going to come and say, ‘Let us help you.’ We have to get those things for our kids to give them those opportunities (PI1).

Her involvement in expanding on the learning experiences through field trips and other expanded opportunities has been one of her main pursuits. Through her interviews, a significant focus for Principal Ryan has been changing the core learning context at Lakemont.

**Principal’s Perceptions on the Core Learning Context**

The core learning context addresses two interrelated components of the school environment; improving teaching, and improving the curriculum being taught (Theoharis, 2009). Improving the core learning context requires an attention to equity and race while recognizing the professionalism of teachers. Principal Ryan reflects on ways that she has tried to address teaching and curriculum at Lakemont school. She identified several areas surrounding the core learning context that she has recognized as important to affecting change including ongoing and continual professional development that targets core instruction. She has also noted that honoring teacher voice in the process was critical. The core learning context is best informed by data to drive instruction. Data regarding student learning is crucial to understanding where students are performing and what instructional adjustments to make to help move students forward. Principal Ryan has helped to shape an environment with her teachers has shifted the focus from
compliance to shared accountability to improve teaching and learning. The journey to improving the core learning context at Lakemont began with her advocacy for change.

Advocating for the core learning context. Principal Ryan describes the ways that she continues to address the core learning context at Lakemont. It is evident from interviews that Principal Ryan recognizes that in order for her students to have the same opportunities as others in the Merritt School District that she has to be an advocate for her students and her staff. Principal Ryan’s advocacy belies continued barriers faced by her students; she describes the importance of consistently advocating for them. Principal Ryan also addresses the learning environment for her students and as previously mentioned, she has failed to see equity between buildings and as such as taken on the task of improving both the outside environment, but also the learning environment within the building.

And in our Learning Commons [library], we wrote a grant this summer, Anni and I did, and we got Apple TV’s, a projector, and two TV screens; large projector screen . . . and we’re changing that room in there so teachers can bring their classrooms in and do projects with their students (PI3).

Principal Ryan has noted that without providing the necessary technology her students will not be prepared for careers in the future. For all Principal Ryan’s efforts to supplement and advocate for students, her support for teachers is also ambitious.

One route to addressing the core learning context is to increase the capacity of teachers and improving the curriculum being used with students (Theoharis, 2009). Principal Ryan has advocated for changes to the core learning context is to pursue grants to provide additional professional development for staff members. One grant provided an additional 60 hours of professional development for her kindergarten, first and second grade teachers on literacy
practices and building a solid foundation for Tier 1 instruction. She also pursues grant opportunities for her staff at the intermediate levels as well.

I went to the staff ... when Whitmire [local university] came out to see how the grant worked from last year, we invited them and they came to visit a couple weeks ago. The Foundation Board that gave us the grant, … were here ... to see what was going on, and the grant people came to me and said, ‘We would like to offer or recommend that you write another grant for your third through fifth’ (PI3).

While these grants have provided additional professional development well above any of the other schools in the Merritt school district, Principal Ryan also focused on literacy resources for her teachers as well, describing how she worked with other staff to find materials appropriate to her students. While the district has provided standardized assessments for all schools, Principal Ryan wanted to add to her teachers’ bank of assessment tools to help her teachers ‘pinpoint the needs’ of students at Lakemont.

**Professional development.** Principal Ryan has noted that the vehicle for improving teaching practices at Lakemont was professional development. As previously mentioned, she secured additional professional development through a grant she wrote from a private foundation. The purpose of this grant was to increase the teaching capacity of primary teachers in literacy practices. Principal Ryan described the direction and content of the professional development relying on the reflections of teachers and on the examination of student data.

For professional development, we always do a reflection at the end. We use that to help drive where we are going to go. We ask a lot about what worked, what didn’t work, [and] looking at their data, what is that we need to add, or what is it we need to change our focus on. ... I think those reflections help guide where to go for the next year for the
next PD offering . . . Everything is on a Google Doc, so the teachers type their reflection, and then we have it instantly as they leave the meeting. (PI2).

She describes how she has used the feedback to recognize the needs of her students and teachers in her leadership meetings. She presented data and teacher reflections to teachers, to help make decisions about the direction of professional development. “This is what you guys said – let’s take a look at our data and decide where we need to go” (PI2).

Principal Ryan reflected that “... in the past, it’s been my coach and myself [making decisions on professional development], and we know that’s not the right direction to go, but it’s sometimes easier, quicker …” Principal Ryan noted that professional development should be responsive to the needs of her students and teachers. “We help guide them, but then see, where are their [students and teachers] needs” (PI2)? She noted how student data helps teachers identify the areas to target to help improve their teaching.

Principal Ryan reported seeing some significant strides in the core learning context for her primary teachers as a result of the foundation grant. She noted that the intermediate teachers (3rd - 6th) were encouraged by these improvements and she planned further professional development opportunities for this group. “We had one professional development whole day, we spend the day looking at the data” (PI2). Principal Ryan had teachers who embraced the PD at the primary grades and as a result led voluntary PD with willing teachers.

The second grade teacher, offered a book study over the summer for anybody K through fifth, and it wasn’t mandatory it was once a week in the summer for a couple hours, and we got together and did the questions in each chapter (PI3).

**Ensuring teacher voice.** Principal Ryan has noted that honoring teacher voice to improve the core learning context has been critical to the success of PD activities at Lakemont.
These findings are also consistent with the need to recognize teacher professionalism while improving teaching practice (Theoharis, 2009; Brooks et al., 2007; DeMatthews, 2015). Teacher voice is influential on matters related to professional development, Principal Ryan has also recognized the importance in making and facilitating further change to the core learning context. At Lakemont school, a leadership team is responsible for school improvement goal setting that consists of teachers from primary and intermediate grades including special education representatives for school improvement goal setting. The team meets on a regular basis, but the frequency and time of day may vary depending on the work required of the team. "We meet once a month, but sometimes we meet twice. Sometimes it’s during the day where we have a half day, or sometimes it’s after school for an hour” (PI2). She noted that the primary purpose of the team was to establish the school improvement plan, but more recently providing feedback on instructional decisions and PD has been apart of these decisions for the team.

In the past, they [leadership team] had not made PD decisions. We’ve [Principal and instructional coach] made that...this year, they helped decide if we are going to add another grade onto the K through second grant, OR are we going to add third through fifth? We decided to add third through fifth...they helped make that decision (PI2).

The decision to include the leadership team in decision making regarding PD stemmed from what Principal Ryan characterized as a mistake. “I wrote the grant. I didn’t get buy-in from them. And I told my superintendent that was a mistake” (PI3). While Principal Ryan recognized that the grant written to support PD for her primary teachers went a long way to improving the core learning context, getting teacher voice in these decisions would have made this transition easier. As she learned from this mistake, she was approached by the foundation to pursue another
grant that would support her intermediate grade level teachers. She describes the encounter with board members of the foundation and the steps she took:

So I went to them [teachers] first, and I said, ‘This is what we [primary teachers] did. We provided the 60 additional hours of time – are you [intermediate teachers] in? Is this something doable? Is this something you want?’ And they’re [intermediate teachers] all, like, yes (PI3).

Principal Ryan honored teacher voice from her intermediate grade levels through the leadership team and individually this has helped to move the professional development forward in a positive manner.

Teacher voice has helped to set the focus for grade level meetings. Principal Ryan does recognize that while teachers have voice it is imperative that student data is a part of the decision on determining what needs to be the focus. Again, another area for teacher voice has been allowing teachers the opportunity to examine student data and show progress to standards in ways that are meaningful to them. “We gave them the option of putting in their own data...some are doing it by standards and others are doing it from quarterly assessments” (PI1).

Providing teachers the flexibility and voice to select ways to track the progress of students empowered the professionalism of teachers. She states that teachers know their students and as long as they can demonstrate the progress and needs of students, this will further empower them. She also discussed the importance of choice over compliance, recognizing that demanding that teachers to conform to assessment or criteria dictated by either the district or from her office ensures compliance, but does not ensure student growth or the use of data to inform instruction. Principal Ryan continually noted that the focus of PD or collaboration should always be on student data.
Setting student expectations. When Principal Ryan began at Lakemont school, she realized that in addition to shifts in instruction there was a need for a shift in expectations for students. “We did not have high expectations for our kids here...that is a piece that...we’ve got to still continue to work on. Our standards were low” (PI2). She explained further that with lower expectations for students, Tier 1 instruction was less rigorous and did not represent grade level expectations as teachers believed that students were not capable of accessing this instruction. She felt that as she was pushing shifts in teaching strategies at Tier 1 and assessments, the shift in expectations must be a priority. “And so we have learned and found out where we need the kids to be, and so now we’re moving [in] that direction” (PI2).

Assessment for learning has helped teachers identify where students should be at specific parts of the year and where students currently are. “In the past, our kids would have been here [below grade level] – that far below – so last year, we started ... the work in January, and now we’re in September and we’re right where they need to be.”(PI3) Through a combination of support for teachers in their Tier 1 instruction and through the use of new assessments, teachers at Lakemont are beginning to recognize that the student expectations are more consistent with a Tier 1 curriculum. “So it was a celebration ... they could see, ‘My kids understand all these things, they accomplished all these things...we should be able to follow this pacing and get them here [grade level standards]’” (PI3). While she acknowledged that this shift is continuing to take place for teachers she is also aware that the focus for many teachers is to reach students who are struggling. “We try to really go for the kids that are not meeting [standards] - students who are not getting it... we usually miss out on the kids that are getting it [meeting standards], and they’re the last to get the services needed” (PI3). She realized that while student expectations shift along with instruction, teachers need to continue to expand their capacity for helping all students.
Principal Ryan has used goals as indicators of progress for grade levels and to identify professional development needs. Teachers have also extended goal setting for individual students to track their growth.

We set goals for every individual student … and then we sat down to see if they got those, and where they were at and what their target was…before next school year, we start pulling this group together and start pulling out the data to see where the next teacher needs to focus (PI2).

Another area of focus that emerged from interviews with Principal Ryan was her attention to creating a climate of belonging for her students and parents.

**Principal’s Perceptions on Climate and Culture**

Another key for social justice leadership is to create a climate of belonging for students, families and staff (Theoharis, 2009; DeMatthews et al., 2016). From interviews with Principal Ryan the theme focusing on the culture and climate at Lakemont school emerged. The culture and climate was perceived by the interactions of students and staff at Lakemont school. Some of the questions used to understand the culture and climate at Lakemont school included: How are behavioral expectations upheld? How do adults respond to behavior issues between students? What role, if any, do students play in the development and implementation of expectations? Is there any consideration for student voice? The responses to these questions provided a context for the culture and climate. Analysis of principal interviews led to a variety of themes addressing culture and climate, the following themes emerged: the need for cultural responsiveness, relationship building with students, and the importance of student voice.

**Recognizing the need for cultural responsiveness.** Cultural responsiveness is based on the beliefs that culturally and linguistically diverse students can demonstrate academic
excellence “...when their culture, language, heritage, and experiences are valued and used to facilitate their learning and development, and they are provided access to high quality teachers, programs, and resources” (Klingner et al, 2005, p. 8). Principal Ryan noted the need for culturally responsive practices, particularly as they related to the discipline of African American students. Principal Ryan recognized that the large number of discipline referrals written for African American students has been a challenge for many years. The high rates of discipline referrals prompted her to reflect on the demographics of her staff.

That’s why we started working on cultural responsiveness last school year. Our African American students’ numbers [discipline referrals] were high. We look at that monthly, and some months we have gone down, and other months we have rocketed right back up (PI2).

Principal Ryan saw a need for cultural responsiveness training as a result of recognizing that there was an inverse relationship in the number of African American staff members and in the number of African American students. The staff at Lakemont exceeds sixty and Principal Ryan indicated that there were two African American teachers. She recognized the importance of cultural responsiveness training for staff members to help them recognize and understand the cultural values of the student population. “Is it your background [staff] that you’re bringing in, or is it their background [student] that we’re bringing in” (PI3). She recognized that unintentionally staff members bring their perspectives, backgrounds and understanding of culture without acknowledging or understanding the backgrounds and cultures that students bring to the classroom. Principal Ryan further demonstrated the importance placed on cultural responsiveness training by its inclusion in the school improvement process.
I took the goal of cultural responsiveness and put it in both of our two goals with reading and math and that everything we do even with our curriculum that we’re thinking about are we meeting the needs of all students, and not just a few (P13).

Principal Ryan also indicated that while cultural responsiveness is an important part of the school improvement process it is also significant part of the professional development plan for Lakemont.

I think that with our professional development and having an understanding of cultural differences amongst our parents and our staff and our students, and focusing on cultural relevancy is a piece . . . that’s been one of our major goals this year (P11).

The importance of cultural responsiveness in understanding the cultural values of the student population serves as the first step in the training, but as noted earlier by Principal Ryan, the larger and more relevant piece of this training is ascertaining whether student background and values are brought into the classroom, to begin valuing student background begins with building relationships with students.

**Relationship building with students.** Principal Ryan noted that cultural responsiveness begins by valuing individuals through the fostering of relationships. While discipline referrals are a direct reflection of behavior, the response to behavior by teachers is a reflection on their ability to understand and respond in a culturally responsive manner. Teachers who invest in building student relationships and help students to resolve disputes demonstrate a greater sense of cultural responsiveness. Principal Ryan notes the importance of relationship building when examining the causes of referral rates. She reflects, “I think if you would compare my data to the other schools, I have too many people writing too many referrals and trying to send kids to the
office and not problem solve” (PI2). Principal Ryan articulates that her role as principal is to equip students with skills to problem solve situations.

So it’s more about finding out what is the problem, and helping kids fix it ... I think here, in general, the kids are eager to want to do that. And it’s not to get out of a consequence, because they may have a consequence, but it’s more wanting to problem solve themselves and create a solution (PI2).

She also notes the importance of using student problems as a teaching tool and Seizes the moment to help students find out the purpose of their actions and use peaceful ways to resolve differences.

I believe in teaching the kids to reflect on why they did it, what their purpose was, and also having the kids themselves come up with what they could do to problem solve. So it’s easier to talk to the kids about those things than sometimes it is for staff to see that it’s about a solution, like they’d rather see the consequence (PI2).

She acknowledges that her role as principal is to help students understand and work out differences by helping them restore relationships that had been harmed by each other's actions.

She notes that the more traditional approach to discipline has been punishment and exclusion that aims to have kids removed from the classroom or school through detentions or suspensions. She stated that that the problem with these solutions are that the results of suspensions and detentions are temporary and fail to restore relationships or support an inclusive environment. These solutions also act to set up a power differential between authority and students which can further complicate the relationships with minority populations. However, traditional solutions are often valued by some staff members and parents because in many cases this has all they have known.
Equally problematic are the attitudes that are demonstrated by parents as they learn of their child’s involvement in an incident at the school.

They want to know what happened to the kid. You know. Not correcting the problem, which in the long term is what I’m trying to do … and help the kids see what they need to do differently . . . and see what mistakes they made and how could they fix it (PI2).

When asked to reflect on teachers who are most effective at addressing climate and discipline in their classrooms, she states that they are

building relationships with the kids. Like, they really hear, and they focus on what is the need of this student. It’s not about them [teachers]. It’s really about the individual student. Where people who have the discipline problems, they may not know how to deal with them (PI2).

