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A Study of the Preparedness and Efficacy of Middle School Teachers to Teach Literacy Skills

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A STUDY OF THE PREPAREDNESS AND EFFICACY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS TO TEACH LITERACY SKILLS

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Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Lorinda Brusie under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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Abstract

A STUDY OF THE PREPAREDNESS AND EFFICACY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS TO TEACH LITERACY SKILLS. Brusie, Lorinda, 2020: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University.

This study examined the preparedness of middle school teachers to teach literacy strategies to middle school students. The study also examined the significance between teacher licensure pathways and their self-efficacy level as it relates to using literacy strategies in content areas. This was a mixed methods study using quantitative data collected through a survey. The survey measured the efficacy level of teachers as it relates to teaching literacy skills. The qualitative data were collected through focus groups. The research questions examined (a) how middle school teachers rate their self-efficacy as it relates to the use of literacy strategies; (b) the preparedness of middle school English language arts (ELA), science, and social studies teachers to address literacy skills; and (c) how the efficacy level of a traditionally prepared teacher compares to that of a non-traditionally prepared teacher. Data analysis indicated that ELA teachers rate their efficacy high, but there were mixed opinions from all teachers regarding the integration of literacy skills. It was noted that content teachers do not have the training needed to integrate effective literacy strategies into their instruction. Overall, teachers did not feel prepared to teach literacy skills at the completion of their teacher preparation courses, regardless of their licensure program unless they had a K-6 teaching license. There was no significance found comparing self-efficacy to licensure pathway.

Keywords: self-efficacy, literacy strategies, traditional teacher preparation, alternative licensure

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

> Reading is the key. Without it, the instructions for playing Monopoly, the recipe for Grandma's lasagna, *The Cat in the Hat*, the directions to the job interview, the Psalms, the lyrics to *Stairway to Heaven* – all these and a lifetime of other mysteries large and small may never be known. (Sedita, 2017, para. 1)

During the last several decades, the nation has placed an intense focus on reading proficiency and the teaching of reading. This attention has led presidents to form national literacy initiatives, federal reports on literacy, the revision of curricula, and professional development by districts. According to the Amos (2004), recent interest in reading directed attention almost entirely to early literacy in lower elementary grades.

Our nation's public education system has seen positive gains in reading proficiency and other literacy skills in elementary level students, but the rate of this improvement has not helped the United States keep up with the rising demands around the world. In a report from the Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, Lee and Spratley (2010) noted that even with the implementation of No Child Left Behind, states across the country have seen a decrease in the literacy skills of adolescents.

School districts are struggling to maintain the reading proficiency and growth of students as they move from elementary grades to middle grades (Lee & Spratley, 2010). There is no question that students should be proficient in reading by the end of third grade, but this has proven to be a difficult task and it continues to be a focus for both policy makers and educators. Even those third graders who are above expected proficiency in reading will struggle in later grades if effective reading and literacy instruction in the middle grades is neglected (Amos, 2004).

Background/Significance of the Problem

In the United States, the share of jobs requiring a postsecondary education has risen to 59%. Advanced literacy skills are needed for young adults to succeed in the current economy (Haynes, 2014). The National Writing Project (2013) stated that close to 40% of employers are dissatisfied with the reading skills of recent graduates, especially with their inability to comprehend more in-depth material. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019) reported that in 2019 only 34% of eighth-grade students scored at or above proficient in reading achievement. As they begin fifth grade, half of minority and low-income students do not meet the most standard level on NAEP assessments (Haynes, 2016). Haynes (2016) described a bleak future for these students if they do not make appropriate progress:

> These outcomes mean that millions of young people lack the rudimentary reading skills to locate relevant information or make simple inferences. Without these essential literacy skills, students are more likely to be retained in school, drop out of high school, become teen parents, or enter the juvenile justice system. Meanwhile, without the advanced literacy skills such as the ability to read complex text and write argumentative essays, young Americans are at risk for being locked out of the middle class and working predominantly in low-wage jobs. (para. 2)

Hauptli and Cohen-Vogel (2013) wrote, "as students' progress through school, the instructional focus shifts from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*; as a result, many adolescents who struggle with the former never master the later" (p. 373). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2010) report on The Conditions of

Education, over half of the students who do not have proficient reading skills prior to middle school will live in poverty as adults. The Conditions of Education (NCES, 2010) went on to say that fourth grade is a critical period, and researchers can often determine that if students have not met proficiency in reading by the fourth grade, there is a significant chance that they will never close the gap with proficient students. The fact that adolescents have historically received little formal instruction in reading compounds the problem (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013). There is plenty of research that has shown what students need in order to be able to decode and read words, but there is less information on how to effectively teach students the skills needed to read complex text for understanding (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003).

Historically, the focus has been and remains on elementary literacy initiatives. Hauptli and Cohen-Vogel (2013) quoted a remark made by former Commissioner of Education Thomas Bell in 1974 as he addressed the rationale for a focus on the early years:

> Early years and early grades is an attempt to prevent a compounded problem later on. The longer a poor reader, or a student who is actually functionally illiterate, is allowed to advance without competence in reading comparable to his grade level, the more difficult his problem becomes. (p. 374)

In a policy research brief, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2007) claimed that student learning is limited by standardized testing. Teachers are finding less time to delve deeper into curriculum due to an often mandated and narrow curriculum due to the demands and stress of standardized testing. The NCTE (2007) policy brief stated that standardized tests may have a variety of effects on students and can place

serious limits on learning for at-risk students. For example, proficiency scores of poor and minority students are often lower than those of middle class Whites, and these results can lead to a failure to graduate (NCTE, 2007). Researchers have seen a wide achievement gap between low-income and high-income students. This is concerning because after third grade, most subject areas include textbooks and require critical reading skills to successfully engage in academics (Potts, 2014).

Many low-income children experience an early learning gap due to medical issues at birth which decrease child development. Research on the effects of poverty on children has found that low birth weight, a significant effect of poverty, is a cause of learning disabilities, grade repetition, low level of intelligence, and low math and reading achievement as well as socioemotional and behavioral problems (American Psychological Association [APA], 2016; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). According to APA (2016), poverty increases the chance that children and teens are living in negative conditions, such as substandard housing, and attend under-sourced schools. These effects on children and teens are often compounded by barriers encountered when families seek physical and mental health assistance (APA, 2016).

Suitts (2015) authored a research bulletin on poverty in the nation's public schools. In 1989, less than 32% of children enrolled in public schools were identified as low income. This percentage has consistently risen; and in 2013, data showed that 51%, a majority of students enrolled in public schools across the country, were identified as low income (Suitts, 2015). The impact of poverty is far reaching and hard to ignore. In a series of articles examining the impact of health and social issues impacting education, former Secretary of Education John King recalled his personal experiences with poverty

and homelessness (Carter, 2016). He credits public schools with the following comment:

> I know schools can save lives, because schools saved mine. Public school teachers gave me a sense of hope, created an environment that was structured and supportive. I understand school can be the difference as a safe and supportive place for students facing homelessness. (Carter, 2016, para. 2)

Jensen (2013) stated that students from poverty-stricken homes live in a constant state of anxiety. The symptoms of this stress tend to mimic ADHD, and students are labeled as having behavior problems. Jensen (2013) studied the effects of poverty on the brain and found that constant stress can create hormones in the brain which can lead to depression, anxiety, and anger in children living in unhealthy and violent conditions. Poor students are not the same cognitively as middle class children. If they were, the achievement gap between disadvantaged and advantaged children would not exist when presented with the same instruction (Jensen, 2013).

As adolescents begin to experience the shift to reading to learn and content-based instruction, they require new skills in order to effectively engage in more complex text and literacies (NCTE, 2007). According to Heller and Greenleaf (2007), many secondary teachers report that they are not equipped to assist students with reading deficiencies and do not believe that teaching these skills is their responsibility. Haynes (2016) noted that the Every Student Succeeds Act requires all schools and educators to uphold high standards and provide students with high-quality instruction and research-based intervention for struggling readers. While there has been a change in expectations for students, the systems for teacher development and improved instructional practices have not changed (Haynes, 2016). For teachers in secondary schools, teaching literacy skills is

not typically an area of strength. Teachers who have earned a degree in a specialized content area often have little or no training in literacy instruction. Building the literacy knowledge of secondary teachers, in an effort to effectively integrate literacy instruction, means that school leaders will need to provide ongoing professional learning (Haynes, 2016).

Coladarci (1992) credited Bandura for providing the theoretical framework for studying teacher efficacy. Teachers who are less efficacious are less likely to adopt change based on staff development programs and are more likely to regard teacher-parent relations as a source of stress (Coladarci, 1992). In her book on collective efficacy, Donohoo (2016) stated that if teachers do not actually believe they can impact student achievement, it is likely that this lack of efficacy will be seen in their instruction and student outcomes. As student accountability increased, teacher effectiveness and efficacy has become more important. Protheroe (2008) stated that teachers who think they have the ability to effectively educate students and support their academic growth to a level that meets these higher standards are more inclined to engage in teaching methods that actually achieve that goal.

Effective teaching is known to be the most significant factor affecting student achievement in schools (Haynes, 2014). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2008) stated that an effective teacher understands and can effectively apply strategies meant to increase academic achievement. Effective teachers are expected to both understand and have the ability to apply that understanding to the development of adolescents. Most often, schools identified as low performing are located in high-poverty areas and equally as often have a lack of physical resources and less effective teachers

than higher performing schools (Editorial Projects in Educational Research Center, 2004). There are many implications for low-income schools in regard to effective teachers. Due to increased stress, student expectations are lowered and teachers take more time off and may transfer out of the school, adding to the instability these schools do not need. Teachers in schools serving an at-risk population often do not have the support from colleagues, access to mentors, or opportunities for collaboration and feedback (Haynes, 2016). Teachers often are not trained to address the emotional needs of at-risk students and may misread student lack of social skills as disrespect or lack of manners (Jensen, 2009). Schools serving low-income students see a 50% higher rate of teacher attrition than high-income schools. These schools also see 40-50% of new teachers leaving the profession after 5 years (Haynes, 2014).

In an article for the Foundation for Economic Education, Boyce (2019) stated that over the next 5 years, the number of teaching vacancies nationwide could climb from 118,000 to 200,000. Retirements and new teachers leaving the profession add to this number. If the best teachers are to be recruited, they need to receive the very best training. Teacher preparation programs are charged with preparing teachers in the content areas that will be taught as well as how to teach that subject. In a written forward for a report for the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE, 2011) on President Obama's plan for teacher education reform and improvement, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated that while there are some standout programs, there are some preparation programs that are not meeting expectations. Secretary Duncan also said that these programs are operating blindly and without data to tell them how effective their graduates are. These teacher preparatory programs are not attracting top students, nor are they setting the bar

high enough (USDOE, 2011).

Most states do not have accountability standards in place to measure the quality of teacher education programs. In 1965, the Higher Education Act was established and required that each state determine which programs are not meeting required standards and work to improve them; but of the 1,400 institutions that prepare teachers, only 37 teacher preparation programs were identified as performing below standards (USDOE, 2011). President Obama's report Our Future, Our Teachers (USDOE, 2011) stated that over the past decade, half of the states did not report any program as below standard. President Obama's administration noted that the Higher Education Act did not lead to any significant differences in the effectiveness of teacher education programs, and they began a plan to provide prospective teacher candidates, hiring school districts, and teacher preparation programs meaningful data on program quality (USDOE, 2011). This regulation would have established eight indicators, which would indicate the quality of a program and be reported on by each state. Stephan (2017), a contributor to the Regulatory Review, wrote that some of the indicators would have focused on the teacher training programs, while others would have included measures of teacher placement and teacher retention, specifically in high-need schools, as defined by income and poverty levels. There was some debate as to whether the rule would have improved education; and this will remain unknown, as President Trump signed a bill to rescind the new regulation, which he characterized as an "unnecessary and harmful regulation" (Stephan, 2017, para. 2).

Schools in high-poverty areas face the challenge of recruiting and hiring highly qualified and effective teachers. Jacobs (2008) spoke of research done in New York City

showing that teacher qualifications vary from school to school but have a strong correlation to the socioeconomic status and race of students. These schools also have seen disparity in the passing rate of teacher certification exams with up to a 30% failure rate in some schools and 100% passing rate in others. Research has shown that there are more teachers in schools with higher populations of at-risk students in urban areas who are likely to have less teaching experience, including no certification and lower scores on standardized exams (Jacobs, 2008). Effective teachers are the best indicator of increased student achievement. There is more and more research showing evidence that the quality and effectiveness of a teacher is the most important factor in determining student success (Goldhaber et al., 2015).

The U.S. has become more residentially segregated over time, and schools have become increasingly segregated by income (Reardon, 2013). Schools and districts will have to take the lead in reducing the teacher inequity gap that is a result of this segregation.

Purpose of the Study

Even with the federal government's role in reading reform starting in 1965 with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), we now see that only 34% of eighth-grade students scored at or above proficiency in reading achievement (NAEP, 2019). Hauptli and Cohen-Vogel (2013) explored the role of the federal government in adolescent literacy and found that it "has been and remains a secondary concern to pre-K and early elementary initiatives" (p. 374). In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson attempted to fight the "War on Poverty" by creating ESEA which provided money to districts with low-income students. Johnson cited several data points which showed a strong connection

between low-income students and their academic performance. As ESEA was reauthorized over the years, there remained limited focus on adolescent literacy. The Nation at Risk report in 1983 highlighted an "education system in crisis" (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013, p. 389) with statistics that approximately 40% of minority youth were functionally illiterate. The focus shifted to "eradicating illiteracy by the year 2000" (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013, p. 392) and the expectation that by third grade, students would be reading on grade level with President Clinton's America Reads Challenge. Hauptli and Cohen-Vogel noted that President George W. Bush continued with an early elementary focus with the Reading Excellency Act of 1998 which, based on reading research, changed the way students engaged in reading instruction. President Bush expanded the expectation for students to be reading at a proficient level at the end of third grade to an expectation for students in Grades 3-8 to be proficient by the end of their assigned grade level. For the first time, required annual reading tests in upper grades put a focus on adolescent literacy by lawmakers (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013). Research has provided much information about what students need to be taught to read words, but less is known about how to effectively teach students the more critical skills it takes to access more complex text (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Teachers must be willing to acknowledge that they can impact student learning and create unified literacy and learning experiences regardless of the content they teach (Haynes, 2016). NCTE (2007) stated in their research brief that research on the practices of teachers who are highly effective with adolescent learners reveals they exhibit the

> top qualities of (1) teaching with approaches that foster critical thinking, questioning, student decision making, and independent reading and (2) addressing

> diverse needs of adolescents whose literacy abilities vary considerably. Teaching without taking individual learners needs into account can cause or increase the achievement gap and adolescents disengagement with literacy. (NCTE, 2007, p. 6)

In middle schools with high academic achievement, there is a culture of collaboration and understanding that being a proficient reader means being proficient in all subject areas. A report on instruction in middle schools stated that "attention to special populations and those not experiencing success involves providing adequate resources, explicit teaching of literacy strategies and opportunities to work with challenging materials in settings where students are motivated and expected to succeed" (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004, p. 22).

Students in middle school are expected to engage in increasingly difficult textbooks and instructional materials. As students begin to engage with more complex texts, it is essential that they understand what they are reading and have strategies to access this new information (Think Literacy, 2005). Lawrence et al. (2010) identified direct vocabulary instruction as an important and effective instructional method for improving reading comprehension. Alvermann (2002) shared that the National Reading Panel (NRP) reported trends in research that indicate vocabulary instruction is effective in promoting comprehension; and Fisher et al. (2016) claimed that students need strong vocabulary skills to be able to comprehend text, indicating that vocabulary instruction is a critical component to literacy instruction.. A major key to student success on standardized tests is their understanding of vocabulary. In fact, what knowledge an individual has on a specific topic comes from the vocabulary knowledge one has about that topic (Sprenger,

2013).

Background knowledge, often referred to as prior knowledge, is another important skill for building comprehension and improving overall reading skills. Background knowledge is acquired through experience, and a student's socioeconomic status and cultural differences play a large role in the acquisition of new knowledge (Sprenger, 2013). Priebe et al. (2010) noted that prior knowledge appears to compensate for poor decoding skills. Struggling readers who show that they have more prior knowledge are able to read more words correctly than struggling readers without prior knowledge.

Swanson et al. (2016) noted that historical observational data suggested there is an overwhelming lack of literacy integration by content-area teachers. Secondary content teachers are not using literacy strategies, including vocabulary, that have been recognized as effective methods of instruction and that allow students to access and engage in the complex texts found in content-area classes. Content-area teachers have been hesitant to be accountable for reading instruction. Reading instruction has been perceived as an additional content for which they have neither the training nor the time (Jacobs, 2008).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to add to the body of research on improving adolescent literacy. Specifically, this study explored the preparedness of middle school English language arts (ELA), science, and social studies teachers to address the reading skills of middle school students and other experiences that may impact student reading skills.

Research Questions

1. How do middle school teachers rate their self-efficacy as it relates to the use

of literacy strategies for teaching reading skills?

2. How prepared are middle school ELA and content-area teachers to address literacy skills for all students?
3. How does the efficacy of a traditionally prepared teacher compare to a non-traditionally prepared teacher?

