Classroom Teachers’ Perspectives of School-Based Team (SBT) Practices in British Columbia

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Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

a. human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics

or

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Abstract

Classroom teachers today maintain a powerful role in educating an increasingly diverse student population in the midst of changing socio-political climates, educational policies, and limited economic funds. Balancing the need to support students who may have special needs to achieve their individual potential, amidst this context can be challenging for many teachers today. In order to alleviate some of the challenges and pressures teachers face in educating diverse student needs, school-based teams (SBTs) exist in many schools in British Columbia (B.C.) to support teachers with developing the necessary instructional expertise and to identify potential special needs in students. Despite the purpose of SBTs, many classroom teachers report that school team practices are ineffective and largely disconnected from the practical realities of teaching diverse students (Doll et al., 2005; Lane, 2013; Young & Gaughan, 2010). To understand teachers’ experiences and perspectives of SBT practices in the specific context of a large and diverse school district in B.C., I interviewed 15 elementary teachers who had previous experiences teaching students with special needs in the classroom and who had referred their students to SBTs. In their interviews, classroom teachers’ responses uncovered a dissonance that exists between SBT policy and practice. In analyzing their interview responses, I found three key themes: (a) The instructional recommendations made by SBTs are ineffective, (b) There is a lack of funding and resources to implement SBT decision outcomes, and (c) Classroom teachers’ professional judgement was not given the consideration it deserved by SBT members. By using key ideas from Ball et al.’s (2012) conceptual framework for policy enactment to illuminate the findings of this study, I conclude that the “material,” “interpretive,” and “discursive” components of policy enactment play an important role in revealing why tensions exist between SBT policy and practice. The findings of this study suggest that the special education practices in the Rosendale School District need further attention.
Dedication

They say it takes a village to raise a child and that is how I felt about the process of developing this research paper. I want to thank all my family members and those people in my life who continually inspired me along this long journey. Specifically, I would like to dedicate this research paper to my spiritual mentor, my two children, my late husband, my late father, my sisters, and my mother. First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this research paper to a spiritual mentor of mine, Uncle M. Uncle M planted the seed in my mind to initiate my doctoral studies and made me believe that I was capable of this intellectual endeavour. Next, I would like to mention my two children, Jahaan and Deeya. I thank you for being patient all the times I was studying, instead of spending time with you. I also thank you for teaching me that what makes children unique should not be feared, but that uniqueness should be celebrated and honoured in every way. Finally, I would like to dedicate this paper to two members of my family who I have lost along the way while completing my studies. My late husband, Jag, I thank you for supporting me in caring for our children while I would be in classes. Next, I would like to mention my late father who always asked me when I would be done my studies. Rest assured, Dad, I finally completed it! I would also like to dedicate this paper to my sisters who supported me in many ways. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this paper to my mother. Without my mother’s support with raising my two children while I was in classes, I would have quit a long time ago. I thank all of the people mentioned in this paper and many others who encouraged me to continue, despite the odds that were against me.
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Glossary

**High-Incidence Disabilities:** Students with high-incidence disabilities, by definition, are the most prevalent among children and youth with disabilities in schools. This group typically includes students with emotional and/or behavioural disorders, learning disabilities, and mild intellectual disability (Gage et al., 2012).

**Inclusion:** Describes the principle that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their education. The practice of inclusion is not necessarily synonymous with integration and goes beyond placement to include meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016).

**Integration:** One of the major strategies used to achieve inclusion. With integration, students with special needs are included in educational settings with their peers who do not have special needs, and provided with the necessary accommodations determined on an individual basis, to enable them to be successful there. The principle of “placement in the most enabling learning environment” applies when decisions are made about the extent to which an individual student is placed in regular classrooms, or assigned to an alternate placement (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. v).

**Learner Support Team (LST) Teacher:** Will have special education and/or English language learning instructional skills and experience to work collaboratively and cooperatively with classroom teachers and members of the school-based team (SBT) to improve individual student learning. The LST teacher will deliver a range of support services to students, either in the general classroom or in an alternate, to students with diverse learning needs. This may include, but is not limited to, students classified in the “high incidence” special education categories, English as a Second Language, or students who otherwise experience challenges in their learning (Rosendale School District).
**Pre-Referral Process:** When a classroom teacher observes exceptionalities in learning and behaviour in a student and has introduced variations in instructional approaches that prove to be insufficient in meeting a student’s educational needs, they initiate the referral process to a school-based team (Rosendale School District).

**School-Based Team:** An on-going team of school-based personnel that has a formal role to play as a problem-solving unit in assisting classroom teachers to develop and implement instructional and/or management strategies and to coordinate support resources for students with special needs within the school (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016).

**Special Needs:** Extending beyond those who may be included in handicapped categories (e.g., physical, intellectual, behavioural) to cover those who are failing in school for a wide variety of other reasons that are known to likely impede a child’s optimal progress (UNESCO, 2006, p. 48).
Chapter 1. Introduction

I’ve come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It’s my personal approach that creates the climate. It’s my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.

(Ginott, 1972, p. 15)

Classroom teachers play a powerful and important role in shaping the future academic, emotional, and intellectual development of young children today. In fact, I believe the impact that a classroom teacher holds over his or her students is perhaps second only to a child’s parents or closest caregivers. Given these sentiments, I think it is vital that those who hold the responsibility for educating children today ensure that they are doing everything they can to not only connect with their students, but also for them to know how to best teach to individual student’s potential. This is of course not an easy task. It requires that educators be aware not only of their own biases and beliefs underlining student strengths and weaknesses in learning, but it also requires that educators compare their own assessments of their students with that of curriculum expectations and pedagogical ideals. In other words, teachers must be well versed and confident in their abilities to assess and evaluate student learning and behaviour in relation to not only their own expectations of excellence in student learning, but they must also have the professional judgement or expertise to determine whether a student is progressing or not in relation to curriculum outcome expectations. Essentially, this means that good educators must have the expertise to not only recognize and identify student learning and behaviour exceptionalities, such as those considered to be “special needs,” but also able to connect to the individual special needs in their students and create bridges to understanding curriculum content. In this sense, and as highlighted by Ginott’s (1972, p. 15) words in the opening quote, teachers’ responses to what is considered to be a special need in a student’s learning profile plays a powerful role in determining whether to escalate or de-escalate further action in schools.
I say these words with much conviction, as they connect to my own personal and professional experiences of teaching children in elementary schools in the role of both a generalist and specialist teacher. These experiences also connect with my role as a parent of two young children, who bring with them unique learning profiles. In my professional teaching related experiences, I find myself continually having to navigate how to best support children who experience difficulties or problems in accessing classroom curriculum, while still allowing them to achieve a measure of success. This task often requires much reflection and consideration of how a child learns best and if what I am observing and assessing in a student who is experiencing difficulties is a result of an internal characteristic of the child, or if it is a symptom of the ways in which the teaching context is structured, or can it be attributed to the teacher-related factors, such as instructional expertise. Moreover, I often find myself questioning at what point I think that a student meets the criteria of being considered special needs. This questioning is based on my own personal sense-making processes of what it means for a student to have a special need and my professional knowledge or expertise.

Typically, when classroom teachers are uncertain as to why a child is not progressing towards his or her individual potential or progressing towards achieving classroom expectations, they begin the process of questioning whether or not that child has a special need. However, determining how to identify a potential special need in a child and what that exactly means is not an easy or clear task for many teachers. For example, Wheat (2011) stated that many classroom teachers are often confused by what a special need is, and this can often lead to misunderstanding about when to refer a student who is suspected of having a special need. In fact, the term special needs and its application to student exceptionalities is considered to be so vague and unclear that many times, it has reached a point of contention among educational stakeholders (e.g. Hallahan & Kauffman, 1994; MacMillan et al., 1994; Mehan et al., 1986; Pugach, 1985). This sense of confusion is apparent when exploring the concept of special needs in educational policy documents at the national and international level. For example, when examining the definition of special needs as provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; 2006), a global leader in educational policy and children’s rights, children with special needs are defined as:
The concept of ‘children with special educational needs’ extends beyond those who may be included in handicapped categories to cover those who are failing in school for a wide variety of other reasons that are known to be likely to impede a child’s optimal progress. (UNESCO, 2006, p. 48)

Although UNESCO has not delineated what these handicapped categories may be, or what a variety of reasons would entail, searching further to Canadian and U.S. policy documents for further clarification of the concept of special needs may be required. In the local context of British Columbia, the B.C. Ministry of Education (2016) defined special needs in its policy and procedures manual as being “a student who has a disability of an intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional or behavioural nature, has a learning disability or has special gifts or talents” (p. 1). Although this definition is still a bit murky, in that it describes special needs as “a student who has a disability,” it is still more detailed in providing concrete examples of different categories of disabilities (i.e., intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional, or behavioural). Likewise, in examining the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 and 2004 in the U.S., Knoblauch and Sorenson (1998) stated,

> The term child with a disability means a child: “with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. (para. 1)

Although the definitions provided by educational policy makers at the national and international level have similarities, in that they use terms such as “disability” to describe special needs, they all still lack clarity in how a special need is related to a disability or how severe a disability must be within each domain to be considered a special need by educational personnel.

Despite policy documents that clarify and delineate the concept of special needs, the research literature about teachers’ professional judgement in identifying potential special needs in students painted a different picture. For example, when examining the research literature regarding teachers’ professional judgment in being able to identify potential special needs in students, one can find mixed reviews. For example, in their comprehensive review of the research literature of the accuracy of teachers’ judgments in
assessing a student’s academic achievement as an indicator for potential learning challenges, Hoge and Coladarci (1989) reported a moderate to high agreement between teacher judgments and academic achievement in students. Teachers’ judgements of students’ academic ability and its relationship to achievement were not the only area examined by researchers. In fact, evidence to support teachers’ validity in their professional judgment of differentiating students who may be at risk for learning-related difficulties was found by Gresham and MacMillan (1997) and even as early as Kindergarten (Taylor et al., 2000). Gresham and MacMillan reported that teachers are accurate in identifying and classifying children into many different psycho-metrically defined at-risk groups of learning disabilities, low IQ, and learning assistance. Moreover, Menzies and Lane (2012) showed similar results when they looked at the ability of general education teachers to be able to distinguish effectively between typical and at-risk groups with and without academic and behavioural concerns. These findings seem to suggest that teachers’ ability to identify students who may potentially have special needs in the general education classroom and that students who would require additional supports as being accurate (Menzies & Lane, 2012).

Despite the research literature suggesting teachers are generally accurate in their professional judgment of students who may be considered special needs, other researchers have reported different sets of findings that place the basis of teachers’ judgements and their ability to identify students with potential special needs to be subjective and potentially biased. For instance, in her study examining teachers’ responses to students’ challenging behaviours and their subsequent referrals for special education services, Wheat (2011) found that teachers tended to vary on their understanding of what constituted a student need and what exactly justified a referral for special education services. Wheat attributed teachers’ lack of understanding related to student needs and general uncertainty regarding referral practices and special education laws as possible reasons for a variation in teacher evaluations of students. Researchers who have questioned the basis of teachers’ professional judgment in the identification of special needs in students have pointed out that teachers tend to use rather ambiguous and subjective processes in identifying high incidence disabilities, or those disabilities that occur most frequently in schools, in referred students (Klingner & Harry, 2006).
Furthermore, Christenson (1982) argued that teachers are more likely to refer a student for an assessment because of bothersome behaviours, rather than examining why a child is bothersome to them.

Other researchers examining teachers’ professional judgement in identifying special needs in students have attributed teacher subjectivity in classroom teachers’ judgements to using classroom norms and socio-cultural expectations of normal behaviour and learning for students. For example, in their study of teachers’ judgments of 2,340 primary students with learning and/or behavioural difficulties in the Netherlands, Maas and Meijnen (1999) found that comparisons of student behaviour and learning to current class norms played a contributing role in teacher judgements of students with potential disabilities. Mass and Meijnen argued that as classroom environments become more diverse, the need to compare students to traditional notions of normal behaviour and learning has, in part, created a push towards designating differences or disabilities in students. In the U.S. and Canada, Epstein et al. (2005) and Klingner and Harry (2006) also reported similar findings related to comparing socio-cultural standards of the norm, or typical behaviour, and that learning has been used as a benchmark by which to judge all other students.

The research literature discussed henceforth regarding teachers’ professional judgement in the identification of potential special needs in students demonstrates that teachers’ interpretation and application of definitions of special needs is open to variation and, consequently, confusing for many educators. In order to help support classroom teachers in the identification and evaluation process of potential special needs in students, classroom teachers in B.C. are encouraged by school-based teams (SBTs) to seek out their assistance through a pre-referral process. The pre-referral process, as outlined in B.C.’s special education policy, is initiated when

A classroom teacher observes exceptionalities in learning and behaviour . . . responds by initiating in-depth, systematic classroom observation and evaluation. Further, while beginning a comprehensive assessment of learning needs, the teacher should introduce variations in instructional approaches, evaluating the success of using such teaching techniques and instructional materials with the student . . . If these efforts prove insufficient to meet the student’s educational needs the teacher should embark on a process of consultation and collaboration with the school-based resource personnel. (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 13)
In B.C., an SBT typically includes a small group of regular members, such as a school principal, a learning assistance or resource teacher, a classroom teacher, and a counsellor. An SBT is defined as:

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An on-going team of school-based personnel which has a formal role to play as a problem-solving unit in assisting classroom teachers to develop and implement instructional and/or management strategies and to coordinate support resources for students with special needs within the school. (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 14)
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It is during SBT meetings that crucial decisions regarding how to remedy student problems and whether or not students should be further referred for testing by specialists are determined.

Special education policy in B.C. (School Act, 1996; B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016) and in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) mandate that school teams must abide by specific special education policy requirements in their evaluation process used to determine the eligibility of a special needs designation. For example, the 1975 EACHA and the 1990 and 2004 versions of IDEA stipulated that school teams must use an appropriate evaluation to determine whether a special needs designation and placement should be considered (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 2007). This policy stipulation of “appropriate evaluation” methods is important to note, as it stands as one of the fundamental intentions behind the creation of special education policy and as one the purposes of school teams: namely, that school teams were created to serve many intended purposes, primary among them was the need to reduce unnecessary referrals for students who were deemed to be difficult-to-teach by classroom teachers and to address the misidentification of students from Hispanic, African-American, and other disadvantaged groups as being special needs (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Graden et al., 1985; Nellis, 2012). School teams today have evolved not only in their ability to problem solve student cases through the use of increasingly sophisticated assessment and evaluation methods, but also with the inclusion of a wider scope of specialists to ensure that students problems are evaluated using the “appropriate” methods and that students receive the special education services that they need (Burns et al., 2005; Kovaleski & Glew, 2006; Rosenfield et al., 2018; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004).
Despite improved methods by school teams for the identification and evaluation of special needs in students, many classroom teachers report feeling that school teams are not effective or that they are less than satisfactory in supporting students who are potentially considered special needs (e.g., Papalia-Berardi & Hall, 2007; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004; Young & Gaughan, 2010). In fact, some researchers have reported that classroom teachers find the pre-referral process and school team practices to be problematic and largely disconnected from the practical realities of teaching students with diverse needs in general education classrooms (Doll et al., 2005; Lane, 2013; Ruby et al., 2011). In the local context of this study, teachers must teach in increasingly large class sizes with a diversity of learners, reduced funding, and a shortage of teachers, and therefore, teachers’ capacity to identify and support potential special needs students is further complicated (Gacoin, 2020; Naylor, 2005). Unfortunately, this has led to a situation where classroom teachers have actually or functionally withdrawn from school team practices that are intended to alleviate some of the pressures faced by classroom teachers in the identification process of potential special needs students (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). Furthermore, this has made teachers unlikely to access or be resistant to referring students to a school team in the future (Nellis, 2012). Clearly, further research into classroom teachers’ understandings and perspectives of school team practices is needed.

Not only can I attest to the challenges inherent in trying to identify potential special needs in students, but I also see the difficulties school teams face in trying to solve student problems that school teams are unsure of. In my role as a learner support teacher and SBT member, I have wondered if what I am observing in a referred student or whether other classroom teachers’ assessments of a referred student’s development should be considered atypical or not based on the evidence given or if there may be other factors at play. Moreover, I have witnessed many well-intentioned classroom teachers trying to expedite the pre-referral process for the identification of a potential special need in a student. Many teachers are hoping that by simply referring their students to the SBT will somehow be enough to secure a formal disability designation that is tied to classroom supports they are desperately seeking. Unfortunately, when classroom teachers are unsuccessful in their attempt to obtain a special needs designation for their students
due to SBTs deciding against this course of action, many teachers end up feeling frustrated, disillusioned, and some classroom teachers see the pre-referral process as a waste of time. On a more personal level, I am also a parent of two young children who both bring with them their own unique learning profiles in their elementary educational experiences. Both of my children, like many other students in the school system, have experienced challenges in the way that they access the curriculum, which has, in turn, brought me to meet with their teachers and other specialists to explore ways in which we can identify what may be the underlining source of their problems. I have witnessed classroom teachers and child specialists push for a formal special needs designation for one of my children, thus enabling them to receive the extra supports that are attached to a specific disability category.

With these personal and professional experiences, as well as problems reflected in the research literature on school team practices, I bring a moral purpose and an intellectual curiosity to explore this area. Specifically, I chose to explore the issue of school team practices from the perspective of those who typically initiate the pre-referral process and those closest to the immediate teaching context of students with potential special needs in the general education classroom: classroom teachers. As an advocate of students with atypical learning profiles or who some consider difficult-to-teach, I feel a moral purpose to support children who are experiencing difficulties in the classroom. Also, in my professional role as a specialist teacher and a regular member of SBTs in many different schools, I feel a moral obligation to understand how school personnel, specifically classroom teachers, understand special needs and what they believe to be the purpose and goals related to school team pre-referral processes. Specifically, by conducting a qualitative research study using interview methods that tap into teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices, I hoped to uncover teachers’ beliefs, values, and feelings underlining the identification process of special needs students, while further extending the existing research base on school team practices. Currently, as there is a dearth of qualitative research studies exploring classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices within the context of schools in Canada, and specifically within the context of B.C., where teachers are currently fighting to maintain special education services, it is more important than ever to conduct this study. Therefore, by interviewing a select group of
classroom teachers within the local context of B.C., I hoped to get at the heart of teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices. Essentially, conducting research in this area is vital not only for interested stakeholders of special education, it is also imperative to the improvement of education for students who experience difficulty in the classroom, no matter what their particular special need may be.

1.1. Overview of the Research Study

Relying on a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 1980), I sought to explore and understand in rich detail and description how a select group of 15 classroom teachers interpret SBT practices in elementary schools in one of the largest school districts in B.C.: the Rosendale School District (to protect the anonymity of participants and students, a pseudonym has been used for this school district). Specifically, by asking classroom teachers interview questions related to what the pre-referral process consists of, what occurs during SBT meetings, and teachers’ perspectives regarding the instructional recommendations and decision outcomes of SBTs, I set out to uncover Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives of the SBT practices. I explored this research inquiry with the intention of improving the ways in which students with special needs are supported by school personnel and with the intention of understanding how classroom teachers within the local context of the Rosendale School District experience SBT practices. Realizing that improving school team practices contains a broad spectrum of different factors that may necessarily include the perspectives of different key stakeholders involved in school teams, I chose to narrow the focus of this study to the perspective of classroom teachers. I focused on the perspectives of classroom teachers in elementary schools, as they are often the ones most closely connected to the day-to-day realities of teaching students with special needs in the general education classroom. Classroom teachers are typically the initiators of students who are referred to the SBT (Poland et al., 1982). Moreover, classroom teachers are one of the most frequent consumers of the SBT pre-referral process (Papalia-Berardi & Hall, 2007).
It is with these research aims that I employed the following general research question: *What are Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices?* I used the following two sub-questions to guide this research inquiry:

- *What are Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives of the instructional recommendations and decision outcomes made by SBTs?*
- *How do these classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices allow us a better understanding of special education policy in the context of the Rosendale School District?*

### 1.2. Significance of the Study

This research study is worthwhile for researchers investigating school team and special education practices, policy makers, school team members, school leaders, general education teachers, specialist teachers, and parents of special needs children. In essence, the findings of this study are valuable to anyone interested in better understanding and improving school team practices and support services provided to students with potential special needs. Essentially, if SBT practices are to do what they are intended to do, as stipulated in policy documents, which is to identify and solve student problems and also to support classroom teachers in meeting the special needs of students, then an exploration of how school team practices are conducted in B.C. and how school team practices are understood by classroom teachers is needed. It is vital that special education policy makers be made aware of how those implementing special education policies come to understand the purpose behind school teams and the contextual day-to-day practical realities teachers face when supporting special needs students. Thus, in order to improve school team practices and to provide students with potential special needs their right to access a quality education, it is important to conduct research in this area. It is my hope that this study will further explore issues related to problematic school team practices and the implementation of special education policy. It is imperative that we do this today; otherwise, I am afraid that if left too late, classroom teachers will continue to check out of school team practices and consider the pre-referral process to be nothing more than a meaningless exercise in documentation (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004).
1.3. Dissertation Structure

This dissertation consists of six chapters. In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the research literature that contextualizes problematic SBT practices within the broad scope of research literature by breaking it down into two parts or two strands. The first of these two strands entails an examination of the evolution of school team practices, since its inception in the U.S. in the 1970s till current time. Additionally, I review the second strand of the literature reviewed that demonstrates how problematic SBT practice can be analyzed using policy implementation theory as a frame of reference.

In Chapter 3, I set the stage for the current conceptual framework used in this study by Ball et al. (2012). I make the case for how Ball et al.’s conceptual framework, which incorporates a cognitivist, interpretive, bottom-up approach, is useful in understanding how policy actors at the street level struggle over, make meaning out of, and enact complex school team practices in schools.

In Chapter 4, I outline the methodology I used in this study. This consists first of disclosing my role as a researcher-practitioner, the general methodological approach taken, and the research questions I posed. Following this, I describe in detail the procedures I followed in this study, which included the following sub-topics: the research site, participants, data sources, data analysis, and trustworthiness criteria employed.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings uncovered in this study. Firstly, I provide a short background regarding the general procedures and processes followed by classroom teachers when referring students to the SBT. This sets the background for understanding the key themes uncovered in this study. Next, using classroom teachers’ interview quotes, I discuss three general themes related to classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practice, and I use components of Ball et al.’s (2012) enactment theory to illuminate these themes. Specifically, by using the material, the interpretive, and the discursive, I deconstruct how classroom teachers’ interpretations and understandings of special needs discourse within particular material and situational contexts necessarily influences their perspectives of SBT practices.

Finally, I conclude this dissertation with Chapter 6, which includes a summary of some of the important ideas related to the findings of this study and its significance for
key stakeholders involved in Rosendale School District SBT policy making and practice. Finally, I end the chapter with some of the limitations identified and areas of focus for future researchers who study school team practices.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

Research studies examining school team practices and the implementation of special education policies have reported that many classroom teachers find school team practices to be ineffective and are frustrated with the ability of school teams to support teachers in educating students they find difficult-to-teach, or who have atypical learning profiles in the general education classroom (Doll et al., 2005; Ruby et al., 2011; Truscott et al., 2005; Young & Gaughan, 2010). Teachers’ dissatisfaction and frustration with school team practices have unfortunately led many teachers to actually or functionally withdraw from the pre-referral process (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004), and teachers consequently feel unlikely to access school team pre-referral practices in the future (Nellis, 2012). In this chapter, I provide a broader perspective and background regarding why this situation exists for many teachers. Specifically, I review two strands of research literature to illustrate how SBT practices have evolved to become what they are today and also to demonstrate how an analysis of problematic SBT practices requires a deconstruction of how educational policies have traditionally been analyzed. Reviewing these two strands of research literature: (a) the evolution of school teams and practices, and (b) the historical landscape of policy implementation analyses, I pave the way for introducing how an alternative conceptual framework by Ball et al. (2012) is useful to understanding problematic school team practices.

Before turning to the first strand of research literature, I want to draw attention to the fact that most of the research examined in this paper comes from the U. S. context. This is mostly because there is a dearth of research literature about school team practices within the Canadian context and even less so from the B.C. context (Lupart, 1998). However, when comparing special education policies, legislation, and human rights laws in the U.S. and B.C., several meaningful parallels can be drawn between the two countries in how school teams practice and their related discourses have developed over time. Similarities can be drawn between how the U.S. and B.C. protects the equal rights of individuals with disabilities through their respective legal constitutions, which include
Amendment 14 of the U.S. Constitution (as cited in Cornell Law School, n.d.) and Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Constitution Act, 1982), and at the international level through the governing board of UNESCO. Additionally, one needs only to compare B.C.’s Special Education and Inclusion Policy (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016) and School Act (1996) to the U.S.’s Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), later renamed IDEA (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 2007), to examine how school teams are required to identify and evaluate special needs student cases.

British Columbia (BC) policy, procedures, and guidelines for the SBT student pre-referral and evaluation processes can be found in a manual published by the B.C. Ministry of Education (2016). Typically, the pre-referral process in schools is initiated when a general education or classroom teacher begins to assess and observe students and varying instructions within the general classroom. Teachers are encouraged to implement different instructional methods or strategies to support the identified student while monitoring their effect on the student’s learning and behaviour. If a classroom teacher determines that a student is not responding to these teaching methods, then the parents of the student are involved to determine if deeper consideration of the issue can be pursued by a family physician (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016). Additionally, classroom teachers may decide to “embark on a process of consultation and collaboration with the school-based resource personnel” (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 13). Typically, this process of consultation includes a learning support team (LST) teacher, school counsellor, school administrator, or speech-language pathologist. If this consultation proves to be ineffective in providing the classroom teacher with the support he or she needs, then a student is referred to the SBT. As stipulated in the BC Special Education Services Manual (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016), the SBT is defined as:

An on-going team of school-based personnel which has a formal role to play as a problem-solving unit in assisting classroom teachers to develop and implement instructional and/or management strategies and to co-ordinate support resources for students with special needs within the school. (p. 14)

In essence, the role of the SBT is to provide support through extended consultation on possible classroom strategies, and the SBT meeting is the avenue in which resource decisions are made. Local Rosendale School District policy provides similar guidelines
about the student pre-referral process and the role of the SBT that is parallel to B.C. provincial special education policy guidelines. For example, the Rosendale School District’s description of the SBT’s role, quoted here, is similar to the description in the provincial policies:

The School-Based Team (SBT) is a collaborative problem-solving team that works with classroom teachers to develop educational programs for students who may or may not have special education designations. The SBT also works together to make decisions regarding case managers, pre-referrals (e.g., Speech-Language Pathologists, School Psychologists), resource allocation etc. (Rosendale School District)

Thus, keeping in mind the specific policy guidelines and procedures as stipulated in the local B.C. and Rosendale School District context, parallels can be drawn to the special education and school team practices in the research literature discussed within the U.S. context in the next section.