She also stated that effective classroom teachers created a positive culture and climate in their classroom through relationship building with students. She described the importance of relationship building as a priority noting that from day one she thought about meaningful ways for her staff to build and establish relationships with students.

The very first day of school, one of the things I challenged the staff to do [was] … taking a couple of students and working with those students in getting to know them as individuals – what are their likes, what are their dislikes – and really focusing on just getting to know the child (PI3).

Principal Ryan’s priority in building relationships with students went beyond a simple first day activity as she built accountability into the exercise by getting teachers to bring artifacts demonstrating evidence of relationship building with some of the more challenging students in the school.
At their first faculty meeting, [teachers] had to bring their notes from what they did to work with those kids that were challenging in the classroom. And then in our building, we talked about what worked, what didn’t work, and what strategies [were used] ... what [teachers] can do to help make that connection; make it personal so that they have a better relationship with the child and with the families (PI3).

Principal Ryan acknowledged that there is a lot of work to do, but that by prioritizing relationships with students, teachers’ perspectives on challenging students can be viewed in a positive light and vice versa.

**Ensuring student voice.** As part of fostering relationships with students and building a climate of belonging, Principal Ryan also noted that valuing student voice plays a part in a culturally responsive environment. She reflected that in classrooms in which student voice was validated by teachers there are few discipline problems. “Who’s giving kids choices, and allowing to hear their voice. So I have some classes where it’s all about the students’ voices, and I have some classrooms where there’s not a voice ever being heard” (PI2). She notes that the prevalence of where student voice is honored shows divisions by grade level. Principal Ryan noted that in kindergarten, first and second grade, student voice is routinely honored and important in all decisions. The importance of student voice in the primary grades (K-2) is evident such that students have helped to shape the learning environment. Principal Ryan stated that in one of those classrooms “. . . they got new furniture, and the students helped pick [it] out, and helped design the room” (PI3).

She described how students are in some of the intermediate classrooms, desks lined up in rows and students are meant to be quiet. While in primary classrooms, we’ve given other furniture options to suit the different learning styles of students. Not every student chooses a
The ownership of learning by students is reflected in how they dealt with activities that traditionally required desks. “We weren’t sure how it was going to work out with breakfast in the classrooms and things like that, and the kids adapted well. They don’t have assigned seats. They don’t argue about where they’re going to go” (P13). Many of the changes described in classroom organization can be traced to the grant work that was previously described.

**Principal’s Perceptions of Parent Engagement**

Parent engagement from all members of the student population in schools is an integral part of a social justice leadership framework (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2009; Frattura & Capper, 2007) An extension of supporting a climate of belonging at Lakemont has been addressing the engagement of parents. While Principal Ryan has recognized that positive teacher and student relationships are important, she feels that an extension of this depends on positive parent relationships as well. Traditional parent networks such as boosters or Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) do not exist at Lakemont and as such Principal Ryan has used different avenues to foster parent relationships. Parent involvement in leadership groups such as the school’s leadership team has been limited, however, Principal Ryan has recognized and values the importance of developing positive parent relationships and participation.

**Fostering positive parent relationships.** Principal Ryan notes the value and importance of communicating with parents while she has faced challenges in getting parent participation. One method she uses to foster positive parent communication is inviting parents to school programs. She has tried a variety of strategies to increase her participation, but has found participation continues to be low. “We would try it ... right after school. We would try evening. We tried to get some really cool activities going, but the parents wouldn’t come” (P12).
I had a grant and did some activities with our families thinking it would be really awesome, and we would do really cool activities trying to get the parents in ... and we would get, like 15 families that would come, but … with 300 kids, you should have more than that (PI2).

Her attempts have had some success when they “… did tie-dye t-shirts … with reading. We had a big turnout for that because we had that activity” (PI2). Principal Ryan concluded that, “It’s just being creative coming up with activities and always feeding them” (PI2).

With a very high mobility rate, Principal Ryan notes that stemming the mobility of students from Lakemont to other schools in the district begins by developing positive relationships with parents. She frames her thinking by asking: “What can we do to help build this relationship to a more positive one” (PI1)?

She notes that her programs have evolved over the years. In the past, the school offered programs that serve to highlight the accomplishments of students or provide activities for students and parents to engage in together. More recently, programs have been designed to educate parents about ways that parents can support the academics of their students at home. “In the past, we’ve done ... programs ... for parents that really don’t teach parents and we’re trying to shift our thinking with that...so rather than … a reading night, ... an activity night for parents” (PI1). It was evident that parents were eager to learn ways to support their students. “So maybe they [parents] don’t have enough background knowledge of how to do that” (PI2).

Principal Ryan acknowledged this shift has also resulted from a breakdown in communication between parents and the school. “We feel that the parents aren’t doing anything at home, but the parents are doing things at home, but … we’re not communicating ... and we’re not working together” (PI2). “We do have a lot of kids’ parents who come in and will meet with
us, and say, what can we do to help? And they are doing those things and we’re finding success” (PI2). She has acknowledged that listening to parents while also educating them on how to help students strengthens communication and helps students achieve.

**Parent voice and involvement.** In addition to increasing parent participation in activities, Principal Ryan has also attempted to increase parent voice and participation in more purposeful ways. She recognized that one of the traditional avenues for parent voice and participation in the school has come through the parent teacher association (PTA) or parent booster clubs. When asked about the defunct parent booster club she recognized that this discontinued, “... because I’ll get one or two parents active” (PI2). Principal Ryan could identify parents that do support students on a regular basis. “I do have parents that come in every single day, and I have parents that will help if I call or ask for a specific need, but I don’t have a group of parents” (PI2). However, Principal Ryan notes that there has been a vacuum of collective parent voice in traditional forms.

Another area in which she has attempted to get parent voice has been on her building leadership team. The leadership team consists of representative staff members to help make building decisions. Therefore the inclusion of parents on this team would provide a voice for parents. Again, Principal Ryan’s efforts have been met with failure. “I’ve tried to get people to be on committees and be on boards. We don’t even have a booster club here at our school” (PI2). She has attempted to make participation on her leadership team as amenable as possible to parents. “I’ve tried to do it in the morning, I’ve tried to do it during school, and I’ve tried them in the evening and after school, and I just get very little participation” (PI2). While she has met with failure in representing parent voice her perseverance for securing this voice is not
unwavering. “And I’m not done – not giving up. I mean, we’re going to keep reaching out and keep trying” (PI2).

When Principal Ryan reflected on possible causes for the low rates of parent participation and involvement it is evident that the needs and priorities of parents may have a lot to do with this problem. Principal Ryan reflected on parents’ concerns regarding more pressing needs for their families. The high poverty of families at Lakemont contributes in many ways to the low participation rates. Staff members explained that events that took place at the end of the month will have much lower attendance or participation because of the timing of welfare checks and parents’ ability to purchase gas for vehicles to travel to the school. Principal Ryan has recognized these concerns and has scheduled school events at the beginning of the month where possible and has also tried to provide food and childcare for families at events. Clearly, the needs and priorities of families at Lakemont are significant and survival clearly surpasses any participation at Lakemont.

**RtI through a Social Justice Leadership Framework**

Principal Ryan previously described the importance of the core learning context which centered on the improvement of both teaching and the curriculum. While the core learning context offers insights on improving instructional practices and curriculum, Response to Intervention (RtI) addresses student growth and student achievement which is identified as another key in the framework for social justice leadership and with the literature (Capper & Young, 2014; Frattura & Capper, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2009). Principal Ryan initially identified some concerns about the instruction at Lakemont school. While the needs of the building are high the instruction did not represent the expectations of a Tier 1 curriculum, requiring a shift in the ways that teachers present Tier 1 curriculum for students through
instructional strategies that scaffold learning while maintaining grade level expectations. Principal Ryan developed a plan for transforming Tier 1 instruction to ensure a fidelity of instruction. Principal Ryan has also noted that setting expectations for Tier 1 instruction has been equally important. Principal Ryan recognized that an important tool for teachers in their implementation of Tier 1 curriculum has been the use of assessment tools for student learning that provide useful information to plan for instruction. Assessment tools that help teachers pinpoint their instruction to help build on the foundational skills required in a Tier 1 curriculum.

**Perceptions of RtI Implementation**

When Principal Ryan has reflected on the traditional approaches to RtI, she has identified a conflict between student needs at Tiers 2 and 3 and the resources available to address these needs. She recognized early on in her principalship attempts to address instruction through the three tiered model of instruction were met with a lack of student progress. She recognized teachers taught Tier 2 curriculum to her students, curricula relevant for small groups, yet fails to provide the core learning context of the Tier 1 curriculum. The Tier 2 curriculum often provided little context for cultural responsiveness and focused on skill attainment for the purpose of helping students use these skills in Tier 1. Another problem was the lack of adequate resources to provide Tier 2 interventions with fidelity. Tier 2 interventions typically require a teacher for 4-6 students to be implemented with fidelity. With whole classrooms of students requiring Tier 2 interventions this was problematic. Through these struggles with traditional RtI practice, Principal Ryan adopted a different version that was responsive to the needs of her students and teachers. While she acknowledges that Tier 1 instruction is paramount in any RtI system, particularly at Lakemont, any system of RtI is dependent on the individual student problem
solving process model and ensuring that while interventions are important the ability to address instruction through a variety of instructional strategies at all tiers is critical.

**Fidelity across Tiers of Instruction.** After acknowledging that RtI could not be conducted in the manner recommended by research, Principal Ryan looked closely at Tier 1 instruction at Lakemont school. She recognized that often times her teachers were not providing a variety of strategies for her students. “What steps are you putting in place for those students that may look different [from] core instruction” (PI1)? She recognized that while the majority of student may not be meeting grade level expectations she acknowledged that teachers “...really need to look at ... core instruction ... what are you doing to help those individual students” (PI1)?

While students were struggling to meet Tier 1 expectations, Principal Ryan also asked teachers to reflect on how they were scaffolding the learning to make it accessible for students while continuing to have Tier 1 grade level expectations. “After you’ve done your whole group lesson, your small group – what strategies are you using to help reach those [struggling] kids”(PI1)?

One of the major concerns that Principal Ryan recognized early on was that teachers were moving students into Tier 2 interventions more frequently than could be maintained by an already overtaxed system. “We have some misunderstanding of what that [Tier 1 instruction] needs to look like because … people think we identify a kid who is [struggling], ... they automatically go to Tier 2”(PI1). Given the propensity for moving students to Tier 2, there was a lack of understanding by teachers that when students failed to achieve basic foundational skills interventions should first be provided at Tier 1 using a variety of instructional strategies.

Principal Ryan attempted to reset the instructional practices for Tier 1 instruction by putting in several steps to support Tier 1 learning prior to a recommending moving a student to the next tier. “If they’ve got a student not achieving... they’re supposed to be meeting with the
instructional coach and ... talking about those [instructional strategies implemented]” (PI2). She perceived that the most important part of the three tiered approach to instruction is at the foundational level. “We are still focusing on Tier 1. We are not at 80% in anything yet” (PI3). While, student learning has not approached the 80% level of proficiency recommended by the state RtI plan, Lakemont continues to focus on tier 1 strategies for students. “Maybe its lack of strategies that our teachers offer the students...knowing how to reach the kids. And I would say even helping the parents” (PI2).

When students are recommended for the next tier of instruction, this is significant in several ways as it increases the intensity of instruction, but is also part of the eligibility process towards special education. Principal Ryan noted this as she saw teachers using the student transition to the next tier as an opportunity to consider students for special education services. “So that’s where we should be [tier 1 instruction], but it’s like they [teachers] want to move automatically to the problem-solving team and start the student into the special education cycle” (PI3). The implications of this approach would be the over identification of students for special education when not all strategies have been exhausted in Tier 1 instruction. For this reason, Principal Ryan has put further measures to ensure that all instructional possibilities have been exhausted by the classroom teacher. “I want them [teachers] to come [to student problem solving] before we even move the kid to tier 2. So maybe we[Principal and Instructional coach] can provide some other answers to them[teachers] to help move them[students] along” (PI3). Principal Ryan expresses her concerns about moving students to Tier 2 instruction.

I try not to assign to Tier 2. I try to keep them at Tier 1, because when we look at our data, we improved from two years ago to last year, but we’re still not where we need to
be. I’m still trying to make sure they done everything they need to do before they start with another process [Tier 2] (PI3).

While the use of a variety of instructional strategies is the expectation for teachers at Lakemont, this does not happen without intentional support. “During that problem-solving team, we will...pull up a classroom and look at that data... Where are they? Are they at 80%? If not, dig deeper within a certain area and then focusing on ... helping the teacher” (PI3). Help and support comes in a variety of ways for teachers. This can be as simple as making suggestions for teachers during student problem solving meetings with different team members. However, a more common avenue for support is through the use of the instructional coach.

The process is – go to [the instructional coach] – so she can come in the classroom and see, what are you doing? What are you providing, and what do we need to do, before they even come to the team [problem-solving] (PI3).

Principal Ryan has continued to set the expectations for teachers to use these procedures for supporting students at Lakemont. She is also directly involved in supporting teachers as well. A shift in instructional practices has also led Principal Ryan to ensure that teachers use data to drive their instruction.

**Data driven instruction.** The use of data to inform instructional decisions is one practice at the heart of improving the core learning context. The process of reflecting on student data and understanding where students are and determining next steps or sharing in successes of prior instruction are a natural part of what happens at Lakemont. As Principal Ryan points out, this has been a process that has continued to evolve. Principal Ryan started the process of data driven instruction by examining student work. She noted a concern in looking at data relative to standards as she recognized some inconsistencies in what teachers rated as meeting standards.
We want to focus on the standards but I don’t think everyone has a good understanding of that...you and I might have a different understanding of [a] standard and how to assess [it]. I may say these kids are all getting 80 to 100%, and then you might come in and say, ‘No, they’re at 60%.’ So how do we build that consistency of what it looks like (PI1)?

As Principal Ryan reflected on these inconsistencies she recognized that one way to bring about consistency was to focus on student work across grade levels on a regular basis.

One thing we are doing is we are looking at student work together [and this] is helping everybody to be on the same page. So you’re bringing your work; I’m bringing my work, and we are looking at that work to see if we are both going to assess it the same way (PI1).

Examining student work helped bring consistency in comparing students’ abilities to standards. In addition, the teachers also focused their efforts on bringing student data for review. In addition to the district assessments, Lakemont was piloting additional assessment resources to provide a more complete picture of the student. She had recently sent some of her staff members to an RtI conference to get some additional assessment ideas and had focused on another assessment, *Phonological Awareness Screener for Intervention (PASI) and the Phonics Screener for Intervention (PSI).* Principal Ryan has noted that the advent of data driven instruction has forced her staff to reexamine assessments being used in Tier 1 instruction.