Significance of the Study

With the authorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act and its required high-quality instruction and evidence-based instruction, there is a sense of urgency to address adolescent literacy concerns. High stakes testing and accountability have changed the expectations for students and teachers, but the fundamental systems for cultivating effective teachers and improving instructional practices have not (Haynes, 2016). Unfortunately, many secondary educators feel unequipped to support and grow reading skills or do not take responsibility for teaching these skills (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007).

Research Design

This was a mixed-methods study using a survey that was administered to middle grade ELA, science, and social studies teachers in four Title I middle schools within a large urban school district located in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. Focus groups were formed with middle school leadership teams in the four schools. The survey measured the perceived self-efficacy of literacy and content-area teachers as it relates to affecting student growth. The survey was based on a Likert scale.

The focus groups were made up of leadership teams from Grades 6-8. Team members were asked to comment on and discuss their experiences with at-risk students, factors that impede at-risk student growth, perceptions of teacher preparedness for

literacy instruction, perceptions of teacher effectiveness, and perceptions of opportunities for teacher growth.

Definition of Terms

Adolescent Literacy

Adolescent literacy is literacy instruction in Grades 4-12. It includes concepts and skills that move students beyond basic reading skills and require them to engage in more complex texts (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013).

At Risk

For the purpose of this study, at risk is defined as students who are at risk of academic failure due to failing to learn in school or dropping out of school (NCES, 1992).

Literacy

Literacy is quite simply the ability to read and write, but Kena et al. (2014) defined literacy as being able to read and write printed information, using this skill to function and to develop to full potential.

Literacy Strategies

Literacy strategies are research-based techniques teachers use to teach students to become strategic and independent readers and writers.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1997) as a belief in one's capacity to perform specific tasks.

Traditional Teacher Preparation

USDOE (2016) defined teacher preparation as a course of study approved by the

state, which when completed, signifies that the prospective teacher meets requirements set by the state for licensure in a specific subject or level.

Alternative Teacher Preparation

The American Board (2015) defined alternative teaching certification as a certification earned by a teacher outside of a traditional program. These individuals have a bachelors' degree but no formal training or degree in education.

Teacher Effectiveness

Teacher effectiveness, for the purpose of this study, is defined as the focus on student learning and teacher pedagogical methods and processes that promote higher student achievement (Ko & Sammons, 2014).

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 was an introduction to the study and the research project. It included background information and the problem being studied. The purpose of the study and the research questions were identified in this chapter. The research design and framework were explained, and the significance of the study was stated. This chapter also included a definition of terms used throughout the study.

Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature relevant to the topic. Topics will include literature and studies on adolescent literacy, teaching at-risk students, teacher certification, teacher self-efficacy, and the effectiveness of literacy strategies.

Chapter 3 describes an overview of the research methodology used in the study. The chapter describes procedures used to collect data as well as the research design, survey development, data collection, and protocols used for analyzing the data collected.

Chapter 4 summarizes the findings of the research conducted. The research

questions are answered, and a detailed description of the data is provided.

Chapter 5 summarizes the research project, including a detailed discussion of the findings, limitations of the research, and implications determined by the data. Suggestions for further research based on the findings are also provided.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the preparedness of middle school ELA and content-area teachers to address the reading skills of all middle school students. The research and review of literature is focused on the following research questions:

1. How do middle school teachers rate their self-efficacy as it relates to the use of literacy strategies for teaching reading skills?
2. How prepared are ELA and content-area teachers to address literacy skills for all students?
3. How does the efficacy of a traditionally prepared teacher compare to a non-traditionally prepared teacher?

To build the framework of the study, the most relevant literature was reviewed, revealing the following themes that contribute to concerns surrounding adolescent literacy: effective adolescent literacy instruction in ELA and content-based courses, implications of poverty on literacy instruction, professional development, and teacher certification.

Effective Adolescent Literacy Instruction

Every 2 years, NAEP releases data that reflect the current knowledge of American students in certain subjects and how well they can apply that knowledge. These assessments are considered to be rigorous and highly reliable, but the results have also been noted to be stagnant (Wexler, 2018). In fact, the 2019 NAEP assessment results showed that reading scores for eighth graders are down two points from the 2017 assessment. Also known as the Nation's Report Card, NAEP assessments are often

referred to as “the gold standard of student assessment” (Schaffhauser, 2016, para. 3). Wexler (2018) stated that NAEP announced that reading scores have not seen any significant gains since 1998, with approximately a third of students performing at a proficient level. A panel of experts in Washington, DC gathered by NAEP concluded that the root of the problem lies in the way we teach reading.

For decades, cognitive scientists have known that simply mastering comprehension skills does not guarantee that a child will be able to transfer that new skill to any text they encounter on a standardized test or other academic areas (Wexler, 2018). Educators have considered comprehension to be a reading skill, but Wexler (2018) argued that reading comprehension really depends on what the reader already knows. NAEP panelists believe that educators are making a mistake by having students practice reading skills by reading text on independent reading levels rather than on their particular grade level. Marilyn Jager Adams, a developmental psychologist and NAEP panelist, said, “giving children easier texts when they are weaker readers serves to deny them the very language and information they need to catch up and move on” (Wexler, 2018, p. 5).

Adolescent literacy includes concepts and issues beyond reading skills. Students begin to experience a transition to content learning and need the support and scaffolding from teachers to develop the necessary skills to access the more specialized academic literacies (NCTE, 2007). Buly and Valencia (2003) conducted a study of 108 fourth-grade students in a Washington state school district who performed below the state average in reading. Their goal was to learn more about the variability of difficulties these students experienced, which put them in the below proficient category on state assessments (Buly & Valencia, 2003; Salinger, 2011). They administered a diagnostic

test to the students and developed profiles on student performance. The data showed that 9% of students had a learning disability. The data showed a variety of strengths and weaknesses in the other students. Buly and Valencia identified that 18% of the students lacked word attack skills, many of whom were English language learners; and 41% of the students struggled with fluency, which affected comprehension skills. Approximately 33% of students had adequate word attack skills and fluency but struggled to make meaning of the words, and this is just at the point in their education when comprehension becomes an essential skill for success (Salinger, 2011).

Salinger (2011) predicted that students from this study more than likely experienced difficulty moving from elementary to middle school. Fourth grade is universally recognized as the transition from learning to read to reading to learn (Salinger, 2011). Students entering fourth grade typically find little or no explicit reading instruction. They encounter instructional material that may vary in quality and contain more content and fewer textual aids (Salinger, 2011).

The term "struggling reader" has been contested as a label placed on adolescents. Alvermann (2002) suggested that people may interpret the term differently, such as students with a diagnosed reading disability "as well as those who are underachieving, unmotivated, disenchanted, and generally unsuccessful in literacy activities involving print based text" (p. 195). There is a broad range of research on struggling readers, which may vary in content based on what is causing the reading difficulty (Alvermann, 2002).

Greenleaf et al. (2011) stated, "It is now widely recognized that even skillful reading at early grade levels will not automatically translate into higher-level academic literacy" (p. 654). A nationwide focus has been put on adolescent literacy with the

International Literacy Association's *What's Hot* survey showing adolescent literacy as an *extremely hot* topic among literacy leaders (Flaum-Horvath et al., 2017). Alvermann and Wilson (2011), as cited by Flaum-Horvath et al. (2017), noted that due to the focus on early literacy skills and the ongoing debate between proponents of direct skills instruction and those who believe in more holistic methods of instruction, adolescent literacy needs and the unique skills needed for literacy instruction at the middle school level often go unnoticed by policy makers and the general public.

Direct instruction in basic skills is no longer enough for adolescent readers. Literacy demands of the workplace continue to increase, making it clear we need to address the adolescent literacy crisis (Jacobs, 2008). Jacobs (2008) said that the best steps moving forward are those that clarify and support meaning-based strategies for reading in and across content areas.

Reading research indicates that good readers use various literacy strategies to make meaning of what they read (NCTE, 2007). Alvermann (2002) stated that adolescents will meet the expectations of reading in the content area when they have the needed background knowledge and are able to apply strategies for reading a variety of texts. The Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) offers educational research, statistics, and data on how well public schools are performing. The IES operates as an evaluative component to the USDOE and issued a report on improving adolescent literacy. The IES report (NCTE, 2007) on improving adolescent literacy stated that O'Brien et al. (2001) indicated that many content-area teachers are unaware that if they could build the background knowledge of their students and increase their ability to read assignments, they could increase the depth of content to be covered effectively. The study also showed

that most programs schools use to help struggling readers are part of a special education program and serve only a portion of the students who need them. Alvermann (2002) noted that student needs to comprehend and think critically about multiple types of text led NRP to conduct research in Grades 3-8 on effective ways to teach comprehension in middle school. The NRP (Alvermann, 2002) identified specific literacy strategies as being effective, including comprehension monitoring and vocabulary, which facilitates comprehension. Frey et al. (2016) identified leveraging prior knowledge, vocabulary techniques, and reading comprehension instruction in context as effective strategies; and a report by Kamil et al. (2008) on effective adolescent literacy recommended vocabulary instruction, comprehension strategy instruction, discussion of and about text, and student motivation and engagement as effective strategies to increase adolescent literacy skills.

Frey et al. (2016) was interested in determining if student learning could be improved by pairing the student learning expected by educators with literacy strategies aligned with content standards. Frey et al. determined through their research that teachers were ready to implement literacy strategies but wanted to know which strategies or interventions were dynamic enough to make a difference and improve reading skills. Hattie (2012) stated that a teacher will impact student growth in a positive manner by simply teaching, as compared to the absence of any action. Certain literacy strategies or other teacher influences will increase student growth in reading by a year or more, and others will not. Frey et al. found these strategies to be the most effective and worthy of using in the teaching of adolescents, with an effect size of at least 0.40 (Hattie, 2009).

Frey et al. (2016) described the deepening of learning as learning experiences that will provide students the opportunity to link skills and concepts into practice within the

same strategy. Norman Webb's theory on depth of knowledge allows for this integration. Webb (2005) noted that prior knowledge is a key factor in the depth of knowledge students need to acquire a given task. Frey et al. discussed the depth of knowledge model, which has three phases, beginning with surface knowledge, where "students become acquainted with the knowledge base that will be needed in a unit of study" (p. 568). The second phase, deep learning, asks students to blend content and concepts and determine how they work together. At this phase, more meaningful and long-term learning takes place. The emphasis at this phase is on student ability to organize their thoughts, elaborate in more detail, and reflect on their learning (Frey et al., 2016; Hattie, 2012). The final stage is when learning becomes transferable. At this phase, "learners formulate their own questions, understand how to pursue their own inquiries and direct their learning" (Frey et al., 2016, p. 558).

Frey et al. (2016) worked with eight content-area middle school teachers to conduct research on the careful pairing of literacy strategies in the content area with the three phases of learning to determine if the combination of strategies and phases would deepen student understanding of the content. The researchers shared Hattie's (2009) list of strategies and their effect size and discussed the three phases of learning. The teachers were observed twice a month, interviewed once a month, and encouraged to participate in focus groups. The researchers were focused on teacher perceptions and practicality of the strategy as well as whether or not the strategy was placed in the appropriate phase.

The results of this study found that when teachers engaged in conversations about the three levels of learning and used specific instructional practices designed for each phase, they noticed an increase in both student engagement and learning. Frey et al.

(2016) said, “deep learning tools aren’t very effective in helping students acquire surface-level learning any more than effective surface-level learning instruction automatically develops transfer” (p. 574). It is more about individualizing instruction and matching the strategy to the needs of the learner.

Leveraging prior knowledge is intentionally teaching to build on student existing knowledge (Frey et al., 2016; McNamara & Kintsch, 1996). Studies have shown that having some existing prior knowledge on a topic will improve reading comprehension (Priebe et al., 2010). Priebe et al. (2010) conducted a research study to find out if differing amounts of prior knowledge make a difference in word identification. Their purpose was to determine if different levels of prior knowledge would lead to differences in word identification within a reading passage. This information could then lead the researchers to a better understanding of the process of word recognition and comprehension and how both can be enhanced.

Priebe et al. (2010) examined oral reading accuracy in readers who were developing at a typical rate and those with poor reading skills. The researchers chose 60 fourth-grade students, half of whom were in the process of referral for a learning disability in reading and the other half were a control group. Students were presented with a reading passage which was selected based on prior knowledge of the topic after researchers asked students a content-based question. The goal was to have a varied level of prior knowledge for both poor readers and readers progressing at a typical rate. The passage was then read orally, and the examiner scored for fluency and accuracy as well as free recall of the story (Priebe et al., 2010).

The results were tabulated based on comprehension, fluency, and accuracy.

Struggling readers with an appropriate level of prior knowledge recalled significantly more than struggling readers with no prior knowledge. Priebe et al. (2010) found that prior knowledge appears to offset the fact that students have poor decoding skills. Poor readers with prior knowledge also read more words correctly than poor readers without prior knowledge. Priebe et al. also noted that there was no significant difference in fluency among good readers with or without prior knowledge. There was also found to be a significant difference in the total number of errors and substitutions with poor readers with and without prior knowledge. Poor readers with no prior knowledge made twice as many substitutions that were graphically similar. Similar results were found with readers in the control group.

Priebe et al. (2010) found that word identification is affected by prior knowledge, but it is mainly confined to struggling readers. Struggling readers with no prior knowledge were found to rely on graphic information as opposed to semantic information from the text. This study led the researchers to believe that building content and background knowledge can improve literacy skills (Priebe et al., 2010).

As early as the 1920s, vocabulary skills have been shown to be important to the comprehension of content. Alvermann (2002) shared that NRP reported trends in research that indicate vocabulary instruction is effective in promoting comprehension, although they did not draw any conclusions on the most effective methods of instruction. Graves (1986) and Frey et al. (2016) identified vocabulary techniques as those which allow students to generalize through definitions and understanding. Frey et al. claimed that vocabulary instruction is a strong predictor of reading comprehension. They also stated that vocabulary instruction should be taught so students can use the new learning

authentically.

Kamil et al. (2008) published a report for the Institute of Education Sciences which included research-based classroom strategies and interventions. Kamil et al. wrote about the importance of explicit vocabulary instruction and noted that there is strong evidence indicating the need for direct instruction of vocabulary in both literacy and content-area classes. Specifically, Kamil et al. stated, “by giving students explicit instruction in vocabulary, teachers help them learn the meaning of new words” (p. 11). Student ability to use new words in their reading, writing, and speaking will be strengthened through frequent instruction and exposure to new vocabulary (Kamil et al., 2008).

In their study on literacy and text reading in secondary social studies and language arts classrooms, Swanson et al. (2016) noted that historical observational data suggested there is an overwhelming lack of literacy integration by content-area teachers. Secondary content teachers are not using literacy strategies, including vocabulary, that have been recognized as effective methods of instruction and that allow students to access and engage in the complex texts found in content-area classes.

Swanson et al. (2016) selected a total of 20 social studies and language arts teachers with an average of 10 years of experience to participate in a study to explore what type of text material these teachers were selecting. Researchers utilized a rubric to record the use and frequency of vocabulary and comprehension strategies within their instruction. The researchers coded the effective use of instructional strategies as well as a combination of classroom observations and audio recordings of lessons. Teachers were selected at random to have their data collected for analysis in the study (Swanson et. al,

2016).

Swanson et al. (2016) reported in their findings that vocabulary instruction was higher in language arts classes then in social studies classes. They calculated that 67% of the time, vocabulary was observed in language arts classes, with definition work being most common and context clues strategies observed the least. In social studies classrooms, direct instruction of definitions was the most common method of teaching vocabulary. This was also noted to be of low quality. The use of context clue strategies was used only 11% of the time in social studies classrooms. Researchers found little use of linguistic strategies being taught in either subject area (Swanson et al., 2016).

Students are expected to determine the meaning of unknown words and also to demonstrate independence in learning new vocabulary. Although teachers in this study were observed teaching vocabulary, there was no evidence that teachers were using effective strategies to provide students the ability to learn new vocabulary in future learning (Swanson et al., 2016). The results of the study would indicate that the teachers in this study missed meaningful opportunities to integrate essential literacy instruction that would have impacted both vocabulary and reading comprehension in positive ways (Swanson et. al, 2016).

Reading comprehension is a skill identified as linking concepts within a text and interpreting text (Frey et al., 2016; Moje et al., 2011). Fisher et al. (2016) argued that teaching reading comprehension is achieved through the use of several instructional practices that will equip students with the tools to organize and analyze knowledge. The ultimate goal is for students to automatically engage in these processes.

When World War 1 soldiers struggled to read training manuals, remediation

classes began to emerge outside of the regular class (Jacobs, 2008). Content teachers considered reading to be a separate subject, and reading instruction was relegated to the reading staff. Jacobs (2008) noted that historically, content-area teachers have been reluctant to accept the responsibility for reading instruction. Reading instruction has been perceived as an additional content for which they have neither the training nor the time. There have been few resources or interventions in place for students who struggle to read class material. Jacobs stated that direct instruction of basic reading skills is not enough. The literacy demands of the workplace have increased, and it is clear that we need to address this crisis. Jacobs wrote, "The best steps moving forward are those which clarify and support meaning based strategies for reading in and across content" (p. 17).