2.1. The evolution of school teams

Although school teams in the U.S. have been referred to by many different names (e.g., Teacher Assistance Teams, Mainstream Assistance Teams, Pre-Intervention Teams, etc.), for the sake of clarity and consistency in reviewing research findings in this section, I will refer to them collectively in this section as, school teams. Looking back in history since the de-institutionalization and de-segregation of children with disabilities in schools, classroom teachers have been faced with the task of teaching students with a diverse range of needs and abilities within the general education classroom (MacMillan et al., 1994). When classroom teachers have encountered challenges in what they consider to be difficult-to-teach students, they have typically sought out the support of their colleagues and later school teams in how to best meet the needs of these students. By the time most classroom teachers seek out the support of a school team, they are usually wanting a special needs designation for difficult-to-teach students to secure extra supports, services, or, ultimately, an alternative placement for students given a special needs designation. Thus, school teams were generally created for the purpose of supporting classroom teachers in teaching difficult-to-teach students, while at the same time problem solving student learning or behaviour difficulties. Despite the common
purpose of school teams, school team models, and the names which they have been referred to, have varied due to the different ways in which special education policy has been implemented. Moreover, external school influences, such as economic considerations, the socio-political context, and intellectual advances in best practices for special needs students, has influenced the form and function of school team practices (Burns et al., 2005; Graden et al., 1985; Kovaleski & Glew, 2006; Nellis, 2012).

Most researchers often cite Chalfant et al. (1979) as being one of the first researchers to come up with a formal school team model (Bahr & Kovaleski, 2006). Chalfant et al. came up with the teacher assistance teams (TAT) model in the late 1970s in Chicago, Illinois (Kovaleski & Glew, 2006; Nellis, 2012). Chalfant et al.’s TAT model was created as a response to many intellectual, legal, and socio-political influences during the 1960s and 1970s, wherein the importance of the environmental context on child development, as opposed to qualities existing within a child, were given more attention (Gallagher, 1994). For example, the socio-political context of the Civil Rights movement and the impact it had on fighting for the rights of African American people set the stage for reforming special education referral services and practices, as they were found to be overrepresented in alternative special education placements. Legal influences in the form of lawsuits being filed against the school system (i.e., Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, as cited in Chestnut & Hill, 2004) instigated serious inquiry into the desegregation/segregation of blacks and disabled students and its equation with school achievement (MacMillan et al., 1994).

Politicians began drawing from disability discourse that demonstrated the importance of the environmental factors on intellectual development to assist in the justification for revamping the special education system. Thus, with the introduction of special education policy in the U.S. (EACHA, 1975), policy makers mandated that school teams alter the way they evaluate and educate special needs students. Specifically, it stipulated that students with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment and that school teams were required to use an appropriate evaluation to determine whether a special needs placement is required (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Exactly how school teams determined what an appropriate evaluation should look like was left for school teams to decide. However, the purpose behind the stipulation of
an appropriate evaluation was to ensure that teachers biases were reduced so that students were not mistakenly diagnosed with special needs disabilities, difficult-to-teach students were not labelled in order to place them in alternative settings, and that students of African and Hispanic minority groups were being fairly assessed (Chalfant et al., 1979; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Keogh, 2007). With the implementation of EACHA (1975), state- and district-level educational officials were struggling to process massive amounts of student referrals, leaving school teams the arduous task of determining appropriate educational programming and services for special needs students in a timely manner (Safran & Safran, 1996). Thus, school teams felt the economic burden of having to fund special educational services for an ever-increasing number of high incidence special needs students.

Chalfant et al. (1979) determined that the TAT model would address some of the above-mentioned pressures and influences at the time, while providing daily instructional support for classroom teachers. The goal of the team, according to Chalfant et al., was “to obtain more efficient and effective delivery of special help to children by placing the initiative for action squarely in the hands of classroom teachers before the formal special needs placement procedures occurs” [italics added] (pg. 88). Chalfant et al. made a point of distinguishing the difference between their TAT model and other multidisciplinary team models that traditionally had team members consisting of specialists (such as school psychologists, counsellors etc.) and school administrators. Although professionals external to the teaching context were invited to participate on the TAT as needed, Chalfant et al. asserted that the TAT’s focus was more about having classroom teacher colleagues supporting one another in the day to day realities of teaching children with special needs and to brainstorm different strategies that can be used to improve instruction. Although school team models were in their infancy at the time, Chalfant et al. kept the decision-making power of the school team within the realm of teachers, rather than to specialists working outside of the classroom teaching environment. Even school administrators typically were not part of the TAT as there were concerns by Chalfant et al. that they would inhibit the process because of the power they held over teachers through teacher evaluations.
Specialists outside of the classroom teaching context and school administrators’ inclusion in school teams developed later in time when school team researchers came up with alternative school team models. Graden et al. (1985) were some of these researchers. Graden et al. came up with a school team model that would not only address some of the outside influences and pressures mentioned earlier, but would more importantly change the way student problems were handled as well. For instance, the Pre-Intervention Team (PIT) model was headed by specialists, or “consultants” who took the lead role on evaluating student problems, rather than having classroom teachers take the lead as proposed in the previous TAT school team model. Additionally, through the use of formal data-based behavioural methods, the expertise of classroom teachers was stripped away by ‘consultants’ who in theory worked collaboratively with classroom teachers using more technical and data-based behavioural interventions. This move ensured a referred student would be assessed “objectively” by a multidisciplinary team of specialists and not solely on the classroom teacher’s perceptions that the referred student deviated from his/her expectations of student achievement or behaviour. In other words, by including specialists in school teams, one of the fundamental goals of the PIT of reducing the number of inappropriate referrals for testing, particularly for students from African American and Hispanic minority groups, would be served (Graden et al., 1985). This is a critical point in the history of school teams as Graden et al.’s model established the presence and leadership role of outside specialists in school teams, such as the school psychologist for the purposes of reducing unnecessary special education referrals (Safran & Safran, 1996).

School teams involving a more multidisciplinary specialist membership and employing more sophisticated ways of evaluating student problems that also included a more ecological model of looking at student problems began to spring up. Incorporating a more ecological model meant that school teams examined factors associated within the classroom context, teacher and instructional variables, as well as student variables when solving student problems, rather than looking solely at characteristics within the individual (Moore et al., 1989; Rosenfield et al., 2018; Yetter, 2010; Ysseldyke, 2001). For example, Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) came up with their own version of a teacher support model called mainstream assistance teams (MAT). One of the underlining
rationales of creating the MAT model was that a more “objective measurement” held by multiple specialists working outside of the immediate teaching context, rather than the subjective teacher referrals which may be “arbitrary, if not biased,” was needed (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 6). The idea behind including a panel of specialists in the MAT was that “many heads are better than one or two, especially when they collectively represent diversity and richness in formal training and professional experience” of a team of specialists (p. 27). Likewise, the child study team (CST) and the instructional support team (IST) or instructional consultation team (ICT) also emerged around this time, which included a whole new set of specialists in diverse areas of child development, such as speech and language pathology, behavioural psychology, special education, and physical therapy. Proponents of the CST and IST models believed that not only would the new school team models serve the same purposes described by the school team models of the past, most importantly of which was reducing inappropriate referrals, but they would also tap into the diverse needs of students by providing a variety of expertise at the table (Moore et al., 1989). Moreover, it was thought that having a school team of specialists come together to solve student problems created a sense of mission and team spirit for those involved (Kovaleski & Glew, 2006).

School team models evolved making many changes from the original TAT model. Chalfant et al. (1979) intended their TAT model to be an instructional capacity-building system made to support classroom teachers who were to hold the power of decision making in the school team. Replacing the way in which teachers were encouraged to brainstorm ways to improve the instruction of special needs students was the increasingly sophisticated and technical evaluation processes of the new multidisciplinary team. School teams consisted of a panel of specialists who eventually took over the practical classroom expertise of teachers. Even though the original purpose of solving student problems remained the same, the form and functioning of school teams were forever changed. Along with amendments to special education policies, such as EACHA (1975) and IDEA (1990, 2004) that were influenced by the socio-political context at the time and intellectual advancements in special education practices, school teams have achieved increasingly specialized techniques to evaluate problems students have in the classroom. However, with these changes, the expertise of consultants or specialists external to the
teaching environment has taken the decision-making power and the everyday practical classroom expertise away from teachers in the name of objectivity and unbiased decision-making practices. All of these influences provide context for the current state of school team models and the problems teachers face when implementing school team polices in schools. In the next section, I review more current research on school team practices to gain insight into why some teachers are dissatisfied with SBT practices today.

2.1.1. Current research on school team practices

There are a multitude of research studies examining the effectiveness of school team practices in the U.S. Some researchers have focused their inquiries on the effectiveness of school teams in decreasing unnecessary special education referrals or in improving student outcomes (e.g., Burns et al., 2005; Kovaleski & Glew, 2006; McNamara & Hollinger, 1997). Other researchers have examined the gap that exists between school team policy and practice and described some of the barriers that have caused this gap (e.g., Doll et al., 2005; Ruby et al., 2011; Truscott et al., 2005). As it is beyond the scope of this review to discuss all of barriers that exist, I have chosen to focus on two recurrent themes in the research literature as they directly relate to the findings of this study: (a) differing beliefs about the purpose of school teams (Nellis, 2012; Papalia-Berardi & Hall, 2007; Ruby et al., 2011; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004) and (b) the need for quality interventions and resources to support recommendations (Doll et al., 2005; Papalia-Berardi & Hall, 2007; Ruby et al., 2011).

2.1.2. Differing beliefs of the purposes of school teams

In their national survey of over 400 school teams across 50 states in the U.S., Truscott et al. (2005) found that school teams lacked any clear school-based consensus about the goals of school teams. This finding may be related to a general sense confusion or misinterpretation of the purpose of school teams by school personnel. For instance, Ruby et al. (2010) reported that most classroom teachers misunderstand and are frustrated about the purpose of problem-solving team process, even though the purpose is strongly emphasized in the professional development materials and in problem-solving team policy manuals. Other researchers examining school team practices have also cited that
differing beliefs regarding the purpose of school teams are a significant contributing factor related to the gap between policy and practice. For example, in their research review examining seven different empirical studies assessing teachers’ judgments of the social validity or treatment of TATs, Papalia-Berardi and Hall (2007) reported that teachers were dissatisfied with the overall TAT process. Specifically, classroom teachers believed the TAT was an extension of the special education referral process, and as such, they desired direct support and assistance for their students. As a result, teachers perceived the lengthened referral process as an obstacle to students gaining access to much-needed special education services. Put plainly, classroom teachers agreed that the TAT process was another paper-pushing procedure, lengthening an already lengthy referral procedure (Inman & Tollefson, 1988; Papalia-Berardi & Hall, 2007). Fuchs et al. (1990) also concurred with these findings, as they reported that one of the biggest barriers to implementing the problem-solving component of SBT practices was the belief among some classroom teachers that difficult-to-teach students are better served in special education placements and because of characteristics that are internal to students, rather than external, such as the learning environment. Similar findings have been discovered by other researchers in the field (Doll et al., 2005; Nellis 2012; Ruby et al., 2011; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004).

2.1.3. Quality interventions and resources to support recommendations

Another significant factor that has contributed to problematic school team practices as reported in the research literature is that teachers have reported a lack of quality interventions or recommendations as promised by school teams (Doll et al., 2005; Harrington & Gibson, 1986; Pfeiffer, 1981). If teachers are expected to teach to an increasingly diverse spectrum of student needs in the general education classroom rather than have students taught in alternate settings, then quality interventions and resources need to be in place as recommended by school teams. However, this has not always been the case for some classroom teachers. For example, in their ethnographic research study on classroom teachers’ perceptions and experiences of the pre-referral intervention team process, Slonski-Fowler and Truscott (2004) discovered that a majority of teachers interviewed stated that the recommendations made by the school team were redundant,
generic, or too vague to implement. Moreover, teachers consistently reported that the pre-referral team made very little novel recommendations that the teachers had not already implemented prior to attending the meeting. Other researchers concurred that classroom teachers resent requests to repeat strategies they have already tried with students they have referred (Harrington & Gibson, 1986; Inman & Tollefson, 1988).

Not only are school team recommendations deemed redundant by many classroom teachers as reported in the studies above, but the recommendations suggested are also less than ideal when compared to the research literature on best school team practices. For example, in their national survey conducted in the U.S. with 200 school employees, Slonski-Fowler and Truscott (2004) found that most teams did not make suggestions for more ecologically based interventions as promoted in research studies and in special education policy. In fact, it appears that most Pre-Intervention Teams seemed to rely on referring to other services (e.g., counselling), instruction from other people (e.g., peers and remedial teachers), or considered a change in student requirements (e.g., reduce work), rather than offering any substantive modifications to instruction. These researchers concluded that there is a substantial disconnect or gap between ideal school team practices and the everyday reality for teachers (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004).

Although the research literature mentioned here is informative to understanding why a gap between school team policy and practice exists, there is a dearth of qualitative interview research that examines teachers’ perspectives of school team practices, especially within the context of B.C. When I reviewed the research literature about teachers’ perspectives of school team practices, I discovered only a handful of qualitative research studies and that these studies were based in the U.S. (Lane et al., 2003; Meyers et al., 1996; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). For instance, Meyers et al. (1996) conducted a qualitative study that examined teachers’ perceptions of the goals of pre-referral teams using observations, surveys, and follow-up interviews in eight different schools in New York. Although, Meyers et al.’s study was informative and included multiple methods of data collection, the study was conducted over 20 years ago. Likewise, Slonski-Fowler and Truscott (2004) used multiple sources of data collection in their ethnographic study of teachers’ perceptions of and engagement in the pre-referral
process in schools, but their study was also based in the U.S and conducted almost 15 years ago and in New York as well. Finally, Lane et al. (2003) conducted a qualitative study exploring teachers’ expectations and perceptions of the pre-referral team process in southern California and Arizona. However, Lane et al. used surveys methods rather than interviews with teachers as a method of data collection, and the study was also conducted in the U.S.

To my knowledge, there have only been two research papers that have examined inclusion-related issues in B.C. For instance, Naylor (2005) has explored the goal of inclusive education in B.C. However, the data he relied on originated from other sources in the research literature across Canada and internationally. The other research study consisted of a qualitative research study conducted in the local context of B.C. Specifically, Gacoin (2020) interviewed 15 teachers about their perspectives of some of the key conditions necessary for inclusive education as well as the opportunities and challenges to achieving these conditions. Although Gacoin’s research study was informative and relevant to teachers’ experiences with special needs students in B.C., his study specifically addressed teachers’ experiences and perspectives of SBT practices. Consequently, I believe that recent qualitative research examining B.C. teachers’ experiences and perspectives of school team practices is needed.

In sum, the current school team research literature reviewed indicates that there is a disconnect between school team policy and practices. However, if one analyzes problematic school team practices from a different frame of reference, the policy to practice gap may reveal a deeper problem that has to do with the framework used to analyze the problem. In other words, in order to deconstruct the problem of teachers’ dissatisfaction with school team practices, a deeper consideration of how special education policy is enacted from the perspective of those who depend on school team practices, such as classroom teachers, must be applied (Ball et al., 2012). In order to illustrate this point, I reviewed the history of policy implementation theory for a broader understanding of how researchers have traditionally analyzed policy implementation problems in the past and what is occurring in the field in current times.
2.2. The Historical Landscape of Policy Implementation Theory

In this section, I provide a brief introduction to policy implementation research spanning over three generations of time. This is divided into: (a) first-generation policy research (just before the 1970s to 1980s), (b) second-generation policy research (1980s to 1990s), (c) third-generation policy research (1990s), and finally, (d) what has occurred in the policy implementation research field “afterwards” (Deleon & Deleon, 2002; Howlett, 2019; McLaughlin, 1987; Saetren, 2014). Reviewing the evolution of policy implementation analyses over three generations of time is useful to readers, as it will enable one to find the shortfalls and benefits to using prevailing theoretical approaches. This review will also set the stage for connecting the issue of teacher dissatisfaction with current school team practices within the larger historical background of how policy implementation problems have traditionally been analyzed. Additionally, using the research literature on policy implementation theory, I make the case for why using an alternative framework by Ball et al. (2012) to analyze the school team policy-to-practice gap is needed.

2.2.1. First-generation policy research

Prior to the 1970s, policy processes for the most part were considered unproblematic and semi-automatic, as many standard procedures and operations were in place (Howlett, 2019). The-policy cycle, or what is also known as the policy stage model, was widely accepted among policy researchers in the field as a framework for describing the policy process. The policy cycle framework stipulated the process wherein policies typically were formulated at the top levels of government and filtered down through five sequential stages that are typically categorized as (a) agenda-setting stage, (b) policy formulation stage, (c) decision-making stage, (d) implementation stage, and lastly, (e) the evaluation stage (Howlett, 2019; Hupe & Hill, 2008; Jann & Wegrich, 2017; Parsons, 1995). Policy analysts tended to focus on issues of policy formulating, decision-making, and agenda setting at the front end of the policy making process (Howlett, 2019). Any implementation problems that existed were thought of as being a surprise to policy planners and analysts, as they were either overlooked or assumed to be non-existent
(McLaughlin, 1987). It was in the first generation of policy implementation in the 1970s that researchers raised public awareness of the ineffectiveness of wide-scale reform programs, such as the Great Society’s social programs and the failure of policy realization (Püzl & Treib, 2017). Implementation problems that surfaced at the time were thought to be caused by the ‘irrational man’ who failed to maximize policy objectives, acted in unpredictable or idiosyncratic ways, or simply resisted policy aims. However, first generation policy researchers, particularly in the field of education, failed to show how local factors, such as commitment, capacity and institutional complexity shaped how implementers responded to policy (McLaughlin, 1987).

2.2.2. Second-generation policy research

In the words of McLaughlin (1987, p. 172), “Whereas first generation analysts discovered the problem and sketched its parameters, the second generation began to unpack it and to zero in on relations between policy and practice.” The field of policy implementation at this time became divided between those two camps. These two camps consisted of policy analysts who were primarily concerned with whether the focus of attention on the top levels of government at the ‘policy maker’ level or on the bottom level of policy deliverance at the ‘street’ level (Hupe & Hill, 2008; Parsons, 1995). This ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ debate limited theoretical development in the policy implementation field due to the stark difference in where the focus of policy power and decision-making was conceptualized. The divide between these two opposing approaches predominated much of the policy research at this time and shaped the future development of policy implementation analyses. As such, it is important to briefly discuss these two different approaches to understand how the divide between the ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ camps is relevant to current policy implementation analyses (Conteh, 2013; Hill & Hupe, 2002; Howlett, 2019).

The top-down policy research approach

Top-down policy implementation analysts believe that policy-making and consequently decision-making power is tied to the top levels of government where policies are created and inputs are made as opposed to the bottom level of the system
where implementation outputs occur (Parsons, 1995; Hupe & Hill, 2008; Pülzl & Treib, 2017). Thus, the focus of top-down analyses is how to best deliver policy makers’ intentions and objectives through bureaucratic procedures to ensure that policies are executed or implemented as accurately as possible (Pülzl & Treib, 2017; Sabatier, 1986). Top-down theorists believed that effective implementation requires a good chain of command and a capacity to co-ordinate and control the policy process. Top-down analysts argued that:

> Implementation is about getting people to do what they are told, while keeping control over a sequence of stages in a system; and about the development of a program of control which minimizes conflict and deviation from the goals set by the initial policy hypothesis. (Parsons, 1995, p. 466)

Said differently, analyzing policy failure from this perspective means that policy failure can be attributed to the inability of policy makers to create clear and consistent directives or to adequately supervise the implementation of their goals (Spillane et al., 2002). Thus, the analysis would identify possible causes of policy failure as use of the wrong strategy, wrong instruments, programming of the bureaucracy, and operationalization of policy, resulting ultimately in something going wrong at the shop floor level. Consideration of how policy actors at the bottom levels are left to implement policy objectives is irrelevant.

Critics of the top-down approach are quick to point out the drawbacks to this way of analyzing policy implementation problems. Critics mostly pointed out that the top-down approach is over simplistic and sterile, as it does not pay attention to the local context or policy actors at the bottom level who are involved in policy implementation (Ball et al., 2012; Jann & Wegrich, 2017). Likewise, opponents of the top-down approach argued that top-down theorists tend to ignore, or at least underestimate, the strategies used by street-level bureaucrats to get around policy and/or to divert it for their own purposes (Sabatier, 1986). Finally, skeptics of the top-down approach argued that the top-down emphasis on macro-level analyses is limited in how it can guide policy makers in understanding program outcomes, evaluating alternatives, assessing internal work requirements, or developing models of how policies should work in practice (McLaughlin, 1987). In light of the criticisms made of the top-down approach, one could argue that research studies examining the gap that exists between school team policy and
practices make the mistaken assumption that there is only one correct way in which to implement special education policy that educational personnel need to follow. However, this may be a rather simplistic way of analyzing problematic school team practices, given the reality of special education policy implementation within differing contexts, interpretations of different policy actors, and other factors that may influence how special education policy is implemented by actors at the local level (Naylor, 2005). To illustrate this point, the next section contains information to understand how the bottom-up perspective can lead educators into this train of thought.

**The bottom-up policy approach**

Around the late 1970s, early 1980s, policy analysts began to reject the idea that policies are defined at the top or central level of the system. These policy theorists aligned themselves with what became known as the bottom-up approach. Proponents of the bottom-up approach are critical of the idea that there is only a one-way causal link between policy objectives and policy outcomes, and they have exposed the reality that the consequences of even the best laid plans or decisions made at the policy formulation stage depend on how those throughout the policy cycle stages interpret and act upon policies (McLaughlin, 1987). They also showed how educators and local bureaucrats at the bottom level have a high level of discretion in how they interact and negotiate or shape policies within contexts of multiple priorities and policies and different political environments, as they are the ones who work nearest to the real problems and solutions than those at the top of policy making (Jann & Wegrich, 2017; McLaughlin, 1987; Pülzl & Treib, 2017; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). Policy analysts who apply a bottom-up approach also stress the fact that implementers’ willingness and motivation, which is crucial to policy implementation, depends on many factors beyond the reach of the top, such as environmental stability, competing centres of authority, contending priorities or pressures, and other aspects of the social-political arena (McLaughlin, 1987). Within the context of special education policy implementation, Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) emphasized the important role teachers who work at the bottom level play in interpreting policies within local school realities. Specifically, Weatherley and Lipsky’s work helped to shift the focus away from analyzing how institutions and institutional goals set policies
towards how individual beliefs, values, and local capacity influence the ways in which policies are carried out and interpreted.

Despite the appeal of using the bottom-up approach as a lens in which to analyze policy problems, there are some drawbacks to this approach that warrant mentioning. Firstly, the bottom-up approach tends to over emphasize the bottom level of policy implementation in its ability to frustrate the centre or top level of policy intentions. Related to this point is the second limit of the bottom-up approach. That is, in making the perceptions or interpretations of policy actors a prime focus, the bottom-up approach is in danger of ignoring the larger socio-political, legal, and economic factors that structure policy actors’ resources, context, and ability to implement policy (McLaughlin, 1987; Sabatier, 1986). Moreover, bottom-up approaches linked to micro-level analyses provide limited information to policy makers faced with larger organizational issues and system-wide decisions (McLaughlin, 1987). Finally, the bottom-up approach does not consider whether policy actors at the bottom level are able to carry out policy decisions or outcomes as intended by policy makers (McLaughlin, 1987; Sabatier, 1986).

2.2.3. Third-generation policy research

A third generation of policy researchers in the late 1980s and 1990s ambitiously attempted not only to synthesize the two dominant approaches of the previous generation, but they also tried to fill the conceptual gaps that each approach was lacking (Hill & Hupe, 2002; Howlett, 2019; Pülzl & Treib, 2017). However, few researchers achieved the goal of successfully integrating different approaches into a hybrid theory that is comprehensive, empirically validated, and inclusive of long-term studies (Deleon & Deleon, 2002; O’Toole, 2000). Because linking the macro level of analyses to the micro level of analyses proved to be too challenging without moving too far up or down the policy system, implementation researchers shifted their focus away from creating grand theories of implementation (McLaughlin, 1987). Instead, policy analysts discovered that examining the different levels of the policy system (i.e., top, middle, bottom) with a range of policy models or analyses that could be used for different information and discourse was more beneficial (McLaughlin, 1987). For some policy researchers, this means selecting policy theories that focus on explaining concerted action across system
boundaries, where a multi-focus perspective that looks at a multiplicity of actors, loci, and levels should be explored (Conteh, 2013). Other researchers, such as O’Toole (2004), proposed that policy researchers should choose from among three different options in pursuit of analyses of implementation problems that suits their research focus best. O’Toole proposed three options: (a) build on points of theoretical consensus, (b) develop a contingency perspective or strategy of comparative advantage that would help practitioners in the field choose from different theories, or lastly, (c) researchers can tap into emerging ideas to build on a synthesis of partial perspectives. Considering O’Toole’s three different options, I have chosen to apply the third option to the present research study. Namely, in using Ball et al.’s (2012) conceptual framework for enactment, I demonstrate how his synthesis of different perspectives or approaches to policy implementation, as applied to the realities of different school contexts and policy actors, is the best framework to use in analyzing the findings of this study. To gain perspective and background of Ball et al.’s policy enactment framework and where they borrowed their ideas from, I turn to the interpretivist approach to policy implementation.

The interpretivist approach

The interpretivist approach offers a different ontological stance than the theoretical analyses preceding it. It challenges the unbiased neutral observations underlining the positivist scientific theories of the past and instead seeks to replace it with the feelings, thoughts, and meanings of implementing agents (Püzl & Treib, 2017). However, like all policy approaches and perspectives, the interpretivist approach does not exist in a vacuum of its own. The interpretivist approach can be traced back to the work of bottom-up analysts who called into question theories of implementation based on principles of the rational man and cost-benefit analysis (Püzl & Treib, 2017; Yanow, 2011). Essentially, the interpretivist approach encourages policy researchers to examine how policy actors and policy communities interpret policy based on their values, feelings, and beliefs and then how these interpretations are communicated to and read by various audiences of the policy processes (Yanow, 2011). In other words, interpretivists investigate how policy actors derive meaning and interpret policy within particular and local contexts, and then they track down the effect of these multiple understandings on the implementation process (Püzl & Treib, 2017; Yanow, 2011).
As interpretivists believe that policy problems may be the result of divergent and competing interpretations and meanings of policy that exist for policy actors, they differ significantly from traditional top-down policy analysts. Interpretivists generally deny the top-down theorist’s assumption that problems are based on a single policy statement truth that is realized incorrectly or because there is a gap between policy and practice. Instead, interpretivists are concerned with policy implementation analyses that focus on what policy means (Yanow, 2011). Moreover, interpretivists are charged with the task of examining how different actors interpret the ‘policy culture’ (or the symbols, metaphors and policy language) and then they track down the effect of multiple understandings of the policy culture to the implementation process. In the final analysis, interpretivists extrapolate the tensions or puzzles between what an analyst expects to find and what he or she actually experiences in a field of policy study. This mismatch is said to create an opportunity to resolve the differences between what is intended by policy makers and how policy implementers are interpreting policy messages (Yanow, 2011). In exploring policy actors’ interpretations and sense-making processes of policy implementation, two related perspectives show significance in how policy is understood. These two interpretive perspectives can be broadly categorized as the cognitive and emotional perspectives.