So we’re the only building using the 95% [assessments – PASI and PSI]. I want them [teachers] to do the District [assessments] and do this [95% assessments] to see what’s working. And then we can look at three pieces of data to say, ‘What do we need to do to best meet our kids.’(PI3)
While Principal Ryan helped to reset instructional practices for Tier 1, she also acknowledged that this has required a new approach to assessment. Principal Ryan discussed how assessment for learning was something that needed to be uniform across grade levels to bring consistency and fidelity to Tier 1 instruction. Assessments for learning are important in providing teachers with information they need to adjust their instructional planning to better meet the needs of their students. Through these changes, Principal Ryan described several assessments that teachers have begun to use in earnest to understand students’ instructional needs at Tier 1. “For writing, we have adopted . . . rubrics that we’re all using consistently. We have found holes with them so we are hoping we can build our own rubrics when we’re ready” (PI1). The use of student data to help determine the pathway for instruction has also been useful to drive collaborative conversations during grade level meetings.

Principal Ryan described the use of grade level time to review data as a reflective process for teachers. Teachers recognize growth at grade levels, but can also make comparisons to previous groups to see the differences in growth and make instructional adjustments. Principal Ryan has expanded the time for collaborations and used an entire day for teachers to analyze and understand the student data and the professional development needs for the upcoming school year. Principal Ryan has also recognized that in making data based decisions, recognition of the progress that teachers have made with their students is important in reinforcing the process.

In the past, our kids would have been here [below grade level] – that far below – so last year, we started ... the work in January, and now we’re in September and we’re right where they need to be. It was a celebration … because they could see, ‘My kids understand all these things – they accomplished all these things. They are here and we should be able to follow this pacing and get them here’ (PI3).
Principal Ryan noted that through the use of data she has also moved the discussions beyond grade levels and has looked at ways to articulate data vertically across grade levels.

Data discussions also are expanded to create a vertical alignment of data across grade levels. Vertical alignment is used as teachers of one grade level meet with the teachers of the next grade level to discuss student progress to help teachers know where students are for the following year.

The kindergarten teachers talk to the first grade about where they need to focus, and first grade talking to the second grade, and second grade talking to third grade and doing some vertical alignment with looking at the data and our class lists for next year, so that way they know where their kids are standing right when they walk in (PI2).

Principal Ryan has created a venue for teachers to share with colleagues the academic needs for students prior to the beginning of the year. By doing so, classroom teachers are able to begin formulating a plan for the first day on how to best address the needs of students. The use of data has not been exclusively on academic progress, but has also involved a review of discipline data as well. As previously mentioned, these practices are consistent with other efforts in literature to increase the achievement of students through a social justice leadership framework (Theoharis, 2009).

**Discipline data in decision making.** When talking about culture and climate, Principal Ryan reflected on how discipline data were used to help target and problem solve for individual students. While student discipline data has been used by the PBIS team to support individual students, the use of school-wide data has been used to create a dialogue regarding classroom management practices.
We talk about our data school-wide, and where we have zero referrals, and over the last couple of months, we have been working on everybody talking to one another – what’s working; what’s not working – them bringing their problems to the table and seeing if they’ll listen to one another rather than listening to myself and my coaches (PI2).

**Evidence of student growth.** The process of data analysis is one that not all teachers have had ownership for at Lakemont. Principal Ryan understands that for teachers to comprehend and internalize data she has to use a hands-on approach. “Well, just me telling them and then looking at it [data analysis] isn’t enough. They have to come up with it on their own ... because then they internalize it – they know that this needs to be fixed” (PI2). While the district had not yet provided recommendations for assessment procedures, Principal Ryan opened this discussion with her teachers to get their ownership of student growth. “What are you going to show to me, and what are you going to show to yourself, that your students are making the growth” (PI1)? By giving teachers both the flexibility and the accountability for student growth, Principal Ryan has found that this combination has helped teachers begin to internalize the need for student growth and change assumptions attributed to a fixed mindset. While Principal Ryan and her coaches have shared why instructional changes are necessary for continued student growth, she has also found that sometimes teachers need to hear from a variety of sources before they can internalize the need for change.

**Using a problem solving model.** Another way that Principal Ryan has continued to address the fidelity of implementation through the instructional tiers has been through the problem solving process. The conventional individual student problem solving session in the traditional RtI model has focused on understanding student progress. The essence of discussions at a student problem solving meeting focus on the possibility of changing interventions for
students based on data. At Lakemont, similar discussions also take place, but an important element included in these discussions is how teachers are responding to the instruction of struggling students.

During that problem-solving team, we will be able to pull up a classroom and look at that data. And we look at...where are they? Are they at 80%? If not, dig deeper within a certain area and then focusing on ... helping the teacher (PI3).

Principal Ryan wants to make sure every effort to ensure the teacher has provided students with a variety of instructional strategies supported by the instructional coach prior to recommending a switch of tiers.

Principal Ryan has also looked at making procedural changes in how teachers were involved in the problem solving process. The current procedure for problem solving at Lakemont has consisted of a team of representative teachers discussing the needs of the student being brought to the problem solving team. Since this meeting is taking place during the school day, the classroom teacher has been unable to attend this meeting. Principal Ryan recognizes the need to increase teacher accountability by ensuring that the classroom teacher is present at these important meetings.

I’m trying to put that structure in place to be able to get that to happen [teacher accountability]...I will always have a primary teacher and an intermediate teacher there, but instead of representing everybody[primary or intermediate teachers], they’re going to talk about their own data (PI2).

Another reason for the change in procedures, will be to ensure that classroom teachers have access to the team to provide suggestions or answer questions about the growth of an individual student. “I want them[teachers] to come before we even move the kid to tier 2. So
maybe we can provide some other answers to them to help move them along” (PI3). The team members on the student problem solving team play an important role in that, “they’re helping to make decisions on what the forms look like and how to look at the data”(PI3). The presence of the classroom teacher at the problem solving meeting is essential for helping to adjust or change classroom instruction based on data and suggestions from team members.

**Shifting teacher perceptions and mindset.** When analyzing the reasons teachers bring students to the problem solving team she recognized that teacher mindset played an important role in what teachers’ deemed to be the outcome of the problem solving meetings. Principal Ryan has noted that teachers with a fixed mindset often associate RtI as a matter of compliance while teachers with a growth mindset associate RtI as a means to achieve further student growth. Principal Ryan acknowledges that shifting mindset can be one of the most difficult components to transform instructional practices. Changing a teacher’s mindset is done by challenging teachers’ concepts of RtI through a variety of measures. Principal Ryan has identified several means that she has implemented to challenge a teacher’s mindset. For example, she has identified teacher's understanding about responsibility for learning as a predictable measure of teacher mindset. Professional responsibility is another predictable measure of teacher mindset. One of the tools that Principal Ryan has implemented to shift mindset has come through the use of instructional coaching. She has also recognized that motivation to change is also an important tool in helping teachers to become growth oriented.

A reliable measure of teacher mindset is how teachers view their responsibility for learning. Principal Ryan identified that teachers with a fixed mindset often display a belief that learning is the entire responsibility of the student and parent. “I think some people think and feel its only parent responsibility and student’s responsibility. “I taught it; why haven’t you learned it.
And then you have others where it’s everybody's [teacher, parent, and student] responsibility [for learning]?” (PI2) Principal Ryan reflects that “Classrooms that are ... taught by a traditional teacher doesn’t (sic) take a lot of responsibility. And those that are risk-takers get the responsibility.”(PI2) She further reflects that teachers that are risk takers are most often concerned about student growth and achievement.

Summary

The results from the principal interviews illustrate connections to the social justice leadership framework as outlined by Theoharis (2009) as well as connections to the literature on social justice leadership (Brooks et al., 2007; Capper et al., 2006; Capper & Young, 2014; Frattura & Capper, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2008; Scheurich, 1998; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011). The primary connections that Principal Ryan made to the framework for social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2009) were to the following keys: key 3) advancing inclusion, access and opportunity, key 4) improving the core learning context, key 5) creating a climate of belonging, and key 6) raising student achievement. In interviews with Principal Ryan, she provided her definition of equity for students as, “All of the students having the same opportunities and the same abilities to be able to grow, academically and socially-emotionally”(PI3) and from this definition she recognized the barriers her students and families faced. She identified her advocacy for advancing access and opportunities for her students in their lack of experiences. Principal Ryan also addressed the various ways that she has taken to improve the core learning context at Lakemont through professional development work with her teachers. An important part of the professional development changes has been honoring teacher voice which recognizes the professionalism of her teachers. Principal Ryan has also addressed the need to create a climate of belonging at Lakemont for her students by focusing on culturally responsive training.
with her staff members. Principal Ryan demonstrated her school's commitment to use and implementation of culturally responsive practices by the connection to the school improvement plan. Principal Ryan has also demonstrated a focus on improving parent engagement at Lakemont, but has recognized the continued barriers to fully engaging parents at Lakemont.

The final area that Principal Ryan addressed was her attention to raising the achievement of her students at Lakemont through her focus on the RtI framework at Lakemont. She has particularly focused on data driven instruction to respond to the outcomes of her students. The next chapter will examine the data from teacher interviews, classroom observations and documents to look at classroom practices and the operationalization of RtI at Lakemont school.
Chapter 5
Results: Teacher Interviews and Document Analysis

Introduction

In this chapter results are presented from teacher (n= 4) interviews, classroom observations and summary data from the document analysis. One interview was conducted with the kindergarten and fourth grade teachers together, while the other two interviews were conducted individually with a second grade teacher and the instructional coach. Interview questions addressed experiences and understandings of: assessment/data analysis, core instruction/RtI processes, RtI implementation with marginalized student populations, and parent involvement. Most importantly, teachers also shared perceptions of the influence the principal had on the organization, structure and implementation of programs and activities in the school, particularly surrounding RtI. In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted an observation of an RtI team meeting, along with observations in three classrooms. During the RtI meeting, the researcher took notes on the interactions and topics of discussion between team members, the role of the principal in the meeting and the process of decision-making. Classroom observation data included information about interactions between teacher and students and notes on the environment and displays of student work. Finally, the researcher conducted analysis of key school and district documents to examine policies and/or connections to RtI and assessment and instructional practices.

Teacher’s Perceptions of the Broader School Context

As noted previously Illinois interactive report card and interviews with Principal Ryan pointed to the many challenges at Lakemont including high mobility and poverty rates. These topics were also brought up in teacher interviews, along with other challenges their
students faced. During the interview with the kindergarten and fourth grade teachers noted student mobility was a factor of concern: “The kids come in, and they’re here for three months, then they’re gone” (TI 2). Along with concerns for high mobility rates, the kindergarten teacher (Jacquelin) described level of stress that students brought to school:

I’ve had so many behaviors the past few weeks, and not one of them has been school-related. It’s all trauma from home... I have a lot of angry little children. And that’s unusual for kindergarten. I have kids, I meet them on the playground every morning, and they’re already angry…about something that happened to them before they got to school. (TI 1)

Aside from stress students faced outside of the school environment, some teachers described concern for the fact that many students lacked of preschool experience which teachers felt put them at a significant disadvantage. Jacquelin for example, described experiences with students early in the year: “You can tell the first day of kindergarten when you hand them a pencil to write. I think, ‘I’m witnessing the first time you’ve held a pencil’ (TI 1).

Another factor that presented difficulty in the broader context was garnering parent participation. Some teachers reported that it was not necessarily the case that parents did not want to come to the school. However, they described the reality of parents living paycheck to paycheck in reflecting on why turnout might be a challenge. The reality of living on a fixed income even makes travelling to school events difficult for parents. For example, considerations for event planning must take into account the time of the month that events are scheduled:

We don’t have very good parent turnout at any of our events. Some of it depends on what time of the month it is. If it’s the beginning of the month, they’ll show, but at the end of the month, they don’t have any money for gas (TI 1).
Race and Culture: Cultural Responsiveness

In addressing the general context at Lakemont teachers touched on the topics of race and culture and how these relate to the educational experiences for students at Lakemont. Responses varied on these topics. The instructional coach (Anni), recognized that one goal set by Principal Ryan was to implement training in cultural responsiveness. Anni reflected on this training in the context of the school population. “We looked at it [education] through the lens of cultural responsiveness to students based on who was our population and demographics” (TI4). The kindergarten (Jacquelin) and fourth grade teacher (Sophie) described the importance of cultural responsiveness in their approach to teaching; “We realized then what might actually be the important piece is culture responsiveness. Within our building, what is our building culture, and how do we respond” (TI4)? They also acknowledged the importance of understanding culture and planning culturally responsive lessons:

   We bring it [culture] up to the forefront. Because it’s real easy to just get right back into your old habits. I mean, you have to really be aware of different cultures. And it used to be when I first started teaching, [I would say]’Oh, I don’t even see color’ ” (TI 2).

Further, both teachers remarked that in their careers they recognized the importance of understanding and responding to culture and race for connecting with students. Sophie and Jacquelin noted that the cultural responsiveness training was important in their lesson planning. Sophie stated: “Now, you need to see color. You need to recognize it. It’s an interesting perspective.” (TI 2) When pressed as to why cultural responsiveness training was important they remarked, “...we can make lessons more engaging for our African American students” (TI 2).

The second-grade teacher (Sue) presented a differing viewpoint of race and culture that aligned more closely with a perspective of being “colorblind”:
My kids are my kids. And, you know, they all come from similar backgrounds. You know, we’re in an area that we’re seeing similar backgrounds, I think more on the financial aspect of it than on race or color or religion. But, to be honest, these kids are like my kids. I treat them and I look at their data just to find out what they need. (TI3)

Sue, who served on the RtI team and several other important committees, further remarked that data was the defining feature that helped her support her students rather than race. She discussed the multiple ways that she used data to understand and plan for her students. This included her daily observations, small group and individual conferencing with students to review misconceptions to help support daily lesson planning.

**The Principal’s Role and Influence at Lakemont**

In addressing one of the research questions, it was important to understand teachers’ perceptions of the influence Principal Ryan had on teaching and learning. Anni, the instruction coach had been in the district for over twenty years and was entering her last year before retirement. She noted that she had opportunities to work with a number of principals in the district during her career. She remarked that Principal Ryan was unique in her commitment to learning:

She is involved in all [professional development]. She comes to all the professional learnings. She learns right beside us all. And she listens…but she wants to learn. And she has questions she asks, and she’s a learner, which is amazing for a principal (TI4).

Anni worked closely with Principal Ryan during grade level collaborations, RtI team meetings and faculty meetings. She described how Principal Ryan’s actions supported the principles and practices for which she advocated, stating that she genuinely ‘walked the talk’ which gave her credibility among the staff.
Other interviewees noted similar characteristics and described Principal Ryan’s ability to help focus staff on student growth and learning:

Our principal [and instructional coach]...keep our focus on what we need to focus on... guide our grade level meetings and our discussions … any time that we meet we really have a purpose and we stick to it. We’re really trying to be responsible to help [students] and improve our instruction and to help them to be successful (TI 1).

Other teachers remarked on Principal Ryan’s active role in reviewing and talking about data, which is also relevant in later sections of this Chapter in which school RtI implementation is discussed:

I think she [principal] takes a very active role. She definitely has a no-nonsense role about it. She has us look at our data and talk honestly about our data. She tends to be encouraging. She wants us to look at the real picture and really see what can we do differently – what can we do better. And also look at what is working (TI 1).

Classroom teachers also noted a difference in Principal Ryan’s approach for which has allowed risk taking to become the norm.