Guthrie and Klauda (2014) conducted a study on how reading comprehension, student engagement, and motivation effect adolescent literacy. The researchers wanted to determine if students would be more authentically engaged in their learning and show higher reading achievement with more support in place within their language arts instruction. Guthrie and Klauda used Concept Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI), an instructional design which uses four motivational engagement supports. CORI provides teachers with assistance in designing lessons that provide student choice, collaboration, and help for students to recognize the importance of reading.

Guthrie and Klauda (2014) had two expectations when conducting this study: (a) CORI would be linked with higher informational text comprehension than traditional instruction; and (b) students' perceived and actual motivation and engagement would increase due to guidance provided to teachers by CORI (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014).

According to Guthrie and Klauda (2014), "when teachers encourage students to

provide input into instruction and link their interests to learning activities, students' motivation and engagement should increase and therefore raise their achievement" (p. 389). Guthrie and Klauda also believed that collaboration between teachers and students as well as between students allows students to acquire literacy practices and higher order thinking skills.

Participants in Guthrie and Klauda's (2014) study included 615 seventh-grade students in four separate middle schools, instructed by 11 ELA teachers. Demographically, 47% of students were male, 16% were African American, and 20% received free and reduced lunch. Each student in the study participated in both the CORI instructional design, which was the treatment group, and traditional instruction, which was the control group. All teachers involved were provided with 2.5 days of professional development in the use of CORI.

CORI implementation included the four motivational engagement supports provided by teachers. Teachers provided students with readable text, feedback, and realistic goal setting. Teachers also provided choice through self-selection of books and afforded relevant experiences through building knowledge from text. Collaboration was provided by creating reading partnerships among students and engaging in book discussion groups and group projects. Teachers scaffolded learning for students through the use of literacy strategy instruction for inferencing, summarizing, and creating concept maps. Each was taught through direct instruction with modeling and guided practice (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). CORI instruction lasted approximately 15 minutes through whole group instruction based on content standards and 15 minutes of small group instruction for struggling readers, while the remaining students were engaged in

independent reading or working to apply new strategies. Guthrie and Klauda (2014) had traditional instruction begin with a review of previous material and a preview of the lesson and reading assigned that day. Students would volunteer to read aloud and teachers asked focused questions on the story elements based on current reading.

Guthrie and Klauda (2014) suggested that CORI increased informational text comprehension in students compared to those engaged in traditional instruction when each student consistently received instruction from the same teacher in multiple instructional periods. The results confirm what the researchers expected with the strategies and practices used in CORI being more effective than practices used with traditional instruction for increasing achievement as well as motivation and engagement.

Guthrie and Klauda (2014) stated,

> We believe, however, that the enhanced motivational-engagement support was the decisive factor. When students experienced relevance, personal meaning, competence in handling complex text, and shared interpersonal relationships, they were energized to process the structures and connections in informational texts relatively deeply. (p. 405)

Guthrie and Klauda also noted that although their results indicated that literacy strategy instruction primarily accounted for their results, earlier studies (Guthrie et al., 2004) have shown that strategy instruction taught in isolation did not increase comprehension any more than traditional instruction did.

Hagood et al. (2008) conducted research on the new literacies and how adolescents are engaging with these texts to make sense of the world. These texts include print, audio, visual, Internet, and video. Their study focused on teacher and student views

and understanding of new literacies and how their use of texts has changed as a result. Hagood et al. indicated that many teachers are persistently unaware of how to use best teaching practices and converge new strategies with student social and cultural interests to create instruction that will engage them and improve literacy demands of the 21st century.

This study included two low-performing middle schools in an urban population with a high rate of free and reduced lunch. All ELA and social studies teachers were mandated to participate in the study. The participating schools were identified as having lower student achievement in both language arts and social studies when compared to the rest of the district in Grades 6, 7, and 8. All participants attended a fall and spring institute where they engaged in new learning about new literacies and creating new lessons that included strategies using the new literacies. The teachers were also required to participate in grade-level meetings to discuss and plan for the new literacy strategies and would be observed and interviewed several times. In collective study groups, they discussed classroom implementation and their current understanding of the strategies. Teachers were trained in basic reading instruction and received training in 14 new literacy strategies that focused on learning about out-of-school literacies and connecting these literacies to content area and subject area. They also focused on connecting adolescent new literacies to skills teachers found to be deficient in students, such as vocabulary, fluency, genre, text structure, grammar, and decoding (Hagood et al., 2008).

Researchers administered surveys to both teachers and students based on their uses of texts and new literacies. Hagood et al. (2008) used the survey information to gather initial beliefs and conceptions of reading and writing as a way to document

changes through the year of the study. Teachers were also administered a confidence scale in which they rated their confidence in perceived ability to teach new literacy strategies.

Hagood et al. (2008) found that teachers continued to instruct in traditional ways and maintained traditional views of literacy, including the view that many of the new literacies and standards addressing visual and digital text were more appropriate for extracurricular classes. They implemented few, if any, new literacy strategies in their classrooms. A follow-up survey indicated that the views of both teachers and students had changed in respect to the new literacies. Hagood et al. found that teachers were making connections to out-of-school literacies, such as pop culture, to teach traditional strategies encouraging reading comprehension. Teachers also expressed a belief that new literacy strategies can help students transfer information and develop vocabulary.

Teachers showed initial excitement in collaborative group meetings, but data collected showed that they frequently utilized these new strategies to develop their traditional lessons based on literacy practices with which they were already familiar. Explicit instructional strategies continued to focus on traditional comprehension skills. Hagood et al. (2008) found that teachers were using the new strategies but mainly as a tool to introduce new content or as a student project. Researchers found that teachers tended to fall back on their traditional methods of teaching due to the school culture of being a low-performing school and under the stress of high stakes testing. Hagood et al. stated,

> A student-centered pedagogy of engagement, motivation, and connection building was compromised for teacher centered environment of print based traditional

> literacies in an effort to boost test scores. With this structure in place, we will continue to separate the kinds of literacies that are important for being productive in a 21st century world and those that are taught in school. (p. 85)

Leu et al. (2009) reviewed research that identified the internet as a reading comprehension issue for our schools; and to capture this changing nature of literacy, the term "new literacies" emerged. Leu et al. (2015) noted that the lack of references to online or internet use or sources in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for reading may be broadening the achievement gap in the United States. Their extensive research on new literacies for online reading and comprehension show that students from more advantaged schools are outperforming their counterparts in more disadvantaged schools in both offline and online assessments of reading skills (Leu et al., 2015).

Implications of Poverty on Literacy Instruction

The Great Schools Partnership (2013) defined the term "at-risk" as "students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school" (para. 1). These students face a multitude of circumstances that adversely affect their school career both academically and behaviorally, as well as impact their ability to graduate from high school. At-risk students often suffer from learning disabilities, behavioral and mental health problems, and low standardized test scores (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

Li et al. (2017) noted that recent studies show that students from low-income homes face more disadvantages than their peers who are coming from more advantaged backgrounds. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to perform lower academically and show less academic growth than their advantaged peers during

adolescence. Li et al. explored how the psychological factors of a commitment to education and being able to control one's emotions to the perceptions of a school and family partnership impact school climate.

Previous studies found that school climate can be a predictor of middle school student achievement (Li et al., 2017; Ma & Wilkins, 2002). School climate has been found to impact the academic performance of at-risk students. Chen and Weikart (2008) noted that lower academic levels in students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are directly associated with school disorder. Adolescents from low-income backgrounds often do not have an ideal home environment and lack the support adolescents need both academically and socially. When the school environment is perceived in a positive manner, students have more opportunity for success (Li et al., 2017).

Researchers Li et al. (2017) tracked grades from over 900 middle school students in a district with 94% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Low-income students were of particular interest to the study due to the overwhelming dropout rate for at-risk students. Results showed a correlation to the factors measured in the study, both psychological and social, and predicted overall achievement of these students in seventh grade (Li et al., 2017). These findings suggest that parent involvement programs and mindset growth for students could be beneficial for students from low-income backgrounds (Li et al., 2017).

Much has been written over the past decades about at-risk students, and many programs have been mandated and developed. There are many differing opinions and recommendations as to what these programs should look like. While some focus on academic abilities (Slavin & Madden, 1989), others believe that academics are not for

these students and the focus should be on job training programs. Still others focus on restructuring schools and making school meaningful to students (Telfer et al., 1990).

Suitts (2015) compiled a research bulletin for the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) addressing the percentage of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the United States, specifically the south. Based on data collected from NCES, Aud et al. (2013) noted that over 50% of students nationwide were considered to be at risk based on low-income status. In the south, the number of low-income students in public schools is alarmingly high. Suitts (2015) reported that 21 states indicated a majority of low-income students in their public schools. Of those 21 states, 13 are located in the south. The report concluded that without changes nationwide in how low-income students are educated, the reported trends will expand and become a problem for generations to come. Achievement gaps are expanding and schools in these geographic areas will continue to "face the danger of becoming entrenched in inadequately funded educational systems that divide the country between the haves and the have-nots" (Suitts, 2015, p. 4).

Kay Ann Taylor, a professor at Kansas State University, has studied poverty and its impact on education. In her work, Taylor (2009) asserted that teachers lack training in working with students from a low socioeconomic background and frequently do not have the knowledge or experience in understanding poverty. This lack of understanding often obstructs efforts in the classroom. Powell et al. (2013) wrote on the importance of cultural responsiveness as a way to reach all students and close achievement gaps. In their writings, Powell et al. stated that teachers who exhibit cultural responsiveness will see all students equally as learners, recognizing the potential academic success of each individual. Powell et al. stated, "even in difficult circumstances in which poverty and

oppression are ever present in the community, culturally responsive teachers validate their students as learners, affirm their identities as cultural beings" (p. 24). When cultural responsiveness is present in a classroom, the focus is on learning for all, not managing a disruptive environment (Powell et. al, 2013).

Culturally responsive pedagogy and instruction mirrors many of the effective literacy strategies previously mentioned. Cantrell and Wheeler (2011, as cited in Powell et al., 2013) said that student engagement, relevant literacy, and learning are just as important as the explicit teaching found in a culturally responsive classroom. Inquiry-based learning and vocabulary instruction are the foundation of culturally responsive teaching. Both strategies allow students to engage in authentic learning activities (Powell et. al, 2013). Culturally responsive teachers provide guidance in acquiring language and the opportunity to build vocabulary in a "language-rich environment in which there is a focus on deep understanding of words and their concepts" (Powell et al., 2013, p. 25). Instructional conversations that encourage students to engage in discussions requiring deep thought about a topic foster comprehension and creativity. This strategy also provides an opportunity for students to build academic language and vocabulary.

In a time when policies such as ESSA challenge educators to meet the needs of the whole child as well as maintain high student achievement, middle school educators feel pressure to teach to the test (Powell et al., 2013). Persistent achievement gaps among the advantaged and disadvantaged illustrate the detrimental effects of teaching to the test on low-income students (Planty et al., 2009; Powell et al., 2013). A safe classroom characterized by respect and care, positive and trusting relationships between teachers and students, and collaboration among students is what represents the work of a culturally

responsive classroom (Powell et al., 2013).

Leu et al. (2009) reviewed research and educational policy regarding new literacies of online reading and its relation to educational policy. Leu et al. (2009) believed that public policies are ensuring that the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students continues to grow in the development of new skills required to be successful with online reading. They found that a middle school students' socioeconomic status impacts their level of reading comprehension in online reading. Leu et al. (2009) suggested that the integration of new literacies into content-area classes may alleviate some resistance from teachers who do not traditionally integrate literacy strategies into content knowledge studies.

In her article on the impact of poverty on education, Capra (2009) discussed a New York City Teaching Fellows program that was designed to address the lack of highly qualified teachers in the city at that time, particularly in poverty-stricken areas. Capra stated that the Teaching Fellows program addressed poverty in the classroom in a way that traditional teacher preparation programs do not. Individuals seeking a career change were tapped to complete a program that exposed them to the realities of teaching in poverty-stricken communities before they take over their own classroom (Capra, 2009). The author of this program instructed a methods course for in-service fellows and found that this experience provided them with a stronger understanding of the link between poverty and academic success. Capra wrote that by replicating this model and requiring that novice teachers spend time in economically disadvantaged areas, we would produce teachers who are better prepared to meet the needs of disadvantaged students.

Carter (2016) contributed to a series of articles that examined what the impact of

health and social issues has on the planning and operations of a school. In his work, he referenced Eric Jensen, a researcher who has worked with secondary schools across the country on methods to educate students from poverty-stricken communities. In his writing, Carter quoted Jensen as saying, “They get labeled as discipline problems when really, they are living under chronic stress” (p. 2). Carter also noted that Jensen said, “to combat the impact of poverty in the classroom, teachers should have way more empathy before judging students’ ability and work to avoid judging students altogether” (p. 2). Years of research has shown that the challenging of authority and impulsivity are classic behaviors of students living in poverty. Teachers need to be reminded that children do not decide on their families or home environments (Carter, 2016).

Hegedus (2018) and the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) conducted research to examine the relationship between poverty and school performance. Prior research has shown a strong connection between student academic performance and family income. That being said, there may be less of a correlation between academic growth and demographic variables, such as family income (Hegedus, 2018; Reardon, 2016). Hegedus said that as a result of these data, academic growth is probably more closely related to what all the stakeholders within a school do to promote learning and growth, rather than the demographics of the student population it serves.

For Hegedus’s (2018) study, participants were randomly selected from public schools within the United States that partner with the NWEA to administer MAP testing to 50 students. MAP Growth is a computer-based adaptive assessment that was administered in both the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016. This generated a sample of approximately 1,500 schools for the study. The sample was compared to demographic

data collected annually by NCES.

If a school's performance is to be evaluated based on student achievement or growth, adjustments must be made to accommodate for factors beyond the school's control that may affect student achievement or growth (Hegedus, 2018). To maintain the purpose of this study, Hegedus (2018) used a school's student achievement and growth in reading and mathematics for all students who participated in the MAP Growth testing.

The analysis for the study was based on the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch as well as a metric called the School Challenge Index, developed by NWEA in 2011 to determine to what degree schools across the United States will face challenges based on free and reduced lunch percentages, Title 1 eligibility, and other school demographics (Hegedus, 2018).

The results of Hegedus's (2018) study showed that there is a strong connection between student achievement in high-poverty schools based on free and reduced lunch percentages or the School Challenge Index. The analysis of data determined that approximately half of a school's achievement can be accounted for by the number of students eligible for free and reduced lunch (Hegedus, 2018). This was found to be in line with previous research which shows that overall school poverty has more of an impact on student achievement than an individual student's socioeconomic status (Perry & McConney, 2010, as cited in Hegedus, 2018). The analysis of the data as it relates to growth showed different results. There is a small variation in student growth between schools with high free and reduced lunch numbers and those with low numbers, indicating that there is minimal association between student growth and poverty levels within a school.

At the conclusion of his study, Hegedus (2018) found a strong negative relationship between achievement and poverty at the school level and stated that "if schools are to be held accountable using academic measures to determine their effectiveness, the measures should be based on how much students learn without being significantly biased by the population the school serves" (p. 14). The data indicated that more than half of schools with the highest percentages of students from poverty-stricken communities also achieved high levels of growth. Hegedus noted that those students attending the lowest performing schools are more likely to make less growth than students in high-performing schools. If students are both low performing and not making growth, "it is more likely that they are not being served well" (Hegedus, 2018, p. 13).

The Great Society was launched over a half a century ago and still approximately 60% of Latino, Native American, and African American children in the United States are living in poverty compared to 28% of Caucasian children (Portes & Salas, 2009; National Center for Children in Poverty, 2016). In terms of standardized test scores in reading, a 13-year-old White student will outperform a 17-year-old Latino or Black high school senior (Portes & Salas, 2009; NCES, 2004).

In their review of research on poverty and its relationship to development and literacy, Portes and Salas (2009) recognized that there is an ethical obligation in the United States to provide schooling that does not, at the least, prevent future access to educational opportunities such as postsecondary education; however, even with interventions that aim to make children literate in a dominant, middle class sense, economic struggles still exist (Portes & Salas, 2009).

Intervention programs that are research based are rarely challenged at a policy

level, according to a review by Portes and Salas (2009). Portes and Salas also stated that when new intervention programs are successful with at-risk students, the learning generated is often adopted for all students, much to the benefit of already advantaged students. The work of Tharp (1989) is mentioned as an example. Tharp's work with Instructional Conversations in the classroom was adopted into professional development and preservice teacher education. Portes and Salas saw this as another example of the rich getting richer.

Researchers through the years have noted that children's rights to a quality public education have been habitually violated as schools continue to be underfunded, substandard, and staffed with teachers who are inadequately prepared to teach disadvantaged students (Kozol, 2005; Portes & Salas, 2009). As students move from concrete thoughts and literate interactions to the more formal or abstract logic, this transition occurs because of the social and cultural practices available to a child. Portes and Salas (2009) noted that economic poverty can eliminate these opportunities for the development necessary to engage in higher level thinking and functioning within the classroom. Although efforts are made to intervene during early childhood, the promising gains appear to diminish as they enter elementary school and students move forward with less support (Portes, 2005, as cited in Portes & Salas, 2009). Thus, the achievement gap that begins in early childhood sustains throughout children's educational experiences.