The cognitivist perspective

Some of the key components of the cognitivist sense-making process that policy actors use in understanding policy reform initiatives can be traced to the work of Spillane et al. (2002). Whereas traditional or conventional policy theorists assume that implementers’ failure to understand a policy results from policy ambiguity, interpretivists believe that even if implementers understand what policy makers are asking them to do, conventional theories fail to account for implementers’ sense-making processes. Spillane et al. explained that individual implementing agents, first notice and interpret policy signals using their prior knowledge, beliefs, feelings, and experiences to construct new understandings. Second, the situation or the context that implementers may find themselves in is considered an important constituting and multidimensional component that complicates the sense-making process. Finally, Spillane et al. further described how policy signals, or external representations of ideas of the policy messages, can contribute
to implementers’ interpretations of policy. Spillane et al.’s cognitive structure suggests that policy texts or policy messages represent ideas about reformation that can be analyzed to see if it is understood by policy implementers as intended by policy makers.

Spillane et al. (2002) asserted that their cognitive perspective to implementation analysis incorporates both the bottom-up and top-down approaches. The top-down approach is important because the policy messages and the manner in which policy documents represent the policy makers’ intentions are influential in gaging policy implementers’ potentially different interpretations of policy. Conversely, the bottom-up perspective is significant to analysts’ understanding of how individual cognitive structures affect policy implementers’ sense-making processes. Therefore, in using Spillane et al.’s cognitive perspective, policy analysts should be able to break down policy actors’ understandings or misunderstandings based on their interpretations of policy messages, rather than blaming implementation outcomes being attributed to other reasons, such as policy implementers’ rejection of policy messages, their incapacity to execute policy as intended, and their having to deal with the reality of lack of resources.

Despite the appeal of using the cognitive perspective, attention to policy actors’ emotions in the cognitive sense-making process of reforms is often overlooked and understudied by policy analysts (Hargreaves, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002; Zembylas, 2010). To deny the role of emotions in how policy actors’ process and interpret policy would be a loss to any micro-level analysis of policy implementation. Although research on the role of emotion in reforms has been growing in the last decade, some researchers have argued that there is still a lack of coherent theoretical framework in this area (Saunders, 2012; Van Veen & Lasky, 2005; Van Veen & Sleeers, 2006; Zembylas, 2010). In the next section, I examine the role of emotion in implementation analyses and what it has to offer.

**The emotional perspective**

The second derivation of the interpretivist approach, the emotional perspective, is closely connected to the cognitivist perspective. The centrality of teachers’ emotions in implementation efforts has been repeated many times in Hargreaves’s (1998) research on school reforms. Hargreaves called on policy-makers to “come to terms with and embrace emotional dimensions of teaching and learning” for without attention to the emotions
“educational reform efforts may ignore and even damage some of the most fundamental aspects of what teachers do” (p. 850). Several researchers have examined the role of emotion in the implementation and reform process in schools (Saunders, 2012; Van Veen & Sleegers, 2006; Zembylas, 2010). In particular, Van Veen and Sleegers (2006) explored how teachers interact within their environment to give rise to different emotions when faced with reforms. Specifically, Van Veen and Sleegers found that the manner in which teachers react to educational reforms is largely determined by whether the teachers perceive their professional identities as being reinforced or threatened by reforms. Not only does this affect what teachers think about the reforms, as shown by the cognitivists, but also how teachers feel about reforms. Researchers, such as Schmidt and Datnow (2005) and Zembylas (2010) have also shown that how teachers act towards reforms is based on how it fits with their own emotions, values, and beliefs. In particular, Schmidt and Datnow stated that intense and negative emotional reactions are often felt by teachers who must implement reforms that are characterized by conflict, change, and ambiguity. The likelihood of implementation failure or follow through as determined by policy makers is high when teachers have negative emotions towards reform efforts, especially to the degree that they feel powerless and their sense of identity, values, and their beliefs are incompatible with educational reforms (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Zembylas, 2010).

One can find an example of this within the local context of B.C. In B.C., teachers have reacted negatively towards educational reforms introduced by the Liberal provincial government that run counter to teachers’ values and beliefs of what inclusive education should look like. For example, over their 16-year reign, the Liberal government significantly changed funding formulas affecting specialist supports for struggling students and stripped away class size caps, which negatively impacted teachers’ ability to teach special needs students in the general education classroom. Compounding this situation were several educational reforms that have occurred in B.C. over the last 10 years, such as revisions to the Ministry of Education’s Special Education Manual, the development of a re-designed curriculum, the privatization of education services, and the development of a new Individualized Education Plan (Gacoin, 2020). Moreover, although the number of special needs students has remained constant over the last 20 years, the types of special needs categories and complexity of student needs has shifted
considerably (Gacoin, 2019). This has resulted in teachers feeling powerless and has affected their professional identity and capacity to support all learners in the classroom (British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, 2019; Gacoin, 2020; Naylor, 2005). With these conditions in mind, it is not surprising that teachers reported that they do not feel confident in teaching to the increasing diversity in their classrooms and has led many teachers to believe that inclusive education in B.C. is in a state of crisis (Gacoin, 2020; Naylor, 2005).

In sum, it is important for policy makers and policy managers to not only pay attention to the cognitive component of implementers’ interpretations, but to their emotions as well. In other words, knowing how teachers’ emotions work in mediating teachers’ cognitive sense-making processes will not only help policy makers to understand the implementation process, but will also ensure that teachers feel supported in the process (Saunders, 2012). In short, policy reformers need to move away from being highly rational and must instead leave space for teachers’ emotions to be released during the implementation process (Hargreaves, 1998).

2.2.4. Beyond the third generation

There has been a gradual paradigm shift over the generations of policy research, whereby scholars are confronting existing knowledge bases inherent in conventional or traditional implementation theories of the past. Policy implementation researchers today are directing their focus onto more narrowly defined research subjects or cases of policy implementation with applicable methodological tools to guide their research efforts (Conteh, 2013; Hill & Hupe, 2002; Howlett, 2019; Jann & Wegrich, 2017). O’Toole (2004) has stated that it is exceedingly difficult to know ahead of time which kinds of knowledge base and approaches are likely to carry the best possible solutions and practical implications for policy implementation research. Moreover, it is unreasonable to expect that any one theory or multitude of theories will provide researchers with quick, clear, general, and useful analyses to implementation problems. Yet, one must start somewhere in the quest of understanding how educational policies are implemented and why they produce the effects of they do for implementers.
In the context of the present study, I argue that in order to unpack the how and why of SBT policy enactment by classroom teachers, we must look past the causal one-way top-down link between policy making and policy practice in schools. Using policy implementation approaches that deconstruct how policy actors interpret or make sense of policy and how their emotions may colour their interpretations is needed. Likewise, detailing the effects of conflicting interpretations, whether these interpretations are a result of a form of resistance, misunderstandings, a lack of capacity, or resources, should be considered. Additionally, examining the physical or material contexts that situate the environment in which policies are actualized and how these contexts determine local policy implementers’ cognitive and emotional appraisals of policy are required. Lastly, it is essential that macro-level pressures and influences, such as past and present special education policy and laws, economic, socio-political, and intellectual influences, should be considered in an analysis of the intentions behind policy making. All of these factors figure into the relationship between how classroom teachers interpret and come to understand SBT policy practices in comparison to policy makers’ intentions. Using O’Toole’s (2004) suggestions of how best to analyze policy problems, I have chosen to tap into Ball et al.’s (2012) enactment theory, which seeks to build a partial synthesis of the emerging ideas or approaches to policy implementation. Ball et al. offered an alternative framework in which to analyze the enactment of special education and school team policy by emphasizing how local policy actors interpret and make sense of school team practices and who struggle over special needs discourses that permeate contextual, situational, and socio-cultural realities and are infused with relationships of power between stakeholders.

Current school team practices in B.C., like those in the context of the U.S., are historically situated and embedded within layers of influences as demonstrated by the historical evolution of school team practices. School team practices today have evolved and been influenced by what I like to refer to as “the noise,” or past and present economic, political, legal, intellectual/research advances, and special needs discourses. Thus, in order to gain a better understanding and appreciation of teachers’ perspectives of school team practices in the local context of B.C. today, we need a frame of reference that takes into consideration the many interrelated and embedded cultural-economic
factors. In other words, in order to deconstruct the problems inherent with school team practices today, a deeper consideration of how school team practices are nested within a microenvironment of schools, middle layer of school structures, and a macro level of provincial policies, with surrounding “noise.” For a visual account of this nested cultural-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1976); see Figure 1.

![Cultural-ecological model of SBT practices.](image)

**Figure 1.** Cultural-ecological model of SBT practices.

This diagram sets the stage for how an alternative policy enactment framework that is different from the traditional top-down approach can be used for analyzing policy implementation issues or problematic school team practices that have typically been analyzed through a top-down approach are needed. Specifically, in the next chapter, I show that by using Ball et al.’s (2012) key ideas about how school policies enacted within particular school contexts and interpreted by policy actors at the school level, while infused with different relationships of power by policy actors, can be better illuminated and understood.
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

While a great deal of attention has been given to evaluating how well policies are implemented, that is, how well they are realized in practice, less attention has been paid to understanding and documenting the ways in which schools actually deal with multiple, and sometimes opaque and contradictory policy demands, and the diverse ways that they creatively work to fabricate and forge practices out of policy texts and policy ideas in the light of their situated realities.

(Ball et al., 2012, p. 150)

Ball et al.’s (2012) quote illustrates how they attempted to disrupt traditional notions of policy implementation that have originated in past research literature about policy implementation theory. Instead of analyzing policy implementation in the traditional ways of their predecessors, Ball et al. argued that policy enactment is not one-sided, nor should it be considered as being linear in a top-down or bottom-up approach as conceived of by first- and second-generation policy researchers. Similar to other researchers, such as Hubbard et al. (2006), who have moved away from the term implementation altogether, Ball et al. preferred the term enactment to signal that the process should not be conceived of as a straightforward and rational process, nor should policy outcomes be easily traced to their policy origins. Instead, Ball et al. stated that it is impossible to produce a linear model to show how policies make their way into schools. Ball et al. posited that policy enactment is one part of a dynamic process that can be formulated not only at the top, but also produced at the local school level or by local authorities and policy actors. Moreover, much of the research on policy implementation (particularly from the third generation) has produced long lists of variables, flowcharts, and diagrams that make it challenging to apply their theories to explaining the success or failure of policy practices (Matland, as cited in Ball et al., 2012). Ball et al. further explained that traditional conceptualizations of policy implementation would have one believe that “policy is implemented, put into practice (or not), based on ‘personal interest or utility maximization’” (p. 6). In this approach, lead policy actors choose what policies they want to attend to, what they think will be of the most value, and sideline any alternatives that do not fit with their agendas (Ball et al., 2012). In contrast to this idea,
Ball et al. understood policy implementation or enactment as “diverse and complex ways in which sets of education policies are ‘made sense of,’ mediated and struggled over, and sometimes ignored” (p. 11). Thus, policy enactment is a form of translation or a space in between where policy language exists and where policy is acted upon.

### 3.1. The Three Components of Policy Enactment

Ball et al.’s (2012) policy enactment approach utilizes an approach that is an interplay of both theory and data, through using long-term case studies in schools in the United Kingdom. Essentially, three different components of policy processes make up Ball et al.’s framework. These three components consist of (a) the interpretive: the meanings that policy actors make of policy; (b) the material: the physical aspects of a school; and (c) the discursive: the strategies and practices that speak to the wider social processes of the purpose of schooling and the production of the good student. These components originate from previous theories, approaches, and discourses discussed in this chapter. For example, Ball et al. (2012) stated that they drew on Ball’s earlier writing on the policy cycle, Foucault’s work on discourse and governmentality, and the more substantive cognitive-interpretivist work of Spillane et al. (2002). Ball et al. claimed that taken together, these three different aspects (i.e., discursive, material, and interpretative) of policy processes can be best understood as “a toolkit for telling interesting stories about and interfering in’ the webs of social relations and relations of power that produce and circumscribe policy and practices in schools,” which, on their own, is not sufficient for describing policy and practices (p. 51). In the next section, I briefly describe how each of these three different aspects are interwoven in their approach to policy enactment and how it can lead us to a better understanding of special education policy enactment.

#### 3.1.1. The interpretive aspect

Ball et al. (2012) stated that they drew on Spillane et al.’s (2002) cognitive-interpretivist approach to policy implementation problems and labelled it the interpretive aspect of their policy enactment framework. In using Spillane et al.’s cognitive-interpretivist approach, the role of human agency, sense-making, and interpretation that is
missing in most conventional theories of policy implementation is included. Specifically, by incorporating the idea that policy actors necessarily interpret policies based on their existing cognitive structures (such as their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), their situation, and the policy signals, Ball et al. gave agency to local street-level policy actors in schools. However, what is refreshing about Ball et al.’s use of the cognitive approach is that policy actors are not all treated under one broad category. Instead, Ball et al. provided an in-depth typology of eight different and potentially overlapping types of policy actors or positions involved in the process of realizing policy in schools. These eight categories are nonexclusive policy positions, and policy actors can be found to overlap with different policy positions. Ball et al.’s typology of policy actors provides for a better understanding of how different stakeholders connected to school team practices deal with, interpret, and translate special education policy into practices at the classroom level. For example, school principals and district leaders can be categorized as narrators, placing them in the position of interpreting and enforcing particular interpretations of special education policy, while classroom teachers can be categorized as receivers who cope, defend, or depend on special education policy to support their struggling students. Additionally, in the literature review of the history of school team models, evidence was provided as to how school leaders and researchers can be categorized as narrators or translators who developed different school team models (e.g., TATs, MAT, PITs, etc.) that reflected their interpretations of special education policies at the time. Ball et al.’ typology of eight different policy actor positions is presented in Table 1.
Table 1.  *Categories of Nonexclusive Policy Positions or Policy Actors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrators</td>
<td>Those who interpret, select, and enforce meanings of policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurs</td>
<td>Those who advocate, create, and integrate policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsiders</td>
<td>Entrepreneurs, partners, and monitors of policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactors</td>
<td>Those who account, report, support, and facilitate policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasts</td>
<td>Those who invest, create, satisfy and make careers out of policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translators</td>
<td>Those who produce texts, artifacts and events related to policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critics</td>
<td>Union representatives or those critical of policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receivers</td>
<td>Copers, defenders, and dependents of policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Compiled from Ball et al. (2012)*

**3.1.2. The material aspect**

In addition to providing a detailed typology of policy actors’ positions, Ball et al. (2012) also included the component of the material aspect of policy processes by creating different dimensions of the types of contexts that can affect policy actors’ enactment of policy within schools. Ball and his associates argued that considering the material context within which policy actors work is essential to understanding how polices are interpreted and iteratively refracted as considered by the cognitivist-interpretivist perspective. For example, Ball et al. explained how policy interpretation by actors can mix with four different types of resource environments. These resource environments include situated contexts, professional cultures, material contexts, and external contexts that lend themselves to another detailed typology of school contexts. For example, a school’s history, building and infrastructure, staffing profile, leadership experiences, budgetary situations, teaching and learning challenges, as well as social and economic deprivations are all included in Ball et al.’s typology of different school contexts. This typology of different contexts is important to consider when analyzing how school teams are enabled or constricted in their ability to enact ideal special education practices. For example,
schools’ contexts that are endowed with extra funds in their budgets to implement ideal instructional or support services for special needs students would be in a better position to enact special education policies than schools that are lacking in funds or resources. This was evident also in the research literature that showed that many school teams in the past were forced to implement practices shaped in part by financial pressures and tight time constraints of processing increasing student referral cases.

3.1.3. The discursive aspect

Closely infused within typologies of context variables and policy actors’ positions are dynamics of power, according to Ball et al. (2012). This is where the discursive aspect of Ball et al.’s policy enactment framework plays in. By incorporating Foucault’s ideas on power, Ball et al. analyzed how the discursive, in the form of school policy artifacts and materials (e.g., policies and procedure manuals, systems flow charts, etc.) circulating in schools and originating from government can be used as tools to control and regulate how policies are to be enacted. In this way, Ball et al. incorporated Foucault’s ideas on power and control, not only within the analysis of important artifacts related to school policies, but also with the bigger idea of why particular school policies have been written to begin with. Policies are discursive formations when the “sets of texts, events, and practices speak to wider social processes of schooling, such as the production of ‘the student’, the ‘purpose of schooling’ and the construction of ‘the teacher’” (Foucault, as cited in Ball et al., 2012, p. 24). In relation to the current study, discourses embedded within special education policy language and in common understanding in the Western world speak to (a) what it means to have special needs: something different from the norm; (b) how special needs students are produced: as determined through pre-referral processes in schools; and (c) what the purpose of special education and inclusion is: to accommodate students to achieve normality to the best way, while including them in general or normal education. However, as already discussed earlier in the section on current research about the school team policy-to-practice gap, there is room for what Foucault (as cited in Ball et al., 2012, p. 131) argued “is a distribution of gaps, voids, absences, limits, divisions.” In other words, research on the school team policy-to-practice gap revealed that language and other representations of
special needs and its related discourses are often blurry and cracked, and they leave room for different interpretations by stakeholders involved in school team practices. This is especially apparent when particular stakeholders hold different positions of power that superimpose their interpretations on classroom teachers. Essentially, power plays over which interpretation of special needs discourse is correct is played out during school team practices and influences how special needs students and their education is constructed and reinforced in schools. Thus, incorporating the discursive as it relates to interpretations of special needs discourses and the enactment of school team practices is an important component in understanding teachers’ perspectives of school team practices.

Taken together, Ball et al.’s (2012) policy enactment theory takes from the interpretivist approach a rich attention to policy actor positions and interpretations of policies (i.e., the interpretative), as well as concepts of power relations infused within policy actors’ interpretations of special needs discourses (i.e., the discursive) all set within the specific material and situational contexts of schools (i.e., the material). All three aspects of Ball et al.’s policy enactment theory offer implementation analysts and researchers one of the most detailed, yet practical, frameworks that can be used to analyze school policies at the school level. Not only did Ball et al. acknowledge the dynamic ways in which special policy enactment has been delivered in schools over the course of the history of school teams, especially in the 1970s when school teams were just forming and schools were faced with many “multiple and sometimes contradictory policy demands,” but they also paid attention to the different physical contexts in which policies are realized (p. 150). Additionally, Ball et al.’s detailed consideration of different policy actor positions is beneficial, as it does not take for granted that all policy actors interpret and enact policies in the same way. Moreover, Ball et al.’s incorporation of Spillane et al.’s (2002) cognitive construction brings to concrete reality the voice of policy actors. Finally, Ball et al.’s use of the discursive, specifically in reference to particular power relations and how different perspectives of special needs discourses should be interpreted, is a significant element that exists both at the macro policy-making level and at the micro level where special needs discourses are realized, struggled over, and enacted by policy actors at the school level.
However, one dimension that is lacking in detail and consideration in Ball et al.’s (2012) analytical framework is the role that emotion plays in policy actors’ sense-making process. Although Ball et al. mentioned briefly that psychosocial and affective dimensions as being important considerations to make when examining how policy actors deal with policy work, they admitted that more work is required in this area in the future. In this study, I incorporate the role of teachers’ emotions, as they are relevant to the ways in which classroom teachers interpret and understand school team practices, especially given the current climate in B.C. of reduced support services for students with special needs and the effect it has had on classroom teachers’ confidence in their ability to teach to diverse student abilities in the classroom (Naylor, 2005).
Chapter 4. Methods

The aim of this research study was to explore classroom teachers’ understandings and perspectives of SBT practices within the context of their previous teaching experiences and participation in SBT practices. In light of this aim, I designed a qualitative study. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I outline the approach and decisions that guided the design of this qualitative research study. Specifically, I organized the methodological decisions employed in the follow way: (a) my role as a researcher-practitioner; (b) approaches used to ground the study; (c) the research questions posed to guide this study; (d) details related to the data collection and sources of data, such as the research site, participants, recruitment methods, and interview procedures; (e) details related to the analysis of the data collected, such as how the data were coded, categorized, and how themes were created; and; (f) the criteria used to ensure qualitative excellence for this study (i.e., worthiness, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence);

4.1. My Role as a Researcher-Practitioner

I have worked as an elementary classroom teacher and learner support teacher for approximately 20 years. In my role as a learner support teacher, I have worked with students who require additional support in the area of English language acquisition, and I have worked with students with special needs designations. These professional experiences have exposed me to a variety of different educational contexts and school cultures, both within the Rosendale School District and in a neighbouring smaller school district. In these contexts, I have been exposed to many different educational personnel, school policies, and everyday school practices. Additionally, in my experiences of participating and chairing SBT meetings in many different schools in B.C., I have drawn from my educational background in leadership (MEd) when collaborating with different professionals who bring with them their own set of perspectives, understanding, beliefs, and values. These professional and educational experiences have equipped me with both
a theoretical and practical understanding of the challenges of working to solve student problems in schools today. Yet, I often felt frustrated with what appeared to me to be a lack or limit to what SBTs are capable of providing classroom teachers and their difficult-to-teach students. At the same time, I began to see a common pattern in how teachers identify potential special needs in students and the limited capacity of SBTs to effectively support students and teachers, which disturbed me.

Closely intertwined with my professional school experiences are my own background and the personal beliefs and values I bring to this research study. Using a few commonly known labels, I identify myself as a female, only parent of two kids, and an Indo-Canadian daughter of two working class immigrant parents. I grew up in a mostly white, working-middle class, suburban neighbourhood, where I learned the value of working hard and the merit of academic effort. My early educational experiences included attending an elementary school that provided ample opportunities for children to achieve academic, emotional, and physical fulfillment in a multicultural Canadian society. I was mostly content with my elementary educational experiences, which largely outweighed the experiences of feeling like an outsider amongst my peers at school. As a result of these early educational experiences, the values passed on by my parents, mixed with my own aptitude and passion for working with young children, I decided in my mid-twenties to pursue an elementary teaching career, and later in my late thirties to pursuing a doctoral degree in education. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, during my doctoral degree studies, my eldest child was diagnosed with mild autism, and the other one was in the process of potentially being identified as having a special need. Thus, my personal maternal experiences taught me firsthand what it is like to advocate for children who may be perceived as being different or in need of special attention in both the realm of education and the larger realm of society.

I disclose my personal and professional experiences to show how they have influenced my ideas and beliefs about identifying and treating students with unique challenges. For instance, in my professional role, I sometimes felt that teachers were too quick to diagnose student differences and to embark upon a hunt to find the correct match between a student problem and the appropriate special needs label to define what was considered to be a problem. This unsettled me because I felt that teachers were perhaps
not giving their students a fair chance in having others evaluate their students’ problems. Yet, paradoxically, I also found myself empathizing with classroom teachers. I understood that many times the only way for classroom teachers to address their students’ problems was to receive the necessary support they desired by referring them to their SBTs in hopes that they would eventually obtain a formal special needs designation. When this did not occur for many teachers, I would witness teachers being frustrated with process and losing hope in the system. As a fellow teacher, I not only felt empathetic towards my colleagues, but I also felt helpless in not being able to give teachers what they felt they needed.

In sum, these personal and professional experiences sparked a desire in me to further investigate SBT practices. In particular, I was curious to explore teachers’ understandings and perspectives related to special needs discourses or their conception of what it means for a student to have a special need. I wanted to examine how other teachers in the local context experienced the identification and evaluation process of students with potential disabilities and what their perspectives of SBT practices were. I also began to wonder if teachers were also questioning special needs discourses as I was. To answer some of these questions, I decided to turn to the research literature about school team practices and the pre-referral process to gain a broader understanding of my personal and professional experiences.

In reviewing the literature related to my inquiry, I discovered research findings that seemed to suggest classroom teachers find SBT practices to be problematic for many different reasons. Moreover, I found evidence suggesting that from the moment a classroom teacher singles out a student in his or her class as being different and decides to refer him or her to the SBT, to how SBTs problem solve student cases has a powerful influence over how disabilities are diagnosed in children. More specifically, how school personnel come to perceive student problems through their own individual lenses can determine to a large extent how a student’s problem is framed, and the evaluation process unfolds during SBT meetings. Moreover, I discovered that many teachers are unclear about the parameters of identifying and evaluating potential special needs in students. For example, many teachers seemed to be confused regarding how and when to refer a student to a school team and what the purpose of school teams is.
Being familiar with the pre-referral policies and living them in a very personal way in my own life, I believe gives me an authentic voice in my research and gives me a moral purpose in my quest to understand the processes of how children with unique learning profiles are identified as potentially being considered special needs. I describe and acknowledge my professional and personal experiences here to show readers the background, perspective, and ultimately any potential biases I may have brought to this research study (Cox, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Miles et al., 2014; Peshkin, 1988; Tracy 2010). I believe that by acknowledging and disclosing how my professional and personal experiences are intertwined with the role of a researcher throughout the research process, I have been able to be self-reflexive or “conscious” of how the two roles are enmeshed into this research study. My professional experience of being an educator and SBT member gives the advantage of prior understanding of the common everyday practices and equips me with a level of tacit knowledge of both the positive and negative components of SBT practices in elementary schools. Moreover, as stated already, being a mother of two children with unique learning profiles has afforded me the ability to understand what it means to have a child go through the process of being labelled and also in advocating for children’s educational rights.

Thus, with these identified beliefs and assumptions underlining my role as a researcher-practitioner and parent, I embarked upon exploring the classroom teachers’ thoughts and beliefs about SBT practices, or their perspectives. This intention brought me to create the general research question to anchor this research inquiry. Additionally, I wanted to understand teachers’ perspectives of SBT meetings, as I knew that the identification and evaluation of potential special needs in referred students occurred at this stage in the pre-referral process. This is why I included a research sub-question that directly addressed teachers’ perspectives of the SBT’s instructional recommendations and the decision outcomes. Finally, knowing that the larger context of SBT policy and, more broadly, special education policy largely shape the direction within which school personnel implement SBT practices, I incorporated a second sub-question which would situate teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices within the larger context of special education policy in B.C. I direct you to the next section, which outlines the three research questions I posed.
4.2. The Research Question

The general research question used to guide my research inquiry of SBT practices as experienced by classroom teachers who teach in elementary schools was:

*What are Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices?*

I employed two sub-questions to provide further details and to outline the parameters of the general research question posed:

- *What are Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives of the instructional recommendations and decision outcomes made by SBTs?*
- *How do these teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices allow us a better understanding of special education policy in the context of the Rosendale School District?*

To answer the research questions in the best way possible, I decided to use a qualitative interview design which I describe in the following section (Patton, 1980).