I sense a difference. It seems like it’s much more encouraging us to teach and to try and experiment. They [principal and coach] said it’s okay to try something and not have it go well. Reflect on it. Try again, try a different way. In fact, I heard it’s okay to fail. Failure is an option (TI 1).

Giving teachers the license attempt new instructional strategies and fail ultimately led to improved practice and improved student outcomes. New efforts on behalf of teachers also helped establish and solidify self-reflection as part of the ongoing process for improving their practice.

Teachers also appreciated that Principal Ryan was continually focused on growth. It is evident
from teacher observations that celebration of student growth was an important norm that teachers came to appreciate:

She wants us to celebrate any success – you know, small successes, small growth. It’s very definitely a ‘try-and-reflect, try-and-reflect.’ We are celebrating any and all progress our students have made. And it’s another situation where we’re looking forward to beginning next year with all of the learning that we did as educators under our belt. I will know a lot more day one [next year] about what I need to do from the beginning than I did this year (TI 2).

Two teachers acknowledged the new initiatives resulting from Principal Ryan’s grant writing for professional development to support a ‘Daily 5’ reading block that transformed both the classroom structure and teaching. The ‘Daily 5’ was a reading initiative that focused on students interacting both independently and as partners with reading practice activities. These activities addressed major areas of reading instruction including vocabulary, phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension and fluency. The structure of the ‘Daily 5’ provided teachers with the opportunity to conference with small groups and individual students on a daily basis while other students were engaged in the daily reading activities. The grant further solidified for teachers the importance Principal Ryan placed on improving teaching practices and student outcomes.

Our principal wrote a grant for our literacy instruction, and we’ve been learning and implementing the Daily 5 classroom structure. It’s been a real year of learning … we’ve been cleaning out and transforming our classrooms and teaching. She’s really encouraged us to take risks with our teaching, and encouraged us just to reflect – think about what’s going well (TI 1).
In creating an environment that encourages risk taking, Principal Ryan has also the raised expectations of students. The instructional coach described Principal Ryan’s role in helping teachers reflect on their practice.

We’re getting so much better at looking at all the things that are important. But I think she [principal] plays a major role in that. I think she sets the tone for the building and the expectations (TI4).

Sue had similar reflections, but also commented on how Principal Ryan helped unite the school from an instructional standpoint.

So I think, as a leader, she’s pulling us together as a team. So it’s everybody working together. We’re all working towards the same goals, where I think in the past, it was third grade’s doing this; second grade’s doing this; some teachers are teaching writing; some teachers aren’t (TI3).

Another way Principal Ryan helped transform the culture at Lakemont school was how she helped teachers take greater ownership for student learning. Anni noted that prior to Principal Ryan, teachers took a ‘compliance’ approach to instruction and assessment. Previously, teachers were required to provide assessment results and to follow the scope and sequence of curriculum based on a prescribed timeline and spent time simply complying with requirements. Principal Ryan’s flexibility with instructional approaches and review of assessment results to support instruction recognized the professionalism of teachers. She encouraged teachers to move beyond a culture of submitted assessment results and followed curriculum timelines regardless of student need. Her recognition of teachers as professionals placed greater ownership of student learning on her teachers. She supported this change by encouraging new initiatives and insisting on a reflection of learning through the coach. Principal Ryan’s understanding of the broader issues at
Lakemont are also reflected in the schools new approach to RtI and the rationale for making those changes. She noted that compliance to instructional mandates often took the ownership for student learning away from the teacher by deprofessionalizing the teachers’ role.

She really is wanting to learn about this process, and what works, and how we can change. And understanding that it’s a journey… That compliance piece has been huge as well. It’s not just, “Okay, we’re here. Let’s check it off our list.” It really is a journey (TI4).

Implementing RtI

Teachers collectively expressed their concerns regarding the state of RtI prior to Principal Ryan’s tenure and during her first year. They also described reasons for needing changes based on student data. Change began as technical fixes which saw the elimination of the ‘RtI block’ to focus on improving instruction for students at Tier 1. However, technical changes became adaptive as Tier 1 instructional received more emphasis. Changes in instruction were closely tied to Principal Ryan’s focus on data-driven instruction. Interview data also revealed that getting teachers to change their practice, while necessary, was not without tension.

The resounding message from all teachers interviewed was that prior to Principal Ryan’s arrival, RtI was problematic on many levels. They reflected on implementation using something called the ‘RtI Block’, which provided targeted instruction for students at their designated Tier. Jacquelin also discussed RtI early on in Principal Ryan’s tenure; “Two years ago, we were trying to meet all these minutes for students. It was tough. I don’t think we were really doing it correctly” (TI 1). Sue also noted that during this time, “RtI was very difficult for us because it was only the extremes” (TI3) as she was referring to students at the top and bottom end of academic spectrum. With limited resources, teachers found that movement in and out of
intervention groups was limited. She noted, “We spent a year where every morning for 45 minutes, the kids separated into different rooms with different teachers and they never left those groups” (TI3). When asked to explain further, she stated, “If you were in [intervention], you were in [intervention] working on those same skills forever. It wasn’t working…” (TI3)? The teachers felt this lack of progress from students in intervention groups was symptomatic of larger issues with the RtI approach at Lakemont.

One of the issues that emerged from interviews was the inability to meet the needs of students given the limited resources. Sue noted that supporting the needs of so many students at Tier 2 was difficult: “It was hard for us to prove [a student needed Tier 3] when our whole group was Tier 2 instruction, and to get everybody caught up” (TI3). The kindergarten and fourth grade teachers also identified similar concerns, “We have an inverted triangle. The majority of our students are in that 1.5”, referring to 1.5 standard deviations below the mean (TI 2).

The general consensus among all teachers was that the primary purpose for the RtI block was intervention for the student body at large. Sue described her observations of the RtI block:

We didn’t have Tier 1 instruction. Proving a student really needed help was really difficult because, as a building, our students were coming in below grade level. We weren’t on Tier 1 instruction as a whole building. Our 80% was Tier 2. (TI3)

Sue went on to explain that the 80% she referenced in her comment was the typical 80% or Tier 1 that is commonly cited in research and policy (Batche et al, 2005; Illinois State Personnel Development Grant, n.d.). A review of data from the Illinois interactive report card also reflects scores that are consistent with the achievement levels noted by the classroom teachers. During the time period identified by classroom teachers, the state achievement test scores showed that 51% of students at Lakemont scored below state standards while 29% scored in the warning
category. The aggregate percentage of students in the below and warning category was 80\% of all students with only 20\% of students in the category of meets and exceeds standards.

When asked why so many students were at the level of Tier 2, Sue reflected on what they perceived to be low expectations of students, “I think there was a perception for a long time that that’s what these kids could do” (TI3). In addition to low expectations, teachers also recognized that classroom instruction was not addressing student needs at Tier. “We shouldn’t have 80\% of our kids at Tier 2 instruction. That shouldn’t be happening, because these kids are capable of Tier 1 instruction” (TI3). While several teachers recognized the need for a change, they noted that the stimulus for change in RtI came from the Principal who recognized that as implemented, it was not supporting the needs of students. Sue described how this change occurred, “And what we were doing was not working, ... Principal Ryan saw that . . . we all knew it wasn’t working, but you need a leader to say, ‘Okay, how can we change this?’” (TI3) The kindergarten and fourth grade teachers noted, “Our instructional coach and our principal think that the basis of our focus should be on Tier 1 instruction as opposed to trying to implement something we’re not ready to implement” (TI 2). While the structural changes in RtI came relatively quickly with the elimination of the RtI block to a focus on instruction at Tier 1, shifting beliefs about RtI and expectations of students has been an ongoing process.

Anni noted that in the past the district supported at-risk students through school support teams. She saw those teams simply as the gateway to special education. “We had a model a long time ago that was called…Teacher’s Assistance team, and pretty much that was who you brought to the table that you wanted in special ed.” (TI4) While the model no longer exists and RtI has expanded through the district, some individuals still bring the old mindset. “So we’ve had a lot of people that still have that same mindset; that if I bring this child to the table [RtI team], this is
their path to special ed.” (TI4) This pervasive attitude regarding the purpose of the RtI team confounded the instructional coach:

> I think we need to begin looking at data instead of just moving kids – ‘Oh, yes, they’re Tier 2 because we’re going to get them in Tier 3, and they’re gonna get a label.’ And I guess my question was, how is the instruction going to change for this child if they get the label? (TI4)

While Anni noted that Principal Ryan helped shift from the RtI block to the focus on instruction at Tier 1, and that some of the traditional beliefs about special education still persisted, she also acknowledged how changes in the RtI process have begun to transform instructional practices. Teachers described some of these changes. Sue noted that the focus on Tier I curriculum changed was now driven by the academic needs of students. She noted that with the previously at Tier 1 it was about progressing through the curriculum.

> We’re switching to structures in curriculum that allow us to do what our students need. ... when it was basal-driven, you’re trying to get the story and you’re guided by the curriculum and not being guided by what your students need (TI3).

Sue reflected on the professional development work from the grant that addressed instruction at Tier 1. She described the professional development efforts as changing the focus of instruction which provided for more flexibility.

> Everything is transient in my room. You may need to work on this skill today, and if you get it, we’re moving you up here. So there’s no holding a kid into a group for a quarter if they don’t need to, and that’s what we found with RtI in that [old] model. It wasn’t working. Our kids were staying right where they were (TI3).
Sue noted, “I’m able to focus down on what I need to do. There’s no room for fluff” (TI3). She also described how she addressed the ever changing needs within her classrooms. “We’re getting in. We’re learning a skill. ...We’re gonna teach you how to use that skill, and then I’m gonna work with you individually to practice that skill, or in a small group to practice that skill” (TI3). The teacher’s ability to address the instructional needs of individual students has changed the way fidelity of instruction is typically monitored:

Our principal is not looking for us to write down that we had met for 30 minutes three times a week with this student because we’re really tracking their growth from beginning to end. We know where our student is, and we can prove it because we had these conferences, we’ve done these strategy groups (TI3).

The concept of fidelity has evolved from simply recording that students were present for instruction, to providing a more detailed description of individual student growth. “We’re tracking it [student progress], so every time I meet with a student, I track what I’m meeting with them for. All of our instruction is targeted towards the students individually” (TI3). Sue also shared that data collected over the course of instruction was consistent with information required for RtI problem solving meetings for individual students. She reflected on how data would be examined by the school psychologist:

So if I’m showing consistent data points over six to eight weeks of conferencing and strategy groups of a student not growing, he [psychologist] might ask for me to do something specific during those strategy groups for a little bit, but the last year was a learning year because we’ve changed what RtI looks like, what our classrooms look like (TI3).
The changes in instruction at Tier 1 that came about from professional development and the Principal’s determination have provided teachers with a new level of expertise in understanding how to respond to the changing needs of their students.

Changes in Tier 1 instruction have also resulted in changes around the inclusion, with special education teachers co-teaching more frequently in the general education classroom. This shift has helped support all students in their classrooms.

From my experience with Tracy [the cross-categorical special education teacher], she’s been very good. She makes sure she reaches other students. She gathers them in while working with her students. She helps those kids who might fall through the cracks” (TI 2).

The inclusion of the special education teacher into the classroom has also been an evolving practice. The change in attitude and approach is noted by the kindergarten and fourth grade teacher in their interview.

If I had a student who wasn’t a special ed student who needs the same thing as their special ed students, only in the past year or so have they [the special educators] really began taking on those students as well. It used to be, ‘I’ve got enough students. I’ve got to track my own students. I’ve gotta make sure my kids have their minutes.’ Now they’re opening that up and they’re doing more push-in instead of pulling out, so they’ll help other kids in the classroom while they’re helping their own. I think that philosophy has changed a lot in the past year or two (TI 2).

Changes to a more fully inclusive model has helped to provide needed support at Tier 1 and teachers collectively commented on how this has provided greater supports to all students. From
teacher interviews, it was also evident that as teachers took a new approach to Tier 1 instruction and RtI, they became more introspective about their instruction.

Jacquelin and Sophie reflected on ways that targeting the discrepant students changed their instruction at Tier 1: “We really break it[instruction] down by the standards, it helps us to know how our instruction needs to improve” (TI 2). The focus on data has helped teachers to recognize the need to improve their instruction with the whole group. “If the average of our class is low, then that shows us maybe that that particular standard is something we need to increase, or improve our instruction, or find a different way to do it” (TI 2). Teachers also look at student data to target small group instruction, “If a student is discrepant from the class average, then that helps us to know for small groups or how to target their individual instruction” (TI 2).

**Redesigning instruction at Tier 1.** After talking with teachers, the biggest change at Tier 1 was the focus on grade level instruction. Previously, the focus for instruction was providing for Tier 2 or delivering instruction below grade level. Sue notes the focus for her whole group instruction with her students:

> For whole group, I want to be on grade level as much as possible, unless the whole class is below grade level, so then I want to bring up the whole class, so we might target that instruction to a lower level skill if it’s needed (TI3).

Teachers routinely mentioned the need for students to be exposed to grade level materials during whole group instruction which was a contrast to previous focus. While not every student was at grade level, the use of small groups allowed teachers to individualize their instruction, while continuing to expose all students to grade level expectations in whole group.

> Whole group is targeted to on-grade level instruction, and then I expand in small groups for the higher students and then we come back and re-teach for the low students at their
level. But I think that the lower students need to have exposure to what’s really expected (TI3).

Teachers also noticed that the focus on Tier 1 instruction has forced a closer look at data to understand student needs. “We look at data. We look at our instruction. We are reminded that RtI is not necessarily ‘response to intervention’ as it is ‘response to instruction’” (TI 1). With a focus on Tier 1 instruction teachers noted that in addition to student growth their self-efficacy and growth also improved.

Things did improve when we started focusing on our Tier 1 instruction and I was feeling more growth as a teacher…I think I’ve seen more growth with students than when we were trying to meet this child’s Tier 2 minutes (TI 2).

Anni provided her perspective on Tier 1 instruction and its’ evolution:

If we’re really doing our job with Tier 1 and providing those interventions, we may have kids that need to move, but what teachers need to understand is Tier 2 is not teaching it again louder – it’s using different resources and more time (TI4).

Ownership for Tier 1 instruction and the increased efficacy of teachers relies to a large degree on their ability to differentiate to meet varying needs of their students. Interviews revealed views on how teachers have also expanded upon their use of differentiation and built into their lesson planning. “I work really hard to group kids where they need to be. I think for math at one point last year, I probably had eight different math lessons going on in the classroom at one time” (TI3). Differentiation requires time and planning and as Sue noted; “I can teach seven different lessons. It takes a lot of pre-planning for me, but once I set up a unit, I’m able to individualize instruction for almost all 19 kids in the classroom” (TI3).
Data-Driven Instruction. The shifting culture at Lakemont with a focus on instruction at Tier 1 also was closely linked to the use of data. Sue described reflecting on data with her grade level colleagues:

We [second grade team] do look … and say, “You know what, I have four students who need this. What do you do with your kids? What can I do with my kids? What are you doing that I’m not doing?” So we do work together a lot with data (TI3).

However, she also recognized the importance of using observation data to support her daily instruction with individual students:

When I sit down with a student, I’m listening exactly to what he’s reading, what he’s doing, I can turn around and take that data and put it into a lesson tomorrow. If I sit with six students and they’re all struggling with the same thing, tomorrow whole group might target that skill so we can clear it up for everyone (TI3).