Students should be experiencing more than just basic skills. Portes and Salas (2009) wrote that students need to learn higher order skills. We need to engage students in higher order thinking skills, not lower our expectations of them and expect remediation classes to be the answer. These classes often fail to meet individual student needs and do

not promote higher order thinking or student motivation (Portes, 2003, as cited in Portes & Salas, 2009).

Professional Development

Educators around the world are being asked to do more with less, and preparing teachers to meet the needs of all levels of learners in a classroom has left educators at an impasse. Teachers need all of the necessary tools to meet the needs of today's diverse classrooms (Lucas & Frazier, 2014; Rowan & Towend, 2016). Evers et al. (2016) looked at the job demands on teachers and the professional development available on the job. They noted that participation in professional learning has not proven to be effective and that although "teachers need to be an expert in their field, they also need to be able to cope with professional change, more diverse student populations, and higher social expectations and responsibilities" (Evers et al., 2016, p. 228).

In a research article focused on implications for professional development for special education students, Rowan and Towend (2016) noted that there is little knowledge about how beginning teachers assess how well prepared they are when it comes to the challenges of meeting the needs of a diverse population of students. The gap in knowledge for these teachers was seen as significant considering the multiple pressures put on beginning teachers. This is often made more significant when teaching in an environment offering professional development that does not address the immediate and specifically focused needs and challenges of new teachers (Rowan & Towend, 2016).

Evers et al. (2016) determined that more research was needed to examine the relationship between professional development at work and how to stimulate this professional development to develop a more flexible competence within the school. In

their study, Evers et al. included two job demands that factor into the job for teachers, which include the pressure of the work and the workload. They found that professional development at work had a strong connection to a teacher's ability to adjust to change, which they determined to be important to professional development at work and employee career development.

Van Driel and Berry (2011) provided a commentary on professional learning for teachers which focuses on pedagogical content knowledge. Risko and Reid (2019) defined pedagogical content knowledge as "specialized knowledge required for designing and implementing effective learning environments" (p. 424). Risko and Reid believed the development of these specialized content skills to be a critical focus in professional learning because it includes teacher understanding of how students learn specific subject matter. Attention has been drawn to the importance of focusing professional learning communities on pedagogical content knowledge, but Van Driel and Berry noted that the research clearly indicates the complicated attributes of pedagogical content knowledge demands and that professional development be highly specific to individual teachers and situations. While there is a consensus in the literature that active participation and collaboration in teacher PLCs is essential to high-quality professional learning, there is limited evidence on the effects of that professional development (Borko et al., 2010, as cited in Van Driel & Berry, 2011). There is evidence that clearly demonstrates that pedagogical content knowledge development is a complex process that is very specific to the situation and the person, implying that professional learning designed to increase pedagogical content knowledge should be coordinated in a way that ties it closely with teacher professional practices (Van Driel & Berry, 2011).

With the adoption of CCSS, there was an emphasis placed on academic literacy, including standards in both ELA and content areas. Included within the secondary ELA domain are standards intended for secondary social studies teachers. The authors of CCSS "believe that students need to develop disciplinary literacy skills, such as those used in social studies, because the types of texts adults interact within college and a career are primarily informational in nature" (Kenna & Russell, 2015, p. 27).

Kenna and Russell (2015) studied the time commitment of secondary social studies teachers to examining and teaching to CCSS. They also looked to determine what differences there are between social studies teachers based on certification from a traditional teacher preparation program or alternative licensure, formal training, or professional development and years of experience. Kenna and Russell used a 30-line item questionnaire that focused on uncovering the time content teachers spent addressing the instructional standards. The survey data suggested that the social studies teachers indicated that their instructional strategies and methods meet the standards approximately half the time. Approximately 10% of the participants stated that they were not cognizant of CCSS, and over 40% reported that they had not participated in any training for implementing CCSS (Kenna & Russell, 2015).

Kenna and Russell (2015) found that there was no statistical differences in teacher responses based on whether they followed a traditional preparation path or alternate certification. There were also no statistical differences based on training received on the standards or years of teaching experiences for social studies teachers. Kenna and Russell found that more frequent and improved professional development needs to be provided to teachers in order to strengthen the effectiveness of instructional methods in classrooms.

Kenna and Russell suggested that professional development sessions offered to social studies teachers in this study were not effective, especially since there was no significant difference among the level of training teachers received.

While CCSS do not state what type of pedagogical methods of instruction teachers should apply, the verbiage used to describe the work of the standard implies which methods are favored. The social studies standards include a large number of question stems which support higher order thinking. These are methods that would favor student-focused instructional strategies rather than direct instruction by the teacher. Kenna and Russell (2015) found that although student-centered instruction is favored, content-area instruction, especially social studies, has long been more traditionally teacher directed. Saye (2013) and the Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative noted that many teachers give way to relying on what they know, which is a teacher-directed method of instruction to address the depth of the content as opposed to the breadth of content. In conducting his own research in 2010, Russell wanted to know if social studies teachers were beginning to transform their teaching practices. What he found was that 90% of the teachers surveyed still favored the use of lecturing, which led to more passive learning and less active student engagement (Kenna & Russell, 2015; Russell, 2010). Social studies teachers often feel pressured to cover the content due to high stakes assessments, which leads teachers to stick to teacher-directed instruction.

Cantrell et al. (2009) was interested in the perception that content-area teachers have concerning the integration of literacy instruction in content-area classes. The literature about integrating literacy skills into the content area in middle schools showed the resistance of middle school teachers stemming from factors such as culture, teacher

beliefs about their responsibilities, and lack of confidence in their ability to teach literacy skills (Cantrell et al., 2009; Greenleaf et al., 2001). There is research that shows that content teachers are often seen to exhibit high self-efficacy in their content area, but they do not believe they have the background or ability to integrate effective literacy instruction into their content (Cantrell et al., 2009; Greenleaf et al., 2001).

Researchers have known of the obstacles to the integration of content literacy for years, with courses developed to improve teacher perspectives about content literacy instruction. Hall (2005) acknowledged that there was a move in professional development, beyond changing teacher beliefs toward professional development, and instead training teachers to implement effective literacy strategies into content areas. Cantrell et al. (2009) conducted research into middle school teacher views about content literacy instruction based on a training program that included continuous support for teachers over time, modeling, and coaching the successful implementation of literacy instruction in the content areas. Approximately 80 teachers from across three school districts took part in the Content Literacy Project, which was a yearlong professional development program developed to help content teachers learn to effectively integrate literacy into their instruction. The initial training took place over a week in summer and focused on the "five sub-domains of the program: (a) vocabulary development, (b) reading comprehension, (c) fluency, (d) learning to write, and (e) writing for knowledge transfer" (Cantrell et al., 2009, p. 79). Teachers were introduced to instructional strategies created to help them integrate content-based literacy and actively participated in activities using these strategies so teachers could engage hands on and assume the role their students would take (Cantrell et al., 2009).

A portion of the participants were chosen for interviews by researchers to determine their beliefs and attitudes about literacy integration and the effect of the professional development on their efficacy for teaching content literacy. Each of the participants in the study were also observed to judge overall implementation of newly learned strategies in teaching content literacy (Cantrell et al., 2009). Findings of the research study varied based on the teaching of literacy, student learning, and perceptions of their role in the teaching of literacy. Cantrell et al. (2009) found a mixed level of efficacy as it relates to how well-equipped teachers felt to address student literacy needs. Over 60% of participating teachers felt they were better prepared for literacy instruction after the training, but 68% of teachers did not feel prepared to meet the needs of struggling readers, in spite of the professional development. These findings were consistent with middle school teacher beliefs about infusing literacy into their content instruction; they want to integrate literacy into their content but do not feel equipped to do so, especially with struggling readers (Cantrell et al., 2009; Greenleaf et al., 2001; Hall, 2005). After being coached by trainers and participating in learning communities with colleagues over the course of the year, participating teachers also described feeling more confident in their ability to address the literacy demands of their students (Cantrell et al., 2009).

Downes et al. (2017) spoke about their experience providing professional development to middle grade teachers and adding middle school students to the new learning in an effort to offer insight and opinions. They regularly integrate adolescents as consultants into their weeklong summer Middle Grade Institutes. Students offer insight and opinions to teachers on matters of curriculum planning, instructional methods, and

school structures. Student input has been identified as a crucial component to effective schools and student learning (Jackson & Davis, 2000, as cited in Downes et al., 2017), but there is a surprising absence of adolescents and their views in the education of middle school teachers.

A team of professors and middle school teachers facilitates a weeklong Middle Grades Institute each summer to in-service teachers of all levels of experience and is supported by a group of 20 adolescents invited from several local schools. The students spend several hours each day with the teacher participants in different capacities and then spend time at a Career Camp geared toward exploring postsecondary opportunities, including careers and college (Downes et al., 2017). One of the session options for teacher participants was an Embedded Literacy strand which had teachers developing lessons integrated with content. Downes et al. (2017) stated that teachers taught their newly developed lessons with the students and then spent time debriefing together, allowing students to share what they found to be strengths and weaknesses of the lesson.

Participating teachers found that putting a lesson immediately into practice was beneficial to their learning (Downes et al., 2017). Similarly, Cantrell et al. (2009), in their study on professional development, stated that 50% of their participants found the modeling and practice of new strategies to be the most effective piece in their new learning.

In a collaboration with a high-poverty and underperforming school, Kennedy (2010) used research-based professional development in a study to increase literacy rates in a low-income school. A mixed methods approach was used to allow for a range of environmental factors in the home, school, and classroom that may combine and impact

the growth in literacy for students within the school. Kennedy documented participating teacher philosophies and implementation of literacy instruction, including levels of self-efficacy. Parent views of interventions were also captured. The school set about implementing change through research-based, multifaceted professional development. The program's objective was to enhance teacher content knowledge and provide teachers with a variety of instructional strategies to meet diverse needs.

Teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire to establish current instructional practices. Teachers also participated in demonstration lessons and coaching throughout the course of the study (Kennedy, 2010). At the end of the intervention, Kennedy (2010) stated that teachers reported students working more independently, higher achievement in reading, and higher parental support. Teachers also reported holding students to a higher level of accountability as well as higher self-efficacy and assurance in their own capacity to improve achievement for struggling readers. Through gradual change, researchers saw significant change in teacher attitudes and beliefs and saw this as a catalyst for growing self-confidence and self-efficacy in teachers (Kennedy, 2010).

Bandura (2006) stated that teacher views of their self-efficacy can establish how they perceive opportunities for professional development as well as influence their choice of activity, effort put into the new learning, and perseverance through the confronting of obstacles. Rowan and Towend (2016) found that when teachers exhibit a lack of confidence and self-efficacy with a specific task, they will likely refrain from engaging with it. It has been widely acknowledged that self-efficacy can increase with experience and professional development (Gallagher, 2007). It has been found that through novice teacher preparation and continuous professional learning opportunities, a direct impact

can be made on classroom instruction and teacher effectiveness (Cheung & Hui, 2011, as cited in Rowan & Towend, 2016). Professional learning is not always viewed as beneficial to beginning teachers, especially when it is viewed as taking time away from everyday work or if it is not viewed as relevant to immediate classroom challenges. Due to budget constraints, schools often focus on widely recognized areas of need rather than individual needs (Rowan & Towend, 2016).

It has been shown that teachers want and need practical in-service professional learning that addresses their genuine needs in the classroom, makes them better teachers, and improves student learning. A source of self-efficacy information, vicarious experience, which allows an individual to observe the modeling of effective teaching, is a strongly suggested option for the design of professional learning (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003).

Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1995) offered four sources of self-efficacy that are often used by individuals to assess their own efficacy levels in certain situations. These sources are (a) accomplishments, (b) experience learned by observing others who perform the task well, (c) coaching or feedback on performance, and (d) emotional reactions based on ability.

There is a large body of research on the self-efficacy of teachers and how it impacts student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and overall school development to support this theory. Self-efficacy has been described as how teachers view their ability to plan and organize instructional activities and carry these plans out in such a way to meet student and school goals (Martin & Mulvihill, 2019). The goal of a teacher is to affect student growth, so teacher self-efficacy may be determined by their ability to impact

student achievement. Martin and Mulvihill (2019) included the opinions and feedback from several teacher educators in their article, including a professor who was noted as stating that if we base teacher self-efficacy on student outcomes, we can assume that a teacher's perception of self-efficacy will be based on reality rather than their own view of instructional practices. Helfrich and Clark (2016) noted that teacher self-efficacy impacts student achievement and teacher capability and planning as well as increases the motivation of teachers to try new teaching strategies and persevere when working with low-achieving students. Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013) saw teacher self-efficacy as a measure of the degree to which teachers see that their work has a positive impact on student learning.

Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erikson (2013) conducted research to study novice teachers and their growth in content knowledge for reading instruction as well as their self-efficacy as a reading teacher. Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erikson stated, "as both the literacy demands within our society and the diverse needs of our nation's children increase, it is critical that our preservice teachers leave their training programs highly effective and efficacious teachers of reading" (p. 204). These researchers noted that preservice teachers who have a higher sense of self-efficacy tend to receive higher performance ratings during student teaching than those with lower self-efficacy. Teacher preparation courses are meant to teach pedagogy, so this is an opportunity to have a positive impact on self-efficacy for preservice teachers (Leader-Janssen & Rankin-Erickson, 2013)

Participants in Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erickson's (2013) study included novice teachers who finished a reading methods course. Those who were taking an

additional reading course were the treatment group, and the control group was made up of those taking content-area courses. The participants took part in a 16-week literacy course with a practicum that included tutoring struggling readers. Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erickson served as researchers and instructors and designed the literacy course to offer experience with literacy instruction and reading development for low-performing readers. Preservice teachers were required to develop plans for the student being tutored based on individual student needs (Leader-Janssen & Rankin-Erickson, 2013).

As part of the data collection, participants completed a questionnaire addressing comprehension and word analysis, a survey on basic reading skills, and a teacher self-efficacy scale on skills teachers need to teach literacy (Leader-Janssen & Rankin-Erickson, 2013). Select participants were also selected to take part in interviews. Participants completed the questionnaire and survey at the beginning and end of the course but completed the self-efficacy scale and interviews three times. Data collected after the first administration of the instruments showed a general knowledge of content but a lack of pedagogical content knowledge. After tutoring sessions started and the second set of data was collected, researchers noted an increase in pedagogical content knowledge and evidence of student learning. In their final data collection Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erickson (2013) determined that preservice teachers used instructional methods learned in the course work, and it resulted in student growth. If the methods were an area of weakness for the teacher, students were less successful. Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erickson stated,

> Before this experience, preservice teachers believed they could teach reading; at the end of the semester, they stated they knew they could teach reading. They

> credited this knowing to evidence of student learning and increased comfort with teaching methods resulting from practice, feedback, and the support they were given. (p. 218)

Poulou et al. (2019) stated that teachers displaying confidence in their ability to increase academic growth is one of the strongest predictors of increased academic achievement. Additionally, high self-efficacy in teachers will create a learning environment which includes "high-quality lesson planning, meaningful instruction, and effective classroom management" (Poulou et al., 2019, p. 28). Poulou et al. conducted research to explore teacher self-efficacy with classroom management and the relationship to instructional practices in the classroom. The study sample included 58 classroom teachers at the elementary and secondary levels. Participants were observed by trained observers using an assessment system designed to assess the use of instructional and management strategies (Poulou et al., 2019). Teachers were also asked to complete a self-efficacy scale and were then provided with feedback on the observations which included areas of strengths and opportunities for growth.

Results indicated that teachers rated themselves as having high self-efficacy in the areas of instruction, engagement, and management (Poulou et al., 2019). The study found that teachers use effective strategies, praise, and feedback consistently. Poulou et al. (2019) found that elementary teachers with high efficacy levels focused on student mastery of goals and those with lower self-efficacy focused on performance. Results also indicated that teacher efficacy levels with classroom management mirrored their practices in the classroom, but significant differences were noted in the observations of instructional strategies compared to teacher self-efficacy ratings (Poulou et al., 2019).

Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013) noted that teachers with higher self-efficacy are more apt to engage struggling learners and encourage them to change their perceptions of their reading ability. Teachers who demonstrate effective literacy instruction often are insightful when selecting materials, use effective literacy strategies to increase reading comprehension, identify and set goals to meet individual student needs, and consider themselves continuous learners by engaging in professional development (Abernathy-Dyer et al., 2013).

In their study to examine what may influence teacher efficacy and how that can impact literacy strategies used in the classroom, Abernathy-Dyer et al. (2013) included four teachers, two from Reading First schools and two from non-Reading First schools. Teachers were given a questionnaire measuring efficacy, beliefs, and curriculum. They were also interviewed periodically based on questions that emerged throughout the study. Teachers in the Reading First schools were held to the monitored guidelines of the program, while teachers at the non-Reading First school were able to create their own lessons (Abernathy-Dyer et al., 2013). It was noted that all the participants made changes to their teaching methods after working with a coach one on one and receiving feedback on their instruction. Through interviews, the researchers were able to ascertain that once teachers understood why changes to instructional methods were necessary, the changes were evident. These participating teachers can serve as change agents and motivators throughout a school when they have firsthand experience (Abernathy-Dyer et al., 2013).