4.3. Qualitative Research

Researchers such as Creswell (2012), Denzin and Lincoln (2011), Miles et al. (2014), and Patton (1980) have long espoused that qualitative research allows one to explore, understand, and gain insight into the essence of a research inquiry through using naturalistic data. Moreover, researchers using qualitative approaches often used data derived from in-depth, detailed, and holistic descriptions of situations, events, people, and interactions, or from the people’s direct quotations about their experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and thoughts (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 1980). Qualitative researchers seek to explore and interpret people’s experiences and the meanings that they apply to the events and processes in connecting these to the social world around them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Miles et al., 2014). Thus, using a qualitative approach enabled me to explore and understand, in rich detail and description, what a select group of Rosendale classroom teachers think of SBT practices. Moreover, in using an interview research design, I sought to relay firsthand the voice and visibility of classroom teachers’ perspectives and experiences of SBT policy practices. Relying on a qualitative approach to explore teachers’ perspectives also enabled me to obtain a
detailed description of teachers’ experiences and to uncover their beliefs, thoughts, and emotions in a way that would not be possible using quantitative measures. Moreover, it allowed me to relay teachers’ perspectives in a way where I could ensure that I would not be pre-determining a range of options, categories, or standardizing teachers’ responses in a quantifiable form. Also, by choosing to interview teachers, I would be allowing them to report on their own experiences and perspectives in a way that is meaningful to them and in a format where they would be able to use their own words and emotions (Patton, 1980).

Within the general qualitative research tradition, I used an interpretive and constructivist approach. An interpretivist approach entails the ontological assumption of relativism, and that reality is subjective, differing for everyone. Reality is mediated by the senses and emerges when consciousness engages with objects that are “pregnant with meaning” (Crotty, 1989, p. 43). Moreover, meaning is constructed by individuals, who may differ in their interpretation of reality from one another (Scotland, 2012). Thus, interpretivism holds an epistemological assumption, in which the knower and the known are interactive and inseparable, temporal and context dependence, and knowledge is bound by both time and context (Al Zeera, 2001). Using an interpretivist approach allows researchers to explore in detail and interpret people’s perspectives and actions or how they make sense of or bring meaning upon things within particular contexts (Hammersley, 2013; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). In order to understand other peoples’ perspectives, actions, or events, researchers must inevitably draw upon their own personal and social experiences within particular socio-historical circumstances or contexts, rather than seeking to achieve procedural objectivity or universal laws as foundations for explanation (Hammersley, 2013; Willis, 2007). Thus, interpretivists acknowledge that all research is ultimately influenced and shaped by their subjective worldviews of the researcher, who seeks to understand multiple stories, perspectives, reflections, and experiences of the world (Willis, 2007).

Connected to the interpretivist approach, I utilized the constructivist approach helped to ground this study. Constructivist epistemology, like interpretivist epistemology, is distinguished from positivism by the unique characteristics of subjectivity, wholeness, empathy, intuitions, and feelings (Al Zeera, 2001). Like the interpretivist approach, the
constructivist approach adheres to a non-absolutist and relativist ontology, where multiple realities that are incommensurable can exist. Constructivists believe that individuals actively select and construct their perceptions and cognitions of the world around them based on the socio-cultural contexts they are situated in. Moreover, the nature of knowledge and knowledge accumulation, according to the constructivists, involves individual or collective reconstructions coalescing around consensus, as opposed to verified hypothesis or facts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Despite the ontological similarities between these two approaches, there are some epistemological differences. For example, some constructivist researchers questioned whether true understanding of other people and oneself is possible. This point is attributed to the nature of the constitutive processes that underlie true understanding. What this means is that constructivist researchers cannot rely or be misled by the appearance or dispositions of objects for their understanding. Instead, they must focus on the social construction process itself and the discursive processes of shared communication and social interaction in relaying epistemological knowledge (Hammersley, 2013). Thus, researchers must focus on how the knower and the known co-create understanding, meaning, and knowledge that can also be changeable (Lee, 2012). With this researcher-teacher relationship in mind and through the lens of interpretivism, I sought to understand SBT practices by interviewing teachers in a particular research site, which I describe next.

### 4.4. Research Site

The Rosendale School District (pseudonym) is comprised of a student body that is ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse, making it a great choice of a school district to study its SBT practices. Rosendale students, as a whole, reflect the demographic features of the City of Rosendale. In order to illustrate some of the contextual demographical features of the Rosendale School District, I provide a summary of relevant statistical information of Rosendale City first, and then I follow with a brief summary of the Rosendale School District.

Statistics provided for the city of Rosendale was acquired through the school district and Statistics Canada, but to protect the anonymity of this city, no specific
sources will be cited. The Rosendale School District is situated in the Greater Vancouver Metropolitan area of B.C. It is comprised of urban areas as well as significant agricultural and rural areas, covering 32,621 hectares of land. As of 2016, the population of Rosendale was 517,885, which went up by 11% between the time period of 2011 and 2016. Rosendale residents range in the level of income earned. For example, 15% of Rosendale residents earn $30,000 a year and are considered to be in the low-income range, while 49% of Rosendale residents live within the middle-income range ($30,000-$99,000), and 36% live in the upper-income range ($100,000+). Thus, the income level of Rosendale residents follows a typical bell curve income distribution, with the exception of being bigger on the upper-income end. Rosendale residents are diverse in terms of the level of education attained, with the majority of residents obtaining a high school level of education or higher. For instance, at the time of this research, 34% of Rosendale residents held a university degree or higher, 17% had a college or other non-university certificate or diploma, 29% held a high school diploma or equivalent, and 14% of Rosendale residents had no certificate, diploma, or degree. Perhaps most important to note, Rosendale School district has the largest student enrolment in BC, with a total of 101 elementary schools. More than half of the students in the district speak a language other than English at home. Of the more than 195 languages other than English represented in Rosendale schools, the highest percentages are Punjabi, Tagalog (Filipino), Mandarin, Hindi, and Arabic.

In response to the large, diverse, and growing student and parent population of Rosendale, the Rosendale School District has created several policy guidelines surrounding how SBTs must abide by provincial special needs policy, SBT policy, and more generally, how student problems and teacher concerns with students are to be handled. Rosendale School District SBT policy has become increasingly specialized and standardized since the early days when SBTs were created in the district. This has left school personnel, specifically classroom teachers, the task of trying to understand the role and purpose of SBTs, as well as how they must enact increasingly specialized and standardized SBT policy practices. For these reasons, and given my insider status as a specialist teacher in the Rosendale School District, I chose to conduct this study in elementary schools in this district.
4.5. Participants

I utilized a mix of purposeful and convenience sampling to identify and recruit potential participants in the chosen site for this study. Creswell (2012) and Maxwell (1992) described purposeful sampling as a process whereby researchers intentionally select individuals and research sites to learn about and to test developing ideas related to a central phenomenon. I recruited participants by inviting any elementary school teachers employed as classroom teachers within the past five years who had referred at least one student to the SBT during that period in the Rosendale School District. I focused on classroom elementary teachers because typically students with learning and behaviour problems are first identified at the elementary school level, earlier on in their development, rather than later during high school years. The process of referring a struggling student to a school team usually first occurs in the early years of a student’s academic career and when classroom teachers become aware that something is wrong with the way a student is learning, behaving, or interacting with other students in the classroom.

The need to identify, diagnose, and refer a potential special needs student is usually the strongest when classroom teachers are faced with some unanswered questions, concerns, or problems with regards to integrating and educating struggling students in the general education classroom, while at the same time considering alternative placements if needed. Thus, the need to problem solve students’ issues and teachers’ concerns are most acute and ripe for investigation at the elementary school level. Additionally, I narrowed the scope of my study to the perspective of classroom teachers, instead of parents, non-enrolling teachers, administrators, and other educational personnel as classroom teachers are most often the first initiators and most directly involved in educating students in the general education classroom (Poland et al., 1982). Thus, by focusing on classroom teachers’ perspectives of school team practices, I was better able to gain a deeper understanding of how school team practices are understood by policy actors, those most directly involved in implementing school team policies at the local school and individual class level.
4.6. Recruitment

In March 2016, I made a first attempt to recruit participants by including a written advertisement (see Appendix A) in the weekly newsletter sent to all administrators in the Rosendale School District through their district e-mail. The advertisement included a brief description of the study and a request for me to attend an upcoming staff meeting as a method to recruit classroom teachers. Next, I contacted administrators employed at different elementary schools in the Rosendale School District via e-mail, requesting permission to drop off paper advertisements of my study in teachers’ mailboxes at each school. Both of these methods yielded little response, and I did not pursue them further. I decided at this point to contact classroom teachers directly, eliminating the need to involve an intermediary, such as a school administrator, in the recruitment process. I felt that teachers may be too busy to take the initiative to respond during school hours, or advertisements for recruitment may get lost amongst other paperwork in teachers’ mailboxes at schools or simply thrown out. As a result of this decision, my next attempt was to place the same advertisement using social media. I am aware that in recruiting participants through social media, I may have potentially limited the type of teachers I would be sampling—mainly those classroom teachers who rely on social media sites for teachers as a form of connection, information gathering and sharing, as a way of expressing emotions, or those teachers who simply enjoy interacting online as a form of passing time. Looking at this issue from a different perspective, by advertising and recruiting teacher participants through social media sites, I would also be attracting the type of teachers who would want to share their perspectives of SBT practices. In all, I was able to recruit fourteen teachers through word of mouth and social media and one teacher through dropping off advertisements in teachers’ mailboxes at their schools.

Thirteen out of the 15 participants in this study were employed as classroom teachers during the interview process. Two teachers I interviewed were employed as specialist teachers. However, both had been classroom teachers within the past five years, thus meeting my inclusion criteria. All but one of the teachers I interviewed was female. Classroom teachers included in this study had a wealth of teaching experience. This is reflected in the demographic data collected, which showed that 12 of the 15 teachers had
taught for over 10 years. The other three teachers had taught for five years or more. Collectively, teachers also had experience in all of the elementary grades, ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 7. Moreover, teachers’ interview responses drew from their experiences teaching in schools where the student population came from diverse linguistic and economic backgrounds. Teachers, themselves, also held a wealth of educational and professional expertise, with nine out of the 15 teachers achieving some form of post-degree education. Thus, the teachers included in this study reflected Tracy’s (2010) criteria of representing “multiple voices,” which is a marker of ensuring excellent qualitative. For a detailed description of the demographic background of teachers, please refer to Table 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher names</th>
<th>Grade level(s)</th>
<th># of referrals</th>
<th>Years of teaching experience</th>
<th>Years of education</th>
<th>Area of expertise/professional education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Amanda</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Elementary education (B.ED), General Arts (PB+15),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Amy</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Biology/History-undergrad, Masters in Educ. Lead &amp; Admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Andrea</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Psychology undergrad, B.ED (elementary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Ariel</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Child &amp; youth care degree, Education degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Brittany</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>B.ED (curriculum studies minor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Carolyn</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>B.ED (early childhood)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Gina</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>B.ED (early childhood), Master’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Jackie</td>
<td>1/2/3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Master’s Degree in Educational Psychology, currently enrolled in a Doctoral Degree (Education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Julia</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>B.ED (elementary) master’s in leadership &amp; Admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) Lori</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bachelor’s in child &amp; youth care &amp; B.ED (elementary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11) Mary</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bachelor’s in human kinetics, B.ED &amp; PBD in tech &amp; education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12) Nancy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>B.ED (French major) &amp; PBD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13) Paul</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>B.A. in Geography &amp; Economics, B.ED, Masters (curriculum studies) &amp; Doctoral Degree (Education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14) Rebecca</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>B.A., B.ED &amp; PBD (special education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15) Rita</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>B.A., PDP &amp; PBD in special education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.7. Data Sources and Methods of Data Collection

4.7.1. The interview protocol

Prior to commencing each interview, the interviewee completed and signed a consent form (see Appendix B). I used a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of 18 questions that began with experience-related questions intended to elicit teachers’ descriptions of their experiences or pre-referral activities that would have been observable had I been present at their school site (Patton, 1980). Then I moved towards more specific opinion or value questions intended to understand how teachers think and interpret different components of SBT practices (Patton, 1980). I organized these two types of questions within three general categories: (a) pre-referral process, (b) SBT meetings, and (c) SBT’s instructional recommendations and decision outcomes. Towards the end of interviews, I asked teachers questions about their personal background. For example, within the first category, I asked teachers four questions about the pre-referral process, such as: “What does the pre-referral process look like at your school?” Under the next category of SBT meetings, I asked teachers five questions about the SBT meeting, such as: “Suppose I am a new teacher at your school attending a SBT meeting for the first time, what would I see happening?” These questions were designed to gain information about the structure of the meeting, the participants, and the kind of discussion involved during a meeting. Following this, I asked questions related to the instructional recommendations and SBT decision outcomes category, such as: “Describe some of the decisions that have resulted after your student has been referred to the SBT” and “Describe some of the instructional recommendations that resulted afterwards.”

Following the experience-related questions and subsumed under each of the three categories, I asked teachers questions what their opinions were regarding each section and if they would change anything. Finally, the last six questions were demographic in nature or related to teachers’ background (Patton, 1980). To achieve this end, I asked questions related to participants’ educational and teaching experience background. For further details related to the interview protocol, please refer to Appendix C.

The interview questions posed in the interview protocol were originated based on my own experiences as a specialist and generalist teacher in elementary schools.
Additionally, as I have participated in several SBT meetings and contributed as a regular SBT member in different schools, I utilized my background knowledge and experiences in the area when creating interview questions. However, keeping in mind that I wanted to elicit teachers’ own understandings of the process of pre-referral to SBTs, I created interview questions that would be inclusive of participants’ own experiences. Thus, as suggested by Creswell (2012) and McCracken (2008), I constructed the interview questions for the most part to be general and nondirective to allow participants to tell their stories in their own way or to allow participants to voice their perspectives and experiences, without leading them in a particular direction (Creswell, 2012).

To ensure the quality of the interview questions posed, I reviewed my interview protocol with two faculty supervisors and piloted them with two classroom teachers. One classroom teacher was employed as an intermediate teacher (Grade 4) in the Rosendale School District. The other classroom teacher was employed as a primary teacher (Grade 2) and taught in a school district outside of the Rosendale School District. Having a classroom teacher who is employed at an elementary school external to the research site to test out the interview protocol was beneficial in checking that the questions could be clearly understood by a teacher who may be unfamiliar with Rosendale SBT practices. Testing out the interview protocol with these two classroom teachers was helpful in achieving an element of trustworthiness or rigour in two ways. Firstly, I was able to check the authenticity of the questions posed during the interview, making sure that the questions were true to the research questions posed in this study. Secondly, having these teachers do “mock interviews,” I was able to ensure that the questions posed were clear and understandable to others. I used what I learned from the pilot interviews to further refine my interview protocol. For example, during the pilot interviews, I realized that the class review process was important, as one of the teachers I interviewed had mentioned it in her response. I followed up with this by creating a question related to class reviews in the interview protocol. I also discovered that the interview questions were powerful in assisting one teacher to retell a specific story related to a student who was referred to the SBT. This showed me that it would be helpful at times for me to suggest teachers think of a particular student case that might highlight their SBT experiences when answering some of the more general interview questions.
4.7.2. Interviewing teachers

I conducted all interviews with teachers in person, after school hours, in a private room, either in their own schools or at a local coffee shop. Each interview ranged in the length of time it took to complete the interview, which was anywhere from 20 minutes to approximately 45 minutes. The average length of each interview was approximately half an hour. The interviews took place over three months, between the months of March and May 2016. During the interviews, I took notes on a hard copy of the interview protocol in case the recording process failed and as a way of keeping track of questions asked. With the permission of the participants, all 15 interviews were digitally recorded, and I later transcribed over 141 pages of verbatim transcriptions of the teachers’ interviews. The number of pages transcribed yielded rich and detailed descriptions of teachers’ perspectives and interpretations of the SBT referral practices. Additionally, personally conducting the interviews and transcribing the data allowed me to stay in touch with teachers’ voices even after the interviews were over. This process connected me personally to the data, where I could still feel what was said in the interview when reading over the transcribed notes. Moreover, by transcribing the data myself, I was able to recall not only what teachers said, but also what was not said. Meaning that the pauses, hesitations, and intonations of the teachers and the fine nuances of teachers’ responses were remembered when I later read over the transcribed notes.

While transcribing the data, I also kept a memo book, which helped me to make note of significant points that came out of my interviews with individual teachers and possible connections between the responses of different participants. It also helped to further refine some of the interview questions posed to teachers in subsequent interviews. For instance, from the initial interviews, I learned that when asking the questions related to the class review process, using the term “netting” in the question made it easier for teachers to understand the questions. Another example is that I asked additional prompting questions when teachers would describe the decision-making process during SBT meetings. For example, if teachers reported that their opinion of SBT decisions was not positive, I would prompt teachers further by asking them if they ever disagreed with decisions made by the SBT, and if they said they did, then I would further prompt them by asking them why they disagreed. These prompting questions were eventually included
at relevant points during subsequent interviews with other teachers, as I realized a common thread in many teachers’ responses.

After I transcribed and did a preliminary analysis of each of the first four interviews, I decided to refrain from transcribing and analyzing interview data until more interviews were completed. I did this for two reasons. Firstly, I was under a tight time constraint to finish interviewing teachers before the end of the school year, and I knew teachers would be writing report cards and they would also be involved with numerous end-of-year school activities (a very stressful time of the school year for many classroom teachers). Secondly, I felt that waiting to analyze teacher interviews until after three or four teacher interviews were finished would force me to focus on the teachers I was interviewing at the time. Seidman (2006) concurred with my line of reasoning in his guide to conducting interviews for qualitative research. Specifically, Seidman stated that one should avoid the trap of analyzing interview data too early, even if one notes possibly salient themes, so as to ensure that meanings from one participant are not imposed onto another. Thus, I focussed on transcribing interviews in batches of approximately three or four, once interviews were concluded, and whenever time allowed me to.

4.8. Data Analysis

The data analysis process I used is akin to what Saldana (2016) described as moving from the particular to the general. Specifically, when I began the process of exploring interview data, I used a generalist and exploratory approach of coding the data. The process of coding, categorizing, and thematically organizing the data used consisted of moving from the particulars to the whole is espoused by other researchers, such as Creswell (2012) and Patton (1980). In the next few sections is a detailed explanation of the data analysis process I used to develop codes, then categories, and finally themes.

4.8.1. Data coding

The coding process I used consisted of first reading each interview transcript line by line and made descriptive notes regarding the content in the margins (Creswell, 2012). It was important for me to trust my initial judgement in what I believed was significant
when coding interview (Seidman, 2006). Keeping this in mind while I coded the data, I made notes in the margins of transcripts relating to what I thought would potentially be important. If I came across data that I was unsure of, I would still code the data and include it, in case it would prove relevant later in the analysis process. I initially coded the data using a mix of descriptive and in vivo methods (Saldana, 2016). Descriptive coding entails assigning labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase (most often as a noun) to describe the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data. For example, if classroom teachers described the SBT meeting initially by explaining who was present, I would code the data as “SBT members” in the margins. I also included teachers’ perspectives related to other SBT members in the meetings under this general code. Likewise, when teachers explained how decisions were made during the SBT meeting, I would code the data as “SBT decision making,” and similarly, I coded data that pertaining to final SBT decision outcomes as “SBT decision outcomes.” Another example of this is that when I coded data when teachers were describing the paper procedures involved in referring a student to the SBT, I would code the interview excerpt in the margins as “SBT referral.”

However, whenever it happened that teachers explained a step in the pre-referral process or a particular component of SBT practices using their own key words or phrases, I tried to maintain their exact words by coding the data using those same words. In this way, I employed the use of in vivo coding methods, which is described as using words or short phrases from the participant’s own language in the data record as codes (Saldana, 2016). For example, when coding the data connected to class review processes, teachers used the term “Netting” to refer to this, and I would maintain this term in my coding process. Likewise, I used the phrase “Wait and see,” as it was used by several of the participants and related to an approach used by the SBT. I used teachers’ words of “Waiting” to code data that referred to when teachers had to wait to receive support services. I also used the in vivo coding method when teachers communicated to me that they felt their voices were not being heard or that their professional judgement was ignored during SBT meetings. When this happened, I coded the data as “Teacher voice.” Using teachers’ own words or phrases to maintain the authenticity of the interview data, or in vivo codes, was also suggested by other researchers, such as Rubin and Rubin.
Refer to Appendices D and E for examples of how interview transcripts were coded using this process. Finally, after initially coding the 15 interview transcripts, I had created a separate code sheet document, which was accompanied by a short explanatory description (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 1980). This process of coding eventually yielded a total of 19 codes. I then rearranged the 19 codes in chronological and topical order relating to the pre-referral process from beginning to end (see Appendix F).

Next, as suggested by Seidman (2006), I collated all the responses from the different participants that related to each of the 19 codes and saved them in a separate Word document—one document for each code. Then, I printed out each of the 19 collated Word files and spread out in front of me. Doing this allowed me to step back from the data and take a broader perspective of how much information each code yielded and where I needed to examine my codes further to potentially bring codes together into thematically similar categories. I then created categories from codes by making notes in the margins of interview transcripts relating to salient points made by participants. The process of collapsing codes into categories was based on the decision related to the amount of information contained within each code, the relevance of the information to my research questions and how well the data contained in the category hangs together (Patton, 1980). For example, through the initial process of coding interview responses, I separated all responses relating to SBT action plans (a plan that is created at the end of an SBT meeting that states decisions and actions to occur) into its own code entitled “SBT Plan of Action.” However, I later realized that this code could be subsumed under the broader category of “SBT Decision Outcomes,” as SBT action plans were the document format of decision outcomes of SBT meetings. In another instance, after initially creating a separate code called “SBT structure” relating to time and place of SBT meetings, I discovered that it did not contain enough information on its own to carry a category. Instead, I subsumed the “SBT structure” code into the broader category of “SBT process,” as there the data were not rich enough to hold a category of their own.

4.8.2. From codes to categories

At this stage, I collapsed the 19 codes into 13 different categories (see Appendix G) and later removed two categories that I felt did not yield enough information on its
own (Categories 9 & 11). I collapsed or refined the codes into broad categories using a process of thematic analysis as outlined by Rubin and Rubin (2012). Rubin and Rubin described the process of thematic analysis as one wherein summary statements, causal explanations, or conclusions can be drawn by researchers after the coding process is complete. Essentially, I followed Rubin and Rubín’s guidance by summarizing the information from the 13 category files and created 13 different summarized Word document reports. Then, I printed out each of the 13 reports, laid them out on a table, and compared them thematically with the rest of the summarized Word document reports. I began looking for what Seidman (2006) described as connecting threads and patterns among different summarized reports that may result in the identification of specific themes.

4.8.3. From categories to themes

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested researchers ask themselves what the overall story of different themes may reveal about a topic. After reading, comparing, and integrating the information from all 13 summarized reports, I began to interpret the collective consensus that teachers were communicating to me. In simple lay terms, I began to see what the overall story was at the time. I took note of these themes by recording them in my personal memo book and further reflected on “the bigger picture”—or the story that I felt teachers were telling me. At this point, I decided to discuss the themes I discovered with a few friends working outside the realm of education. Sharing initial findings and themes of my study with others who, in turn, shared their perspectives on my findings and themes was beneficial for helping me to clarify or fine tune my interpretations of the data. For example, in communicating to others why teachers were dissatisfied with SBTs and why they felt that their voices were not being heard, I was prompted to further examine how it related to the dilemma of expertise and deeper issues related to power and the interpretation of special needs discourses. This was a way for me to not only achieve a check on my interpretation of the research findings, but for me to also test the quality of my research findings (Tracy, 2010).
4.8.4. Thematic saturation

As mentioned by Braun and Clarke (2006) in their review of thematic analysis, it is impossible to provide clear guidelines for when to stop the process of generating themes. They recommend stopping the theory generating process when one’s refinements are not adding anything substantial. Similarly, Creswell (2012) used the word “saturation” to describe the point in the analysis process when the researcher has identified the major themes of the study and no new information can add to the existing themes or to details for existing themes. For me, it became clear to stop my search for themes when I realized that my search was not yielding any more pertinent information.

One of the most salient and frequently recurring themes of my study was the sense of dissatisfaction felt by classroom teachers about their past experiences with SBT practices, specifically with SBT meetings. This theme stood out throughout the coding and summarizing process. In particular, most teachers interviewed in this study felt that the instructional recommendations and final decision outcomes that came out of SBT meetings were problematic, given their understanding of the goals of the pre-referral process. With this overarching theme in mind (i.e., teacher dissatisfaction), I examined the interview data even more closely, discovering several interrelated factors or reasons that played an important role in explaining some of the underlining reasons of teachers’ dissatisfaction with SBT practices. With this in mind, I wrote the first draft of the findings of this study. I initially separated teachers’ explanations and perspectives of each aspect of the pre-referral process from the beginning of the process to the end. However, after writing several drafts, I changed the format of my findings to two different sections: (a) an explanation of the pre-referral process as experienced by classroom teachers, and then (b) I wrote about the salient themes that stood out for me after analyzing and writing several drafts of the findings. In this way, I came up with the overarching theme of this study: teachers’ dissatisfaction with SBT practices, and then I summarized the following causes or reasons that could be attributed to teachers’ dissatisfaction with SBT practices: ineffective instructional recommendations, lack of money/resources, teachers “voices” being unheard or overpowered by different SBT members, using SBT meetings as a way of documenting students issues, using a “wait and see” approach, SBT follow-up meetings that did or did not occur after SBT meetings, and class review meetings.
However, eventually, I realized that some of the reasons listed (like the last four listed) either did not yield enough rich data to stand alone or that the reasons listed could be better organized under a bigger theme, such as the theme of “lack of money or resources.”

Overall, the process of analyzing the data included several steps which entailed the following: coding each transcribed interview line by line, creating several drafts of a code list to explain and refine the codes used, transferring the codes used into general categories, and compiling each participant’s interview data together into 13 different summaries corresponding to the 13 different categories employed. Finally, I analyzed the summary reports for themes. Next, I wrote about those themes in several drafts, which eventually revealed the overarching theme of teacher dissatisfaction with SBT practices and the contributing causes or reasons that supported it. In the following section, I highlight the methodological criteria used to ensure qualitative excellence was applied to several components of this study.

4.9. Criteria Used for Qualitative Excellence

Indeed, the creative brilliance of qualitative methods, like any interpretive art, is learned through practice and apprenticeship. While rules and guidelines are helpful, if it were really as straightforward as “eight simple criteria,” there would be no magic, no surprises, and therefore no genius. Furthermore, although best practices serve as goals to strive for, researchers can and will fall short, deviate, and improvise.

(Tracy, 2010, p. 849)

The criteria I used to ensure that my findings were methodologically sound and in adherence to excellence in conducting a qualitative study were drawn from several different sources (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1986; 1994; Miles et al., 2014). In the following section, I primarily use Tracy’s (2010, p. 840) eight “Big Tent” criteria to measure the strength of the qualitative methods used in this study, as it offered the most succinct framework in which to guide my research inquire, while maintaining the “magic” of discovery. Specifically, I describe how I utilized the following eight criteria: worthiness, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence in judging the quality of
research studies; these criteria can be traced to Tracy’s work, as well as to other researchers.