Principal Ryan has been a catalyst for data-driven instruction, whether for individuals or groups. “I think she [Principal Ryan] looks at us to make sure that we know our kids and what’s happening with our students, and where they need help, what students we need to really target as a building” (TI3). The skill of reading and reflecting on data has been an area of growth for teachers at Lakemont. This is evident in Sue’s comments:

[Principal Ryan] really supports us in being able to read the data. Some teachers are really struggling with using the data and guiding instruction with the data, and understanding of our standards and our curriculum, so we can tie it all together. So, she’s a leader, I would say, in the use of data to drive instruction in our building (TI3).

Anni described trepidations about interpreting and reflecting on data: “I don’t think they’re[teachers] used to that. So they wanted to come and they wanted to show us the data, and
they wanted us to tell them how to fix it ... because I think that’s what teachers want” (TI4). Anni noted that in some cases the process of reflecting on data often became personal because in some ways, the data reflected the classroom teacher’s abilities and instructional practices.

As we [Principal Ryan and instructional coach] just asked more questions, it just became a bone of contention. And so that questioning them, and trying to get them to reflect on why that data is[sic] the way it is not always taken real positively (TI4).

Anni conveyed that Principal Ryan continued to help teachers move past the personal part of reflecting on data and encourages their ownership for student learning. Anni has noted that while the process of getting teachers to reflect on their data has been particularly difficult at times the rewards of seeing changes in practice have been particularly powerful.

I’ve seen some teachers really, really change their practice, and to me, that’s the really powerful part because it[data driven instruction] empowers the teachers as a learner.

Because they know their kids. If they don’t they will get to know them. And it’s not just data as a number (TI4).

Anni also noted that teacher growth has resulted from having the opportunity for self-reflection on their own learning needs and those of their students. “…I am excited by that growth within teachers because I think that’s the powerful piece. It has to be them recognizing what they need. I can’t tell them what they need. Only they know” (TI4). She stated several times that when coaching teachers, she tried to imbue a cognitive dissonance to help them see the need to shift their practice. “I won’t say that it’s become part of their embedded practice yet, but it’s really causing some cognitive dissonance with professionals that have been in the teaching profession for a long time” (TI4). When asked to expand further she described difficult moments that emerged when reviewing data with teachers. Principal Ryan and Anni prompted reflection
on data with several questions designed to elicit their thinking and reflection. “Last year, we were told they were very challenging. We focused on reading, and the teachers felt challenged” (TI4). The responses from teachers also conveyed similar tension during grade level collaborations. Sophie, interpreted the self-reflection sessions from a judgmental standpoint. And you see, that’s something that I feel like we get judged a lot on. Because we’re looked down on – it’s frowned upon – if our class does not make 80% on...the post-test. Well, if you’re not at 80% then it’s your core instruction – you should be trying different things. You’re not doing it right. That’s what it makes me feel like (TI 2).

Sophie noted that while the self-reflection sessions were meant to help improve instruction she did not feel acknowledgement for the growth her students did make. “When you start out … at 1%, and you … make it up to 78%? That’s a lot of darn growth. So it’s kind of aggravating when you gotta be at 80%” (TI 1 & 2). These perspectives on the process of self-reflection demonstrate the delicate balance between support and pushing forward to change. The second-grade teacher, Sue had a more hopeful take on the process of teacher growth and change:

I think that teachers have to learn…if it’s not working today, then we really do need to figure out a way to fix it tomorrow, or try something new for a week. I mean, track what happens, and if it doesn’t work, then tweak it. Maybe don’t change it completely, but tweak it so it will work. But new teachers, it’s a learning process. Believe me…I still fall on my face a lot (TI3).

**Raising student expectations.** While teachers recognized more growth from the changes in their teaching practices, it was also noted that a shift in expectations of students accompanied this change. Anni, the instructional coach stated that upon arriving at Lakemont she confronted staff about their low expectations of students.
What I found when I came here was, ‘Well our kids can’t. They can’t. We have different students. They’re different. They’re really impoverished. They can’t.’ I just asked, ‘Why not? How are they different?’ Because I don’t like to use poverty as an excuse (TI4).

During her interview, Anni stated that she believed expectations were an extension of a teachers’ mindset. She felt she could help teachers set higher expectations during coaching: “I think we set the expectations high and then, because those expectations are high, that’s where our change will come about” (TI4). While Anni felt race and culture was used as an excuse for low expectations, classroom teachers provided a different perspective. Sue remarked that while she too acknowledged low expectations earlier in her career at Lakemont she noticed a significant change in the last several years.

I’ve been at Lakemont seven years. I would say there has been a huge change in attitude and expectations from the day I started to what happens now in this building. Completely different environments, you know, expectations of students, and what’s happening in the classrooms, I think, has changed completely (TI3).

Similarly, Sophie noted changes in perspectives around student growth.

We see so much growth in our students…but yet they might still end up the year comparing to other students in other buildings or other places, they might not be right where those students are, but the tremendous amount of growth we have seen is exciting (TI 2).

Collectively classroom teachers identified a positive change in expectations for students at all levels and attributed this change to Principal Ryan. According to Jacquelin an example of increased expectations was evident from the kindergarten team as she noted how sight word expectations for students nearly tripled from where they were the previous year.
For years, we’ve had a list of 31 sight words that we expected the kids to learn and we’d begin to work the curriculum and get them to learn the 31 words, and as part of our new grant, we made the decision that we were going to have our kids practice with a list of 92 words, which is almost triple what we were learning (TI 1).

Jacquelin described that after a year of new kindergarten sight word expectations that the mean score for Kindergarten was 68 words. While it remains to be seen if there is a change in overall belief systems, expectations of students have changed in a positive way. The next section presents results of data collected from observations and the review of school documents.

**Observations**

Three classroom observations were conducted in the Fall of 2015. Classroom observations lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. During observations, data were collected on student and teacher interactions as well as student engagement within the lessons. In addition, data were gathered on the classroom arrangement, the organization of student work areas and the display of student work. In late spring of 2015 an observation was conducted of an RtI team as they deliberated during individual student problem meetings. Data were gathered on the role of the principal, the interactions among team members and topics of discussion.

**Classroom Observations**

Observations were made in a Kindergarten, 2nd grade and 4th grade classroom in classrooms of teachers that were previously interviewed. All three observations took place during literacy instruction. The following descriptions detail the observations from each classroom.

**Second grade classroom observation.** As I enter the second grade classroom the most striking difference from traditional classrooms is the distinctly different layout from a traditional
classroom. There are 4 desks in total in a small section of the classroom and students are seated at the desks working on a writing project at the desks. The remainder of the classroom has a variety of areas for students to work independently or collaboratively. In the corner of the room is a couch surrounded by colorful beanbag chairs on either side. Here students are reading independently to themselves. On one side of the room a carpet and SMART board suggests a gathering place for students. Currently there are just four students sitting at the carpet working on white boards with magnetic letters, making words from lists. In another part of the room is a large student library full of books arranged by reading levels. Some students are reading to each other on a carpet by the book shelves. In another area of the classroom is a kidney shaped table where the teacher is working with a student on an individual reading assessment. The teacher lets me know that she is in the middle of doing her weekly assessments with individual students and welcomes me to explore the classroom. The most obvious piece of furniture missing from this second grade classroom is the absence of a teachers’ desk.

Students are assembled around the room in different areas of the classroom working on their Daily 5 reading activities. In another corner of the classroom are some computer stations where students are playing a phonemic awareness game with their headphones on. Students are actively engaged and this is evident as over 95% of the students are actively working independently or collaboratively with another classmate. An aide is also in the classroom and is working with a small group of students. She asks them to shift to another activity and while they are shifting to another activity the aide greets me and we have a small conversation about the classroom. She shares with me that this second grade teacher cares for all of her students and really pushes them to succeed. After about 20 minutes, a timer goes off and the teacher announces to her class that is time to go to the next station. Students quickly transition to their
next activity without any lost instructional time and they begin to do the activities of the next station. At the conclusion of this last Daily 5 station, the teacher invites her students to the carpet. The teacher asked students to reflect on their level of effort during the Daily 5 rotation and then encourages them to aim for improved accuracy in their reading for the next rotation of the Daily 5. The teacher has students take a stretch break while participating in a literacy game and then works on students’ fluency by going through word phrases that students repeat aloud. The teacher then presented words to the group and had students focus on phonics by pointing out verbs and closed syllables in the words. At the conclusion the teacher then dismissed her students to begin another rotation of the Daily 5.

**Kindergarten classroom observation.** As I enter the kindergarten classroom, the structure of the room is similar to the structure of many kindergarten classrooms. Students are sitting in a circle at the carpet which is located at the front of the room. Around the carpet are tables and chairs where students sit and nametags adorn the table spots for students. The teacher is summarizing a writing activity that students have completed and she goes around the circle as students share out what they have written on the prompt. This proves challenging for some students and in particular one student who is not seated, but rather walking around the classroom despite the urging of his teacher to sit down. He begins to take the writing from another student and this prompts the teacher to walk over to the student and instruct the student to give back the writing to the student. The teacher then asks the student who had her story taken how it made her feel when the student had taken her paper. This exchange goes back and forth between students and teacher and results in an apology. However, a few other students are now actively getting up from the circle and the teacher must go back to getting the attention of the class. She has all of her students sit down at the carpet spots to finish the activity. The students are then dismissed to
their tables where they prepare for a snack. The transition does not happen without more
interactions between students either talking or running between the tables. The students finally
settle in at their tables where they wait anxiously for their snacks. I leave the room as the snack is
being served to the students. At the peak of this activity about 60% of the students are engaged in
the lesson. Those students who are engaged are actively listening to the teacher while the other
students are either out of their seats going to other parts of the room and/or socializing with each
other.

Fourth grade classroom observation. The fourth grade classroom has many similarities
to the previous second grade classroom that I visited earlier. The classroom has 4 desks set in the
corner of the classroom. There is a couch with two small chairs set in one corner of the
classroom where a large student library is located. In the other corner near the rear of the room
are three computer stations set on a table with three chairs. In the middle of the room off to one
side are beach chairs with a small table. Immediately adjacent to the beach chairs is another
comfortable reclining chair. On the other side of the classroom is a SMART board centering a
carpet for the class to assemble. Near the front of the room is a kidney shaped reading table
which is close to the teacher’s desk. In the front corner of the room is another gathering area for
students with a carpet centered by a chart board with paper adjacent to a chair.

Students are working on Daily 5 activities and are found scattered throughout the room
while the teacher is sitting at the kidney shaped reading table working with a small group of 4
students. Students are actively engaged in the activity and this is evident from the over 95%
student engagement in the activities. After twenty minutes the teacher signals the end of their
activity and asks them to rotate to the next station. The transition to the next station happens very
quickly and little time is spent making this transition. Students rotate through the stations again
in another twenty minutes with a signal from the teacher. Students who were not in the daily 5 rotation were actively working with the teacher in small group mini-lesson or assessment. The rotation of students through the stations ends with a signal from the teacher and students gather at the carpet.

Students in the 4th grade classroom completed a round of the Daily 5 reading rotation and the classroom teacher has them sitting at the carpet where they are asked to reflect on their work. The students provide feedback to the teacher with a thumbs up or down. The teacher tells her students to work on their stamina during their reading activities to increase their reading skills. Students take a water break and then return to their Daily 5 rotations.

**Summary of observation.** In reviewing the organization of work areas in the 3 classrooms, two of the classrooms (2nd and 4th grade) were non-traditional in their set up and demonstrated a large variability in student work space with only 3 or 4 desks visible for classrooms of 18 and 24 students respectively. The remaining spaces for students include carpeted areas, comfortable chairs, and a couch for reading. Figure 1 below is a photograph of the 4th grade classroom, which also mirrored the organization in the 2nd grade classroom. The organization of these classrooms provided students with a variety of choices, a stark contrast to traditional classrooms with desks for every student. The kindergarten room was more typical of modern classrooms and provided tables for every kindergarten student.

Classroom observations at Lakemont revealed a strong focus on individualized instruction, particularly in examining the 2nd and 4th grade Daily 5 rotations. The teachers met with individuals or small groups of students working on a variety of skills and assessments. Evident in all classrooms were opportunities for student self-reflection on learning. Self-reflection often led to informal goal setting as students prepared for the next learning activity.
The organization of the 2nd and 4th grade classrooms were student centered providing a variety of spaces to support learning.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 6.** Classroom organization in a 4th grade classroom at Lakemont

*Note:* The photograph demonstrates the variation in learning spaces for students in the 4th grade classroom at Lakemont School. The classroom did not have a traditional set of desks, but a variety of learning spaces for small groups of students ranging for soft chairs, sofas, and carpet spaces.

**The RtI team meeting**

My primary purpose in observing the RtI meeting was to see how progress was reviewed. Discussion was held on the progress of students being considered for retention for the upcoming school year. Principal Ryan facilitated the meeting and the academic progress for each student was carefully reviewed by the team. During the discussions, attention was given to attendance and interventions at the school and district level to improve attendance. The discussions also involved a review of the academic progress of students with a detailed analysis of the
interventions attempted during the year. A prominent voice in these discussion was the instructional coach, Anni. The discussions for each student concentrated on individual assessment measures for reading and math and the students’ performance on various reading and math standards. At several times during student review Anni and Principal Ryan discussed the importance of monitoring the success of interventions at Tiers 1 and 2 and student issues that emerged. During the deliberations for one student, the instructional coach took the lead and after a review of data she pointed out that Tier 1 instruction in the classroom was not meeting the needs of 80% of the class and was unsure of why the student was being singled out for retention. The instructional coach then pointed out that changes were taking place in the classroom as a result of the work on Tier 1 instruction. Anni discussed the possibility of using the K-2 grant to help expand on the work required for some of the interventions and their implementation. The decisions to retain or not to retain students was a collective decision, but Principal Ryan lead these decisions. Principal Ryan asked questions of team members about the potential issues of retaining and asked team members for their opinions.

**Document Review**

A review of documents from Lakemont revealed meeting minutes and agendas from a variety of professional development opportunities for staff members. Meeting agendas were examined for professional learning community meetings, grade level meetings, leadership meetings and faculty meeting minutes. A review of agendas revealed various topics of discussion across meetings.

The Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, which occurred on a quarterly basis and included school-wide membership, discussed topics related to cultural responsiveness training in approximately 25% of the meetings, literacy training in about 75% of the meetings
and school-wide data in about 25% of the meetings. Grade level meetings took place on a monthly basis and in all meetings that three reflective questions were commonly asked when examining data or student work: What did you learn? What questions do you still have? What did you learn about your students? Discussions about data figured prominently at these meetings and were particular to the assessments at each grade level. Agendas also revealed that in meetings for second through sixth grade, teachers participated in goal setting conferences with their students. Also, common to all grade level meetings were discussions about strategy groups that were part of the Tier 1 interventions.