Shaukat and Muhammad-Iqbal (2012) noted that teachers with higher self-efficacy are motivated to try new ideas and bring new methods to their teaching. These teachers are less critical of students and more committed to teaching. These

characteristics bring positivity to a school and promote effective change. Shaukat and Muhammad-Iqbal also noted that when teachers observe someone effectively carrying out a task, they will modify their practice based on that experience. The study conducted by Shaukat and Muhammad-Iqbal was designed to examine teacher self-efficacy as it relates to student engagement and instructional strategies. Participants included 198 teachers in both elementary and secondary schools with either a bachelor's or master's degree and approximately half of the teachers serving in an interim position. Participants were administered a self-efficacy scale as the source of data collection. Shaukat and Muhammad-Iqbal found no significant differences in types of degree or permanent versus interim teachers as it pertains to instructional strategies but did find that interim teachers were much more likely to maintain student engagement than permanent teachers.

Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erickson (2013) noted that teacher efficacy is a powerful theory to pay attention to, due to the cycles it takes on in educators. Those with higher levels of efficacy tend to work harder and put in more effort, leading to higher achievement and teaching ability, which then leads to higher efficacy levels. This cycle may occur in teachers with high or low efficacy. Martin and Mulvihill (2019) argued that if a teacher exhibits low self-efficacy levels, it does not mean the teacher will be ineffective. Doubt and low self-efficacy may motivate a teacher to work on new skills and strategies, leading to increased student learning. For teacher educators, the work lies in making sure new teachers experience success with effective instructional strategies. New teachers need to be advised to not be overly confident, as it may lead to a lower level of self-efficacy which can result in leaving the field of education.

Teacher Certification

According to the Congressional Research Service (2018) report on teacher preparation policies, "decades of federal policymaking have been built on the premise that all good pre-service preparation is an effective route to quality teaching, and ultimately, improved educational outcomes" (p. 1).

Policy makers have looked for ways to increase the effectiveness of teacher preparation and training programs as well as the recruitment and retention of quality teachers. In 2015, the USDOE recommended federal regulations for teacher preparation programs throughout the country. This included developing evaluation systems and the use of collected data to inspect the effectiveness of the programs (Jang & Horn, 2017). Policy makers have also considered policies which would tie the performance of graduates to financial assistance to the program (Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014).

The Higher Education Amendments of 1998 require the Secretary of Education to present a report to Congress and the public on teacher preparation across the country. According to Kuenzi (2018), the most recent report contains data for the 2013-2014 school year, with select data being presented online since that time. The Secretary's Tenth Annual Report included statistics on teacher preparation programs, including the fact that 70% of the 26,589 teacher education programs in the U.S. are traditional preparation programs, with approximately 450,000 students enrolled. By far, the two largest traditional preparation programs are online universities (Kuenzi, 2018).

Even with the growing body of research designed to gain more understanding of teacher preparation, the studies available were not seen as useful to preparation providers due to the outcomes, which measured the performance of graduates after they began

teaching. The teacher educators did not want to wait until graduates entered into teaching to learn more about their effectiveness as a program (DeMonte, 2017). American Institutes for Research brought together researchers, teacher preparation providers, and school leaders to discuss how to design a research study that would help answer the questions of how to obtain information on how effective specific education programs may be, as well as gain information about what activities and experiences within a preparation program have the biggest impact on what prospective teachers know and can do (DeMonte, 2017).

Goldhaber and Cowen (2014) studied the mobility of teachers across teacher preparation programs in Washington State. Their longitudinal study took place over the course of 22 years, studying job decisions of teachers from 20 collegiate preparation programs. Since policy makers should be interested in the longevity of teacher careers, the researchers focused on teacher attrition rates. School districts may suffer financial loss and lower academic gains when they experience teacher attrition. Goldhaber and Cowen noted several reasons for the teacher turnover affecting student achievement. Teachers gain significant experience in their first few years of teaching, so replacing this experience with novice teachers could result in lowering overall teacher quality when those teachers leaving the classroom typically have more experience than a beginning teacher (Clotfelter et al., 2010; Goldhaber & Cowen, 2014). Goldhaber and Cowen referred to the "churn associated with teacher turnover, which may itself reduce student achievement" (p. 450).

Goldhaber and Cowen (2014) stated that some teacher preparation programs may be more effective than other programs at cultivating skills that generate and promote long

teaching careers. Previous research has shown a connection between the type of training novice teachers receive and the probability of teacher turnover. Also, graduates from preparation programs can be sent to various types of schools, and it is well documented that school characteristics impact teacher attrition (Clotfelter et al., 2010). To begin their research, Goldhaber and Cowen gathered teacher assignments as well as their training programs and certification types from state administrative databases. They included all teachers who entered the teaching profession in Washington State as a beginning teacher after the 1989-1990 school year. As they studied the sample, they found that teacher attrition seemed to follow similar rates across the nation, with approximately 15% of teachers leaving their schools per year with about half of them leaving Washington State public schools. Among first-year teachers, 10% leave Washington public schools and 13% leave for another school within the state (Goldhaber & Cowen, 2014).

Goldhaber and Cowen (2014) noted an extensive variation in the stability of teachers who were trained within the 20 preparation programs within the study. While researchers accounted for preparation programs, salaries, school characteristics, and experience, they also paid attention to unobserved factors such as training programs routinely sending graduates to the same districts and factors that affect school climate such as mentoring and administrative leadership. Researchers found that teachers receiving credentials from programs outside of Washington State are more apt to leave the school district within a 5-year span. Also of note was that one program had those most likely to stay in the teaching profession with an 82% survival rate. Even at 10 years of experience, there were differences between programs, with one program showing a 73% survival rate and another at 34%. Those graduating from the five largest teacher

education programs, which train close to 50% of the new teachers in the sample, have comparable mobility rates (Goldhaber & Cowen, 2014).

The results of the study by Goldhaber and Cowen (2014) suggest that policy makers should be cautious when assessing teacher education programs based only on student achievement. Goldhaber and Cowen estimated that the effects of teacher training programs and the length of a teaching career affect student achievement by (a) assuming that novice teachers are replacing more experienced teachers, (b) teacher turnover affects student achievement directly, and (c) effectiveness of teachers as seen through the strength of programs may decline over time as teachers gain experience and skills on the job and let go of elements of their teacher training.

Darling-Hammond (2006) appealed to teacher educators to consider how they might support the kinds of learning teachers need to take on the difficult and often complicated job of teaching and meeting a level of success. She argued that many policy makers see teaching as a job that anyone can do fairly well as long as they know something about the subject and can pick up the essential skills while on the job (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Specifically, for more practical approaches to teaching literacy to all of the adolescents being taught by beginning teachers, Kavanagh and Rainey (2017) believed that teacher education needs to be leveraged. Practice-based teacher education does not currently seek to develop beginning teacher abilities to support adolescent literary learning. In their study of an alternate teacher education program, Kavanagh and Rainey found that the impact of specifically designed learning opportunities and the connection between teacher preparation and beginning teacher training indicates that the work to advance teacher training is justified. Although teacher educators have tried to

specifically identify what teachers need to learn (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017), there is not yet a widespread understanding of what well-designed, sustainable, and meaningful professional development looks like.

Howell et al. (2013) believed that those who educate our future teachers and building administrators must be more present and involved in training and supporting effective teachers. Howell et al. conducted a study in 2013 on the effectiveness of middle grade teaching and the perceptions of the preparedness of newly hired teachers. Howell et al. stated, "with leadership so closely tied to school improvement and change in middle schools, it is important to consider how these individuals perceive the preparation of teachers entering the workforce" (p. 2). They surveyed 36 middle school principals: 51% held a middle level teacher certification, and only 47% indicated they had specific preparation in their teacher education program to teach students at the middle level. The demographic data of the principals also showed that only 31% of the principals indicated that their administrative preparation program provided specific training for leading at the middle school level (Howell et al., 2013).

Analysis of the survey data indicated that 80% of the principals surveyed felt new teachers were extremely or adequately prepared to show that they have the expected knowledge in their content area to effectively educate students. Additionally, 92% of principals reported that new teachers were extremely or adequately prepared to be enthusiastic about the content they teach. Based on these responses, Howell et al. (2013) found that the respondents perceive content knowledge and enthusiasm about said content to be a strength. In their work with indicators of quality teacher preparation for literacy teachers, Risko and Reid (2019) identified content knowledge development as

having a positive effect on academic achievement. Risko and Reid noted the importance of beginning teachers being able to draw on multiple areas of knowledge to effectively plan and implement instruction as well as make critical decisions to support instruction. On the other hand, respondents found that statements related to developmentally appropriate instruction, culturally responsive teaching, planning for individual differences, interdisciplinary instruction, assessment, and feedback were perceived as a lack of preparedness. Researchers were disappointed that there was a negative perception related to curriculum, assessment, and relationships. Based on these findings, Howell et al. recommended that teacher preparation programs emphasize the core framework for best practices in middle school, which among other things, teach the appropriate dispositions and understandings of the developmental spectrum as well as building relationships with students and colleagues.

A roundtable of educators from the school level as well as teacher trainers met in Washington, DC, led by California Representative Susan Davis. They concluded that teachers are not fully prepared when entering the classroom and lack the necessary experience to work with at-risk students, especially the trauma that can impact these students (Mader, 2015). The group noted that districts do not recruit or hire teachers who represent the diversity of students in our classrooms. In addition, teacher training programs are not providing student teachers with experiences in schools with low-income students and high diversity. Mader (2015) wrote that increasing teacher diversity was a well-known component in plans to improve the quality of teachers who were submitted to the USDOE. Teachers on the panel made suggestions for improvement, which included the partnerships between traditional and alternative programs, higher expectations for

teachers in training, the “need for teachers to learn both content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge” (Mader, 2015, para. 9), and longer student teaching experiences.

Teacher educators continue to see blame placed on preparation programs by policy makers for ineffective literacy instruction. In an article identifying important matters for preparing literacy teachers, Risko and Reid (2019) argued that the most successful teachers will be those who received a high-quality teacher education and are fully prepared for the job. Risko and Reid saw current efforts to “deprofessionalize teacher preparation through ideas that teacher preparation education is a waste of money and lead to more and more fast-track programs with reduced coursework and few opportunities for supervised practice teaching” (p. 424.) In their review of literacy teacher preparation programs, Risko and Reid came to the conclusion that novice teachers would have more opportunity for success by attending a formal teacher preparation program that offers appropriate training; adding that the high expectations for well-developed content knowledge, being equipped to teach students from diverse backgrounds, and relevant practice such a program provides will prepare teachers to have a higher impact on student learning. They also added that taking away formal teacher training will not meet the expectations of policy makers who have increased expectations that new teachers will have expertise they need to provide the level of rigor they expect (McCarthey & Geoghegan, 2016, as cited in Risko & Reid, 2019).

Alternative teacher preparation programs allow candidates to receive licensure in an expedited pathway and rapidly increase the number of available teachers. Jang and Horn (2017) reviewed research on alternative teacher education programs to determine

the most effective path to becoming a teacher. They found that among nearly 730,000 teacher candidates in 2010, approximately 12% were enrolled in some type of alternative preparation program. Teach for American and The New Teacher Project as well as temporary or emergency certifications are the most common alternative programs. These programs are managed by state educational agencies and are required to report such data as teacher retention, student achievement, and feedback from schools to the federal government (Jang & Horn 2017). Jang and Horn described traditional teacher preparation programs as "a four- or five-year undergraduate program at a postsecondary institution. A traditional program generally includes courses on pedagogy, subject content, and courses on teaching particular populations" (p. 2).

In 2014, a team from the University of Washington partnered with a national education nonprofit organization to create an alternative teacher preparation program designed to last 6 weeks (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). The University of Washington currently has an alternative licensure program in place, but it is a yearlong plan and was redesigned to help newly accepted teaching candidates be better prepared. The redesigned summer institute was centered around four principles that are essential to teacher education: (a) content knowledge as a central focus to learning to teach, (b) a connection between student teaching and course work, (c) ongoing professional development, and (d) a connection between core teaching practices and professional development (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017).

The rationale behind this redesign and study is the fact that adolescents, especially those in low-income schools, are routinely receiving remediation and test prep. Across the country, there are teachers in the beginning stages of their career and there is a need

to confirm that they have the knowledge and skills to effectively reach all students (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). The need is even greater in more disadvantaged schools where there is a higher rate of teacher turnover than in schools with a more advantaged population (Ingersoll, 2003, as cited in Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). With the realization that preparation programs need to find more creative ways to be sure beginning teachers are able to support literacy, researchers at the University of Washington began their work on a redesigned alternative teacher education program and also designed a study on its effectiveness.

The purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which a teacher educator was able to equip beginning teachers with the skills to facilitate text-based collaborative discussions and to determine to what extent novice teachers were able to support students in their engagement of text-based discussions (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). Researchers designed their study to determine if there is a relationship between a teacher educator's instructional practice and the subsequent classroom practice of novice teachers in a secondary ELA classroom. The teachers were supported by the teacher educator over the 6 weeks of alternative teacher preparation. Approximately 400 prospective teachers began training for their first year of teaching at the summer institute. Clinical faculty served as teacher educators for the institute, and they supervised the novice teachers who taught students in teams of four (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). Each team of novice teachers was assigned a secondary-level classroom and taught a group of summer school students for up to 2 hours each morning, which became the main focus for teacher learning opportunities (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). Following the morning teaching, novice teachers spent 3-4 hours each day in methods classes and preparing lessons by

analyzing student work.

Kavanagh and Rainey (2017) based their study largely on a collection of videos of novice secondary ELA teachers who participated in the redesigned summer institute. While all participants were college graduates, not all novice teachers majored in subjects closely related to ELA. Novice teachers worked in one of two urban charter schools, both serving mainly at-risk students who are typically sent to summer school for remedial help. The primary data collected were 24 videos of both lessons taught by novice teachers and lessons taught by the teacher educator, which were filmed in methods courses (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). Kavanagh and Rainey analyzed videos that would give them the best opportunity to see novice teachers attempting to facilitate and support text-based discussion and literary reading and reasoning. Lesson plans and related artifacts, as well as interviews with the teacher educators, were also included as supplemental data. To determine the relationship between how new teachers were instructed and how they facilitated instruction to their students, researchers watched and analyzed video data from both the novice teachers and teacher educators, paying particular attention to the instruction of both the methods of instruction and novice teaching as it related to "(1) approaches to supporting students' text-based discussion and (2) approaches to supporting students to participate in a disciplinary community of literary studies" (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017, p. 919).

Researchers found that the novice teachers frequently supported students as they participated in text discussions but found little evidence of support for students to engage in discussion of literature as it relates to disciplinary literacy or how students are thinking about the text. The findings about novice teacher learning and how they were taught were

very similar. Kavanagh and Rainey (2017) found this mirroring to be important to future discussion about practical experience for novice teachers and how this relates to the methods of teacher educators. The researchers did not find evidence that the method of preparing novice teachers impacted the method of teaching by novice teachers and the method of instruction taken on by the novice teachers. Furthermore, given the design structure for this alternative preparation program, Kavanagh and Rainey cannot say that any results would transfer to other new alternative programs. Kavanagh and Rainey also stated that regardless of the level of rigor, 6 weeks is not a sufficient amount of time for novice teachers to gain the professional standards needed to enter the classroom.

With recent teacher shortages, those who promote alternative licensure are claiming that these programs will allow them to provide schools with higher numbers of prospective teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2016). In 2015, the USDOE published a report documenting data about highly qualified teachers enrolled in alternative licensure pathways. It was documented that close to 700 providers offered over 8,000 alternative education programs, which account for 30% of teacher training programs throughout the nation. Two thirds of these programs were associated with institutes of higher education (Risko & Reid, 2019; USDOE, 2015). Acknowledging the equity in alternative paths to licensure, Risko and Reid (2019) urged researchers to give attention to program quality. It is important to recognize how the pathway to licensure affects high-quality preparation. Traditional pathways are more apt to offer the appropriate time to allow novice teachers to build their knowledge base and implement new skills in practice with ongoing coaching and mentoring (Risko & Reid, 2019).

There are advocates for strong teacher training, especially for teachers going to

work in high-poverty schools with diverse populations. These advocates argue that students need a teacher who knows how students learn and knows how to make learning meaningful and relevant to all students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). Darling-Hammond (2016) maintained that research shows that beginning teachers who graduate from traditional preparation programs are more effective than those who enter the profession without traditional preparation.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that high-quality teaching is only a functionality of intellectual ability or strong subject knowledge. Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) noted Rod Paige's comments regarding teacher quality when he proposed "the dismantling of the teacher certification system" (p. 2) and his plan to redefine teacher qualification systems to "emphasize higher standards for verbal ability and content knowledge and to de-emphasize education training, making student teaching and education coursework optional" (p. 2). The complexities of a classroom in the United States include various levels of poverty and a large range of learning differences, which then require a certain level of personal and professional training (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The American education model has not always supported the notion of alternative licensure; and in contrast to other countries around the world, American schools do not promote professional learning time for teachers to collaborate on planning, curriculum development, effective teaching strategies, and data analysis (Darling-Hammond, 2006). While efforts were being made to improve teacher preparation, competing agendas tried to replace the traditional paths of the teaching profession with a clearer path into the profession as well as eliminating tenure, creating more possibility of termination. Those who promote these ideas argue that any specialized skills can be learned on the job

(Darling-Hammond, 2016).