4.9.1. Is it a worthy topic?

Tracy (2010) described a worthy topic by comparing it to a topic of study that was relevant, timely, significant, interesting, and evocative. Tracy further explained that worthy topics often emerge from “disciplinary priorities and, therefore, are theoretically or conceptually compelling, and easily grow from timely societal or personal events” (p. 840). Likewise, (Creswell, 2012) concurred with Tracy (2010) when he stated that researchers must be able to justify the importance of conducting a research problem or issue by providing reasons to others. Certainly, the topic SBT policy implementation in B.C. elementary schools and how classroom teachers make sense of implementation practices is compelling and especially timely. In fact, it was decided by the Supreme Court of Canada in 2016 that class sizes would be decreased, a cap was placed on the number of special needs students who would be integrated in general classrooms, and services provided by specialist teacher services would be reinstated to levels in the past (British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, 2019). The 2016 Supreme Court decision revoked an earlier ruling in which learning condition rules (i.e., class sizes, class composition, and specialist teacher services) were stripped away from teachers by the provincial government of B.C. in 2002. The 2016 Supreme Court ruling has necessarily had an indirect effect on potential special needs cases brought forward to SBTS and how these cases are handled. In other words, if classroom teachers want more control over the how many special needs children they are educating in the general education classroom and how specialized services are delivered, then referring potential special needs students and how these cases are handled in SBTS take on an evocative and significant role. Classroom teacher who refer students to SBTS may be in effect pursuing an important avenue that will ensure that their students receive the supports they need in the classroom. This raises concern by classroom teachers who are the most frequent users of SBT practices and most affected by how student cases are pre-screened, processed, and problem solved by the SBTS. For these reasons, I argue that researching teachers’
perspectives of SBT practices is significant, evocative, and worthy in order to inform policy makers of the effects of special education policy at the ground or school level.

4.9.2. Is there rich rigour?

In addressing the criteria of rigour, as addressed by other researchers such as Guba and Lincoln (1986), Tracy (2010) posed four questions to researchers to assess whether data would provide for and substantiate meaningful and significant gains:

- Are there enough data to support significant claims?
- Did the researcher spend enough time to gather interesting and significant data?
- Is the context or sample appropriate given the goals of the study?
- Did the researcher use appropriate procedures in terms of field note style, interviewing practices, and analysis procedures?

I can say with a reasonable amount of confidence that there is enough data to support my claims. By interviewing 15 classroom teachers, I was able to yield 141 pages of rich, detailed data pertaining to several core components of the pre-referral and meeting process of SBTs that highlighted teachers’ understandings and perspectives. Through the use of interview questions carefully constructed in a broad, open-ended, yet focused way, I was able to probe classroom teachers about their perspectives of the pre-referral process in their schools. Moreover, by going over and analyzing over 600 minutes of interview data and comparing teachers’ perspectives and understanding of SBT practices with research literature that was reviewed, I was able to elicit several themes in teachers’ responses that coalesced around the problematic nature of SBT practices. In sum, given the context of exploring Rosendale Elementary School teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices and the purpose of highlighting how classroom teachers find current SBT practices to be given their experiences, I am providing meaningful contribution to further understanding into how policy actors at the street level come to enact policy.
4.9.3. Is it sincere?

Tracy (2010, p. 841) explained that sincerity is best known as “an end goal [that] can be achieved through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and data auditing.” Likewise, Cox (2012) also espoused the value of practitioner-researchers disclosing their social position and personal experiences and, in turn, showing how this may shape their research inquiries. To address the criteria of self-reflexivity, I believe that I did a thorough job in section 4.2 of this chapter, entitled “My role as a research-practitioner” in disclosing my personal and professional positioning in relation to this research study and how it may have influenced why I pursued researching SBT practices. Additionally, I have achieved the quality of sincerity by being transparent regarding my choice of the context and participants of this study. Moreover, by clearly stating the methodological procedures I employed in interviewing teachers, collecting interview data, and the steps I have taken in analyzing the findings of this study, I believe that a fair measure of data auditing has been applied to ensure a high standard of sincerity has been achieved.

4.9.4. Is it credible?

Tracy (2010) referred to the quality of credibility as pertaining to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings. Credibility can be achieved mainly through the following aspects: thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and multivocality and partiality. The criterion of thick description, or what has been described as descriptive validity, incorporates the idea that enough accurate details of data are provided by researchers so that readers are able to imagine they are right there in the interview (Tracy, 2010). Likewise, researchers such as Guba and Lincoln (1986) and Maxwell (1992) discussed the importance of including thick descriptive data, ensuring that others are able to judge the degree of similarity of part or all of the data to other contexts. In this report, I have made several efforts to ensure the accuracy of details by personally audiotaping and transcribing interviews with teachers. Moreover, by including direct quotes from teachers throughout the findings of this report, I have made provisions for readers to judge for themselves how I have interpreted teachers’ responses. Moreover, in aligning myself with the interpretivist approach to this
study, I sought to discover in depth individual teachers’ thoughts, beliefs, and feelings related to SBT practices, instead of utilizing different sources of data to crystallize and triangulate the data.

Multivocality, or consideration of multiple participant voices that differ from one another and differ from my own, is another criterion of credibility used in this study (Tracy, 2010). Although I did not initially purposely seek to recruit teacher participants from different educational or cultural backgrounds, the teachers included in this study did eventually come from diverse cultural backgrounds, differences in the total amount of years of teaching experiences, and post-teaching degree backgrounds. Moreover, by searching through the interview data for teachers’ perspectives that counteract the main findings of teacher dissatisfaction with SBT practices, I believe adds another element of credibility to the findings of this study. Specifically, by searching the interview data for teachers’ positive perspectives of the pre-referral process and searching for any outliers (e.g., Lori), I have protected myself from any self-selecting biases I may have had (Miles et al., 2014). Essentially, I believe that reporting about positive teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices serves to strengthen the generality of the findings drawn and the conclusions I came to in this study.

4.9.5. Does it have resonance?

Resonance, according to Tracy (2010), refers to research’s ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience. Resonance can be achieved through the following three ways: aesthetic merit, evocative writing, and formal generalizations or transferability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1986, 1994; Miles et al., 2014). Aesthetic merit and evocative writing is akin to writing in a way that challenges readers to think, feel, interpret, react or change in some way. By using several quotes from teachers and from the literature reviewed throughout the content of this dissertation, it is my hope that I have illuminated several important ideas and points to highlight and compare. In this way, I was attempting to writing in a way that is clear, relatable yet evocative in eliciting empathetic understanding.

Resonance also shows up in quality writing by the ways in which a study can be valuable through a variety of contexts or situations and is referred to as transferability or
naturalistic generalizations. Although some researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1986, 1994; Tracy, 2010) agreed that generalizations typically are not applied in the way that it is in quantitative research, they maintained that the knowledge gained through qualitative findings can still transfer to other populations, settings or circumstances. Specifically, Tracy (2010) stated that transferability is achieved when readers are able to overlap their own situation with what the story in research, and intuitively, readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer research findings into action. Perhaps, the teachers’ perspectives I have reported on in this study may not necessarily find congruence with all teachers working in other contexts and situations, such as in high schools or in other elementary schools in other parts of the province, country, or different countries. However, readers may be able to understand the perspective of teachers in this study as interpreted and presented in this report, while at the same taking what they find to be meaningful from these situations. It is my hope that policy actors at the street level and those in decision making or policy creating will be able to appreciate the experiences and perspectives of classroom teachers presented in this report and act in ways that promote a common understanding between policy stakeholders.

4.9.6. Is it a significant contribution?

In judging the significance of the findings of this research study, I applied the criteria of ontological, educative, and catalytic authenticity criteria as described by different researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 122; Guba & Lincoln, 1986, p. 114; Tracy, 2010, p. 845). To guide the application of significance to the findings of this study, Tracy (2010, p. 845) encouraged researchers to judge their work for themselves the following questions: “Does [your] study extend knowledge? Improve practice? Generate ongoing research? and Liberate or empower?” Answering these questions is believed to determine the contribution research makes to our social understanding. I contend that this study has extended my knowledge, my professional practice as a specialist teacher and SBT member, and will hopefully empower others. Coming from a personal holistic perspective of a female, Indo-Canadian, parent, and specialist elementary school teacher who seeks continual improvement in the education of students with diverse abilities, I
believe that conducting and reporting on this study has extended my knowledge of SBT practices considerably. Prior to initiating this research study, I had my own ideas of what SBT practice should look like and how special needs discourses should be interpreted by teachers and SBTs. After reflecting on my personal research journey for over six years now, the conclusions have changed somewhat from what they were during several stages of the research process. I believe that after completing this study, my own perspective of SBT practices is one that is realistic and balanced, yet I am hopeful of the changes that may result from my understanding of the complexities involved in SBT practices and policy. (For further details regarding my reflections, please refer to the conclusion section of this study.) Moreover, in answering the question: Does this research generate ongoing research? I would sincerely hope so. I think that there are more perspectives of SBT practices to consider, not only from classroom teachers in the Rosendale School District, but other voices are also needed, especially from SBT policy makers, school psychologists, school leaders, and parents of children with unique needs. Researching these other perspectives regarding SBT policy and practice would be essential in starting the conversation about SBT policy enactment.

4.9.7. Is it ethical?

Like Creswell (2012) and other researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Miles et al., 2014; Tracy, 2010), I ascertained ethical consideration in qualitative research as a universal end goal, as well as a means to an end. Tracy (2010) pointed to different practices that can be employed in qualitative studies to ensure ethical consideration, including procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics. The first practice entitled procedural ethics pertains to ethical actions dictated as universally necessary by larger organizations, institutions, or governing bodies. In this study, I abided by procedural ethics by seeking consent to conduct this study first from the Simon Fraser University (SFU) Research Ethics Board (REB). The procedure involved for gaining ethics approval from the REB at SFU entailed completing a detailed proposal of this study including the research participants that would be involved, the proposed site of the study, and the questions I would be asking participants, and how I would ensure participant confidentiality and privacy. Upon approval from SFU, I then received consent
secondly from the Research and Evaluation Department of the Rosendale School District. A similar procedure in which I submitted a proposal stipulating the nature of this study, the research site where interviews would be conducted, and how I would maintain teacher confidentiality was included. The selection of classroom teacher participants employed in elementary schools in the Rosendale School District commenced once ethics approval was granted by both the SFU REB and the Rosendale School District. The original detailed study description and consent form given to participants explained the nature and potential consequences of the research and voluntary nature of teacher participants in detail and can be found in Appendix B.

Tracy (2010, p. 847) also discussed the term “situational ethics” as a component of her ethical considerations criteria. Situational ethics suggests that ethical decisions are made throughout the research process based on the particularities of a scene. What this means is that should a situation or series of situations arise during the research process wherein a researcher is faced with an ethical decision, he or she must reflect on, critique, and question whether or not the practices outweigh the goals of the research study. I can say with assurance that to the best of my ability, I did not knowingly come across any situations during the research process wherein my research practices were at odds or unethical in pursuing the goal of answering my research question. Nor have any participants communicated to me that they have felt that my practices have violated any ethical issues for them.

Tracy (2010, p. 847) defined relational ethics as “involving an ethical self-consciousness in which researchers are mindful of their character, actions, and consequences on others.” Put simply, relational ethics is about how we relate to others and involves an ethic of care towards others. It encompasses the values of mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between the researcher and participant and the communities in which participants live in. As a teacher colleague to many of the research participants in this study, I took extra precautions to relate to other teachers while conducting interviews. I made sure that teachers felt safe or trusted in revealing their experiences and perspectives towards their superiors and generally towards SBT practices, even if this meant that their responses may have been at odds with my own beliefs and role as a specialist teacher. For example, when some teachers explained their frustration towards
having to follow particular SBT practices that they felt were unnecessary or wrong, I was able to put my own perspective aside and focus instead on teachers’ experiences. In this way, I was able to maintain the researcher-participant trust and participants’ dignity by respecting their perspective, while reserving any judgements I may have had. My response and way that I handled these situations also incorporated respect for my role and position as an SBT member in different schools in the Rosendale School District. As such, the element of relational ethics was kept in check while I conducted interviews with teachers.

Finally, Tracy (2010) suggested that researchers consider how to best present the findings of their study in a fair or just way that will avoid any unintended consequences. Using what Tracy called “exiting ethics” (p. 847), researchers are strongly encouraged to examine how they leave the research scene and share their results. I believe that I have addressed the criteria of exiting ethics in this study by writing the report in a balanced and fair presentation of the interpretations of the key themes discovered. Moreover, the language I have chosen to communicate the findings of this study is respectful and diplomatic, yet maintains the voice of teachers. It is not my intention to lay blame when representing the issue of problematic SBT practices in this report. Instead, I have tried to show how classroom teachers feel and think about SBT practices within the particular context of the Rosendale School District. However, despite my good intentions, one must remember that “researchers never have full control over how their work will be read, be understood, or used” (p. 847).

4.9.8. Is it meaningfully coherent?

For a study to be considered as meaningfully coherent, the research design, data collection, and data analysis must be consistent with the theoretical framework and situational goals employed. In other words, a study must hang together well and must plausibly accomplish what it set out to do in order to be considered coherent (Miles et al., 2014; Tracy, 2010). Using Ball et al.’s (2012) policy enactment theoretical framework to illuminate the findings of this study as well as using an interpretive-constructivist qualitative approach, a qualitative interview design, and a self-reflexive and rigorous data analysis process, I was able to answer the research question originally posed in this study:
How do elementary teachers understand SBT practices? My choice of using Ball et al.’s policy enactment theory, which incorporates what they term, the material, interpretive, and discursive, was the best choice, given the subjective, interpretive, and constructivist approach I took with my research study. As I explained in Chapter 3, Ball et al.’s policy enactment theory provided a comprehensive framework for understanding teachers’ perspectives, given the contexts in which they work in. Moreover, using an interpretive-constructivist approach grounded or situated the open-ended personal interview design I employed. Through interviewing classroom teachers and later analyzing teachers’ responses, I was able to report about teachers’ understandings of SBT practices. Although Ball et al.’s policy enactment theory is not completely perfect, as is any theoretical framework in “the real world,” it does offer a good interpretivist critical lens to understanding many aspects of how teachers understand SBT policy practices. It is my hope and intention to make my representation of teachers’ perspectives and understandings of SBT practices as coherent as possible in this study.
Chapter 5. Findings

In this study, I interviewed 15 classroom teachers who had previous experiences referring students to SBTs for the purpose of discovering their perspectives of SBT practices in their schools. I begin this chapter by detailing classroom teachers’ descriptions of SBT practices in order to relay a general background regarding the procedures involved in referring students to the SBT or what is otherwise known as the pre-referral process. Following this, I uncover three recurrent themes related to classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices, and I utilize some of Ball et al.’s (2012) key ideas related to their policy enactment framework to help illuminate teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices.

5.1. Teachers’ Descriptions of the SBT Referral Process

When describing the student pre-referral process at their schools, most of the teachers interviewed in this study \((n = 11)\) reported that their schools participated in an informal practice, which was commonly referred to as “netting,” or what may also be known as classroom review meetings. Netting meetings typically occur closer to the beginning of the school year and are a practice that, although not mandated by any formal SBT policy requirements, has nevertheless been incorporated informally by school personnel. Netting meetings offer an opportunity for school personnel, such as administrators, specialist teachers, school counsellors, and classroom teachers, to meet for the purpose of discussing their concerns regarding students. These meetings offer classroom teachers and other school personnel in attendance the opportunity to discuss new student problems as they occur earlier in the school year, while at the same time serving as a checking or auditing mechanism for student cases from the previous year or from student cases referred from the previous classroom teacher, but were not followed through. In other words, netting meetings offer teachers and other school personnel a somewhat less formal means to exchange information about students and to potentially flag their student concerns before referring to the SBT.
Aside from netting meetings, classroom teachers are given the opportunity to discuss their student concerns with other school personnel by referring their student cases to the SBT. The formal procedures involved in referring a student to the SBT is initiated when a classroom teacher or a specialist teacher (referred to as the LST teacher) work either together or separately to fill out a student referral form to the SBT. The referral form typically outlines a classroom teacher’s concerns related to the referred student’s behaviour or learning. Specifically, classroom teachers informed me that the SBT referral form usually contains the following information: (a) desired purpose or goal of the SBT meeting; (b) student strengths and weaknesses; (c) areas of concern (academic and/or behavioural); (d) strategies utilized by teachers prior to referring students to SBT; and (e) previous assessments or evidence of student learning or observations of student behaviour. Classroom teachers also stated that they have the option, through a series of checkboxes, of requesting other school-based or district-based specialists or administrators they would like to attend the SBT meeting, such as specialist teacher(s), principal or vice principal, speech and language pathologist, school psychologist, school counsellor, or social workers. It is important to note that school psychologists, counsellors, and speech-language pathologists, all of whom are important in determining student eligibility for a special needs diagnosis, usually service several schools in their caseload and, thus, are not guaranteed to attend the SBT meeting, even if they are requested by teachers. However, classroom teachers reported that the SBT chair will usually attempt to schedule an SBT meeting where all the “key players” are present. Once the referral form is complete, classroom teachers submit the form to the designated SBT chair at their school. Classroom teachers explained that the SBT chair is typically a specialist teacher at their school, referred to as the LST teacher, who is usually responsible for both scheduling and chairing the SBT meeting.

Once the SBT referral form is submitted to the SBT chair, an SBT typically occurs a few weeks or a month afterwards. Most classroom teachers reported that the SBT meeting typically begins with a classroom teacher presenting the student’s case to the SBT. Ideally, the referring teacher will first start off by describing the student’s strengths. After this, the classroom teacher will follow by describing their concerns with the referred student’s learning or behaviour-related problems in the classroom. Other
school personnel who work closely with the referred student may join in on discussion, describing their own observations and concerns regarding the referred student. This is the point in the SBT meeting when the discussion will open up to the entire SBT team for exploring the possible underlining reason(s) for the referred student’s challenges and when solutions to a student’s problem are proposed. Hjörne and Säljö (2014) and Ruby et al. (2011) referred to this as being the “problem analysis” stage of the SBT meeting. During this stage of the SBT meeting, group-based decision making by all those present at the meeting comes into play.

Most of the classroom teachers interviewed indicated that decisions regarding recommendations for referred students were made collaboratively or consensually between all school personnel present during the SBT meeting. The idea that a consensus is formed almost “naturally” or “organically” during the process of dialogue amongst SBT members came about in several interviews with teachers. Furthermore, classroom teachers stated that SBT meetings typically end with a series of agreed-upon recommendations made by the SBT, which classroom teachers refer to as the “action plan” of the SBT. Teachers’ responses related to the types of recommendations suggested by the SBT can be organized into two general categories: (a) academic- or instructional-related interventions and (b) behaviour-related interventions. Common instructional-related interventions recommended by the SBT include some of the following: scribing for students; giving oral instructions, as opposed to written instructions; using visuals and graphic organizers; and having a student sit closer to the front of the class or where the classroom teacher’s desk is located. When and if the SBT determined that a student’s behaviour was impeding his or her learning, they typically suggested some of the following recommendations to help support students with their challenges: (a) designate a time for the student to work with a child care worker or counselor; and (b) solicit the professional advice of a behavioural consultant, social worker, or other child care professional outside of the general school-based supports.

Classroom teachers explained that if the academic or behaviour interventions suggested by the SBT had already been implemented by classroom teachers and proven to be unsuccessful, then further behaviour and/or learning assessments are usually recommended by the SBT. Further assessments are typically conducted by school
personnel other than the classroom teachers, such as specialist teachers, school counsellors, district consultants, or the school psychologist. The purpose of these further assessments are to provide required evidence for the eligibility of a special needs designation and the supports and resources outside of what the classroom teacher is able to provide for referred students. However, it is usually at the discretion of the SBT and usually after several attempts, that further assessments and supports are pursued. In other words, it is the SBT that ultimately determines at the end of the meeting whether a student case moves forward to determine a special needs designation and further supports or not. Therefore, the decisions made by the SBT weigh heavily in importance to classroom teachers and can colour teachers’ perspectives of SBT meetings and SBT practices as a whole. Using the background given regarding the general procedures of the pre-referral process, I turn now to unpacking some of the key themes related to the findings of this study.

5.2. Teacher Perspectives of SBT Practices

Like what is the point of school-based team? Right? Just because you have a student that’s—how much does a student need to struggle before you should be seeking out help from a wider group of your peers? There’s no um, there’s no guidelines set out to teachers as to-kind of—you know what types of students to bring up to school-based team, right? If they’re just a little bit behind, like how extreme does the problem need to be before you seek help, right? That’s not clear. (Jackie)

In my interviews with classroom teachers, I discovered that many classroom teachers, like Jackie’s whose quote is highlighted above, were unclear with different aspects of SBT practices and the purpose of the SBT pre-referral process. Not surprisingly, this lack of clarity or confusion necessarily influenced many teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices as being problematic. Specifically, the majority of teachers’ responses uncovered three important and interconnected themes that could be attributed to teachers’ perspective of problematic SBT practices. It is important to note that these three themes are directly related to what occurred during SBT meetings: (a) ineffective SBT recommendations, (b) inadequate funding, and (c) the dilemma of expertise. Please refer to Figure 2.
5.2.1. The ineffectiveness of SBT recommendations

In interviews with classroom teachers, I asked teachers about whether they found the SBT’s instructional recommendations useful for either themselves or their students. Their responses were mixed. Four out of the 15 teachers believed that the instructional recommendations made by the SBT were not useful to either themselves or their students (Gina, Julia, Nancy, Rebecca). There were a few teachers who communicated that they were satisfied with the instructional recommendations made by SBTs in a fraction of their past experiences. For example, Andrea felt that with her most recent experiences working in her current school, the SBT provided some effective solutions and ideas. Likewise, Amanda stated that the effectiveness of the SBT’s instructional recommendations was depended on whether or not the particular school could provide the supports suggested. Moreover, one teacher (Rita) explicitly stated that recommendations made by the SBT were useful to both her and her student. However, Rita’s affirmative response came with a caveat to it. For example, although Rita responded “yes,” she was quick to follow her statement by noting that the recommendations were “as useful as I guess as they can be when one is working in a system that can provide only so much support.”
Most of the classroom teachers I interviewed in this study reported that the instructional recommendations made by SBTs were useful only “some of the time” \((n = 10)\) to both their students and to themselves. Classroom teachers who reported this to me stated that they were already using the recommendations suggested to them by the SBT. For example, Andrea, a classroom teacher who has been teaching for over 15 years and experienced in how to deal with students with diverse and exceptional needs, was one of several teachers who communicated this perspective:

Sometimes through discussion with peers, you kind of get something better than what you originally thought of, but mostly nowadays, I just feel like, yeah I already know that, I’m already doing that, I already thought of that.

Gina, another teacher with extensive teaching experience, also confirmed that she did not find the SBT’s instructional recommendations useful to her. This is why she was seeking the advice of the SBT, hoping for somethings different. This was evident when she stated:

I would say they’re not terribly useful, simply because a lot of the recommendations that come out of SBT are largely things that we would have in place anyways, and we would still continue to have concerns anyways with things like that in place.

Ariel, who also is an experienced teacher (over 20 years), also made a comment that was similar to Andrea and Gina’s responses. What is particularly interesting about Ariel’s comment in comparison to the responses of the other two teachers is that her response highlights the perspective some of the teachers held regarding the redundancy of SBT recommendations given and the feelings of frustration towards the SBT that it can bring for many teachers:

So, then you just, yeah, you’re just frustrated because you’ve maybe done everything, and then they’ll just shrug and say, “Yep, we have nothing else to offer you, bye.” (Ariel)

Finally, Carolyn, a kindergarten teacher who has extensive early childhood experience, also reported a similar comment that can be attributed to the redundancy of the SBT’s instructional recommendations. Carolyn, found the SBT’s instructional recommendations to be rather generic, and she felt that she required something different than the typical avenues explored by SBTs. For instance, Carolyn stated:
Like I don’t, I don’t necessarily feel like I go there, and I think I can’t wait to hear like these great ideas, and I feel like it’s sort of like, okay we’ll involve the parents, and I would like it to be more of like, a little bit of more of a think tank and it to be like a little bit more outside the box.

The perspectives of these four teachers (i.e., Ariel, Gina, Andrea, Carolyn) showed that SBT recommendations, and thus the ability of the SBT to offer effective solutions for teachers, are limited. These teachers are not alone in their sentiments regarding the lack of effectiveness of SBT recommendations. In fact, this point has also been echoed in the findings discovered by other researchers who have examined teachers’ perspectives of the ineffectiveness of recommendations made by school teams (Papalia-Berardi & Hall, 2007; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004; Truscott et al., 2005). If classroom teachers do not find SBT recommendations to be helpful, then it would make sense that they would find enacting the SBT policy to be nothing more than “a practice of going through the motions” as described by Paul, another teacher who was interviewed in this study.

In looking deeper into the issue of the lack of quality instructional recommendations given by SBTs, I noticed that sometimes a teacher’s interpretation of what he or she considers a useful instructional recommendation may be different than what the SBT considers a useful recommendation. For example, Jackie, a classroom and specialist teacher, demonstrated her interpretation of a quality instructional recommendation and her experiences of the SBT’s recommendations:

As a classroom teacher, the SBT doesn’t offer a lot of instructional advice with things you can do with instruction. It seems to be a lot of “Okay, we’ll refer, we’ll do this testing or this testing,” or, you know, the school speech-language pathologist will do, you know, a speech screening, but it just seems to be more like a pre-referral for testing, but not actually—you don’t leave with a whole bunch of ideas as to how to support the child in the classroom.

Jackie’s testimony regarding the quality of SBTs’ instructional recommendations is an example of how teachers may be interpreting SBT recommendations through their own cognitive structures or knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of what a quality recommendation should entail (Spillane et al., 2002). Thus, some of the teachers, interviewed in this study, such as Gina, Ariel, Andrea, Amy, and Jackie, have interpreted the role of SBTs as providing them with instructional strategies that are “different” and
“better” from what teachers already have in place for their students. Some participants found the SBT’s recommendations provided them with specific ideas on how to best support their students, rather than referring students for testing. Instead, the reality for these teachers is that they are receiving more of the same type of instructional strategies from the SBT that have been already tried and tested with referred students.

The ways in which the SBT’s instructional recommendations are interpreted by teachers is one of many variables that may affect how classroom teachers make sense of special education policy and SBT practices. For, as mentioned by Ball et al. (2012), A framework for policy enactments will need to consider a set of objective conditions in relation to a set of subjective interpretational dynamics. Thus, the material, structural and relational need to be incorporated into policy analysis in order to make better sense of policy enactments made at the institutional level. (p. 29)

Amy’s experiences exemplified how, sometimes, the SBT’s recommendations are not always effective according to her interpretation, given the material conditions mentioned in Ball et al.’s (2012) quote. Amy elaborated on this in her statement:

Well, just because there’s not like, often times there’s just not enough of it, right? [technological infrastructure to implement SBT recommendations]. We don’t have enough of it, or it doesn’t work, or it crashes, and it’s just, and it’s just like another, I don’t know, it’s just another form, right? Like you have to have a USB, and then you have to plug in the USB, rather than having everybody’s work in one area right, so it’s just like another, it’s another extra bit, right? But, if it helps the child, then it’s like, for sure.