Leadership meetings were held on a monthly basis with membership limited to grade level representation. The agendas from these meetings revealed a review of the balanced literacy components throughout the year. Agendas and minutes also revealed a review of school-wide data and students who had made no growth or low growth at each grade level. Additionally, members identified and reviewed prerequisite skills needed for students to make growth to attain the next level of achievement from the MAP assessments (benchmark assessment).

Faculty meetings were held on a monthly basis with all staff members. Several meetings were devoted to having teachers sharing their K-2 grant work with the whole faculty. Other topics covered during the faculty meetings included climate and culture and strategies to use with students who presented behavioral challenges, including time for brainstorming ideas for prevention and intervention on climate related issues. Other key topics from faculty meetings included discussions of cultural responsiveness and relationship building with students and parents. During faculty meetings, the principal along with the instructional coach facilitated the discussions among staff members evident from the minutes of the meetings.
Summary

A review of teacher interview data, classroom, RtI meeting observations and document review revealed some themes that surfaced across various data sources. One theme that was evident throughout the data was the focus on changes in instructional practices. Teachers spoke to the work they had done through professional development, grade level collaborations and instructional coaching to change their instruction. The impetus for the changes in the instructional practices was a reflection on student data and outcomes. Teachers were compelled to review and reflect on data on a routine basis by Principal Ryan and the instructional coach, Anni. The reflections on data were also confirmed by a review of minutes from faculty and grade level meetings. Teachers were also afforded the professionalism to attempt different instructional strategies in an effort to improve outcomes for their students. Again, sharing of these different instructional strategies was also confirmed from the faculty and grade level meeting minutes. Another theme that emerged was the influence and support of Principal Ryan in facilitating changes. Teachers noted that RtI and Tier 1 instruction was problematic prior to the Principal’s tenure. Teachers noted that she recognized the need to change course from a traditional RtI model with an intervention block to focusing on Tier 1 instruction. Teachers reflected that Tier 1 became the focus for RtI efforts at Lakemont with a focus on improving the core instructional context for students by reexamining instructional practices with a focus on data-based decisions, reexamining curriculum and providing culturally responsive training for the staff. Again, these results were affirmed by the meeting minutes that demonstrated Principal Ryan as the facilitator throughout these meetings along with her instructional coach.
Chapter 6
Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this case study was to examine how one principal’s beliefs and understandings of social justice influenced the policy, framework, and implementation of RtI in their school. The primary research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are one principal’s beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership?
   How do those beliefs and understandings operationalize in the overall organization, structure, and implementation of RtI in their building?

2. To what extent do these beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership impact the professional practice of teachers in reaching diverse populations of students?

During this study, one principal was identified as having strong understandings of Social Justice Leadership (SJL) as defined within Theoharis’ framework for SJL. The identified principal, Principal Ryan participated in three semi-structured interviews. The first interview examined her beliefs and understandings of SJL and the second focused on her implementation of RtI at Lakemont school. The third interview addressed additional topics related to RtI, but also followed up on ongoing work at Lakemont and explored the intersection of SJL and RtI. Four teachers from Lakemont volunteered to participate in forty five minute semi-structured interviews focused on RtI implementation, current teaching practices, and the influence Principal Ryan had on both RtI policy and practice. Data were collected through observations conducted during literacy instruction in three different classrooms and during an RtI team meeting. Finally the researcher reviewed school documents including agendas and minutes of grade level collaboration as well as faculty meetings, presentations, leadership meetings and Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings. The data from observations, document analysis, and
teacher interviews were used to corroborate or refute the findings from the principal interviews. In this chapter findings are synthesized in relation to the research questions and are presented within the context of current literature on the topics of SJL and RTI.

My proposition in this study assumed that if a principal was identified as having strong understandings and conceptions of Social Justice Leadership that these beliefs would influence how RtI would be operationalized within the school and would reflect a system that supported minority achievement consistent with SJL literature. It has been established that one of the biggest challenges with RtI has been the lack of cultural consideration given for minority students, resulting in a perpetuation of discrepant outcomes (Artiles et al., 2010; Drame & Xu, 2008; Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Through building leadership and a social justice framework the implementation of RtI should reflect changes in teaching practices evident across teacher interviews, classroom observations and a review of school documents. The synthesis is presented through the research questions. In addition, recommendations for practice and future research are presented.

Beliefs and Understandings of Social Justice Leadership

In reviewing the literature on social justice leadership, one of the primary assertions focuses on creating an equitable environment for students that depends on the principal’s leadership to recognize and dismantle policies that serve to exclude and limit access to members of the student population (Capper & Young, 2014; DeMatthews, 2015; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011). One method used in the reconstruction of schools for social justice is through the equitable distribution of resources to ensure that marginalized populations are afforded equitable opportunities (DeMatthews, Carrola, & Mungal, 2015; Furman, 2012). Principals are key players in advancing social justice in the school environment (Klingner et al., 2005). Those with a
heightened sense of social and critical awareness are able to identify barriers to equity and/or access for marginalized groups within their school population and take action to lead their schools towards a more socially just agenda (DeMatthews, et al., 2016; Furman, 2012). One focus on social justice leadership that has addressed inequities in schools happens by reexamining the structure of schooling through inclusion. An inclusive schooling model aims to create a heterogeneous classroom environment that moves away from segregated settings and gifted/enrichment classes. Through a more inclusive schooling model a diverse classroom provides all students the opportunity to succeed through the collaboration of support personnel and the classroom teacher and literature has demonstrated positive academic outcomes for all students (Brooks et al., 2007; Capper et al., 2006; Capper & Young, 2014; McKenzie, et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2009; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011).

As previously mentioned the social justice leadership framework described by Theoharis (2009) was used as the theoretical framework for this study. Theoharis (2009) as previously described has outlined his framework for social justice leadership through 7 keys recognized as significant towards advancing SJL. The first key of the SJL framework focuses on “Acquiring broad, reconceptualized consciousness / knowledge / skill base” (p.13). Theoharis (2009) acknowledges that principals who have and develop their “critical consciousness” towards policy, culture and climate of a building, recognize the injustices that may be present both within and outside of the school environment and use this knowledge to support their actions to rectify challenges (Capper et al., 2006; Brooks et al., 2007; Theoharis, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2008;). The second key in the SJL framework (Theoharis, 2009), often linked with the first key, focuses on possessing core leadership traits. Principals act from their “critical consciousness” as they address the barriers and challenges found within and outside the school environment. The actions
taken by principals can require core leadership traits to address often longstanding barriers that threaten the status quo. Principals advocate for marginalized students and their families to change policy and attitudes to improve understanding of cultural responsiveness, and to change curriculum to be more culturally responsive (Brooks et al., 2007; Theoharis, 2007; Frattura & Capper, 2007).

In the study, Principal Ryan summarized her beliefs on social justice through the following quote: “All of the students having the same opportunities and the same abilities to be able to grow, academically and socially emotionally” (P13). Principal Ryan demonstrated ‘reconceptualized consciousness’ as she identified the barriers her students and families faced. She was acutely aware of barriers to equity and access that were external to the school itself such as funding structures, poverty of families and student mobility. Principal Ryan also recognized that her students came to school at a distinct disadvantage, as most had no preschool experience. Principal Ryan took an active role in promoting and advocating for her students and families in a manner consistent with the literature on SJL (Theoharis, 2009; DeMatthews, Edwards, & Rincones, 2016). Her core leadership traits were evident on many different fronts. She has written grants to provide fieldtrips for students who had limited experiences outside of their home environment. She also wrote grants to bring technology to the school, and provide access to technology for families. Her interest in advocating for families is also supported by her efforts to engage her families through a variety of methods such as providing childcare and food for families at school functions, understanding that these were core needs for the families.

The third and fourth keys of the social justice leadership framework address the professional practices of teachers and the learning environment (Theoharis, 2009). Specifically, key 3 focuses on advancing inclusive practices, and increasing access and opportunity for all
students. Key 4 focuses on improving the core learning context which includes examining

teaching and the curriculum (Frattura & Capper, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2009;
Capper & Young, 2014). Principal Ryan demonstrated action on key 3, advancing inclusion,
access and opportunity. Her work to create more inclusive classroom environments with special
education services supporting all students in the regular classroom setting served as an example
of this work. More evidence of her support of key 3 came through the changes in RtI
implementation that saw the elimination of the intervention block that pulled students into
interventions that were ineffective in improving student outcomes as noted by teachers and
Principal Ryan.

Principal Ryan also demonstrated action on key 4, improving the core learning context.
Her actions taken in this key were the most notable of all the keys from the social justice
leadership framework. Principal Ryan was committed to providing professional development for
her teachers from a culturally responsive and academic perspective notable areas that resulted in
changes to instructional strategies and the core curriculum. Principal Ryan identified needs in the
core learning context, as she recognized significant discrepancies in learning outcomes for her
students that did not match the traditional RtI framework of 80% of students demonstrating
success in the Tier 1 curriculum (Batsche et al, 2005). To address these changes in the core
learning context, Principal Ryan saw a need for professional development focused on teachers
using culturally responsive practices. She described a significant cultural divide between staff
and students with a predominantly white female staff and a primarily racial minority student
population. Principal Ryan’s focus on culturally responsive practices enabled teachers to begin
acknowledging culture as it related to academics and behavior. Her efforts to improve teaching
practices were not possible with the current district funds or the constraints of teacher contracts.
As such Principal Ryan wrote grants to a) support an additional 60 hours of professional development for her kindergarten, first and second grade teachers and b) purchase additional curriculum materials to support their core instruction. She was also in the process of writing a grant to support their professional development for her third, fourth and fifth grade teachers.

Two more keys of the social justice leadership framework that focus on changes within the school environment include: creating a climate of belonging, and raising student achievement (Theoharis, 2009). In creating a climate of belonging (key 5), leaders support the outcomes of marginalized students and foster a school environment that is supportive and encouraging and includes outreach to families of these students (Scheurich, 1998; Theoharis, 2007; DeMatthews et al., 2016). Key 6 focuses on raising student achievement, specifically for marginalized students who have continued to achieve below grade level. Principal Ryan has been working on creating a climate of belonging in classrooms. The actions of some of her classroom teachers demonstrated how they have honored student voice. This was particularly evident as students provided input into transformations that took place in classroom learning environments to meet the needs of all learners. Teachers in these classrooms identified how student input into decisions about the learning environment was instrumental in creating a supportive environment that helped students feel needs were being met.

Key 5 also identifies the importance of engaging families of marginalized students. Principal Ryan described many efforts made on her behalf to engage her families, but despite these efforts, engagement continued to be low, data confirmed through teacher interviews. In trying to understand the lack of engagement of families at Lakemont, Principal Ryan acknowledged many roadblocks and shared her persistence to realize this goal through several new initiatives. Teachers also acknowledged roadblocks to parent engagement at the school and
while some offered new ways of engagement parents many offered no solutions. In analyzing the disconnect with parent engagement at Lakemont school, it was evident from interviews with Principal Ryan that she was continually trying new and different ways to engage parents. These initiatives to make changes to the core learning context often involved many hours outside the regular school day and had encouraged additional team planning and preparation. While these changes were recognized as positive for changing the core learning context, one teacher reported that making time to fully engage families became a challenge. Principal Ryan also acknowledged that these changes were challenging staff and perhaps left little time for the important job of engaging families in different ways. However, shifts in the core learning context did give teachers pause to think of different ways to engage parents through goal setting and planned events to show parents what their students were learning. These examples suggested that teachers were beginning to think of different ideas for engaging parents.

Key 6 focuses on raising student achievement for marginalized students and in many ways is a culmination of the work to the core learning context. Principal Ryan addressed key 6 through restructuring RtI implementation at Lakemont. RtI implementation focused on data to guide instruction and support student outcomes. One example of increasing student achievement through professional development initiatives was the threefold increase in expectations and outcomes for Kindergarten students related to sight word acquisition.

The final key of the social justice leadership framework focuses on a leaders’ ability to develop resilience as they take on the difficult work of social justice leadership. Key 8 was beyond the scope of this study and no data were collected to examine how Principal Ryan renewed herself personally and professionally. Principal Ryan has shown through her collective actions the importance of advocacy to pursue equity and social justice at Lakemont.
Operationalizing Beliefs and Understandings

Social justice leadership differs from one school setting to the next largely because social, political and organization variables impact schools and their communities in different ways (DeMatthews, 2015; Theoharis, 2009). One way that social justice leadership has been operationalized in literature is through an inclusion model that recognizes the diversity of the classroom and places resources such as support personnel into the classroom to provide a comprehensive delivery of services to support all learners (Frattura & Capper, 2006; Theoharis, 2009). The inclusion of services in the classroom maintains the rigor of instruction and curriculum for all students (DeMatthews, 2015; Capper & Young, 2014; McKenzie et al, 2008).

At Lakemont, the principal’s beliefs and understandings resulted in various changes to the organization, structure and implementation of RTI. Some of the most significant changes led to a shift to emphasis on the core learning context, as evident in principal and teacher interviews, along with a review of minutes from building meetings. Principal Ryan noted after her review of instruction during her first year that the instruction provided to students during the RtI block was below grade level. Principal Ryan and teachers at Lakemont identified core instruction that was inconsistent with the traditional RtI expectations of 80% at grade level (Batsche et al., 2005). Teachers described how students would languish in interventions with little to no movement towards grade level expectations. Principal Ryan addressed this misalignment of Tier 1 instruction and student outcomes by focusing her staff on instructional practices and higher student expectations. Interviewees described the impact of low expectations as there was an inherent belief that students at Lakemont were not capable of making adequate progress in actual grade level instruction. Teachers attributed lowered expectations to the belief that students in...
poverty and racial minority students did not have the fundamental background knowledge to achieve at a grade level standard. The literature has demonstrated that high expectations by teachers is important towards raising student achievement among marginalized students (Scheurich, 1998; McKenzie et al, 2008; Theoharis, 2009).

The focus on improving instruction was a structural and organizational change that resulted from the review of instructional practices by Principal Ryan and the instructional coach that determined the majority of students were not receiving grade level instruction. Teacher interviews noted that this was the sentiment for some teachers, but as one teacher noted, “You need a leader to say, ‘Okay, how can we change this?’” (TI3). Principal Ryan increased expectations of students and helped teachers provide appropriate levels of instruction (or challenge) through extensive professional development and the provision of materials not available through the district.

Another fundamental change came in the organization and structure of professional development meetings, which shifted to focus on student data and ownership of student learning. Both the social justice leadership and RtI literature acknowledge important connections between raising student achievement through the use of data driven instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Frattura & Capper 2006; Theoharis, 2009; Hoover, 2011). Prior to changes implemented by Principal Ryan, the focus of reviewing student outcomes was on compliance for completing assessments, rather than reflections on student needs and growth. Principal Ryan encourages reflection on new instructional strategies and student outcomes, while reviewing and revising instructional strategies accordingly.

In addition Principal Ryan changed the structure of the RtI block. While RtI implementation at Lakemont contained many of the technical elements recommended for Tiered
instruction (Batsche et al, 2005), the success for students was not evident for multiple reasons. One teacher made this observation about the RtI block, “We spent a year where at every morning for 45 minutes, the kids separated into different rooms with different teachers and they never left those groups” (TI3). Teachers reported that instruction for students was, “working on those same skills forever. It wasn’t working…” (TI3). Principal Ryan eliminated the pull-out block and focused on quality Tier 1 instruction and additional intervention that could take place within classrooms.