Jang and Horn (2017) reviewed research on how effective traditional preparation programs are in comparison to alternative licensure programs and noted that the results most frequently show that teachers come out of traditional programs better equipped and with more instructional knowledge. They do recognize that the research does yield mixed results in relation to student achievement. In a study of novice teachers that compared a group of teachers from traditional preparation to a group who were prepared through alternative licensure in Texas, those who completed a traditional preparation program demonstrated a higher level of self-efficacy and preparation with instructional planning and strategies (Jang & Horn, 2017; Zientek, 2007). Ronfeldt et al. (2014) analyzed national data from the Schools and Staffing Survey and noted that close to half of those trained in alternative settings never completed in-service training or student teaching, compared to traditionally trained teachers where 8% did not complete the in-service training. Studies examining student achievement and teacher preparation found alternative programs to be slightly less effective than traditional programs. Clotfelter et al. (2010) used End of Course scores from 10th graders in North Carolina to study the relationship between various forms of teacher training programs and achievement scores. Data showed teachers who attended traditional preparation programs were more effective, with higher student achievement than teachers with an alternate certification, as well as provisional, temporary, and emergency certification (Clotfelter et al., 2010; Jang & Horn, 2017). While summarizing their review of research, Jang and Horn stated that in providing effective instruction for students, teacher preparation is crucial; and policy makers, states, and district leaders should continue to make it a key focus.

In their study evaluating the merits of traditional teacher training programs versus alternative licensure, Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) had certified teachers and Teach for America teachers as participants in this longitudinal study which replicated a previous study for the Hoover Institute's CREDO center conducted in 2001. The researchers worked with the Houston Independent School District to examine data for students and teachers over a 5-year span. This data set included student demographics and test scores in reading and math, certification status, participation in Teach for America, number of years of experience in a classroom, and student demographics (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). The researchers limited their analysis to student growth in Grades 3-5 as compared to teacher characteristics. Darling-Hammond et al. examined test data as students moved from third to fourth grade, as well as fourth to fifth grade, ultimately determining what effects could be associated with fourth- and fifth-grade teachers and students.

The study showed a high rate of attrition for Teach for America within this specific school district and a higher rate of attrition than the district's beginning teachers. Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) found that many Teach for America recruits gained certification over the course of the study, but most left the Houston Independent School District after they received initial preparation for teaching. Researchers also found a high rate of attrition for beginning teachers during the time of the study, with up to 55% of new teachers leaving; but this was possibly related to a reduction in force or difficult teaching conditions. While some suggest that intelligent college graduates who join Teach For America may not require the traditional teacher preparation programs, Darling-Hammond et al. found that when comparing traditionally certified teachers with the same level of experience as uncertified Teacher for America teachers within similar

settings, there was no difference in performance.

Candidates seeking alternative licensure often have full-time jobs as they seek this certificate. As a result, colleges may water down courses to reduce extra readings and classwork to focus on the survival skills of classroom discipline as opposed to curriculum and teaching methods (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Without this experience, and the connection of theory and practice, these candidates would not have a realistic picture of what effective classroom practices may look like. Darling-Hammond (2006) noted, "few may realize that rapidly producing teachers with alternative licensure, who often leave after a few years, may be a major part of the problem in our country rather than the solution" (p. 12).

Summary

Adolescent literacy continues to be a nationwide concern as students move from learning to read to reading to learn. New skills are required for students to successfully read and comprehend more complex text. The literature suggests that direct instruction is no longer enough for students; and with the implementation of specific literacy strategies, student reading skills and ability to access new content knowledge will increase. Teachers are often reluctant to move away from the direct instruction that allows them to cover the required curriculum due to the pressures of high stakes testing, especially in high-poverty schools. The research revealed that as we continue to see high rates of teacher attrition, new teachers are hired to work in high-poverty and low-performing schools in disproportionate numbers. With fewer students entering traditional teacher education programs, novice teachers are being hired with alternative certifications. These teachers often lack student teaching experience and experience working with diverse

populations. Relevant and ongoing professional development will be essential to ensure our students are being taught by effective teachers.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine how well prepared middle school ELA, science, and social studies teachers were to teach literacy skills to middle school students. The study used a mixed-methods design to identify teacher perceptions of their ability and willingness to use literacy strategies to improve the literacy skills of students in both ELA and content-area classes as well as how teacher certification and other school factors may impact literacy skills. A survey was administered to collect quantitative data. This survey measured the self-efficacy of teachers as it relates to literacy instruction. Qualitative data were collected through focus groups at each participating school. The purpose of the focus groups was to gain a school-wide perception of literacy instruction within the school and identify any possible relationships between teacher perceived efficacy and outside factors. The qualitative data were analyzed to determine themes and commonalities, and then both data sources were analyzed and compared to identify what, if any, outside factors impacted the teaching of literacy skills.

Research questions were developed to guide the study and research methodology. The goal of the research study was to answer the following questions:

1. How do middle school teachers rate their self-efficacy as it relates to the use of literacy strategies for teaching literacy skills?
2. How prepared are middle school ELA and content-area teachers to address literacy skills for all students?
3. How does the efficacy of a traditionally prepared teacher compare to that of a

non-traditionally prepared teacher?

Research Design

The research took the form of a case study design in an effort to investigate trends within the schools and among teachers that may affect the literacy skills and reading growth of middle school students. Schools participating in this study have instructional expectations set by the instructional department at the district. The data collected through the survey and focus groups helped determine to what extent teachers were implementing these expectations and how that level of implementation, as well as outside factors, affected student literacy achievement.

The qualitative research was collected through a survey created by Mustain (2006) titled Teacher Efficacy Instrument for Literacy Education (TEILE; Appendix A). The survey measured the efficacy level of teachers as it relates to teaching literacy skills. It was administered to all ELA, science, and social studies teachers in the participating schools. The results of the survey were analyzed to determine if ELA and content-area teachers felt prepared to teach effective literacy strategies and how that compared to their perceptions of what their role is in teaching literacy skills to students. The data were also analyzed to compare the efficacy levels of teachers based on their certification.

In an effort to gain more understanding of how teacher levels of self-efficacy impact student achievement school-wide, qualitative data were collected through focus groups made up of school leadership teams. Discussion questions were created based on the survey taken by individual teachers, and the focus group sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed through online software. The qualitative data were analyzed to determine similar themes and areas of concern. Once all quantitative and qualitative data

were collected, they were triangulated to determine the level of efficacy of participating teachers and how this impacts the schools overall.

Research Instrumentation

Permission was given from Mustain (2006; Appendix B) to utilize his survey. The survey (Appendix A) was sent out to ELA, science, and social studies teachers who were within their first 5 years of teaching, regardless of their path of certification.

The survey was made up of 24 items based on a Likert scale, and participants were asked to respond to and rate questions related to teaching literacy skills within their content areas. Response choices ranged from 1-4, with 1 being "strongly agree" and 4 being "strongly disagree." The instrument was designed to determine teacher self-efficacy levels with teaching literacy in their classroom and how their level of self-efficacy would affect student achievement in a middle school setting. The developer of the survey defined literacy as "the ability to read and write at a level adequate for written communication and generally at a level that enables a student to successfully function at their current grade level" (Mustain, 2006, p. 111).

Each participating school was asked to have their leadership team participate in a focus group. The focus groups were asked to engage in discussion on the topics of literacy instruction, teacher self-efficacy, and how factors such as poverty and teacher certification impact student achievement. The leadership teams were made up of school-based administrators and teachers representing each grade level and department. The discussion was recorded and then transcribed for analysis, looking for key words and themes as they relate to the discussion questions.

Focus group questions were created and designed around the survey taken by

participating teachers (Appendix C). The questions were stated as,

1. How do teachers in your building view their responsibility for teaching reading, regardless of content taught?
2. What types of ongoing professional development do you think are needed to make sure your teachers are prepared to teach literacy skills throughout all content areas?
3. What skills do you believe are necessary to teach students so they can be successful with the comprehension of content in textbooks?
4. How does high poverty affect the literacy skills of your students, and how does your school work to counteract that?
5. What literacy strategies has your school implemented that have been successful in promoting student growth?
6. Did you receive your teaching license through a traditional teacher preparation program or an alternative program?
7. Did you feel prepared to address the literacy skills of middle school students when you started teaching?

Content Validity

Permission was obtained to use the TEILE survey. The survey was validated by Mustain (2006) using a variety of questions pulled from several previously validated surveys addressing self-efficacy and literacy. Mustain then validated his survey using 32 middle school teachers from a district not included in his study with no more than 3 years of teaching experience. The researcher conducted a reliability analysis and found that questions with the highest mean score from the pilot survey were the same questions with

the highest mean score in his study (Mustain, 2006).

The focus group questions were validated using the Lawshe content validity process. The focus group questions were sent to school administrators and leadership teams in middle schools not participating in the study with the request to rate the questions as “essential,” “useful, but not essential,” and “not necessary.” Overall, all but one of the seven schools identified the questions as “essential” or “useful, but not essential.” Following the validity of the focus group questions, they were sent to the school administrator and leadership team chair for review prior to the scheduled focus group meeting.

Research Participants

The target population group for this research study included teachers from four Title I middle schools in a large urban school district in the southwestern region of North Carolina located within the greater Charlotte area. The district is made up of 55 schools serving approximately 31,000 students. There are 11 middle schools in the district. The four middle schools were chosen based on their Title I status, which impacts teacher turnover and student achievement levels. Title I schools have access to more funding and typically participate in additional professional learning for teachers, interventions for students, and other programs as determined by the school or the district.

The participants were selected through sampling based on the content they teach and the number of years of teaching experience. The purpose of this criteria is to determine to what extent literacy strategies are taught within these content areas as well as teacher perceptions of their role as a reading teacher. A second criteria for selection was the length of teaching career. For the purpose of this study, and in determining the

level of preparation of teaching literacy skills, ELA and content-area teachers within their first 10 years of teaching were asked to participate.

The participating focus groups were selected through purposeful sampling. These leadership team groups represented staff members from the four participating Title I middle schools and were peers of the teachers participating in the survey, working with the same population of students.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a survey sent digitally to participating teachers. Teachers were provided with the background and purpose of the study as well as a consent to participate letter. Identifying information, including the name of the school of employment, was not used in the study. Participating teachers were asked to respond within a period of 1 to 2 weeks and were provided with a reminder to complete the survey as necessary.

Once the survey data were collected, focus groups were scheduled with the principals of participating middle schools. The researcher worked with each school administrator and leadership chair to be added to the agenda of a previously scheduled meeting. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not possible, so the researcher worked with the school administrator to schedule a virtual meeting. The chairperson of the leadership team was provided with the focus group questions and asked to lead the team in a discussion based on the questions, with the researcher as a facilitator. Focus group discussions were recorded and later transcribed and analyzed for common themes and key words and phrases.

Data Analysis

The survey used to collect qualitative data was analyzed by first tabulating the data for each question. Scores were assigned to each question based on the response ranging from 4=strongly agree, 3=agree, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree. Categorical questions such as "What content area is your primary teaching area" were assigned numbers such as 1=ELA, 2=science, and 3=social studies. A single-item score was then assigned to questions for each individual participant (Creswell, 2012) and complied into a spreadsheet. Using the online statistical system SPSS, these data were put into the computer program for analysis. A Pearson correlation test was used to compare the self-efficacy level of teachers and an independent *t* test was used to determine a level of significance between the self-efficacy levels of teachers based on their licensure pathway. Data were then displayed through tables with a detailed explanation of the results.

Qualitative data were collected through the recordings of four focus group discussions. The recordings were transcribed through the use of the qualitative computer program Trint and coded to identify broad themes, identifying key words and phrases as they related to the preparedness of teachers to teach reading, the use of effective literacy strategies, the impact of student poverty levels, professional development for teachers, and teacher licensure. The responses from the focus group were analyzed and coded based on the research question they answered. The qualitative data were displayed through tables and charts as well as narrative descriptions.

Data from both the survey and focus groups were triangulated to answer the research questions.

Summary

This study sought to determine if middle school ELA, science, and social studies teachers had the skills and knowledge to effectively teach literacy skills to students. The research helped to determine the level of self-efficacy teachers have in regard to teaching literacy skills and if they felt prepared to use these skills and strategies to improve student achievement. The research also sought to determine if factors such as student poverty levels impacted their achievement, and if teacher certification path and school- or district-level professional development impacted their teaching ability and student achievement, as well as comparing the level of self-reported efficacy between traditionally and alternatively licensed teachers. The information shared through teacher surveys and school leadership focus groups helped to understand how the perceived level of preparedness of teachers impacted student achievement in a Title I middle school. Chapters 4 and 5 provide details of the findings.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the preparedness of middle school ELA, science, and social studies teachers to address the reading skills of middle school students. This study examined the self-efficacy of middle school teachers in relation to teaching literacy skills and the impact that factors such as student poverty and teacher path to certification may have on student literacy levels.

The research questions to be answered in this study were

1. How do middle school teachers rate their self-efficacy as it relates to the use of literacy strategies for teaching reading skills?
2. How prepared are middle school ELA and content-area teachers to address literacy skills for all students?
3. How does the efficacy of a traditionally prepared teacher compare to a non-traditionally prepared teacher?

A survey and focus groups were used to answer the research questions.

Survey Results

The TEILE survey was sent to teachers from four Title I middle schools in a large urban school district in the southwestern region of North Carolina, located within the greater Charlotte area. The district is made up of 55 schools, serving approximately 31,000 schools. There are 11 middle schools in the district. The four middle schools were chosen based on their Title I status, which impacts teacher turnover and student achievement levels. Title I schools have access to more funding and typically participate in additional professional learning for teachers, interventions for students, and other

programs as determined by the school or district.

Participants from each of the four schools were chosen based on the content they teach and the number of years of teaching experience. The purpose of this criteria was to determine to what extent literacy strategies are taught within these content areas as well as teacher perceptions of their role as a reading teacher. The second criteria was the number of years of experience a teacher had. Originally, only teachers with 5 years or less of teaching experience were included, but that produced a low number of participants, so it was increased to 10 years or less of teaching experience.

The survey was sent digitally to participants at all four middle schools with an overall response rate of 41.1%, with 14 of 34 teachers responding. To quantify the survey, responses to each of the survey questions were assigned a point value ranging from 1 to 4 as follows: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=agree; 4=strongly agree. Table 1 displays the overall self-efficacy score of each participant, in addition to the licensure path that participant took to gain teacher certification. Of the teachers choosing to participate in the study, 79% earned their teaching license through a traditional teacher preparatory program and 21% through an alternative licensure path.

Table 1

Survey Results of Self-Efficacy by Licensure

Participant	Self-efficacy score	Licensure path
T1	66	Alternative
T2	61	Traditional
T3	68	Alternative
T4	59	Traditional
T5	60	Traditional
T6	60	Traditional
T7	63	Traditional
T8	64	Alternative
T9	54	Traditional
T10	58	Traditional
T11	64	Traditional
T12	57	Traditional
T13	67	Traditional
T14	63	Traditional

Note. The highest possible score on the TEILE is 80.

When requesting information from each of the middle schools to determine which teachers would be asked to participate in the survey, it was discovered that three of the four schools had less than five teachers with 5 or fewer years of teaching experience. The criteria for participating in the study then changed to include any ELA, science, or social studies teacher with 10 or fewer years of experience. Of the 14 teachers who participated, only one was in their first year of teaching, 21% has less than 5 years of teaching experience, and 71% had between 5 and 10 years of teaching experience. Table 2 shows the average self-efficacy score for each of the three levels of teaching experience.

Table 2

Average Self-Efficacy Scores by Years of Experience

Years of experience	% of participants	Average self-efficacy score
First year	.07%	54
1-5 years	21%	64
6-10 years	71%	62

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with the Leadership Team of each of the four middle schools. While each school did have at least one focus group participant who also completed the self-efficacy survey, that was not a requirement to participate since the Leadership Team for each school has teachers from all content areas and levels of experience. The purpose for conducting the focus group with the Leadership Team was to gain a school-wide perspective of literacy instruction and how teacher preparedness, licensure, and poverty impact that instruction.

The principal of each middle school was contacted to schedule a meeting time with the Leadership Team. As these meetings were being scheduled, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted our schools and we were ordered to close by the state. Meetings were then scheduled through Google Meet and conducted virtually. The principal and Leadership Team were provided with a copy of the questions through email. Each participant was asked if they received their teaching license through a traditional teacher preparatory program or an alternative pathway, and the following questions were asked in each of the focus group sessions:

1. How do teachers in your building view their responsibility for teaching reading, regardless of the content they teach?

2. What skills do you believe are necessary to teach students so they can be successful with the comprehension of content-based reading?
3. What literacy skills has your school already implemented that have been successful in promoting student growth?
4. What types of ongoing professional development do you think are needed to make sure teachers are prepared to teach literacy?
5. How does high poverty affect the literacy skills of your students, and how does your school work to counteract that?
6. Did you complete your certification through a traditional teacher preparation program or an alternative pathway?
7. Did you feel prepared to teach literacy skills to middle school students when you began teaching?