The technological barriers in the form of “not having enough of it” or having it “crash,” as Amy described is a relevant example of how the material conditions related to the school’s financial budget and technological infrastructure can greatly impact teachers’ ability to enact school policies. Although Amy generally accepts the instructional recommendation of supporting her student through the use of technology, the budgetary restrictions that impede proper technological infrastructure in her school limit her ability to carry out the instructional recommendations made by SBTs.

Paul is another teacher who expressed difficulties in following the SBT’s instructional recommendations, given the lack of attention to the “situated factors” of his school. Ball et al. (2012) referred to situated factors as those aspects of a school context that are historically and locationally linked to the school, such as a school’s setting, its
history, and intake. In Paul’s case, the situated factors of working in an inner-city school, where the vast majority of the student population come from low-income families that receive social housing and social services support for substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence, necessarily influence his ability to enact generic SBT recommendation. Paul’s quote illustrates this point:

I think sometimes recommendations are also quite [pause] utopian. They’re out of reach. It’s easy to say, “Oh, well, put this kid in touch with an options worker and, well, things will work out.” Well, it’s not just putting him in touch with an options worker. It’s putting them in touch with the right options worker. So, that’s a different cat to work with ‘cause—and that’s the tough part, you know—you can do X, but it’s easy to say, “Do X,” but the doing, the doing part is the hard part, and I think a lot of that is left to the teacher .... because other support staff are busy doing their stuff. I think at our school it’s because we’re putting out fires. I mean in a [pause] utopic situation, yeah, they would be ok [SBT practices], but then, the daily life of an inner city schoolteacher is, um, it’s very in the moment um things. I mean things come out from left field that sometimes will take up a long period of time um and sometimes they’ll you know, ah, flow over to the next day ah those kinds of things I think really impede um action plans. Um….they make it hard for me, ah, which is, I mean we’ll have fights, we’ll have the police show up, um, someone pulled the fire alarm accidentally, um, all those sorts of things, unexpected things, they, they take priority and precedence to-over this.

The pressure of meeting the different needs of students in an inner-city school can put undue stress on school personnel. This was evident when Paul stated that “support staff is busy doing their stuff” and that often he would be “so busy putting out fires” that he was unable to get to the some of the well-intentioned, “textbook” type ideal solutions. He expressed that these ideal solutions lacked consideration of the unique and “situated” context of the working within the context of an inner city school.

To summarize, a recurring theme regarding teacher perspectives of SBT practices had to do with the redundancy and ineffectiveness of instructional recommendations. Many classroom teachers in this study were looking for practical, immediate, innovate, and new instructional recommendations to utilize in meeting the individual needs of their referred students. Taking into consideration individual teacher interpretation regarding the quality and applicability of SBT recommendations is important if we are to understand why some teachers find the SBT’s instructional recommendations to be less than optimal. Lastly, paying attention to the situated and material contexts of a school
may put undue pressures on the ability of school personnel and the SBT to enact instructional recommendations. As seen in the next section, the material contexts of a school can impact how SBTs make their final decisions to refer students for school supports.

**5.2.2. The bottom line: A lack of funding**

The reality for many classroom teachers who refer students to the SBT is that even if the SBT decision outcomes are decided in their favor, often there is a lack of funds and resources to implement extra supports and services for referred students. This greatly impacts how SBT and special education policy enactment occurs or does not occur. Ball et al. (2012) made this point when they stated,

> Taking the context of school-specific factors which act as constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactments tends to be neglected in most policy implementation analyses. Policies enter different resource environments; schools have particular histories, buildings and infrastructures, staffing profiles leadership experiences, budgetary situations and teaching and learning challenges and the demands of context interact. (p. 27)

What this means is that if special education policies are to be enacted and realized at the ground level in many schools, the material context or financial allotment allocated to individual schools must be considered. In the end, when the “rubber hits the road,” it all comes down to whether there is enough funds to meet the desired outcomes of SBT decisions.

In the first section, I already demonstrated how the material or monetary context of schools necessarily interacts with SBT policy enactment through providing examples related to teachers’ ability to follow through on the SBT’s instructional recommendations. Here, I provide different testimonies from classroom teachers that show how a lack of funding in schools necessarily limits the types of supports and services that can be provided to enact final decisions made by SBTs. In particular, many classroom teachers in this study complained about the fact that they had to wait, sometimes years, for their students to be assessed by a school psychologist. This was due to long waiting lists for students requiring evaluations and the limited number of school psychologists employed in the school district and, consequently, individual schools.
Having a student assessed by the school psychologist is crucial for classroom teachers in securing a learning-related special needs designation and to ultimately receiving the supports and services tied to them. For example, Amanda stated her experiences with having to wait for an assessment to be conducted from the school psychologist for a student in her Grade 4 class. Andrea’s testimony regarding the long wait time to have her student tested for a potential disability designation demonstrates that something more must be done to have students assessed in a timely manner:

I feel like I’ve already been saying, like I think that the waiting bit, that’s just frustrating. I don’t agree with that. I don’t think that we need to be doing a lot more testing than we already are, and I think that-I get that it takes a long time, but if it needs to be done, it needs to be done, right? I think that for a child to be tested when they’re in like Grade 7 [rather than in Grade 4, which her referred students were in] is like, they could’ve had the support a lot sooner. I don’t know. Like that just seems really wrong.

To provide a broader perspective regarding the material or budgetary constraints in which SBT policy enactment has occurred in Rosendale schools requires consideration of the larger socio-political context of special education reforms in B.C. Rosendale classroom teachers have been working in the context of special education reforms that have resulted in limited funding and resources in the last 20 years or so in B.C. Many of the classroom teachers who were interviewed in this study have noted a crucial difference in how SBT policy is enacted today, specifically related to the degree or severity of student problems being referred to SBTs, in comparison to the way in which SBT practices were enacted in the past. These teachers can attest to the harsh realities of working within the larger socio-political context of reduced funding available for support services. For example, two experienced classroom teachers, Amy and Gina, mentioned in their interviews how support services for special needs students have drastically changed throughout their teaching careers, impacting the current service-delivery model in their schools. Specifically, Amy found that support services in the past were much more specialized and targeted to the needs of students than they are now. This can be attributed largely to the availability of funds in the past in comparison to today. Amy expressed that she preferred learning and behavioural services that were more in line with the strategies and suggestions made by the SBTs of the past, as opposed to the current umbrella model of learning and behavioural support services in her school district. The umbrella model
has the effect of streamlining and stretching support services for special needs students. Gina also commented that special education services have altered drastically from a time in the past when more resources were available and less requirements to prove that students have a disability than what it is like today. She described in detail how this situation has evolved in her experience:

I’ve been teaching for 20 years now and there are more needs and there are fewer resources, and so I know, especially being a primary teacher, that if I refer somebody who might just need a little bit of, you know, what would’ve been learning assistance in the past they’re going to be so far down the roster of who’s going to be looked at today. There are going to be students with bare needs, and you know the older kids are going to most likely looked at first, ‘cause they’re more likely to get tested first as well. I have had cases come through where there is clearly a child with some special needs, and it’s recognized by the school-based team as well, and the result is absolutely no additional resources whatsoever. And I’ll explain how that happens and why it gets there, okay? So, if there is a medical concern that a student might have that is related to their learning and the parent has not advocated for that child and has not taken them to the doctor and there is no diagnosis, we will get zero support.

Gina’s response highlights the reality that many teachers face in getting support for students who are required to pursue a special needs diagnosis through the medical system, a measure that makes it increasingly difficult to expedite supports needed immediately in schools. Unfortunately, there is not much that school personnel can do until the parents of a referred student follow through with their family physician. It is not uncommon in these types of cases for students to fall through the cracks of the system if their teachers do not continually follow up with parents and advocate for support for their students. This can sometimes be a very difficult thing for classroom teachers to do given the obstacles they face in convincing parents and doctors that a referred student may have a potential disability. Gina’s recollection of her SBT experiences over two generations can be attributed largely to the changing political context in B.C., which resulted in drastic cuts to special education that have affected the service delivery model for special needs students in B.C. schools (Naylor, 2005). This has, in turn, altered SBT meeting decisions, where fewer options are available to offer to classroom teachers in the kinds of supports and services schools are able to provide classroom teachers to integrate and teach special needs students in the general education classroom.
Today, classroom teachers continue to advocate to bring back funding for special education to the way it used to be in the past. Given the current material context for schools in the Rosendale School District, SBTs are often left with no other choice but to suggest textbook-type or “much of the same” recommendations that classroom teachers have already tried because schools are not equipped with the funds to implement added supports and services. This leaves classroom teachers feeling that the SBT is unable to offer any effective, workable solutions to their students’ problems. Therefore, I concur with Ball et al. (2012), who made the argument that “policy making and policy makers tend to assume ‘best possible’ environments for ‘implementation’: ideal buildings, students and teachers and plentiful resources without considering the realities of school-the finances, the physical space and the student body” (p. 49). In essence, it is the unique material factors of a school that largely determines the range of solutions offered by SBTs and how they are able to offer support to classroom teachers. Ariel reported that classroom teachers begin to feel “frustrated” with the limited amount of support received by SBTs:

Sometimes, they [SBT instructional recommendations] are things you’ve already done, you know, like have a child sit close to you, have a child sit at the front of the room, you know, do the binder thing instead of the duo tangs and you’re just like, “No, done that, done that, done that, done that, done that, done that, done at, done that, and done that around the block.”

Thus, the contextual and situational realities for many schools, in the form of limited financial budgets and the challenges that come with it, can in turn influence not only how SBTs are able to enact special education policy, but also how classroom teachers feel about special education reforms and current SBT practices. This is an area that greatly impacts teachers’ interpretations and understandings of SBT practices and will be explored in the next section about the role of teachers’ emotions in interpreting and understanding SBT practices.

5.2.3. The role of teachers’ emotions

Although Ball et al.’s (2012) ideas about how the material and situational contexts of schools and interpretation of school policies influences enactment are important, consideration of how teachers’ emotions are interwoven in their interpretations of
educational policy reforms also deserves attention. Like other researchers who stress the importance of considering teachers’ emotions and how it interacts with their values and beliefs towards educational reforms (Hargreaves, 1998; Saunders, 2012; Van Veen & Sleegers, 2006; Zembylas, 2010), I argue that more attention needs to be given to how classroom teachers’ emotional reactions to special education reforms can shape teachers’ perspectives of SBT policy practices. In other words, how classroom teachers emotionally react to SBT practices within the context of special education reforms that have drastically cut services and support for special needs students is important when deconstructing classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices.

In the Rosendale School District, classroom teachers have had to work in an educational environment of ambiguity and change with special education reforms, not just recently, but they have also experienced this for over 20 years in B.C. Working in a political environment where classroom teachers have been fighting for decades with different provincial governments to reinstate supports and services in special education to what they once were in the past has resulted in teachers feeling that their professional identity are effected and that their capability to teach diverse students has is limited (Naylor, 2005). As a result of this continual fight for the rights of special needs students, classroom teachers report many negative emotions towards SBT practices and special education policies. This was evident in many of the interviews with classroom teachers, who reported feeling “frustrated” with SBT practices. Andrea was one of these teachers who communicated her frustration:

So, my frustration often is, like, these kids who are struggling, it’s tough for them to be not having daily support, not understanding what’s going on with them, not . . . if their teachers and their administrators don’t exactly know what their learning needs are because they can’t get testing or what their emotional needs are because they can’t see a counsellor. If we’re not putting strategies into place, in the meantime these kids are waiting for years, learning to cope in a way that’s not so great. Not well-adjusted.

Like Andrea, Mary was another teacher who reported feeling frustrated with the special education reforms that have reduced staffing levels for specialist services. In her statement, Mary described how she has been forced into the difficult position of having to prioritize her student referrals or simply choose not to refer a student in need to the SBT because her school was forced to ration potential referrals—special needs services based
on stringent criteria required to receive assessments or services by specialists. Mary communicated this in her comment:

So, sometimes, I find I don’t refer kids who might be low level, but still need intervention and I’m not referring them because I know that the school-based team is already dealing with a whole bunch of other issues or I know that they might not have time to meet with me or, right? Or that it might not be worth my time to put into it. So, I think it’s, I don’t know how we create this, but I think trying to, I don’t know trying to have easier access, whether it be more meetings, but I know that it’s just such a stretched. . . . There’s just so many needs and so much intervention needed that it is a stretched process and even when we know like the waitlist for psyched testing and things like that, like we know that there’s not much opportunity to get tested. I’ve heard of situations before where there like, ‘Well no we can’t test this kid yet because we have this kid and this kid. that are kind of higher on the priority list to be tested and then . . . you know things like that. . . . and in my perfect world, all kids that need to be tested, would be tested.” (Mary sighs) And anyone that needed intervention would be able to be able to, to be brought to the meeting. So, if we had more access to specialists, counsellors, SLPs, psychologists, that would help.

Lack of funding and resources for special needs services has, in effect, made it much more difficult for Rosendale classroom teachers to be able to receive the necessary assessments required for struggling students to be supported not only by specialists, but also for teacher’s assistants, or what teachers referred to in interviews as Educational Assistants (EAs). This can be especially frustrating for those classroom teachers who have been around long enough in the Rosendale School District to be able to compare services for special needs students today with what was once provided in the distant past. For example, Gina, a classroom teacher who has been teaching for quite some time in the Rosendale School District, can attest to the changing political environment that has affected the way special education services have been delivered over the last 20 years and how SBTs are left to deal with the consequences of reduced funding:

I don’t blame the district. The resources are what they are. It used to be when I first started teaching that if you had evidence of a problem, you would get E.A. help. I remember, a, young girl we had, grade 1, but she looked like a 4 year old and we knew she had a really, really difficult family background and dad told us that it had been a difficult birth and premature birth and so based on that information alone, without any diagnosis or any further going on to the doctor’s, we were given E. A. time for her, based on a medical condition that we knew existed based on the history of the family that they simply told us, and she got E.A. help. That was about 15 years ago. So, it’s a matter of resources. The district
can’t provide resources that they don’t have. So, this is where, yeah … there’s a problem with resources and what happens as a result of the school-based team decisions.

When situations like those described by Mary and Gina continue to occur and result in teachers feeling frustrated, it impacts their perspective and feelings towards the SBT as being less than effective and less ultimately being a “a waste of time.” Jackie attested to this when she complained:

The SBT just is not always effective. Like I’m not sure if the classroom teacher always gets what they want out of the meeting. I can’t speak for myself personally, but I know colleagues that have been to meetings and then left more frustrated than they were at the beginning ‘cause they don’t feel like the team listened to them at all, and they felt like the meeting was just a complete waste of time.

In sum, lack of funding for special needs students over decades in B.C. has left many of the classroom teachers interviewed in this study with the hard reality of having to prioritize and ration student needs throughout the pre-referral process and has created feelings of frustration on the part of Rosendale classroom teachers. As such, classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices has reflected a sense of dissatisfaction related to the gap between their expectations of how SBT practices should enfold and the reality of their experiences. Unfortunately, this has led many classroom teachers to actually or functionally withdrawing from the pre-referral process (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004) and unlikely to access school team pre-referral practices in the future (Nellis, 2012). In the next section, I will demonstrate how Rosendale classroom teachers’ feelings and perspectives of SBT practices are related to different interpretations of special needs discourse and whose expertise reigns supreme or more powerful in SBT policy enactment.

5.2.4. The dilemma of expertise

In interviews, many teachers expressed that they appreciated the diversity of perspectives drawn from the collective expertise of the SBT. For example, Gina stated, “All aspects of peoples’ knowledge and observations about a child come together.” Additionally, Mary stated, “Yeah, I do find that it’s good [hearing from different SBT members], because they are going to give a different perspective than a classroom
teacher.” Paul also mentioned in his interview with me that it was beneficial to hear previous teachers’ experiences working with his students during an SBT meeting as it provided a much needed perspective in particular student cases. Lastly, Julia expressed how she appreciated the membership of different professionals in attendance during SBT meetings as she felt that she “is relying on the expertise of other people who have different perspectives.”

Although many classroom teachers communicated that they appreciated hearing from different experts during SBT meetings, they expressed that, at times, having so many perspectives at the table was challenging for them. For example, Mary stated that although the decision-making process “is supposed to be collaborative, and often it can be successful, in my experience, it was hard to get people on the same page.” Moreover, Paul used the analogy of having “too many cooks in the kitchen” to describe some of the drawbacks of receiving suggestions from a variety of different members, which did not produce the best solutions for classroom teachers to work with. Given the mix of expertise or “cooks in the kitchen” present at SBT meetings, many classroom teachers feel that it is difficult at times for their own voices to be heard. In fact, this was one of the key themes discovered in this study: Many classroom teachers reported that their “voices” or “professional judgement” was often not given the consideration it deserved during SBT meetings, especially from the school psychologist and administrator. To illustrate how classroom teachers felt about their professional judgement being overshadowed by others during SBT meetings, I provide several accounts from teachers.

To begin with, Carolyn, an experienced Kindergarten teacher, expressed how she felt when being confronted with the school administrator’s decision to deny her what she believed to be her right to refer her Kindergarten student to the SBT:

I’ve never run into that before, but her feeling [the principal] is that she won’t allow children to be brought to school-based team until January in Kindergarten, for the reason that she feels that they need that first four months to adjust, which to some extent I agree with, but there has to be some professional judgement there too, right?

According to Carolyn, her professional judgement in referring her student to the SBT was overshadowed by the authority of the school administrator and ran counter to how the administrator decided to interpret and enacted SBT policy. Carolyn was not in
agreement with the administrator on this decision, as she felt her expertise in identifying a potential disability in her referred student was being denied by the school principal. Another teacher who felt that her expertise was overridden by the school administrator’s powerful role in the SBT is Amy. Although Amy’s situation is a little different than Carolyn’s, in that Amy was granted the right to refer her “gray area” student to the SBT, the two cases show a similarity in showcasing whose professional judgement and interpretation of special needs designation eligibility reigns supreme during SBT meetings. Amy explained:

Sometimes when I do disagree is when the principal or the vice principal, like, says ‘Oh well, they’re just one of those kids that falls in that gray area or whatever’—right, like you know what I mean? They’re not worthy of testing, right? Like sometimes people will say ‘Well, they’re not. They don’t quite fit the bill to be tested’, but then that’s kind of where I disagree, because I think if you’re bringing up a child, what’s the harm in getting them tested, right? Because, like, the whole point is to rule out that they have a learning disability; either rule yes, they have a learning disability, or rule out that they don’t have a learning disability, right? So, why are people reluctant to like approve it, you know what I mean? Yeah, that’s where I would disagree.

Like Amy, Andrea also disagreed with the SBT’s decision not to assess her student by the school psychologist for what she believed was the very real possibility that her student may have a learning disability. Specifically, she recalled:

There’s been frustrations when I’ve been really clear that a child has something going on, they’ve got learning issues, not agreeing that that child should be looked at or tested and then years down the road it turns out, yes, there was definitely [a disability]. They are tested, they have a learning disability, so they’ve gone 2 to 3 more years sometimes not having the appropriate support or understanding of their learning disability.

Carolyn, Amy, and Andrea’s responses illustrate how although many teachers initially welcome the expertise of different school personnel, they still feel that their own professional judgement in the identification of a potential special need in their students is not taken into consideration. This is where the dilemma of expertise comes into play. This problem is especially apparent when SBTs must determine whether a teacher’s request to have his or her student assessed by the school psychologist to determine if there is a learning or intellectual disability or not is merited.
Classroom teachers reported that their professional expertise was ignored not only in student cases involving learning issues, but also in cases where a student’s behaviour is being questioned. As evidence of this, Mary described her experience with having her professional judgment overshadowed by the SBT when discussing the eligibility of a behavioural designation for her student who was in Grade 6 at the time:

So, she [the referred student] was an H [special needs designation] and they [the SBT] wanted to reclassify her as an R [lower special needs designation]. So, because I understand that she needs an outside agency [to maintain her H designation], but instead of trying to see what we could do to try to work within the umbrella of what’s expected for an H, to get that outside agency for her, they [the SBT] just decided that “No, we need to do this and this is how it needs to happen” and “We’re just reclassifying her and not letting Mom know.” So, I had to go, and it was left for me, to try and advocate and say why I thought that that was important for her to keep that designation.

Mary told me later in our interview that it was important for her to advocate on her student’s behalf. She advocated not only to maintain her present behavioural designation to secure the current supports she was receiving in the school at that time, but also for her student to receive future supports in high school as well. When I asked Mary if she felt that her professional judgement was being ignored during this experience, she agreed, replying:

So, I ended up advocating [for her student] and definitely didn’t feel like I was—like my opinion was being valued in that sense and was kind of just more following the rules as opposed to taking my professional opinion to heart, and I convinced the admin[istrator] that we needed to do that, and we needed to work on that, but it was left to me to, to, call Mom and to seek that out.

In another student case involving a student’s problem behaviour that was brought forward to the SBT, Rebecca, a Grade 3 teacher with educational background in special education, also felt that the SBT at her school did not listen to her professional expertise. Rebecca described how her professional judgement was denied in her experience with the SBT:

I think the one that really sticks out a lot was a student that I had that was a major, major behaviour issue, violence and all of the other major yummy things that come along with that, and … it was a very long, drawn-out process. Like I wanted to make a pre-referral for a, what do you call that place? social development [alternative placement for students with intensive behaviour problems] right
away, ‘cause I knew that there’s a waitlist, nobody gets in right away, and I knew that this student was headed in that direction. But I wasn’t given that opportunity to, to, to make that suggestion, and then, like [the SBT decided], “No, we need to try, other options first.” so that’s where I feel like, felt like I wasn’t given the, the control of the situation, versus I’m the one who’s in there, you know, getting my head beat in every day, right?

Later in the interview, Rebecca reported that although several other remedial measures were taken to help the student’s behaviour in class, in the end, Rebecca’s professional judgement regarding the best way to proceed in the situation was denied. Unfortunately, by the end of the school year, after the principal realized that the remedial measures put into place were not working, it was too late to proceed with Rebecca’s initial request to have her student go to an alternative program placement, as the program had reached its capacity.

Classroom teachers’ accounts regarding the struggle to have their professional judgement recognized by the SBT, specifically by the school administrator, directly related to the larger issue of whose expertise, and related interpretations of SBT practices, is considered more valuable and who is in a more powerful position to determine the correct interpretation of special education policy. For example, in Mary’s and Rebecca’s student cases, the school administrator was pivotal in influencing the decision outcome of the SBT. The reality is that by virtue of their position as the official leader and the “policy narrator” of the school, school administrators play the powerful role of selective filtering out and explaining policy to teachers (Ball et al., 2012). Many researchers would concur with this finding and have shown that school administrators have a powerful influence in the interpretation and enforcement of school policies (Ball et al., 2012; Coburn, 2005; Singh et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to say that school administrators are the only SBT members who influence how special education policy is interpreted and ultimately enacted. As already mentioned in many of the student cases illustrated in this report, another powerful stakeholder in enforcing their own interpretation of special education policy is the school psychologist. By virtue of the specialist’s technical knowledge of psycho-educational assessments and their professional duty to enforce a particular interpretation of special education policy, school psychologists hold a significant degree of influence in determining whether a student qualifies to receive a special needs
designated or not. In fact, there were several classroom teachers who reported that the school psychologist’s professional expertise often superseded the professional judgement of classroom teachers during SBT meetings. For example, when asked her perspective about the SBT meeting process, Gina, a classroom teacher with over 20 years of experience, responded as follows:

Yeah, I feel like whatever testing had been done or whatever the specialists [school psychologist] might say or the data is saying is held as higher information than what the classroom teacher might be observing and experiencing with the child. I often feel like I have to fight a little bit to have a voice in there, especially a voice that I think that I should have, considering I would be the person with the most information about the student. It’s not—it’s subtle, it’s not overt, but I feel like, I guess I would put it as, I feel like I have to carve out my place a little bit sometimes at those meetings in order to be well, heard.

Gina’s comment regarding her having to “fight” for her voice to be heard, especially when the “specialist’s” information is held to be in “higher” regard than her is indicative of the larger issue of whose professional judgement and professional expertise is considered most valuable and powerful.

Gina is but one teacher among many other teachers who felt that the school psychologist was given the most power in determining the right course of action to take for students during SBT meetings due to his or her role of the specialist. For example, although Amy initially mentioned that decisions are made by everyone during SBT meetings, her testimony was a little shaky by the end of her quote:

Decisions are well they’re usually typically made by, I guess, um, like I guess kind of everybody, but I guess kind of if Sally [pseudonym] like the psychologist, right? if she thinks, you know, the child, like, merits, like a test, right? if he fits the criteria then he’ll like, say, okay right, so she’ll agree and then the principal or vice principal will you know, agree too and then, yeah, so I would kind of say, we give her the kind of like the decision power. Okay, right? because she’s the one, she’s the specialist, right?

Jackie, a classroom and specialist teacher with extensive educational background, also believes that the school psychologist’s professional judgement supersedes the classroom teacher’s professional judgement in SBT meetings. However, Jackie stated that although classroom teachers may not have the same level of expertise as some team
members, such as the school psychologist, classroom teachers should not “defer” their professional judgement to others in SBT meetings:

They’ve [classroom teachers] got the judgement to bring this child to school-based team and I think sometimes they need to listen a little bit more and sometimes the classroom teacher can kind of defer to the school-based team as being the experts in the situation and maybe they shouldn’t defer that power, right? It’s kind of like sometimes, too, when you as a classroom teacher—when a child that struggles gets a psycho-ed [test] and then kind of like, okay, now you spend every day with them and the school psychologist spent 5 hours with them and all they’re doing is confirming what you already know about this student. Right? But that doesn’t change who the student is, and they might give you suggestions as to what to do in the classroom, but for someone who’s never worked in the classroom, sometimes those suggestions are just not practical.

Like Gina and Amy’s experiences, Jackie made the valid point about why it is important to value the everyday classroom experience and professional judgment of teachers when considering student problems during SBT meetings. Jackie argued that as classroom teachers have first-hand, tacit, and professional knowledge of how to work with their referred students, they should refrain from deferring their power to school psychologists, who although they have access to specialized knowledge, are further removed from the practical everyday reality of the classroom context. Jackie’s case illustrates the difference of value placed on what Nowotny (2003, p. 155) called “scientifically reliable knowledge” and “socially robust knowledge.” Nowotny described scientifically reliable knowledge as knowledge that is traditionally tied to higher institutions and is validated by accompanying standards inherent in specific disciplinary contexts. Nowotny stated that although socially robust knowledge is tested for its validity outside the lab so to speak, its real test typically occurs outside the lab in the world of social, economic, cultural, and political realities. When applied to the case examples given by Gina, Amy, and Jackie, socially robust knowledge is tied to the tacit professional knowledge teachers hold versus the scientifically reliable knowledge of the school psychologist and other educational specialists. Within the context of the present study, it would appear that the scientific expertise of the school psychologist and the authoritative position of the administrator are given more value than the socially robust knowledge classroom teachers may typically hold.
In sum, the dilemma of expertise as evidenced in the testimonies given by classroom teachers has demonstrated how different interpretations of special needs in students can conflict during SBT meetings. In order to further extend this conflict beyond the examples given, a deeper consideration of how special needs discourses are interpreted, translated, and enacted or not based on positions of power in schools is needed. For this to occur, a deconstruction or unravelling of the dilemma of expertise as related to special needs discourses and special education policy articulation is considered in the next section.