Another area of RtI implementation that was addressed by Principal Ryan was the full inclusion of special needs students into the regular classroom (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Theoharis, 2009). Teachers noted a change in the instructional approaches by the special education staff operating within the Tier 1 curriculum. Teachers noted that the beliefs of cross categorical teachers prior to the focus on Tier 1 instruction emphasized adherence to a pull out model of instruction for special needs students. However, the recent changes have seen the special education teachers pushing into the regular classroom to support the needs of students in special education while also supporting the needs of non-disabled students in need of intervention support. Including special education teachers in the classroom was important for teachers as they routinely shared data on the effectiveness of interventions and adjusted instruction accordingly. The changes in RtI implementation as a result of Principal Ryan’s beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership were particularly evident in the changing practices of teachers at Lakemont school.

The Effects of SJL on Teachers’ Professional Practice

After reviewing the data from principal and teacher interviews, classroom observations and document analysis there were several findings that indicated changes in teaching practice as
a result of Principal Ryan’s beliefs and understandings of SJL. One area that Principal Ryan sought to address with her predominantly white staff was training in the use of culturally responsive practices. Culturally responsive practices have been identified as critical to changing the core learning context (Theoharis, 2009; Capper & Young, 2014; McKenzie et al., 2008). Some teachers referenced their professional development in culturally responsive practices and described how this training was beneficial to their planning and changed their instruction.

Another change in teaching practice that was evident from all data sources, was the new emphasis on data-driven instruction, which mirrored research into the use of data through RtI to support changes in instruction (Hoover, 2011; Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; 2007). Principal Ryan’s emphasized data-driven instruction and a routine review of data throughout collaboration and professional development meetings. She created an environment that encouraged teachers to try different instructional strategies and use data to determine effectiveness. A review of grade level meetings determined that reflective questions were asked each time data were reviewed, and teachers and the instructional coach commented on the tensions that arose from these reflective questions. The instructional coach referred to ‘cognitive dissonance’ that occurred when teachers reflected on their practice and the resulting student outcomes. Along with the emphasis on data-based instruction, was a change in ownership of student learning. The instructional coach noted that prior to Principal Ryan, teachers approached student data from a compliance perspective. Principal Ryan helped to usher in a new approach that relied upon reflection on student outcomes by teachers to take ownership of student learning. Data from interviews noted a heightened concern from teachers on how to meet the needs of their students and this was routinely shared at grade level meetings as teachers collectively tried to find better ways to support students.
Another change in teachers practice was the increase in expectations for students, coinciding with a student driven focus on instruction. As teachers reflected on student outcomes during professional development meetings, grade level collaborations, and faculty meetings a shift in student expectations followed. A kindergarten teacher remarked on how learning expectations increased three fold after professional development demonstrated a need to expect more from students to raise their level of understanding up to grade level expectations. In addition, the change in teaching practices also was evident in the role that students took in the learning process. Student voice became a factor as teachers transformed their learning spaces to become more student friendly. These changes were particularly evident in classroom observations as well as from teacher interviews. The honoring of student voice is consistent with the findings of Scheurich (1998) who identified schools where children must be treated with love, appreciation, care, and respect.

**Discussion**

In thinking about my research relative to the framework for social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2009) and the elements of RtI (Batsche et al, 2005) data revealed ways that SJL beliefs and understandings can support teacher practices within RtI implementation. In the study, Principal Ryan supported many initiatives that fell under Keys 3 & 4 of the SJL framework (Theoharis, 2009). Data demonstrated how Principal Ryan advanced inclusion through her focus on a Tier 1 curriculum that supported the needs of all learners, while also encouraging the full inclusion of students in special education into the classroom. As Principal Ryan began her tenure at Lakemont she identified an RtI system that served to exclude and separate students. What she found was a system of interventions that failed to advance the academic achievement of students at Lakemont. Teacher interviews also confirmed that interventions were at best a holding place
for students as they failed to graduate from these interventions to return to the regular classroom during the RtI block. Principal Ryan’s commitment to reshaping RtI practices began by dismantling the intervention block with a focus on providing instructional support through inclusion of special education services in the classroom to help focus on grade level instruction for all. The reshaping of RtI practices was evident in the way Principal Ryan was able to address Key 4 of the SJL framework at Lakemont.

From the SJL framework, Key 4 focuses on improving the core learning context encompassing both teaching and the curriculum. Principal Ryan identified the need to support changes in both of these areas through extensive professional development that addressed instructional practices and expectations. These changes took place under the premise of making changes to Tier 1 instruction and curriculum to improve RtI implementation. The resulting changes to RtI implementation at Lakemont through the SJL framework had some significant changes to teacher practice (See figure 7). The first of these changes evident from teacher interviews was planning for cultural responsiveness within lesson presentations. Classroom teachers identified the need to recognize and value student’s culture over their own bias and culture to ensure engagement of students. Another practice evident from all teacher interviews was an ownership of student learning. Through professional development and collaborations with the principal and instructional coach, teachers became more reflective in their instructional practices and took ownership of student learning. The shift from what had previously been identified as a compliance to student learning to ownership of student learning set the stage for raising student expectations. Student expectations were historically low at Lakemont school as evident from below grade level expectations. As teachers became more proficient instructionally, they recognized the needs of students and their capabilities to attain higher growth targets.
A final area that was evident from the data was a focus on student-centered learning classrooms. From teacher and principal results the shift to student-centered classrooms was prevalent in classrooms (kindergarten, first and second grade) where extensive professional development had helped improve the core learning context for classroom teachers. Through professional development opportunities, teachers reported how they recognized the importance of honoring student voice and this was evident from the physical organization of classrooms.

An important component of the social justice framework that was not evident from the data was the engagement of parents in the educational process (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2009). Principal Ryan described efforts to support the successful parent engagement. However, she recognized that parent engagement and participation was difficult to improve and maintain. Teacher interviews confirmed low participation and engagement and when pressed to understand this divide teachers identified barriers to parent participation related to parents’ low
income status. Other teachers attributed the low participation and engagement of parents to their lack of time to be able to attend to these professional responsibilities because of their additional 60 hours of professional development. While yet another teacher conveyed that parent engagement was the next school wide focus after the comprehensive professional development with classroom teachers. It was evident that improving parent engagement and participation was separate from the changes to the instructional core context at Lakemont.

**Discrepancies between school practice and the SJL framework**

The discrepancies between SJL as a theoretical framework and the practices at Lakemont school can be further explored through the two theories that take into account the importance of context as it relates to diverse urban school environments. One theory that helps to understand and recognize the context is the opportunity gap explanatory framework of Milner (2012) which helps identify practices in highly diverse school settings, that are often missing from the achievement gap discourse. At Lakemont school, several context specific factors identified by Milner’s (2012) framework contributed to some of the discord between the SJL framework and existing practices. One of the components Milner identifies is colorblindness perspectives on race, in which educators seek not to identify race as they approach teaching a highly diverse classroom. The colorblind perspective is problematic because those who espouse it choose to ignore race as a factor for consideration in classroom, curriculum or assessment decisions, and fail to see how race is already a bias in these areas. “Educators pretend to be color-blind, they are, in effect, constructing and enacting curriculum and instructional practices for students they see as incomplete rather than the complete beings students are” (Milner, 2012, p.699). At Lakemont, one teacher espoused a color blind perspective when asked about her use of student data and if considerations were made for race, ethnicity, language or cultural differences. She
indicated that race or other cultural factors were not a consideration in data-based decisions suggesting that cultural responsiveness training did not have the intended impact on all teachers. When extending the colorblind perspective to parent engagement and participation it could be reasoned that a lack of engagement or participation is placed on parents rather reexamining the means used by educators to reach out to parents.

Another lens from Milner’s opportunity gap explanatory framework to consider is the low expectations and deficit mindset educators may have regarding diverse student populations. Educators holding these beliefs perceive students from diverse backgrounds as being less capable of cognitively challenging work and belief that students are unable to master more rigorous curriculum. At Lakemont school data clearly demonstrated that the majority of the classroom instruction was below grade level prior to Principal Ryan’s tenure. Further exploration of the reasons for these low expectations identified a mindset held among the teaching staff and prior administration that ‘these students’ were not capable of grade level instruction. Principal Ryan challenged these low expectations and deficit thinking and this was evident from the changes in practices. A kindergarten teacher described how the expectations for students increased three fold in one year largely based on their professional development training. The previous recognition that colorblind perspective was still prevalent despite the culturally responsive training would also suggest that pockets of teachers still held to their low expectations and deficit mindset that would certainly extend to expectations of parents and their involvement at the school setting.

The final lens from the Milner’s framework focused on the recognition that when achievement gap data is analyzed there is often an assumption that the differences between school contexts is negligible or neutral. From my work at Lakemont, there is clear evidence that
context is not neutral. From an examination of the context at Lakemont school it is evident that the levels of poverty and minority representation are much higher than other schools in the Merritt school district. It was also recognized by teachers and the principal that Lakemont is nestled in the highest crime district in the city. Lakemont is also recognized by the state as a ‘high priority’ school giving parents the ability to opt out of Lakemont if their child is currently enrolled. These factors collectively contribute to the context of Lakemont which is distinctly different from any of the other schools in the Merritt school district. The use of Milner’s opportunity gap explanatory framework aids in recognizing the context features at Lakemont that contribute to some of the disparities that exist between the SJL framework and the changing practices that continue to evolve under the leadership of Principal Ryan.

Implications and Recommendations

Recommendations for practice. While RtI has become part of the lexicon of schooling and is prevalent through the nation (Berkeley et al, 2009) the ability of RtI to meet the needs of racialized minority students has been questionable (Artiles et al, 2010). Researchers have suggested that improving the outcomes for minority students through RtI requires attention to be paid to cultural factors such as family literacy practices, communication styles and cultural capital (Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Drame & Xu, 2008). It is also evident that the principal is the key player to enact RtI policy at the building level and attention paid to cultural factors are part of a larger narrative about social justice (Theoharis, 2007; DeMatthews, 2015; Frattura & Capper, 2007). In this study, it was evident that a principal with strong understandings and beliefs in social justice leadership was beneficial in helping to transform RtI practices that were also consistent with the tenets of social justice.
In reviewing the results of the research there were some specific recommendations for practicing and aspiring administrators that would be worthy of consideration. First, administrators should be required as part of their pre-service training and professional development to take courses or specific training related to deepening their understandings of social justice leadership. More specifically, it would be beneficial for administrators to understand Keys 3 and 4 of the framework for social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2009) that examine ways to advance inclusion and access for all students while also addressing the core learning context. Advocacy is also an important part of this work and helping administrators recognize and identify the barriers to equity within and outside their school can be useful. While these barriers can be viewed as out of the control of administrators when issues of school funding may arise, it does empower administrators to provide advocacy towards these issues.

Additionally administrators should be required report RTI implementation and design and structure of practices around concepts of social justice. It is important for administrators to see the connections between the RTI framework and a core learning context that attends to culturally responsive models of instruction. While RTI practices should ensure the use of an evidence-based curriculum, it is equally important to ensure that the curriculum values the culture and diversity of the student body. Through RTI practices, data-based instruction is critical to keeping a pulse on the achievement of students and monitoring their progress, but this process should not be absent cultural considerations regarding curriculum and interventions.

**Recommendations for Future Research.** The current study examined how a principal’s conceptions of social justice leadership influenced RTI and teacher practice. While the methodology provided opportunities to discuss and dialogue it would have been useful to have the opportunity to delve deeper into the role of the coach and principal in reflecting on data to
change teacher practice. It was evident in the interviews that the tensions were discernible for both teachers and instructional coach when discussing the reflective conversations about data, but it would be interesting to investigate how the cognitive dissonance over these issues helped teachers to grow in their practices over the long term.

Also, worth consideration was how Principal Ryan came to have such strong beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership. Did her administrative or preservice training provide for an expanded understanding of social justice leadership, or was this a result of her personal experiences or convictions or a combination of both? These answers may help to capture what is required to help aspiring and practicing principals with a similar leadership construct to support diverse student populations. Another area that would be worth further consideration is the issues experienced at this school related to parent engagement and how to more successfully increase engagement to have a greater impact on student outcomes.

Additional areas for future research can include further investigation of how social justice leadership can transform RtI practice from a school perspective. While this case study examined one principals’ experiences of how to influence RtI implementation, further studies could corroborate and strengthen the model of RtI implementation through a social justice leadership framework. Further research also is needed to understand the role that district leadership can play in supporting and strengthening the implementation of RtI through a social justice leadership framework. During this study, it was evident that the district played a significant role in supporting RtI implementation from establishing district benchmarks to the selection of curriculum. However, the district was also identified for creating barriers to equity at Lakemont school. It would be of interest to see how a superintendent that had a strong understanding of social justice leadership could shape a district to support a system of RtI that was socially just.
Conclusions

The current study examined one principals’ understandings of social justice leadership and how her beliefs influenced the school’s structure, organization and implementation of RtI and subsequently how teacher practice changed as a result of these beliefs. The current study provided evidence that teacher practice is influenced by a principal’s beliefs about social justice leadership while also influencing how RtI can be reimagined through a social justice leadership framework. Principal Ryan demonstrated through her actions and subsequent organization and structure at Lakemont a conviction to social justice leadership. When thinking about scaling this research to other school contexts it is worth considering how current and aspiring administrators can come to understand social justice leadership, but act on these principles to transform schools and practices of RtI to support diverse learners. Researchers have recognized the importance of this work in supporting racialized minority students through RtI practices (Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Drame & Xu, 2008). The importance of continuing to revisit and reframe RtI practices through a social justice leadership framework is underscored by the persistent gap in achievement for diverse student populations.
References


ILL. ADMIN. CODE tit. 23, § 226.130 (c). (2007)


Appendix A

Letter to Superintendents

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT Urbana-Champaign

Department of Educational Policy,
Organization and Leadership

College of Education
333 Education Building
1310 South Sixth Street
Champaign, IL 61820

November 2014

Dear Superintendent’s Name,

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of Illinois in the Department of Educational Policy, Organization and Leadership. My area of research focuses on schools that are currently implementing RtI with fidelity and the possible connections to social justice leadership through the principalship. I am looking to identify schools that are currently implementing RtI core practices as identified by the RtI core checklist included with this letter. Once I have identified such schools, the focus of my study will be interviewing principal’s who have been in their buildings for the past three years and demonstrate an understanding and commitment to social justice leadership. My research project focuses on how principals who have an understanding and commitment to social justice leadership implement RtI to meet the needs of minority students.

I wanted to ask you to take a moment to reflect on elementary principals in your district to determine if any fit this criteria. To assist you in identifying principals who have a strong emphasis in social justice leadership, I have attached a form that identifies the key indicators of social justice leadership.

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to consider my research proposal and I will be in touch with you in the next couple of weeks to determine if you were able to identify a principal for my study and to answer any questions you may have about this study.