Middle School 1 is a Title I school serving approximately 550 students in Grades 6-8, with 51% of the population being economically disadvantaged. Based on the North Carolina School Report Card for 2018-2019, 25.3% of sixth graders were proficient in both reading and math at the end of fifth grade. Overall, the school exceeded growth expectations for the 2018-2019 school year and earned a school grade of C and met growth for reading. The school had a grade of D and was labeled as low performing the previous year but came out of low-performing status for the 2019-2020 school year. Currently, approximately 37% of the teachers are within their first 3 years of teaching. The focus group was conducted with five staff members. Of the five staff members, four of them earned a teaching license through an alternative program and one through a traditional preparatory program with a K-6 license. Table 3 shows each focus group

participant and their certification path.

Table 3

Middle School 1 Focus Group Participant Licensure

Focus group participant	Licensure path
Participant A	Alternative
Participant B	Traditional K-6
Participant C*	Alternative
Participant D	Alternative
Participant E	Alternative

Note. *Participant C also took the TEILE survey.

Middle School 2 is a Title 1 school serving approximately 700 students in Grades 6-8, with 56% of the population being economically disadvantaged. Based on the North Carolina School Report Card for 2018-2019, 24.5% of sixth graders were proficient in both reading and math at the end of fifth grade. Overall, the school did not meet expected growth for the 2018-2019 school year and earned a grade of D but met growth for reading. The school fell into low-performing status for the 2019-2020 school year. The school exceeded expected growth the previous 4 years and had a grade of C. Currently, approximately 52% of teachers are within their first 3 years of teaching, and most experienced teachers are not core subject teachers. The focus group was conducted with 11 members. Of the 11 staff members, 35% received their teaching license through an alternative program, 65% through a traditional teacher preparatory program, and 45% started with a K-6 certification. Table 4 represents the licensure path of each focus group participant.

Table 4

Middle School 2 Focus Group Participant Licensure

Participant	Licensure
Participant F*	Alternative
Participant G	Traditional
Participant H	Alternative
Participant I	Traditional K-6
Participant J	Traditional
Participant K	Traditional K-6
Participant L	Alternative
Participant M	Traditional K-6
Participant N	Traditional K-6
Participant O	Alternative
Participant P	Traditional K-6

Note. *Participant F also took the TEILE.

Middle School 3 is a Title I school serving approximately 395 students in Grades 6-8, with 60.9% of the population being economically disadvantaged. Based on the North Carolina School Report card for 2018-2019, 26.7% of sixth graders were proficient in both reading and math at the end of fifth grade. Overall, the school met expected growth for the 2018-2019 school year and earned a grade of D. The school exceeded growth in reading. Middle School 3 was in the final year of a School Improvement Grant. Prior to the School Improvement Grant, the school was low performing; but with improved test scores and student growth, they came out of that status. Based on 2018-2019 data, the school fell back into low-performing status for the 2019-2020 school year. Currently, approximately 37.5% of teachers are within their first 3 years of teaching. The focus group was conducted with eight members of the school staff. Of the eight staff members, 25% received their teaching license through an alternative program and 75% through a traditional preparatory program. One of the eight focus group participants has a

traditional K-6 certification. Table 5 represents the licensure path of each focus group participant.

Table 5

Middle School 3 Focus Group Participant Licensure

Participant	Licensure
Participant Q	Traditional
Participant R	Traditional
Participant S*	Traditional K-6
Participant T	Traditional
Participant U	Traditional
Participant V	Alternative
Participant W	Traditional
Participant X	Alternative

Note. *Participant S also took the TEILE.

Middle School 4 is a Title 1 school serving approximately 860 students in Grades 6-8, with 49.2% of the population economically disadvantaged. It is the largest middle school in the district. Based on the North Carolina School Report Card for 2018-2019, 29.3% of sixth graders were proficient in both reading and math at the end of fifth grade. Overall, the school exceeded growth and earned a C grade and also exceeded growth in reading. The school also placed in the top 5% in the state for student growth. The school is a Restart school, which is a flexibility option for low-performing schools. The Restart provision allows districts to try nontraditional approaches for schools that have been in low-performing status for 2 of 3 years. Middle School 4 is no longer in low-performing status, but the district has made the decision to keep it a Restart school for the flexibility it offers. Currently, approximately 6% of the teachers are within their first 3 years of teaching; and in 2019-2020, the school had no first-year teachers. The focus group was conducted with nine members of the school staff. Of the nine staff members, only one

participant received licensure through an alternative program, while the remaining eight staff members received licensure through a traditional preparatory program. Of those who obtained licensure through a traditional program, 56% of them were initially licensed K-6. Table 6 represents the licensure path of each focus group participant.

Table 6

Middle School 4 Focus Group Participant Licensure

Participant	Licensure
Participant Y	Traditional
Participant Z	Alternative
Participant AA	Traditional
Participant AB*	Traditional K-6
Participant AC	Traditional K-6
Participant AD	Traditional K-6
Participant AE	Traditional K-6
Participant AF	Traditional K-6
Participant AG	Traditional

Note. *Participant AB also completed the TEILE.

Table 7 displays the demographic information for each of the four middle schools involved in the research study.

Table 7

Title I Middle School Information

	Number of students in grades 6-8	% of economically disadvantaged students	Overall growth in 18-19 (exceed, met, not met)	Reading growth in 18-19 (exceed, met, not met)	% of beginning teachers (less than 3 years)
Middle School 1	550	51%	Exceed	Met	37%
Middle School 2	700	56%	Not Met	Met	51%
Middle School 3	395	60.9%	Met	Exceed	37.5%
Middle School 4	860	42.9%	Exceed	Exceed	6%

Analysis Process

The survey results were compiled; and to quantify the survey, responses to each of the survey questions were assigned a point value ranging from 1 to 4: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=agree; 4=strongly agree. Statistical tests were completed to determine correlation and significance of the data.

Upon completing the focus group sessions, the audio was transcribed using Trint software. The transcribed notes were then coded qualitatively to pull common ideas and concepts from the data. The coded data were then grouped into thematic categories.

Research Question 1

How Do Middle School Teachers Rate Their Self-Efficacy as it Relates to the Use of Literacy Strategies for Teaching Reading Skills?

The first research question addressed the level of self-efficacy of middle school ELA, science, and social studies teachers in their ability to teach literacy skills within their content.

Self-Efficacy and Licensure Relationship

A Pearson correlation coefficient test was calculated to determine the strength of relationship between two variables. In this case, teacher licensure and self-efficacy with the teaching of literacy strategies were the two variables. For this test, only survey questions that directly addressed the teaching of literacy strategies in the classroom were pulled out. Table 8 shows the questions that were included in this test and the average response for each question based on the point value assigned.

Table 8

Survey Questions Included in Pearson Correlation Coefficient Test

	Question	Average response
1.	Literacy levels in children are the single most important factor in how well they do in school.	3.0
2.	I consider the job of teaching literacy skills to be a major part of my job.	3.57
3.	Increasing literacy levels in students should be the main instructional focus in middle schools.	3.07
4.	Teachers are limited in teaching content in core classes because of low student literacy levels.	3.0
5.	Teachers should differentiate instruction based on a students' literacy ability.	3.71
6.	I am confident in my ability to recognize students who struggle academically due to low literacy levels.	3.07
7.	I find it difficult to teach students with reading problems.	2.29
8.	The grades of my students have improved based on literacy strategies and activities I employ.	3.0
11.	All teachers are reading teachers.	3.5
14.	Reading the course textbook and materials is difficult for many of my students.	3.29
15.	I incorporate reading comprehension skills within my lessons.	3.57
16.	My school emphasizes a school-wide reading program.	3.36
17.	I provide daily writing exercises for my students.	3.0
18.	All teachers are writing teachers.	3.07
20.	My school emphasizes a school-wide writing program.	2.5

The Pearson correlation coefficient test was applied to these survey questions to determine if there was a relationship between self-efficacy with the use of literacy strategies to teach reading and teacher licensure pathway. With the self-efficacy score as

determined through the survey applied to the targeted questions related to the use of literacy strategies, a moderate (positive) relationship was found ($r(2) = .525$, $p > .05$). Teacher self-efficacy with the use of literacy strategies is moderately related to their licensure path with a correlation coefficient of .525. The positive correlation indicates that with the increase in the number of traditionally prepared teachers, self-efficacy should increase. Ultimately though, no statistical correlation is shown between teacher self-efficacy with the use of literacy strategies and teacher licensure pathways. Table 9 displays the Pearson correlation coefficient test showing the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and licensure.

Table 9

Relationship Between Self-Efficacy and Teacher Licensure

		Licensure	Literacy strategies
Licensure	Pearson correlation	1	.525
	Sig (2-tailed)		.054
	N	14	14
Literacy strategies	Pearson correlation	.525	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.054	
	N	14	14

Overall, teachers rated themselves high on the TEILE. The average score was 62, with the highest possible score of 80. Teachers who earned their licensure through a traditional teacher preparatory program had an average self-efficacy score of 60.5, while the teachers who earned a license through an alternative pathway had an average self-efficacy score of 66. Only one teacher identified themselves as a first-year teacher; and they had a self-efficacy score of 54. Teachers with up to 5 years of experience had an average self-efficacy score of 63.6, and teachers with 5 to 10 years of experience had an average self-efficacy score of 61.9. Table 10 identifies the level of experience and the

average self-efficacy score.

Table 10

Average Self-Efficacy Score Compared to Years of Experience

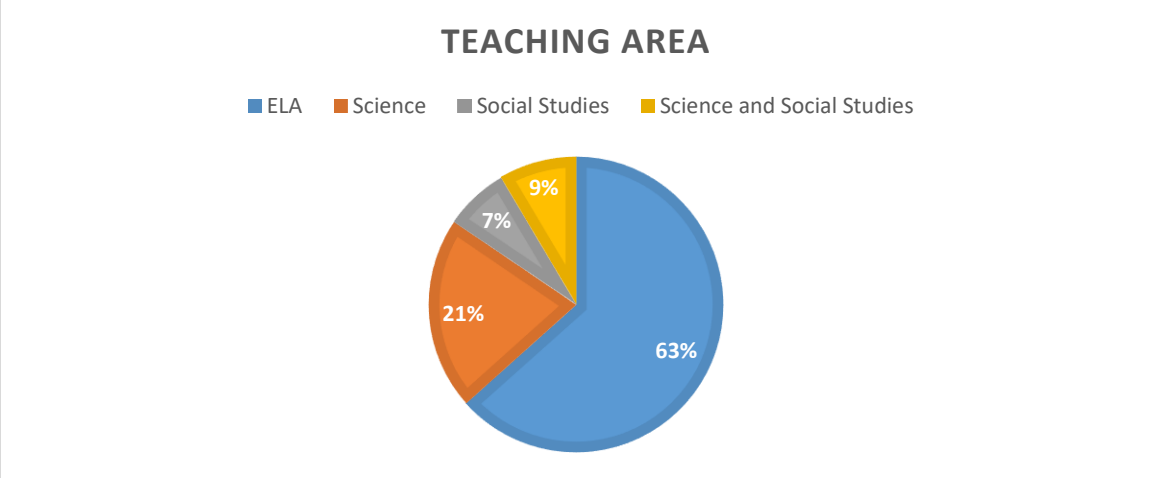
Years of experience	N	Average score
First year	1	54
1-5 years	3	63.6
5-10 years	10	61.9

Literacy in the Content Areas

Most of the survey participants identified themselves as ELA teachers at 68.8% of participants, 18.8% are science teachers, 6.3 % are social studies teachers, and 6.3% teach both science and social studies. The Figure shows a breakdown of the primary teaching area for survey participants.

Figure

Participant Teaching Area



The fact that most of the survey participants are ELA teachers supports the high rating to Survey Question 2, which asked if they consider the job of teaching literacy skills to be a major part of the job. All the participants rated this statement high, with

46.7% who agreed and 53.3% who strongly agreed. Similarly, Question 11 asked participants if all teachers are reading teachers; and they responded with 53.3% strongly agree and 46.7% agree. Focus group participants had different opinions when asked if teachers in their schools viewed themselves as reading teachers regardless of the content they teach. An administrator from each school participated in the focus group, and three of the four did not believe teachers viewed themselves as reading teachers. Participant A, a principal, stated that "they do not see themselves as reading teachers, they see themselves specifically as content teachers." Participant Y, also a principal, had a similar response:

> No, no, no and I think it is twofold. Some of it is because I do not think middle school offers the opportunity for training that elementary teachers get. So I don't think that they do not want to know or they do not have the skills to do it. I do not think they totally understand it because they have never had that background.

Other teacher participants felt that all teachers understood their role as a reading teacher regardless of what subject they taught, but not all the teachers have the capacity to meet those needs. Participant F stated,

> When talking to other colleagues, especially those in the history department, I hear them say a lot of times, well, our testing is basically a reading test, but it focuses on history. So I am not sure if they necessarily see themselves as literacy teachers.

Participant AA responded,

> I think it is true across the board that it is not just that we do not understand literacy as a whole. I think we are just content driven and everybody still has that

mindset. I am in my own little box.

The survey results indicated that teachers rate themselves high in questions related to teaching students with lower reading skills and the use of literacy strategies to address these skills. Survey Question 6 asked participants to rate their confidence in recognizing students who struggle with academics due to low literacy levels. All participants indicated they are confident in recognizing students who have difficulty reading, with 35.7% strongly agreeing and 64.3% agreeing. They also indicated on Question 14 that their students had difficulty with the content reading in their classes, with 33% strongly agreeing and 66.7% agreeing. None of the participants disagreed with this statement.

Focus group participants stated that content-area teachers do want to help with literacy skills but often lack the right mindset or do not have the buy-in needed. They also noted a lack of training as a significant reason literacy skills are often neglected in these classes, which adds to student struggle. Participant A stated, “they tried to really do social studies more as content area reading,” and these teachers often “structure their lessons so that there is not a lot of reading involved because they know that our kids, because we come from where they are demographically, are not strong readers.” Participant Z noted that for teachers in her building, “teaching is still in isolation even though we would like it not to be.” Participant AA added, “content teachers use items like Read Works when reading a passage because they think it is necessary for them to grow kids.” Participant R recognized that her students struggle with reading music and “their ability to read words might affect their ability to learn how to read music.” Survey results showed that responses varied more when asked in Question 4 if teachers are limited in teaching

content in core classes because of low literacy levels, with 46.7% strongly agreeing, 13.3% agreeing, and 40% disagreeing. They also had more disparity with Question 7 which asked teachers if they found it difficult to teach students with reading problems. For this question, no one strongly agreed; but 26.7% agreed, 66.7% disagreed, and 6.7% strongly disagreed. This is likely due to the larger number of ELA teachers taking the survey.

Most teachers taking the survey believe that their efforts in the classroom have had a positive impact on students. Question 8 asked teachers if the grades of their students have improved based on literacy strategies and activities employed in the classroom. Results indicated that 6.7% strongly agreed, 93.3% agreed, and none of the teachers disagreed. Teachers recognized that they have a responsibility to incorporate literacy based on their response to Question 5 which asked if teachers should differentiate instruction based on student literacy ability. All the teachers responded positively with 80% strongly agreeing and 20% agreeing. All teachers responded with strongly agree, 53.3%, or agree, 46.7%, to Question 15 which asked if they incorporate reading comprehension skills within lessons. Table 11 shows survey responses for questions directly related to teaching literacy.

Table 11

Survey Responses for Literacy Related Questions

Question	Response	
4. Teachers are limited in teaching content in core classes because of low student literacy levels	Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	46.7% 13.3% 40% 0
5. Teachers should differentiate instruction based on a students' literacy ability.	Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	80% 20% 0 0
6. I am confident in my ability to recognize students who struggle due to low literacy levels	Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	35.7% 64.3% 0 0
7. I find it difficult to teach students with reading problems.	Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	0 26.7% 66.7% 6.7%
8. Student grades have improved based on literacy strategies and activities.	Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	6.7% 93.3% 0 0
14. Reading the course textbook and materials is difficult for many of my students.	Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	33% 66.7% 0 0
15. I incorporate reading comprehension skills within my lessons.	Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	53.3% 46.7% 0 0
16. My school emphasizes a school wide reading program.	Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	40% 53.3% 0 6.7%

Participant S is a science teacher and stated in the focus group that "it is one thing

to sort of modify your lessons to a lower level, but it is another thing to actually teach the skills as to why they are not reading any better." This teacher recognized the need to address the literacy skills within her teaching but also recognized that not all content teachers know how to do that.

Effective Literacy Practices

Focus group participants identified many literacy strategies and activities that take place within their schools as well as skills students need in order to be more successful with reading in the content area and reading in general. Participant AD identified fluency as a skill students need in order to be more successful, stating, "that is the big issue. If you cannot understand and comprehend what you are reading when you have no fluency, you are so busy attacking every word that you lose the meaning of the text." Participant AF noted that vocabulary skills are lacking for students. Participant B also recognized the lack of vocabulary skills in her students, stating, "one of the things that I know my students struggle with is technical vocabulary. Vocabulary that is specific to the content they are working with." Participant K said, "introducing vocabulary to them is important because they lack that background knowledge and experiences where something is very important to their comprehension." Participant D also indicated vocabulary was important to student success, "and there is a lot of research out there on how to teach vocabulary, whether it is embedded in content or isolated." Participant I recognized that "content teachers have a good idea of their key vocabulary"; and Participant J noted that "I do see teachers working on that vocabulary, especially with the students who have low literacy skills." In addition to vocabulary, focus group participants also noted that background knowledge was lacking in their struggling readers. Participant I noted that

students “may not have the frame of reference and to make that mental movie is all but impossible if you do not have a frame of reference on which to draw.” Participant M said,

> As we are reading and starting a text, I will make sure that I can find something that they can relate to in their lives or even a video or some key vocabulary word and really try to stress those to them because the main thing is that vocabulary.