5.2.5. Deconstructing the dilemma of expertise

Deconstructing special needs discourses as applied to solving student problems in schools is like unravelling an intricately woven tapestry; once you begin to tug at the wool of the tapestry, its unravelling disrupts the entire pattern of the tapestry. If one must start somewhere in unravelling the tapestry, zeroing in on the SBT meetings is an excellent place to start. This is because during SBT meetings, discourses of special needs and their related “inclusion” discourse all come under question and scrutiny by different stakeholders who hold different hierarchical relationships of power to one another. For example, SBT members are obliged to decide whether or not referred students are considered special needs or not, based on how classroom teachers’ and specialists’ observations and assessments of students’ difficulties compare to special education policy requirements and socio-cultural discourses of what is considered normal or abnormal. However, as revealed in one of the key findings of this study, classroom teachers identified that their professional judgement and interpretations regarding what they consider to be a special need in their student’s learning or behaviour problems is not taken into consideration by SBTs. For example, Gina’s comments are evidence of this:

Yeah, I feel like whatever testing had been done or whatever the specialists [school psychologist] might say or the data is saying is held as higher information than what the classroom teacher might be observing and experiencing with the child. I often feel like I have to fight a little bit to have a voice in there, especially a voice that I think that I should have, considering I would be the person with the most information about the student.
Gina’s comments highlight the power that she feels school psychologists hold in determining whether or not students with learning problems meet particular criteria in the determination of a special needs designation.

Another teacher who spoke about not being listened to by specialists when deciding the fate of her referred students during SBT meetings is Jackie. As you may recall, Jackie spoke earlier about the importance of classroom teachers not “deferring” their power to the “experts” during SBT meetings. Jackie further elaborated that having a school psychologist or any specialist make the final decision regarding the determination of whether a student is special or deviates from the norm, “seems contrived, until they’ve actually seen this child and worked with this child.” Jackie’s comment spoke to the value and power given to specialist knowledge or “reliable knowledge” versus the value and power of classroom teachers or “socially robust” expertise (Nowotny, 2003, p. 155).

Gina and Jackie’s comments highlight issues related to the power of expertise that different stakeholders in SBTs hold in defining, interpreting and reinforcing discourses related to special needs. In fact, the power struggle between classroom teachers and members of the SBT in interpreting and enacting special education policies exposes some of the deeper tensions and faults related to the wider social processes of special education, such as the production of the special needs student. In other words, when comparing classroom teachers’ interpretations of what a special need is with the interpretations and evaluations made by the SBT of what is considered normal student behaviour, we can begin to see what Foucault (as cited in Ball et al., 2012) referred to as the “voids/divisions/limits” (p. 24) inherent in special education policy:

We explore policies as discursive strategies; for example, sets of texts, events, artefacts and practices that speak to wider social processes of schooling such as the production of “the student,” the “purpose of schooling” and the construction of “the teacher.” That is, what counts as school is made up of “groups of statements” that constitute the discursive formation of the “school.” However, this is not a totalizing phenomenon, there is a fragility in all this; discursive formations are characterized by “gaps, voids, absences, limits and divisions.” (Foucault, as cited in Ball et al., 2012, p. 24)

To illustrate the voids/divisions/limits in special needs discourses, I turn now to an examination of the special needs definition in the local context of B.C. According to special education policy, a student with special needs is defined as: “A student [who] has
a disability of an intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional or behavioural nature, has a learning disability or has special gifts or talents” (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 1). At first glance, this definition may seem straightforward and clear. Yet, there is still a lot of grey area in this general definition. It does not stipulate what a disability should entail in each of the areas mentioned or how one is to define the term disability. Therefore, classroom teachers, such as those mentioned in this study (for example, Jackie) may not necessarily agree with the ways in which special needs are defined and interpreted by SBT members.

The murkiness of these definitions becomes even more unclear when examining the concept of special needs at the international level by UNESCO (2006). For example, UNESCO recognizes the concept of special needs as “extending beyond those who may be included in handicapped categories to cover those who are failing in school for a wide variety of other reasons that are known to be likely to impede a child’s optimal progress” (p. 48). In the definition given by UNESCO, the assumption is that having a special need can be attributed to any factor that could contribute to a child failing in school. My question to policy makers who created this definition is: What if the child is failing because of a lack of quality instruction by the classroom teacher, or due to a child’s socio-economic background, upbringing, home life, or any other contextual factor that is external to characteristics within a child? How do special needs policy makers account for these types of situations, and who ultimately has the power to decide what is in line with this definition or not? When deconstructing the second part of the definition related to “a child failing [at something] that impedes his or her optimal progress,” more problems become apparent with this definition. For example, what exactly is optimal progress? What does one use as a benchmark for optimal progress? In other words, how are teachers to know whether or not a child is functioning at their optimal level, and once again, who gets to determine what the optimal level should look like?

Although, I am sure that the intention behind the definition provided by UNESCO (2006) is to be inclusive of a variety of different kinds of difficulties that children may face when pursuing their individual excellence in schools, the reality is that most children will face difficulties at some point in time in their schooling and how educational personnel, specialists, and parents determine whether or not a student is progressing or
failing in their individual optimal level may vary considerably. Thus, the definitions used in special needs discourse can be interpreted differently by policy actors, and it may become understandable why teachers, like Jackie (quoted at the beginning of this discussion), are confused over how severe a problem needs to be in order to be considered a special need.

As demonstrated here, once one begins to unravel the wool of special needs discourse, the tapestry related to SBT practices becomes increasingly tangled. Let us unravel some more of the tapestry by examining how classroom teachers understand another discourse that is tightly interwoven with the discourse of special needs—the discourse of inclusion. Inclusion discourses generally are understood to include the premise that everyone, despite their special needs, is entitled to receive an equal opportunity to access learning opportunities in schools. In the special education policy in B.C., the B.C. Ministry of Education (2016) has stated:

Inclusion describes the principle that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their educational programs. The practice of inclusion is not necessarily synonymous with full integration in regular classrooms and goes beyond placement to include meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others. (p. v)

When reading the B.C. Ministry of Education’s (2016) inclusion policy language, the principle of inclusion as stated by policy makers is open for interpretation by school personnel who are left to implement what is being stated. In fact, I contend that different special education policy stakeholders’ interpretations of inclusion and how it looks in practice may contrast with one another. In other words, classroom teachers may have different interpretations of what “meaningful” participation for their special needs students looks like in comparison to what other school personnel, specialists, or policy makers believe to be meaningful for a special needs student. In this study, many classroom teachers (like Rebecca, for example) felt that their student’s behaviour problem would be better addressed or that their students would receive more meaningful instruction in an alternate program setting than in the regular classroom. Yet, at other times, there may be situations where classroom teachers interpret meaningful instruction to be something of a mix between alternative and general class placements. For example, Brittany is a classroom teacher who believes that meaningful instruction for her students
who need extra support in an alternate setting occurs best when they receive instruction that is aligned with what she is trying to do in the classroom. Brittany expressed this to me in our interview when she said:

I feel there is disconnect from the classroom and the learning support classroom. So, for me as a classroom teacher to support that child, I would rather say okay, this is what we’re recommending to help her with her decoding, let’s bring this into the classroom. Let me show you how to do it so you can work with her, and she can do this in her spare time. . . . That way, when she returns to the learning support room, there isn’t this huge gap, where in the classroom I do this, and in here, I do this, and you know I don’t quite remember where I left off yesterday. You know what I mean? ’Cuz that’s what it feels like. It feels like there’s this and then there’s this [Brittany makes a gesture indicating a divide between two things], and I would put them both together [Brittany makes a gesture indicating the two things are brought together].

In sum, although the term special needs and its related discourses of inclusion appears to be defined clearly in policy language at the national and international levels, I argue that these discourses are far from clear for the policy actors who must enact them at the micro classroom level. In fact, special needs discourses are often struggled over and challenged not only in SBT meetings by professionals who hold different positions of power in relation to one another, but these discourses are also confronted in all aspects of school life. More significantly, special needs discourses that are contested expose the fragility of the gaps in different interpretations that exist. These gaps relate to what it means to have a special need and how classroom teachers are to meaningfully include students with special needs into the general education system.

Before I conclude the discussion about teachers’ dissatisfaction related to SBT practices, I must acknowledge and validate the perspective of one teacher (Lori) who reported a perspective of SBT practices to be different than all of the other teachers who were interviewed. When I asked Lori about her opinion about SBT meetings and her experiences with it, she responded by saying, “I’ve been satisfied with everything because the students that have really needed things have gotten what they needed, in the end.” Moreover, when asked if she would change anything about the SBT meeting process, Lori replied in the following way: “I wouldn’t change anything in the process. The team is tweaking thing as they go and anytime they’ve tweaked it, it’s improved it.”
If I compare Lori’s satisfactory responses of being satisfied with SBT meetings to all the other teachers’ responses in this study, she is considered as an outlier in comparison to all of the other teachers’ perspectives that relayed a sense of dissatisfaction (Miles et al., 2014). When re-examining Lori’s responses after reporting on the major themes and conclusions drawn, I noticed that Lori’s perspective of SBT practices was generally satisfactory because her experience with SBT practices was different than all the other teachers. The important difference about Lori’s SBT experiences was that her school had implemented a different and extra step in the pre-referral process that was not stated in any other teacher participants’ schools. Lori told me that at her school, both the classroom teacher and other educational personnel typically would meet before a student would be referred to the SBT. The purpose of this meeting was to brainstorm ideas, problem solve student cases, initiate instructional or behavioural strategies, and test the success of these strategies before referring students to the SBT. It occurred to me later that her experience of being “satisfied” with the SBT meeting process and consequently viewing SBT practices as being effective could be attributed to the fact that at her school, there were a few extra steps involved in the pre-referral process that were already being utilized prior to the actual SBT meeting. Another aspect that could be attributed to Lori’s positive perspective of SBT practices at her school is that being a novice classroom teacher in comparison to all the other teachers interviewed in this study. For example, when investigating Lori’s teaching and educational experiences, I discovered that Lori had the combined background of limited teaching experience (six years) and she did not pursue any post-degree studies. Thus, one could argue that Lori’s relative inexperience with SBT practices may possibly have influenced her positive perspective of the pre-referral process at her school.

Similar to Lori’s positive appraisal of SBT meetings, a few other classroom teachers I interviewed in this study communicated being satisfied with other aspects of SBT practices (see Figure 3). Specifically, Rosendale classroom teachers reported their satisfaction with: (a) the referral form, (b) the existence of a structured opportunity to discuss teachers’ concerns, and (c) SBT members’ perspectives.
Figure 3. Teacher satisfaction with SBT practices.

Interview responses with teachers revealed that one of the most consistent and positive components of the pre-referral process in Rosendale Schools was the referral form submitted to SBTs. As evidence of this, I have included a few testimonies from classroom teachers who spoke positively about the use of the SBT referral form to initiate the pre-referral process. These teachers noted that the process of completing and submitting the SBT referral form was generally straightforward and clear. In particular, Paul was one of the teachers who spoke about the strength of using the SBT referral form:

The referral process at our school, um, of filling out a referral form is very simple and straightforward, ah, so from that point of view, I think it’s good. There’s not um—you don’t have to fill out a form after form after a form. It’s one very straightforward form. Um . . . and ah . . . it’s easy to work with. The referral process itself is, it’s straight forward. I mean, that’s I think one of the best things about our school is the referral process. . . . You don’t have to jump a lot of hoops to get a kid referred to the, to a SBT meeting.

Ariel was another teacher who described the SBT referral form used at her school as being clear, thorough, and effective. She gave a detailed account of what was listed on the SBT referral form:

Okay, it’s actually quite involved and clear, so, um, you know, who the child is, birthdate, concerns, strengths, weaknesses, concerns, what you’ve tried, what
services the student is involved in. So, you know, it could be they get speech, you know, there’s sort of like a tick, you know the Aboriginal [Aboriginal worker], you know there’s different, those sorts of practical kind of, you know who’s working with this child already, and then basically, there’s a section at the bottom, you know what are your concerns, you know, how come you’re here. Flip it over on the back and that’s where we do our actual minutes. So then the minutes are taken at the meeting and then an action plan. Yep, the [SBT referral] form is quite clear and thorough, and it works quite well.

Another positive aspect of SBT practices that emerged in teachers’ interviews was that teachers appreciated that they were able to discuss their concerns about student issues in the format of meeting with a team of professionals. For example, when asked about her opinion about SBT meetings, Brittany gave the following answer:

Um, so, a teacher may feel that they benefit from a school-based team meeting for you know, many different reasons. I think it’s great as a, as a starting point to bring up concerns that can be brought forth to a team to discuss, what everybody has to bring to the table about that child, so whether that be a previous teacher that had that student, or a professional that saw that child, either within the school scene, let’s say it was a counsellor, or, so all these different people can come together in one place and time to share information about a child.

Rita was another teacher who also mentioned appreciating being able to participate in SBT meetings and using it as an avenue to collaborate with other school personnel in solving student problems:

Yeah, and I think, I think, I do like the SBT meeting for being something where everyone is being collaborative, like everybody is able to come together to talk about the concerns I may have with a particular behaviour or learning problem that a student has.

Finally, and related to these expressions of appreciation for the opportunity to discuss their concerns, there were several teachers spoke positively about the chance to hear SBT members’ perspectives when solving students’ problems. For example, Rebecca was a teacher who expressed her appreciation for being able to hear the perspective of SBT members on the team:

I think . . . what I like about it is that like . . . there’s a lot of different members available in there-so you get a lot of different opinions and thoughts from different angles and like I’m the classroom teacher, and it’s nice to know what the LST think and what the childcare worker thinks and all of that.
Paul also spoke positively about hearing the perspectives that different SBT members brought forward during SBT meetings. Specifically, Paul spoke about how important it was for him to hear the perspective of other teachers participating in SBT meetings:

Like, the school-based team meeting was helpful for me because it offered background information from other teachers who were there, but that was I think then the main strength of it was that it offered a lot of the context about a student’s problems.

In sum, the teachers who communicated the above-mentioned strengths of SBT practices: (a) the SBT referral form, (b) the existence of a structured opportunity to discuss teachers’ concerns, and (c) SBT members’ perspectives, highlighting that there are many SBT practices that are positive and worth mentioning. However, when I compared these strengths of SBT practices with some of key themes related to teachers’ dissatisfaction with what occurs during SBT meetings, the strengths seemed to pale in comparison. In other words, while having a detailed and straightforward SBT referral form and avenue in which to discuss teachers’ concerns is important to have, it does not erase some of the more substantial issues inherent in SBT meetings. Moreover, even though teachers appreciated the presence of different educational specialists and teachers present during SBT meetings to offer another perspective in solving student problems, teachers were reluctant to have their own professional expertise overpowered in the end.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

I conducted this research inquiry for three purposes related to further understanding the current problem with SBT practices and special education policy enactment in B.C. Firstly, I sought to use my personal and professional experiences related to what I witnessed in SBT practices as a springboard by which to explore other classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices. Specifically, I wanted to explore if my experiences and perspective of special needs discourse and SBT practices was similarly experienced by other teachers. Secondly, I sought to further extend the findings of this qualitative study to the existing research literature about problematic school team practices (Ruby et al., 2011; Truscott et al., 2005; Young & Gaughan, 2010). In particular, I was curious if teachers working in the context of B.C. were also confused about how to identify special needs in students, school team practices, and the purpose of SBTs. Thirdly, I engaged in this research inquiry with the hope that if school team practices are problematic as suggested by the research literature and my personal experiences, how could I improve the ways in which students with unique or special needs are identified and supported in schools. With these three intertwined purposes in mind, I set out to uncover classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices in B.C. Using a qualitative interview design grounded in an interpretivist-constructivist approach, I asked classroom teachers questions directly related to their past experiences with the pre-referral process in their schools in order to uncover their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about SBT practices. Given my methodological approach, I sought to answer the following general research question: What are Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices? I also asked two sub-questions to guide my inquiry of teachers’ perspectives: (a) What are Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives of the instructional recommendations and decision outcomes made by SBTs? and (b) How do these classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices allow us a better understanding of special education policy in the context of the Rosendale School District? In the following section, I have summarized the findings of this study.
6.1. Summary of Findings

I interviewed 15 classroom teachers about their perspectives of SBT practices within the context of the Rosendale School District in B.C. Teachers’ responses in interviews indicated that they believed that SBT practices are largely problematic. Classroom teachers in this study reported being dissatisfied with several components of SBT practices in their schools. In particular, when analyzing teachers’ interview responses, three recurrent themes were prevalent: (a) Classroom teachers reported that the SBT’s instructional recommendations are ineffective, (b) A lack of funds or resources limits the ability of SBTs to implement decision outcomes, and (c) Classroom teachers felt that their own professional judgement was not given the consideration it deserved from SBT members, such as the school psychologist and administrator.

One of the key themes I discovered in this study consisted of the power struggle that exists between particular members of the SBT (school psychologists and school administrators) and classroom teachers over how to identify special needs in students and how student problems should be evaluated during SBT meetings. This theme revealed the contrasting interpretations classroom teachers and SBT members had in relation to special needs discourses and the goals or purposes of SBT practices. A parallel can be drawn between the findings of my study and the findings of other researchers who have examined teachers’ perspectives of school team practices. Specifically, researchers have attributed problematic school team practices to many different factors, three of which confirm the findings of this study: (a) lack of administrative or leadership support, (b) funding to support best school team practices, and (c) ineffective instructional recommendations (Doll et al., 2005; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004; Truscott et al., 2005). Past research seems to suggest that there is a gap between the reality of school team practices and policy. However, where I diverge from the findings of other researchers is in using Ball et al.’s (2012) policy enactment framework to illuminate problematic SBT practices as being attributable to something more than simply a gap between policy and practices. I argue that viewing problematic SBT practices as being a policy-to-practice gap wrongfully assumes that policy implementation should unfold in a linear, straightforward way as top-down policy theorists believe. Instead, I concur with
Ball et al., who maintained that there are diverse and contrasting ways in which school policies can be interpreted by policy actors who are left to enact policy in schools. In the words of Ball et al., “putting policies into practice can be a creative, sophisticated and complex process” that has little room for black and white solutions” (p. 16).

As revealed in the findings of this study, the reality for many classroom teachers and SBTs in the Rosendale School District is that they are often left to their own subjective sense-making structures of interpreting how to best solve student problems, given the contextual and situational realities of their classrooms and how they interpret special needs discourses. In this study, I have demonstrated that Rosendale teachers’ perspectives of problematic SBT practices deserve deeper consideration. For example, I showed how SBTs working within particular material and situational contexts may be limited in the scope and quality of instructional recommendations and decision outcomes that they are able to provide classroom teachers with. Moreover, I have demonstrated how the specific material context in which Rosendale teachers have been working, such as decades of special education reforms and budget cuts, have impacted the reduced specialist teachers and support services for special needs students (British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, 2019). The situation is further exacerbated as Rosendale teachers have been working within the context of a recently re-designed curriculum, the privatization of education services, and the development of a new Individualized Education Plan for special needs students (Gacoin, 2020).

Closely intertwined within the material and situational conditions in which Rosendale teachers are working is their sense of confusion in how to interpret special needs discourses based on their own cognitive sense-making processes of how to determine if a student is considered special needs or not. This was best exemplified in the words of a one teacher: “There is so much gray area” in how one determines if a student is special needs or not and if a student’s problem warrants special educational supports and services that are sought out by an SBT. Certainly, other researchers who have examined themes underlining problematic inclusive practices in B.C. have confirmed this as well (Gacoin, 2020; Naylor, 2005). Specifically, Gacoin (2020) stated that with the increasing complexity of students’ needs and limited supports available for these students, teachers have found it challenging to teach to a diversity of learners in the
classroom. Naylor (2005) has also echoed these same concerns when he presented his paper on the goals of inclusive education at the B.C. Teachers’ Federation conference in November 2005.

In light of Rosendale teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices, I maintain that Ball et al.’s (2012) conceptualization of policy enactment theory is generative for grasping how SBT policy enactment is not a straightforward process. Like Ball et al., I believe that traditional top-down analysts may mistakenly make the assumption that there is only one correct way in which to implement special education policy by educators at the local school level. Instead, the problems that exist between special education policy and the reality of SBT practices as experienced by Rosendale teachers can be attributed to the ‘interpretive,’ ‘the material,’ and the ‘discursive’ components of special education policy enactment in schools. In short, Rosendale classroom teachers are situated within their own unique school profile, operating under the direction of past and present special education policy implementation, and teaching within a context of limited ability to enact special education policy. With these conditions in mind, it makes it virtually impossible to enact school policies in the same way or as intended by policy makers who may assume ideal contexts. In the words of Ball et al.,

Policy enactments, therefore, cannot be read-off from texts and neither can they be reduced to anything that might be called an “implementation gap”—it is not a matter of policies not being “done” or not being “implemented” “properly.” Policy is always contested and changing (unstable)—always “becoming.” (p. 127)

Despite reporting on the general sense of dissatisfaction felt by Rosendale classroom teachers, it is important to note that some teachers felt there were positive components or strengths of SBT practices that I believe is worth mentioning. For example, a number of classroom teachers reported the strengths related to the SBT referral form that is used in schools. Additionally, most of the classroom teachers in this study reported that they not only welcomed and appreciated having an avenue to discuss their concerns with struggling students, but also being able to hear the perspectives of SBT members. However, I found that the positive aspects of SBT practices that teachers communicated are overshadowed by what they felt were more substantial problems during SBT meetings. For instance, findings in this study revealed that there exists a dilemma of expertise related to decision making during SBT meetings. Teachers
expressed that although they welcomed the expertise of different SBT members, they did not want it at the expense of devaluing their own expertise. The dilemma of expertise centred on the struggle of whose professional expertise during SBT meetings ruled paramount in the interpretation of special needs discourses, or what it means for a student to have a special need or to be meaningfully included in schools.

Although classroom teachers’ professional judgement is invaluable, I argue that the inclusion of professional advice of educational specialists, such as school psychologists, happened during the course of school team history for many valid and important reasons. The change in the composition of school team members, with the inclusion of experts working outside of the classroom context, arose mainly because it was felt that teachers may have unknowingly biased their evaluation of student problems and that students from particular ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Blacks and Hispanics) were found to be mistakenly diagnosed and placed in alternative special education placements in the U.S. Policy makers were forced to take notice of the reality that many difficult-to-teach or troublesome students were being placed in alternative placements for all the wrong reasons (Chalfant et al., 1979; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Klingner et al., 2005). Consequently, one of the main intended purposes of creating school teams with the inclusion of outside specialists and administrators was to incorporate more appropriate evaluation methods and sophisticated assessment techniques in order to protect referred students from the inaccurate identification of special needs through team-based decisions (Christenson, 1982; Epstein et al., 2005; MacMillan et al., 1994; Maas & Meijnen, 1999).

In analyzing one of the most salient themes in the findings of this study, the dilemma of expertise, I exposed that many classroom teachers felt that more often than not, the SBT evaluation process denied them the extra supports or services they sought for their struggling students. Many of the classroom teachers interviewed in this study felt that the process of identifying students for potential special needs labels resulted in them having to abide by several precautionary measures that hindered receiving immediate supports and services, which were tied to disability categories and funding. Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives regarding SBT practices are not new. In fact, many researchers have reported similar findings that teachers perceive the lengthened referral
process as an obstacle to students gaining access to much-needed special education services (Doll et al., 2005; Papalia-Berardi & Hall, 2007; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). However, like Pugach (1985), I believe that classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices can inform us of a bigger problem that is occurring in the Rosendale School District.

Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices reflect their belief that the only means for pursuing supports for their struggling students is to refer their students to SBTs for the purpose of securing a special needs designation. In other words, classroom teachers’ perspective of SBT practices demonstrate that they believe that one of the main purposes or goals of SBT practices is for students to receive a special needs designation that is tied to immediate support services and resources for students. Closely connected to this was the reality that many classroom teachers faced in finding that the instructional recommendations given by SBTs were redundant, ineffective, or simply useless. Thus, by seeking out special needs designations for students via formal evaluations by child specialists, irrespective of whether referred students do in fact fit the criteria for different disability categories, I argue that classroom teachers are desperately trying to secure the extra resources or alternative placements needed to support their struggling students. In this way, classroom teachers are, in fact, acting in the role of what Weatherley and Lipsky (1977, p. 172) termed as “street level bureaucrats,” in not only their interpretations of SBT policy, but also in their enactment of SBT policy in a way that weakens what the policy was originally intended to do: reduce the number of inappropriate special needs designation referrals through using appropriate evaluation methods. As such, Rosendale classroom teachers have attempted to adapt and redefine policy at the classroom level to meet their needs for teaching struggling students in the only way they know how.

I maintain that classroom teachers who refer students who are suspected of having a potential special need should rightfully be required to follow these cautionary or appropriate evaluation measures, such as implementing recommended strategies by the SBT first, before pursuing special needs labels by school psychologists or other educational specialists involved in SBTs. In other words, I argue that some of the evaluation and decision-making processes currently used by SBTs in order to determine
the best course of action for referred students as stipulated in special education and SBT policies, such as an appropriate evaluation, should be maintained or protected. I also contend that specialists, such as school psychologists, counsellors, and special education teachers, were included in the formal evaluation process in school teams for a good reason: to create a balance of perspectives and expertise during the evaluation process in SBT meetings, so that teachers are not unintentionally labelling students when they find them to be difficult-to-teach (Doll et al., 2005; Fuchs et al., 1990; Ruby et al., 2011).

However, as a potential solution to this problem, I concur with Gage et al.’s (2012) suggestion that interventions and supports for struggling students should be ideally provided for based on a student’s individual need and should not be contingent on meeting individual disability categories criteria. Although assessing a student’s abilities in cognitive and behavioural domains is important for determining the degree of strengths and weaknesses a student has in order to inform educators of the instructional needs of a struggling student, student eligibility for extra supports and services should not be solely dependent on diagnostic assessments and reports. I believe making these changes would free up valuable resources and time for school psychologists, counsellors, and other SBT members to devote to how to better address the particular instructional needs of students. In other words, rather than searching for proof of the existence of a disability or special need in students, child specialists would be better directed to discovering and implementing instructional strategies that directly target the learning or behavioural challenges students have. Additionally, by using other alternative approaches to determine student supports, such as a response to intervention approach (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), or by using an approach that targets the unique identified needs of individual students, while continually measuring the progress of applied interventions, safeguards would be in place to ensure that student problems are appropriately evaluated (Gage et al., 2012).