Sincerely,

Trevor Nadrozny,
Doctoral student
Appendix B
Core Practices for RtI Implementation Checklist

This checklist of core practices for RtI implementation has been adapted from the Self-Assessment of Problem Solving Implementation: School Level form [SAPSI-S] from the Illinois RtI Network. As you read and review the RtI practices outlined in the checklist please rate the practices at the school selected accordingly. Please see the rating scale below:

Ratings of Core practices:

- **N** - Practice currently not in place;
- **P** - Practice is currently in process of implementation;
- **F** - Practice is fully implemented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core practices for RtI Implementation</th>
<th>Assessment of practice (N, P, or F)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The school has a three tiered system of support for students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricula and instruction are monitored for fidelity of implementation at Tier 1, 2, and 3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interventions are monitored to ensure that they are evidence based and implemented with fidelity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school has a problem solving team to address student academic and/or behavioral issues at Tier 1, 2, or 3 that meet regularly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents are considered in the development and implementation of interventions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment data are used in conjunction with other data sources to identify students needing targeted group interventions or individualized interventions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark assessments (Universal screener) are administered for all students at least three times each year.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress monitoring for students in Tier 2 and 3 occur on a regular (bimonthly or weekly) basis</td>
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Appendix C
Indicators of Social Justice Leadership

The indicators for social justice leadership are based upon the work of Theoharis (2009) from his book, “The School Leaders Our Children Deserve” he provides a framework for social justice leadership. The indicators below represent a partial list presented in Theoharis’s work as the indicators that would be most relevant and visible to a superintendent. As you review the indicators, please take a moment and use the descriptions to score your principal or principals that you recognize from your district having these attributes. Please score the principal accordingly with a 1 indicating a complete absence of the key indicator to 4 indicating a strong presence of the key indicator.

**Indicator 1: Advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity** – Principals that demonstrate this indicator have actively established a plan to ensure the inclusion of students with disabilities, limited English proficiency students, and minority students into honors classes. The plan for advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity may include changes made to the instructional models at the school that focuses more on increasing co-teaching opportunities and reducing the pull out resource room structure for special education and limited English proficiency students.

**Indicator 2: Improving the core learning content** – Principals that demonstrate this indicator have a clear focus on improving the core learning content identified by the daily curriculum and instruction of classroom teachers. Principals attend to the core learning content by recognizing the needs of their students and addressing issues of race and poverty. This may happen through regular discussions or book studies at faculty meetings. The principal works to coordinate professional development that is meaningful and relevant to their schools student population.

**Indicator 3: Creating a climate of belonging** – Principals that demonstrate this indicator

- have worked to create an environment where every student is welcomed and respected by teachers and staff members.
- Principals reach out to all families. In particular minority, limited English proficiency and low-income families are actively sought out as a part of the school community.
- The discipline practices of principals strong in this area are focused on a proactive approach which recognizes the importance of establishing relationships with students.

**Indicator 4: Raising student achievement**
Principals that demonstrate this indicator have demonstrated an attention to raising the student achievement of all students.
In particular, principals have focused on raising the achievement of minority, limited English language learners, and low-income students.

**Indicator 5: Possessing core leadership traits** – Principals that demonstrate this indicator have a passionate vision for their school and students. In particular, principals are committed to equity, access and opportunities for minority students, limited English proficiency students, and low-income students and this is a constant focus.
Indicators of Social Justice Leadership (Theoharis, 2009)

Candidate: ____________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Improving the core learning content</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Creating a climate of belonging</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Raising student achievement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Possessing core leadership traits</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
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**Scoring:**
1= Absence of indicator in principal practice,
2= Indicator present sometimes in principal practice,
3= Indicator is present most of the time in principal practice,
4= Indicator is present all of the time in principal practice
Appendix D

Recruitment and Consent Letter

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Department of Educational Policy,
Organization and Leadership

College of Education
333 Education Building
1310 South Sixth Street
Champaign, IL 61820

Social justice leadership through the framework of Response to Intervention: An inquiry of principal's beliefs and impact on classroom practice

Recruitment and Consent Letter

Social justice leadership through the framework of Response to Intervention: An inquiry of principal's beliefs and classroom practice is a research project connected to my doctoral dissertation. The purpose of the project is to determine if a principal's beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership impact the RtI practices and implementation in a school. The RPI (Responsible Project Investigator) is Dr. Anjalé Welton who is an assistant professor in the department of Educational Policy, Organization, and Leadership at the University of Illinois.

My goal is to interview a principal and elementary classroom teachers (Kindergarten through 5th grade) and specialist teachers (Special Education, Literacy, and/or ELL teachers) regarding their classroom practices related to RtI. This qualitative study would involve one individual interview lasting about 45 minutes in duration with teachers and three, 45 minute interviews with a principal. The interviews will take place in the spring of 2013. With your permission, the interview would be audio recorded for transcription purposes; no one except the researcher will have access to the audio recordings, and the recordings would only be used for research purposes.

I would like to invite you to participate in this project and share your classroom practices regarding RtI and how RtI is currently implemented in your school. I will be interviewing principals about their beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership and the implementation of RtI at their school. While I cannot pay you for your time, if you choose to participate, I will offer a gift certificate to be used at a local restaurant after the interview.

If you agree to participate in this study, your identity will be protected by a pseudonym along with a pseudonym for your school. Your participation is voluntary and your choice to participate or not will not impact your employment or status at school. If you agree to participate in this project, please complete the consent form at the bottom of this letter, keep one copy for yourself, and return the signed copy to me. I will be in touch with you to arrange the interview. You may find the following risk or discomforts from participating in the study. If participants
share information during the interview that is deemed to be controversial they may feel uncomfortable, but confidentiality is assured for all participants.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me, Trevor Nadrozny, at tnadroz2@illinois.edu, or by phone at 217.649.9432, or the responsible project investigator, Dr. Anjalé Welton, at ajwelton@illinois.edu or by phone at 217.333.0807. If you have any questions about rights of human subjects in this UIUC approved research please contact the IRB Office 217.333.2670 or irb@uiuc.edu, collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant.

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Trevor Nadrozny
Doctoral student
Appendix E
Principal Interview Questions
(Adapted from Theoharis, 2009)

Interview 1: Beliefs and understanding about social justice leadership

You have been identified by your superintendent as being a strong proponent of social justice leadership. I am interviewing you to explore your beliefs and understandings of social justice leadership. I am particularly interested in your beliefs and understandings regarding the education of traditionally marginalized student groups. Traditionally marginalized student groups are often identified in the literature as minority students (Black and Hispanic), English as a second language students, special education or low-income students that background and culture differ from mainstream society. Traditionally marginalized students have routinely struggled to achieve at the same achievement level as their non-marginalized peers. My first interview with you will focus on your beliefs and understandings regarding the education of traditionally marginalized students and the barriers (internal or external) that they face.

Equity and Access
1. When you think about equity and access for all students what does that mean to you? How does that play out in your school?

2. What are most important issues to you regarding equity in your school?

3. When looking at the achievement of your students on State exams or district benchmark tests what are some of the first things that you look for? Do you review State assessment results or benchmark assessment results of your students with teachers? If so, what steps do you take in the analysis of this data? What teachers do you involve in this process (classroom or do you include specialists)? Do you involve parents in the process?

4. How do you see your teachers supporting the learning of all students? Is that different for marginalized student populations, if so how is it different?

5. Are there common barriers that your marginalized student populations face? Are these barriers internal (ex. Teacher expectations) or external (ex. Resources)?

6. Do you work with your staff to recognize and identify these barriers?
7. Where is the locus of control regarding the student achievement of your students among your staff? Does this vary? How do you help teachers in recognizing barriers and taking responsibility for student achievement and growth? Can you think of a particular example of how you influenced a teacher and this has worked to the benefit of their students?

Parent engagement
1. How do you engage all of your parents? Are there different ways that you reach out to different parent groups?
2. What are the traditional avenues (newsletter, PTA meetings) for parent communication that you use routinely?
3. What are some of the avenues that you have utilized to reach some of your marginalized student parent groups?
4. What are the most pressing issues for your families? How do you deal with them? Do you convey the issues your families deal with to your staff and through what means?

Climate
1. What are your beliefs about discipline with your students? What are the most important aspects of discipline that you emphasize in your school?
2. In looking at discipline data are there disparities that you recognize with certain student groups? If so how do you address this with faculty? with parents?

Core Instruction and Inclusion
1. In what ways do you monitor the effectiveness of the core curriculum in reaching the needs of all of your students?
2. What are your beliefs about inclusion for marginalized students?
3. How do you serve your marginalized students in the regular education classrooms when barriers may include English language proficiency or large gaps in academic background knowledge?
4. In what ways do you help teachers in serving their marginalized student populations in the regular classroom setting? (ex. Professional development)

Interview 2: Improving the core learning context.

You and your school were selected for this study by your superintendent because you have successfully implemented RtI for the past three years. Your school has been identified as having made progress towards the core practices of RtI for the past three years. In this interview, I am interested in learning more about how you have established RtI processes and practices in your school. Specifically, I want to learn more about how you have utilized RtI to benefit your students and the structures in place to make this happen. I am also interested to know more about the dynamic between RtI implementation and instruction and if this effects classroom practice.

(Questions will be informed by the results of the Core practices checklist submitted by the superintendent and may change some of the postulated questions below.)

Assessment/Data Analysis
1. When results from benchmark testing are received how does your school staff examine and analyze these results? Who is involved with the analysis?

2. What do teachers do with the results? How does the analysis of assessment data inform instruction at the Tier 1, 2 or 3 levels?

3. How does analysis of assessment data provide an understanding on the effectiveness of curriculum for students at Tier 1, 2, or 3? Is there an example you can think of where the gaps in understanding were particularly large for a large number of students in Tier 1 and how did you and your teachers handle this issue?

4. How do the results of assessment data affect student placement in Tiers?

5. Who progress monitors your students who are in the Tier 2 and 3 interventions? How is this communicated to the parties involved with the student including parents?

6. What are some of the ways that classroom teacher practices may change as a result of looking over screening data results? What other decisions does this guide in the school?

7. When looking at the data for students who are traditionally marginalized? What barriers are identified? If they are identified how are they addressed? How are teachers equipped to handle these barriers (training, professional development, study groups)
Core Instruction/RtI Processes

1. What structures do you have in place to help with problem solving for individual students? Tell me about the structures that your school has in place to monitor overall student growth?

2. What are some of the ways that the instruction of classroom teachers is monitored to ensure fidelity with the Tier 1 curriculum? How is this communicated to teachers if this is or is not happening?

3. What are some of the ways that the instruction on interventions at Tier 2 and 3 is monitored to ensure fidelity of instruction? How is this communicated to teachers/interventionists if this is or is not happening?

4. What are the ways that you use RtI to reform and transform instructional practices in your school?

5. What are the most important factors that contribute to the success of students in the academic curriculum at your school?

6. What role do you have in these factors? What role do teachers play in these factors? What about specialist teachers (literacy, ESL) and their role in these factors?

7. Who are most important and influential people as it relates to RtI implementation in your school?

8. How does RtI implementation factor into your school improvement planning?

9. Does RtI play a significant role in faculty meetings/staff development meetings?

RtI and marginalized students populations

1. What are some of the more successful interventions/strategies that are used in Tier 2 and 3? Do any of these interventions make considerations for race/ethnicity, language, or cultural differences of students?
2. In talking with your staff members about students that are currently failing to meet standards are considerations of race/ethnicity, language, or cultural differences apart of the discussion? If so how? Is this a part of the plan regarding intervention placement?

3. Are there any considerations made for race/ethnicity, language, or cultural differences when students are progress monitored by teachers? If so how?

4. Do you address issues of race/ethnicity, language, and cultural differences as it relates to student achievement? If so how and in what venues?

Parent involvement
1. How are parents a part of the RtI process in your school?

2. In ways do you communicate with parents regarding intervention support and services?

3. Do parents participate on the intervention team meeting and if so what does their participation look like?

4. How are parents routinely provided with progress of their students as they move through interventions within the school?

5. What considerations are made regarding race/ethnicity, language or cultural differences with regard to parent communication and participation in the RtI process?

6. Are parents resistant to the support afforded through interventions in the RtI framework and if so how do you or your staff members address these objections?

7. What are the most important issues to parents as they think about interventions and the progress that their students are making?

Interview 3: Social Justice Leadership and RtI Implementation

This interview session will follow up on the interview answers from the two previous interviews and will require the analysis of these interview results for common themes for further discussion.
Appendix F
Teacher Interview Questions

To what extent does your principal advocate for the following?

a) Parent participation 1-5

b) Achievement

c) Etc.

To what extent has your school engaged in the following RtI activities?

Send this to the teacher prior to the interviews with the teacher.

Your school was selected for this research study because your school was identified as having implemented RtI successfully for the past three school years. Your school has also been identified as having made progress towards the core practices of RtI for the past three years. In this interview, I am interested in learning more about how you have used RtI to guide your classroom decisions and instruction. I am also interested in learning more about how your principals' beliefs about social justice leadership are reflected in how your school implements RtI. Specifically, I am interested to know how students that are identified through research as traditionally marginalized (students whose race/ethnicity, language or culture are different from the mainstream society) are supported through the RtI process in your school. This research project is important in potentially demonstrating connections between a leaders' attitudes towards marginalized populations and their implementation of important policies that directly address these issues.

Assessment/Data Analysis

1. When you receive student benchmark assessment data (universal screening data) how do you use it? Do you analyze the assessment data individually or as part of a team?

2. When analyzing assessment data is there attention paid to matters of race/ethnicity, language or cultural differences of students? If so how?

3. Do you make changes to your instruction based on the results of this data? Are the changes made in your instruction reflective of race/ethnicity, language or cultural differences of your students? If so how?

4. What are other assessment measures that you use when looking at the progress of students? Do any of these measures take into consideration race/ethnicity, language, or cultural differences in students?
5. What is your principal’s role in examining the assessment data of students? (Prominent to not at all).

6. How do the results of assessment data affect student placement in Tiers?

Core Instruction/RtI Processes
1. How does your principal work with you and your colleagues as you look at how your students’ needs are being met through the core curriculum?

2. As a classroom teacher, how do you know if you are teaching the core curriculum with fidelity and integrity? As an interventionist, how do you know if you are teaching the intervention/strategy with fidelity and integrity? How is this monitored?

3. Does your school have a student problem solving team? How often do you access this team? What role does your principal play on this team?

4. When your team is student problem solving is consideration given to race/ethnicity, language, or cultural differences in students when looking for solutions?

RtI and marginalized student populations
1. Who are the most important and influential people as it relates to RtI implementation in your school?

2. What are the most important factors that contribute to the success of students in the academic curriculum at your school?

3. What role do you see yourself contributing to these factors?
   a. What role do you see specialist teachers (literacy, ESL, Special Ed) contributing to these factors?
   b. What role do you see your principal contributing to these factors?
   c. What role do you see parents contributing to these factors?

4. How often is RtI apart of faculty meetings and professional development meetings?

5. When meeting in faculty meetings are matters of race/ethnicity, language and cultural differences in students’ topics for discussion. If so how are these issues addressed?
Parent Involvement

1. What role do parents play in the RtI process with students who receive interventions?

2. How do you communicate with parents throughout this process?

3. What considerations are made regarding race/ethnicity, language or cultural differences with regard to parent communication and participation in the RtI process?

4. What role does your principal play in engaging parent involvement?