In conclusion, Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices and specifically their interpretations of the purposes or goals of SBT practices can inform us of how special education policy in the Rosendale School District is need of deeper consideration by policy makers. As revealed in the findings of this study and the research literature about school team practices, classroom teachers and other policy actors’
interpretations of special needs discourses and SBT practices are continually being contested, challenged, and are changing in light of both past and present special education policy, intellectual advances, special needs discourses, and the socio-cultural milieu of education in today’s society. Assuming that special education and SBT policy enactment should unfold without consideration of these macro factors, as well as local micro contextual factors, and disregarding the important role of how local policy actors understand special education policy would be a grave disadvantage for special policy makers. Finally, what I would like readers to take away from this research study is that although it may appear that Rosendale teachers are dissatisfied with SBT practices because they are not getting what they want, classroom teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices may in fact be revealing to us the flaws or cracks in special education policy and a system of support for special needs students.

Although I am confident in the findings discussed here, I still believe that the conclusions drawn should be interpreted with a reasonable amount of caution. Consequently, I discuss some of the cautions or limitations to this study in the following section.

6.2. Limitations of this Study

Despite utilizing several criteria for ensuring rich rigour to the findings of this study, such as eliciting a thick source of interview data, using a careful process of data analysis, and interpreting the findings of this study with a balanced approach (Tracy, 2010), the general conclusions drawn in this study should be taken with a degree of caution. I would like to identify three points related to my own personal, professional, and research biases that may have affected the ways in which I constructed, interpreted, and concluded the findings of this study. These points include (a) my original intentions behind pursuing this research inquiry, (b) constructing the research interview questions to reflect my personal intentions, and (c) how the findings may have been interpreted to reflect my own subjective biases. In this section, I detail how these three limitations may have impacted the findings of this study.

Firstly, in reflecting back to my original intentions or purpose when pursuing this research inquiry, I already had an idea of what I believed to be the problems inherent in
school team practices at the time. Working as a specialist teacher and serving as an SBT member in many schools, I remember being frustrated with the pre-referral process and particularly with what I observed occurring in SBT meetings. Additionally, having advocated for both of my children with special needs, I remember being personally affected with what I believed to be lacking in the way children with potential special needs were being identified and how the school system was dealing with their exceptionalities. Consequently, I believe that I sought out to conduct this research study and pursue the research questions I did with these personal and professional frustrations in mind and with the conviction to improve special education policy and SBT practices.

Additionally, I endeavoured to explore the research literature looking for evidence of problems within school team practices. When finding what I was looking for in the research literature, I was convinced that from the perspective of teachers, school team practices are problematic and in need of reformation. With this knowledge in mind, I may have unintentionally constructed some of the interview questions in the interview protocol to lead participants to also look only for problems in the process and not what parts of SBT practices were working well for them. For example, after asking participants about their perspectives of the pre-referral process and SBT meetings, I would ask classroom teachers if they would change anything about each area in question, such as the pre-referral process or SBT meetings. In hindsight, I might have asked teachers what aspect of SBT meetings, if anything, they would keep or what they considered to be beneficial. I now wonder if I had not asked these questions, if teachers’ responses would have exposed several of the problems with SBT practices that were mentioned in their interviews.

Finally, although I took several measures to ensure that my interpretations of teachers’ perspectives were accurately represented, it would be reasonable to assume that another researcher might have drawn a different set of interpretations when analyzing the interview data. In other words, although I employed several measures to ensure that the conclusions drawn in this study are credible, such as by being transparent with the data analysis process, other researchers examining the data of this study may have reservations with how I coded, categorized, and came up with the themes in this study. Nevertheless, I still believe that given the research approach with which this inquiry is
aligned: namely, an interpretivist-constructivist approach, I have openly acknowledged and set a particular standard in which to guide the research process. As such, I think that I may have potentially addressed issues related to personal subjectivity found in this study. In other words, it should be understood that rather than seeking to achieve procedural objectivity in any part of the methodological process, the personal and social experiences that I bring with me are acknowledged and accepted as being in alignment with the interpretivist constructivist approach I grounded this research study in (Hammersley, 2013; Lee, 2012; Willis, 2007).

6.3. My Personal Reflections of This Research Journey

As I reflect back upon the process of my research journey since its beginnings up until the present day, I am surprised several changes that have occurred in my perspective about SBT practices. I say this because although I found that with each step of the research process I became clearer about teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices, I paradoxically had even more unanswered questions about SBT practices and teachers’ understandings of SBTs. Perhaps, this may have something to do with the subjective lens I brought with me when beginning the research journey. For instances, when I look back to when I started this research study, I think I may have already been biased to see some of the problems that I believed existed in many SBT practices in the elementary schools where I was employed. Moreover, being a parent of two special needs children made me, in many ways, sensitive to how children with unique learning profiles, or how students who are otherwise considered to be different from the norm, are perceived and educated in schools. In these ways, I may have already steered this research study to find what I was looking for, which is the problems I believed to have existed with SBT practices and how classroom teachers identify student with potential special needs. However, I began to realize with every step of the research process, my fixed preconceptions and prior ideas related to SBT practices and teachers’ interpretations of special needs discourses began to change as I considered new lenses by which to understand teachers’ perspectives. Somewhere along my journey of interviewing classroom teachers and in comparing their perspectives to the research literature, as well as my own changing professional and personal experiences, my perspective regarding the problematic nature
of SBT practices also altered somewhat. Being a teacher myself and working within the confines of an educational system with tight budgetary restrictions and supports, trying to reach children with diverse needs in the classroom, while teaching in a climate of continually changing curriculum can make it extremely challenging for teachers to do their job to the best of their abilities.

In conducting this research inquiry and using the conceptual framework provided by Ball et al. (2012), I have come to believe that many classroom teachers are, in fact, doing the best they can, given their situational and material circumstances and personal perspectives of how they believe they should be supporting struggling students or students who they find difficult-to-teach. Likewise, I also think that school psychologists, counsellors, school administrators, and SBTs are all also trying to do the best they can when trying to meet their own professional obligations, mandates, and personal perspectives of how to best support teachers and special needs students to thrive in the general education classroom. Thus, it is in keeping with the above-mentioned points that I have discovered a newfound appreciation of not only teachers’ efforts, but also other stakeholders’ positions in relation to special education policy enactment. As such, I have gradually positioned myself in a more balanced and measured approach to school team practices and in understanding both my own as well as classroom teachers’ perspectives of how to best support special needs students. However, having declared my relatively balanced position on this issue, I still am convinced that findings revealed in this study indicate that there is still room for improvement in the ways students with potential special needs are identified and supported in schools.

I think that it is safe to say that in retrospect, when asked the question of what I would change if I conducted this research study knowing the things I know now, I can think of several things I would do differently. For example, although asking teachers’ perspectives of key components of the pre-referral process and SBT practices yielded important information in this study, I think that if I had directly asked teachers interview questions regarding what they believe are the purposes or goals of the SBT practices, their responses might have yielded even more valuable information than in my own interpretations of their perspectives. Moreover, I would probably have asked a different set of questions, such as asking teachers what their understanding of the term/concept of
special needs is and how their understanding further affects the ways in which they identify students with special needs. I think that asking such a set of questions may have helped me in analyzing teachers’ perspectives of SBT practices a bit better. Finally, I also would have liked to have explored other special education stakeholder perspectives of SBT practices, such as the perspectives of school psychologists and parents to gain a broader perspective and understanding of SBT practices and special education policy. However, exploring these other stakeholder’s perspectives would have naturally changed the orientation and purpose of my inquiry and is also more importantly beyond the scope of this study. A last thought I would like to leave you with regarding my reflections of this research journey is that researchers are not infallible. By declaring my own personal biases and my reflections on my research journey, I consider them a sign of authenticity and trustworthiness in my research. It is my hope that the findings revealed in this study will leave even the tiniest bit of an impression on its readers.

6.4. The Implications of Tensions between Teachers’ Perspectives of SBT Practices and SBT Policy

Rosendale classroom teachers’ perspectives of the goals of SBT practices in comparison to the intended purpose of SBT policy reveals a mismatch between the two and has many implications at both the macro policy making level and at the micro school level. The tensions that exist suggest that at the macro policy making level, policy makers must ensure that their intentions related to the purposes and goals of SBT policy, as reflected in policy documents, are transparent and clear for policy actors at the micro school district and school levels. This also means that current definitions and concepts related to special needs require clarification in policy documents at the provincial and local Rosendale School District level. Alternatively, policy actors at the micro school district and school levels who are in charge of implementing special education and SBT policy (i.e., district special education personnel, school administrators, school psychologists, counsellors, and teachers) would benefit from checking their own understandings related to the purpose and goals of SBT practices as intended by SBT policy makers, and they need to be familiar with current special needs definition and concepts.
As revealed in the findings of this study, Rosendale classroom teachers reported that the instructional recommendations made by SBTs were not useful for either themselves or their students and that there are limited resources and funding to implement desired services and supports for special needs students. Both of these problems need to be addressed at the macro level by special education and SBT policymakers in order to implement the required resources and instructional expertise to SBTs and classroom teachers who support special needs students. The bottom line is that in order for teachers to support students with special needs in the general education classroom, better instructional strategies and more resources and support services are required, which entails not only more funding, but also the instructional expertise to solve student problems.

Part of the problem that Rosendale teachers have in securing more support for struggling students is that the only way they are able to help these students is to prove their students meet the required criteria for specific disabilities. This means that many classroom teachers must wait long periods of time for referred students to be assessed by school psychologists, due to the fact that there is a limited amount of school psychologists employed in the Rosendale School District. One way to solve this problem may be to change the current requirements needed to meet the criteria for particular high incidence disabilities. Doing this would not only abolish the need to categorize student problems and attempt to fit the confines of predetermined designations, but would also result in freeing up much-needed resources for other services, such as building Rosendale teachers’ instructional capacity to teach to particular student needs. However, I state this with one caveat in mind. This caveat is for students with significant physical disabilities or what is currently categorized under the heading of a low-incidence disability (i.e., physically related disabilities that are found to occur in low incidences in the general school population). Students with low-incidence disabilities should be treated as an exception to the changes noted here, as students with these types of disabilities are typically more dependent on supports to function successfully in schools and, thus, should be given higher priority when determining supports and services for them. Finally, in place of taking away the current special education requirements of appropriate evaluation by SBTs, a new process of determining the eligibility of supports or services
for students with high incidence disability categories who are struggling to make progress in the classroom should be created and determined at the school level.

In sum, in order to address the problems faced by Rosendale teachers in supporting students who are struggling in the classroom, I believe the following three recommendations for the Rosendale School District should be considered:

- Increase the current funding allotment for schools to meet the needs of all students who require extra classroom supports or services in schools. This may mean that the current eligibility requirements for special needs categories or designations and service delivery model in the Rosendale School District may need re-examination.

- Build on Rosendale classroom teachers and SBTs instructional capacity by equipping them with the necessary strategies or skills to help support students with unique needs. This may include several different measures, not limited to suggestions that include: (a) provide training to SBTs to broaden their instructional expertise, (b) include the membership of teachers with exceptional instructional expertise and mentoring abilities to support novice classroom teachers in SBT meetings, and (c) Provide workshops or courses targeting instructional strategies for special needs students to be taught at the school and district level to build teachers’ instructional expertise.

- Determine the purpose and goals of referring students with learning and behaviour challenges to SBTs and communicate this to educational personnel in the Rosendale School District. Suggested avenues for communication at the school level include, but are not limited to, staff meetings, at the beginning of SBT meetings, and on SBT referral forms.

6.5. Further Research

Based on the conclusions drawn in this study, I suggest that researchers examining school team practices and the enactment of special education pre-referral processes conduct research that considers the perspectives of all other interested
stakeholders in special education, especially those involved in the creation and implementation of special education and school team policies. Conducting research in this area would be beneficial in comparing different stakeholders’ interpretations of the intent of special education policy with those left to implement policies in schools. Doing this would ensure that policy makers are clear in their communications regarding the intentions behind special education policy and special needs discourses, while clarifying any misunderstandings that exist between different stakeholders’ interpretations of special education policy and special needs discourses. Moreover, by using Ball et al.’s conceptual framework, policy makers can pay attention to the specific contextual factors at the school level and local policy actors’ interpretations of special education policy and special needs discourses that may impact the enactment of SBT practices in schools. Finally, researchers investigating this area may want to examine the perspective of parents of students who are difficult-to-teach or potentially considered special needs. Being a parent of two special needs children myself, I maintain that gaining the perspective of parents and their understanding, interpretations, and perspectives of how special needs discourses are enacted in schools would be beneficial in understanding how to best support struggling students. Conducting research in all of the above-mentioned areas may yield valuable information to consider and include in the reformation of special education and SBT policies.
References


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Appendix A:

Written Advertisement for Elementary Administrators

This is an invitation to all Elementary Administrators to grant permission to attend your next school staff meeting for a brief 5 min. presentation to recruit classroom teachers for the following Doctoral Dissertation study through the Faculty of Education at SFU:

*Elementary Classroom Teachers’ Understandings and Opinions of the Referral and Evaluation Process Used by School-Based Teams*

This is an opportunity to explore and potentially build upon current policy and practices around the referral and evaluation process of School-Based Teams. If you are interested, please contact me (Sue Dhaliwal) at [email address] for additional information.
Appendix B:

Consent Form for Participants

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

Study: Elementary Classroom Teachers’ Understandings and Opinions of the Referral and Evaluation Process Used by School-Based Teams

Who is Conducting the Study?

Principal Investigator: Sue Dhaliwal, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University (SFU) Private and confidential contact information of the Principal Investigator: [email address] Supervisors: Dr. Paul Neufeld and Dr. Lucy Le Mare, Faculty of Education, SFU Contact Information for Dr. Paul Neufeld: [phone #] or at [email address]. Contact Information for Dr. Lucy Le Mare: [phone #] or at [email address] of Education: Kris Magnusson

Why should you take part in this study?

You are being invited to take part in this study to help us gain a better understanding of teachers’ understandings and opinions of the process of student referrals and evaluation at School-Based Team (SBT) meetings. Through providing your opinions regarding your experiences with the student referral and evaluation process and subsequent decisions that are made, it is hoped that further awareness and possible improvement in the policy and practice of how students with behavioural and/or learning problems are referred to and evaluated at SBTs will occur.

Your participation is voluntary

Your participation is valued to us, and it is voluntary. You may choose to refuse to participate or withdraw at any time from this study without giving any reason and with no effects on your employment or reputation. If you feel like withdrawing from this study at any time, simply contact the principal investigator of this study through the private and confidential contact information provided at the top of this page.

What you will be asked to do?

If you choose to participate, you will be interviewed for approximately half an hour. In the interview, you will be asked several open-ended questions about your experiences and opinions in regard to the student referral and SBT evaluation process, and subsequent decisions that are made. Interview sessions will be conducted face to face with you and recorded on a digital recorder. Interviews will occur in a quiet area of your choosing, such as in your classroom at your school and will occur either before or after school
hours. Alternatively, a different location can be chosen should you feel uncomfortable to participate in an interview at your school setting. At the end of the interview, you will receive a $5 gift card to your choice of either Starbucks or Tim Hortons. You will receive a copy of the interview transcript in case you would like to read it over, although you do not have to. Later, you will receive a draft copy of the findings to get your feedback but, again, you do not have to provide feedback to the investigator if you do not want to or are too busy to do so.

Personal interviews will be designed to answer the following research question:

What understandings and opinions do elementary classroom teachers have of the processes by which students are referred to and evaluated by School-Based Teams and of the subsequent decisions they make?

Could this study be bad for you or are there any risks to participating in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. The study is considered a minimal risk as you can reasonably be expected to regard the probability and magnitude of possible harms implied by participation in the research to be no greater than those encountered by aspects of your everyday life that relate to the research. If, however, you feel uncomfortable in any way by answering any of the questions in the study, please let the principal investigator of the study know about your concerns at any time. In addition, if you feel that some of the questions asked are too personal or sensitive in nature, or if you feel in any way influenced to answer any of the questions that are posed to you, you may decline participation in the interview. You may also choose to withdraw from the study at any time during the research, with no effects to your employment or reputation.

When answering interview questions, you will be asked to refrain from identifying the specific names of students or colleagues, as well as the names of school sites in order to protect the identity of anyone who may be associated with either your experiences or the experiences of your colleagues.

What are the benefits to participating?

Very little is known about teachers’ understandings and opinions regarding the process of both referring and evaluating students who display behaviour or learning challenges in the classroom at the local context. This study gives you a chance to contribute your opinion on how students are first referred to the SBT and on the evaluation process that typically unfolds during SBT meetings. Your input be beneficial in informing future professional policy and practice on the process of evaluation for special needs designations here in BC. Results of this study may also potentially be a benefit by adding to the existing research base in this topic area.

How will your privacy be maintained?

If you do decide to participate, a number will be used instead of your real name, name of the school you are working at, and the name of the school district when the data are reported. One key sheet will be made containing the number and real name of each
participant, along with contact information. This key sheet will be kept in a locked and secure place in the home of the researcher of this study. All interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed, and these transcriptions will be stored on the personal, password-protected laptop of the principal investigator, during the period of analysis. These files will also be backed up on an external hard drive, which will be stored in a secure place in the home of the researcher of this study. After two years, both the hard drive and key sheet will be destroyed by erasing all electronic copies and shredding hard copies.

**What will happen to the results of this study?**

Results of this study will be reported in a final doctoral dissertation thesis if accepted by the department of Education at SFU. Once accepted, the study will be published and available to the general public in an academic journal. Access to the final study results is available to you after the study is completed through the contact information listed below.

**Who can you contact if you have complaints or concerns about this study?**

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact the Director of the Office of Research Ethics, at [email address] or [phone #].

**Future Contact**

In the event that more information may be required from you, I (Sue Dhaliwal) may contact you at a future time. Do you agree to future contact?

Yes/No

**Participant Consent**

Being a part of this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to be a part of this research project at any time during the course of the study. If you decide to participate, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact to your employment or reputation.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

_______________________________________________________
Participant’s Signature

Date:

Participant’s confidential and private contact information:

_____________________________________________________
(non work-related e-mail address and home/cell phone number)
Appendix C:
Interview Protocol

Regarding the SBT Student Pre-referral Process: (3 general questions)
1) a) What does the student pre-referral process look like in your school? (to gain an understanding of the steps of the pre-referral process)

b) Follow up question: Does your school follow a class review processes? If so, what does it look like? (to determine if there are extra steps involved in the pre-referral process)

2) What is your opinion about the student pre-referral process at your school? (prompt for explanations) (to determine teachers’ perspectives of the pre-referral process)

3) Would you change anything about the student pre-referral process? If so, what would it be? (to determine wishful thinking/ideal world scenario)

Regarding SBT Meetings: (5 questions)
1) Suppose I am a new teacher at your school attending a SBT meeting for the first time, what would I see happening? (to determine what occurs during a SBT meeting)

2) What is your opinion about the SBT meeting process? (prompt for explanations) (to determine teachers’ perspectives of SBT meetings)

3) Describe for me how decisions are made at SBT meetings in your school? (to determine power relations/different interpretations of SBT members)

4) What do you think about the process of decision making at SBT meetings? (to determine how decisions are made and by whom during SBT meetings)

5) If there were anything you could change about the SBT meeting process, what would it be? (to determine wishful thinking/ideal world scenario question)

Regarding Instructional/Diagnostic Decision Outcomes: (4 questions)
1) Describe some of the decisions that have resulted after your student(s) has/have been referred to the SBT? (to determine types of instructional recommendations)

2) What is your opinion about some of decisions that were made? (to determine teachers’ perspective of SBT’s decision outcomes)

3) Describe some of the instructional recommendations that resulted afterwards? (to determine the types of instructional recommendations made by SBTs)
4) In your opinion, were the recommendations given useful? (to determine the effectiveness of SBT recommendations)
   • For yourself?
   • For the student?

**Regarding Personal Demographical Data: (4 questions)**

1) Approximately, how many students have you referred to an SBT meeting in the past and what were your reasons for referring them? (to determine the teacher’s past experiences with the pre-referral process)

2) Tell me a bit about your teaching background. (to determine whether the teacher is a novice/expert teacher)

3) Approximately how many years have you been practicing in your current role as an elementary/intermediate teacher? (to determine whether the teacher is a novice/expert teacher)

4) What is your educational background? How any years of formal education have you had? (to determine the influence of background educational knowledge/expertise in educational pedagogy/best teaching practices)
Appendix D:

Rebecca’s Interview Transcript

Rebecca: “-all the LST is there, and as well as like ummm….integration support worker or teacher.”

Interviewer: “okay”

Rebecca: “and there are a few other people…oh..and our child and youth care worker attends-”

Interviewer: “okay”

Rebecca: “and who else….I think there’s also our speech and language, yeah our speech and language attends as well, and then……I think……..that’s about it in terms of who comes there…..and then ummm they start off the meeting by….ah…whoever is the LST who got the form will start off by saying we’re here to meet about this student and teacher so and so has brought up these concerns and these are what’s worked so far and then….ummm….people just jump in whenever they can to say like I’ve had an experience with this student and this and this is what I’ve noticed and then it’s kind of like an open forum where people talk-”

Interviewer: “okay”

Rebecca: “and then um…and kind of then talk about their experiences with that child or what they’ve noticed…”

Interviewer: “okay”

Rebecca: “and then they start to forward into like temporary suggestions and then long term suggestions and like wh-what do we need to do here “

Interviewer: “okay”

Rebecca: “and then if we need to do any follow up meetings and things like that…..yeah”

Interviewer: “okay….what would be your opinion about the SBT meeting process?”
Rebecca: “I think...what I like about it is that like...there’s a lot of different members available and there...so you get a lot of different opinions and thoughts from different angles and like I’m the classroom teacher and it’s nice to know what the...LST think and what the childcare worker thinks and all of that-”

SBT meetings: *opinions*/SBT expertise

Interviewer: “okay”

Rebecca: “What I don’t like about it is...for the same reason...because there’s so many people there, sometimes I feel like they can’t talk about what they think openly-”

SBT members

Interviewer: “yeah”
### Appendix E:
**Mary’s Interview Transcript**

**Interviewer:** “Mmmhmmm”

| Mary: “And to advocate for myself and my student to get things moving quickly because often it was a very slow approach to try and wait and see and in my experience I find that teachers are trying to manage and deal with their own problems as long as they can and then……...they kind of once they’re seeking this help it’s getting to a point where we need to get things moving.” |
| Teacher as advocate: Wait and See |
| Teachers screening student referrals |

**Interviewer:** “Okay…………so often it’s collaborative, but sometimes it’s……..who would kind of make the decisions?”

| Mary: “I found that admin would often play a role based on what they say was fit for their school…..um sometimes psychologists who might not know the child so much and might assume that some strategy might work when you had already tried it and….yeah…..those kinds of things.” |
| Admin as final decision makers |
| SBT Decision Making: School Psychologist |

**Interviewer:** “What about counsellor? Have you ever been in a-”

| Mary: “Ah…………right now our school doesn’t have a counsellor, so just having the access to have the counsellor and specifically getting all these specialists to be able to meet at one time when we have such limited access to SLP, childcare workers, counsellors and things like that” |
| SBT members present/available |

**Interviewer:** “So getting them all in one day is-”

| Mary: “Yeah, and even getting them to come to one meeting or like we’ve had people to have to send in notes about a student because they weren’t there that day or scheduling can be quite tough……...I think.” |
| SBT structure |

**Interviewer:** “Is your-so one of my questions that I skipped over when I was talking about the decision making-What is your opinion about the school-based team meeting process at your school?”

| Mary: “Ah…….I find that I always have hopes that it’s going to be very helpful and it doesn’t always meet……..meet that expectation…….What I’m kind of hoping to get more support and…….more…….concrete ways to move forward and that’s not always available for me……………………and I end up having to do it all myself.” (Mary giggles) |
| SBT Process: High hopes, but not meeting expectations |

**Interviewer:** “Can you give me an example?”
Mary: “Um………………… I have a student who is high anxiety, selective mute, um and………..needed to be reclassified or due to district and government policies didn’t have an outside agency and she needed to be reclassified and instead of ah……..when I took this to my admin, instead of fighting to try to do get her an outside agency or get her support and advocate to Mom and her how important it was for her mental health to be supported……um……it was kind of-I was told, “Nope, this is how it needs to happen. We need
Appendix F:
Initial Interview Codes

1) “Netting” Meetings- flagging teacher concerns about students via consultation with admin for the upcoming year
2) LST Gatekeeper-refers to LST used to “screen” SBT student referrals or be the gatekeeper to SBT meetings
3) SBT referral form-refers to the SBT referral form that teachers must fill out as a pre-screen to the SBT meeting, being detailed/not detailed, effective/not effective, “concerns”
4) SBT student referral process-clarity, effectiveness/ineffectiveness, filling out the form, communication, researching student files
5) “Waiting”-refers to wait for testing (school priority list), SBT meetings, forms or documents to be filled out, pediatrician or other specialists, long process, etc.
6) SBT meeting process-feelings “intimidating,” “frustrating,” “Waste of time”
7) SBT members perspectives/expertise-pros/cons
8) SBT decision making -consensus, collaboration, “overruling powers” (admin, school psychologist, counsellor, LST etc.) ideal (improvements), too rushed
9) SBT decision outcomes-more creative needed, instructional outcomes vs. behaviour, practical vs. reality, learning plans? Designation=support (means to an end)
10) SBT structure-scheduling, time limits, school year, SBT members present/not present
11) Teacher voice/professional judgement- teacher feeling their expertise is not heeded or given due consideration during SBT meetings
12) Follow-up-teachers describing what occurred after the SBT meeting/Action Plan
13) “Wait & See”-approach taken for student concerns
14) Documenting/Paper trail/exercise in bureaucracy
15) SBT plan of action- follow up after SBT meeting/Action plan at end of SBT meeting
16) Lack of resources-manpower, funding, specialists, resources for support
17) Teacher Advocate-teachers having to advocate for referred students
18) Teacher demographics –teaching experience, education, average referrals
19) Beyond elementary school-”flagging” students for High School.
Appendix G:

Final Interview Categories

1) “Netting” Process-flagging teacher concerns about students via consultation with admin for the upcoming year
2) SBT referral form & LST as gatekeeper-refers to the SBT referral form that teachers must fill out & LST person collaboratively fills it out & forwards referral to SBT
3) SBT student referral process (perspectives)-how effective/ineffective are the forms, what is filled out on the forms, who is it submitted to.
4) SBT members-all members present at the meeting
5) SBT decision making-description & perspectives (describes the proceedings, who leads the meetings, how are decisions made, who has the final say?
6) Instructional Recommendations-description (what types of recommendations are made for learning/behaviour, teachers’ perspectives about usefulness)
7) SBT decision outcomes-What happens at the end of meetings, teachers perspectives, plan of action and follow-up
8) SBT process-teacher perspectives of the entire process from referral to SBT, SBT meetings and what happens afterwards & SBT structure
9) Paper Trail-documenting student cases to leave a “paper trail” or accounting for student cases brought to SBT.
10) “Wait & See” Approach-approach taken where teachers are recommended to just “wait and see”, with little or no major interventions/further action
11) Follow-up-follow up after SBT meeting/Action plan at end of SBT meeting
12) Teacher voice/professional judgement-teacher feeling their expertise is not heeded or given due consideration during SBT meetings
13) Lack of resources-lack of manpower, funding, specialists, services or resources