Vocabulary was also noted as an important skill and strategy for content teachers by Participant O who said,

> If students are familiar with the key vocabulary word they are able to decipher many of the questions, especially in science and social studies. So being able to understand the vocabulary is a strategy that is used quite often to help students be successful.

Focus groups identified small group instruction as another literacy strategy that is implemented in the schools and has been successful in promoting student growth in reading. Participant Y stated that her school has really tried to focus on small groups; and Participant AF, from the same school, when asked what strategies have been successful for students said, “Small groups. They are so wonderful. I have found that I see the biggest growth in small groups and doing those regularly every day.” Participant N stated that using a balanced literacy approach allows students to read independently and be pulled for small group within the same class period.

One literacy strategy mentioned by the focus group participants as being implemented in classrooms was graphic organizers. Participant D noted,

> First we teach them to identify text structure with non-fiction and then they have to create their own graphic organizer. Then every time they encounter this

> structure, no matter what the subject is, you are going to use the same graphic organizer.

Text structure was noted as important to understanding a text and using what one knows about text structure and transferring that knowledge to other content areas. Participant B said that her students "do not even know what to look for or know how to use the resources that are physically on the page so that they can understand it better." Participant I stated that annotating a text has been helpful for students to pick out important pieces of information. Participant R also noted that in her class, "students use sticky notes for annotations or making notes. Words they don't understand they can write down and ask me about."

Independent reading time and having books that are just right for readers was also a common strategy discussed in focus groups. Focus group participants from all schools noted that providing independent reading time was critical for their students. Participant S said, "Everybody in this building reads. These children see even the adults reading, even the SRO sits in the library and reads." Participant P noted, "Allowing our children time to read every day has been very impactful in some classes with helping to engage them in reading and helping build those reading skills." Providing students with a variety of books to choose from helps to make sure they have an appropriate book. Participant S recognized that her students did not always make the best choices when selecting an independent reading book, stating,

> A lot of times these kids sort of want to fool you They go in the library and they pull out one of these great big books and they carry it around for three weeks and they have not even opened it. Maybe they are more on a Captain Underpants level

> versus the Twilight level, but they will pull it just to be cool and carry it around and then return it to the library. The point is, we have got to get them opening it and reading it. Trying to get the right book in their hands makes a big difference.

Teachers recognize that literacy is connected through all content areas; and in some capacity, they incorporate literacy skills and strategies. Participant A said, “

> We are teaching strategies and skills. It is really how to compensate for a lack of reading skills as opposed to the skills themselves. We can teach how to build engagement, how to build a reading life, and we teach what to do with a specific type of text. But the reading mechanics are taught in the lower grades and middle school teachers do not know how to do this, they teach a specific curriculum.

Based on the self-efficacy survey results and focus group sessions, specific skills and strategies were discussed as lacking for students with reading difficulties, with vocabulary skills and background knowledge being coded most frequently. Based on focus groups, skills and strategies are being utilized in classrooms, with small group instruction and independent reading time being coded most frequently.

Research Question 2

How Prepared Are Middle School ELA and Content-Area Teachers to Address Literacy Skills for All Students?

Research Question 2 utilized self-efficacy survey response data and coded focus group data to determine if middle school teachers are prepared for teaching literacy skills for all students in the classroom.

Self-Efficacy and Preparedness

The TEILE survey included two questions directly related to being prepared to

teach literacy. Question 9 asked participants to rate their feelings on having enough training to teach literacy and deal with literacy problems in students. Participants responded to this question with no one strongly agreeing, 66.7% agreeing, 33.3% disagreeing, and no one strongly disagreeing. Question 10 asked participants to respond to their feelings on if literacy training and coursework during teacher preparation gave the skills to effectively teach literacy. Responses included 13.3% strongly agreed, 46.7% agreed, 40% disagreed, and no one strongly disagreed. Table 12 shows the response rate for Survey Questions 9 and 10.

Table 12

Survey Responses to Questions 9 and 10

Question	Response	
9. I have enough literacy training to teach literacy strategies and deal with literacy problems in my students.	Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	0 66.7% 33.3% 0
10. My literacy training and coursework during my teacher preparation gave me the skills to effectively teach literacy.	Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	13.3% 46.7% 40% 0

The strongest theme to emerge from the focus group sessions was that teachers all understood their role in teaching literacy but do not feel prepared to incorporate literacy strategies. Several factors supported this theme, with the lack of training being the most talked about. Each of the four middle school focus groups discussed this factor at length, with 67% of participants bringing up the topic from Middle School 1. When asked if teachers feel responsible and prepared to teach literacy in their classrooms, Participant C said,

> It does not matter what your content is. What strategies do you use in social studies, for example, to help students understand vocabulary, or in math to help students who struggle with word problems. What strategies are you using with poor kids when they are dealing with more problems? So in essence, all teachers are reading teachers, but they are really not because they do not have the tools that they need to implement those strategies when all they can really do is focus on their content.

Lack of Training

Participants from Middle School 2 noted the lack of training in literacy strategies at a rate of 63%. Participant H said, "It isn't that teachers do not feel it's important, they don't have the capacity. With so many new teachers we are building the plane as we fly it." Participant P noted, "I have the background in literacy. I think a lot of teachers do not and in middle school, even if they do have the background…I think they shirk at the opportunity or responsibility."

Middle School 3 had 33% of focus group participants speak about the lack of literacy training. Participant S said, "I do end up teaching reading skills quite a bit in science. I think teachers are aware of it, but I think the actual how do I do it is that part that makes it a little difficult." The focus group from Middle School 4 had 67% of participants mention no literacy training as an issue for middle school content-area teachers. Participant Z noted,

> Content teachers will eventually come to realize that they are a literacy teacher. It's a book and the content requires reading it at one point or another. They are going to have incorporate a reading lesson, but they don't have the skills to do so

and they don't know what to teach and how to go about.

Time Constraints

Another factor that was heavily coded in the focus groups that affects the teaching of literacy strategies is time constraints due to teaching the required content. Middle School 1 had 17% of participants mention time constraints when asked if all teachers considered themselves reading teachers and used literacy strategies in their classroom. Middle School 2 had 38% of participants mention time constraints. Participant H said,

> It is very difficult and as well as the difficulty there is the time constraint. If you are an advanced math teacher, you have the test at the end of the year. Yes, it is important to implement the strategies, but time constraints are there.

Middle School 3 had 17% of participants mention time constraints. Participant Q stated, "I think they are all aware of it, but they don't always have the time. Sometimes it gets shuffled in the priorities." Finally, Middle School 4 had 33% of participants mention time constraints as an issue. Participant Y said, "we are asking teachers to do something that they have never seen. I think buy-in is an issue because it is overwhelming, and it is such a different mindset when they are content driven."

Elementary Certification

The next factor attributing to the lack of literacy instruction in content-area classes is parallel to lack of training. Many middle school teachers have a license to teach kindergarten through sixth grade (K-6). Training for an elementary certification typically requires more courses in the teaching of reading and foundational reading skills such as phonemic awareness and decoding. Middle School 1 had 33% of participants mention that teachers with a K-6 certification had more of a literacy background. Participant A

stated,

> I think it is hard in middle school when you don't have teachers that do not have an elementary background, because many times, especially if they are teaching middle grades ELA they have not been taught how to teach reading. Teaching ELA is different from teaching reading skills.

In Middle School 2, participants mentioned K-6 certification as an advantage 13% of the time, with Participant P saying, "I did teach elementary before I taught middle school…and I was taught the basics of phonics and phonemic awareness and how to teach children in that way." Middle School 3 had 33% of participants talk about elementary certification. Participant T noted,

> When we hire middle school teachers, sometimes we have to look at elementary and drop down a certification. With middle school teachers you rarely have anybody who has taught reading or has any type of experience with teaching reading or reading skill.

Middle School 4 had 17% of focus group participants mention elementary certification, with Participant AE saying, "when you are teaching elementary school you are trained in all areas, but once you get to middle school, your training is more specialized." Table 13 shows the factors attributing to the lack of implementation of literacy strategies based on focus group sessions, including the percentage of participant responses on the topic from each middle school.

Table 13

Factors Attributing to Lack of Implementation of Literacy Strategies

Factor	Middle school 1	Middle school 2	Middle school 3	Middle school 4
No training	67%	63%	33%	67%
Time constraint	17%	38%	17%	33%
K-6 has more background	33%	13%%	33%	17%

Successful Literacy Implementation

Focus group sessions also generated discussion about what literacy strategies teachers are implementing that they feel are successful for their students. All four middle school focus groups coded for two factors, time for independent reading in school and the help of a literacy coach on staff.

Independent reading time was mentioned in all four focus group sessions as a strategy that is being implemented and is a strategy important to student achievement. Middle School 1 had 20% of participants mention the strategy. Participant A mentioned, "We have to give them independent reading time because we know when they leave us, their eyes are not going to be on text when they go home." Middle School 2 had 13% of participants talk about independent reading; and Participant P said, "allowing our children the time to read every day has been very impactful in some classes in helping to engage them in reading and helping build those reading skills." Middle School 3 had 33% of participants mention independent reading. Participant R said, "reading is promoted in the master schedule. The first 10 to 15 minutes of Encore class is reading of some kind, usually independent reading." Middle School 4 had 17% of participants mention

independent reading with, Participant AC saying, “the opportunity to read, we have to read independently, it is one of the things that has really helped us out.”

Title I middle schools are provided with funding for a literacy teacher. All four of the participating middle schools have a literacy teacher on staff and mentioned this position as a factor that has positively impacted their school. Middle School 1 had 20% of participants mention the literacy teacher. Participant A stated,

> I would have to say that one of the things we have that has helped is having a literacy teacher. Having someone here to help guide PLC meetings and be a person that can bring it all together and provide support is an extremely helpful tool that has made a big difference.

Middle School 2 had 13% of participants speak about the literacy coach. Participant H stated, “as a science teacher, it wasn’t until our literacy coach got here that realized the importance of literacy. She led PLC meetings and everything she did highlighted literacy and that is where I learned the most.” Middle School 3 had 16% of participants mention the literacy coach, and Middle School 4 had 17% mention the literacy coach. Middle School 4 has three literacy coaches, one for each grade level. Participant Y explained, “with Restart funds we have one literacy coach for each grade level. They are pulling small groups, modeling and using data to drive instruction.” Table 14 represents the factors focus group participants indicated as contributing to the success of literacy in their schools.

Table 14

Factors Contributing to Successful Literacy Activities

Factor	Middle school 1	Middle school 2	Middle school 3	Middle school 4
Independent reading	20%	13%	33%	17%
Literacy coach	20%	13%	16%	17%

Skill Deficits

When asked what literacy skill they felt was necessary to improve overall literacy achievement in their school, all four middle schools mentioned vocabulary and background knowledge as an area of concern. Many other skills such as fluency, decoding, nonfiction reading, context clues, and confidence were brought up; but vocabulary and background knowledge were the only skills mentioned in all four focus groups. The focus group with Middle School 1 had 17% of participants mention vocabulary. Participant B noted that students "struggle with technical vocabulary that is specific to the content they are working in." Middle School 2 had 50% of participants mention that vocabulary and background knowledge were a concern. Participant K said, "kids really struggle with background knowledge and being able to apply that…and having to introduce vocabulary to them because they lack that background knowledge and experiences where something is very important to their comprehension." Middle School 4 had 17% of participants talk about vocabulary. Participant AF stated, "our students are so needy with vocabulary skills; they don't have the vocabulary skills to apply to their nonfiction." Table 15 shows the percentage of participants in the four middle school focus groups who identified vocabulary and background knowledge as a

skill deficit for their students.

Table 15

Skills Identified as Necessary for Reading Success

Factor	Middle school 1	Middle school 2	Middle school 3	Middle school 4
Vocabulary and background knowledge	17%	50%	33%	17%

Poverty and Literacy

The topic of poverty and how it affects student ability to read was also coded in focus group data. Each of the four middle school focus groups saw the effects of poverty on their students, and each school responded to how they try to counteract poverty to help their students in different ways. Middle School 1 talked about building a reading life for their students while in school. Participant B noted, "They still don't have that reading stamina. They don't have that drive to just push through when it gets boring for two pages and it's because literacy isn't supported at home." Participant D added,

> When you have parents who are illiterate and the kid is reading that permission slip to them and filling out the permission slip…the only thing we can do is figure out as a community how to better educate our…adult learner community.

Participant A spoke about the importance of providing time for students to read at school, adding,

> I think we realize that when kids leave here, they are taking care of younger siblings or they are the ones cooking dinner or they are being the parent at home. So they are not going to sit down and read at home."

Middle School 2 addressed the issue of poverty and its impact on their school. The

focus group participants talked about how they work to provide experiences for their students to help them bridge the academic gap. Participant M stated,

> As we are reading and starting a new text, I will make sure that I can find something that they can relate to their own lives A video or some key vocabulary word and really try to stress those to them.

Participant G spoke about building confidence in her students as readers, saying,

> I try to give my students the perception that knowledge is power, that they are just as capable as other students…give them the sense that they are going to have to work hard, but that this power is something that they can have, just like any other student in any other school.

Middle School 3 also focused on building a reading life for their students. This school is going into the final year of a School Improvement Grant and has placed a school-wide focus on literacy. Participant T noted,

> Poverty is such a massive issue for us. It is hard to differentiate the haves and the have nots when they are all have nots. We have tried to provide opportunities for them to read at school because I know that there are not opportunities at home. Also, when we purge our books, we provide a free book selection in the front of the school to give them an opportunity to increase their home libraries. We try to encourage parents to get involved…if we are building those home libraries then in the future those younger kids will have a better opportunity to increase their literacy skills.

Middle School 3 Participant U noted,

> A lot of children of color get to middle school and have never read a book with

> someone that looks like them in it. I think that also affects a lot of their desire to interact with text because they are not connection with it like other students.

Middle School 4 is a Restart school and used that financial flexibility when staffing to employ an assistant principal, a counselor, and a literacy teacher for each grade level. They also have a full-time nurse and social worker in the school. Participant Y clarified,

> A lot of people don't know that we have a large geographical area…and we are the largest middle school. Our reality is much more diverse, and people are surprised that we have more white children than we do African American. We are not far from being a third and a third and a third with our Hispanic population.

Middle School 4 has focused their efforts to mitigate the effects of poverty on literacy through their strong relationships with students. Participant AE stated,

> Building relationships is one of the pieces. Having the assistant principal, the literacy teacher, and the counselor that goes with them from grade to grade, we are really able to build relationships that motivated them. They get to have a small group with the literacy teacher for three years, which provides a safe place. They also have the counselor and assistant principal and we are able to encourage them. For relational learners it is really a big deal to have those people in your corner.

Participant Y stated, "Having a full-time nurse and social worker makes a difference too…because having that support staff in place does take away a lot of barriers that children have to overcome." Relationships were also mentioned by Participant AC who said, "Sometimes we are the only stability that they have in their lives. If they know you care about them, they will work as hard as they can." Table 16 shows the response each

middle school had in addressing the literacy needs of students in poverty.

Table 16

Focus Group Responses to Growing Readers in Poverty

School	Primary action by the school
Middle school 1	Building a reading life
Middle school 2	Providing experiences and connections
Middle school 3	Building a reading life
Middle school 3	Building relationships

Professional Development

Focus group data were also coded for professional development for teachers. Participants in all middle schools discussed what professional development would be helpful for teachers in their building to address the literacy needs of all learners. All the schools identified professional development needs that address foundational reading skills. Middle School 1 overwhelmingly believed that teachers should learn the continuum of reading to help identify gaps in learning as well as have a better knowledge of how reading skills progress. Participant D stated,

> You have to know the continuum of reading in order to know where a kid falls on the continuum. You have to be able to fill in those gaps on the continuum to get them where they are in that grade level. A starting point is what does the reading continuum look like for a student and what are they supposed to know at each level.

Participant A added, “One of the things teachers say is that students struggle with comprehension, they don’t understand what they read. But what is the root cause of the lack of comprehension.”

Middle School 2 also mentioned that identifying struggling readers would be

beneficial for teachers. Participants also mentioned that training for content-area teachers on the use of literacy strategies in their classrooms would be helpful for teachers. Participant H stated, “One thing that would be needed is identifying struggling readers because that looks different depending on the kid.” Participant K said, “I think it would be really beneficial for other content areas to be able to attend some literacy professional development to be able to use the same strategies that we are using in language arts.”

The focus group session with Middle School 3 brought out ideas for professional development that address specific skills for readers. Participants stated that being able to address foundational reading skills and still teach the curriculum is challenging. Other participants felt more focus on vocabulary skills would help teachers. Participant Q stated,

> I have some students who cannot decode and then I have some who are able to decode, but they don’t understand what the words mean. How do we effectively differentiate that far and still be able to teach our curriculum.

Participant V added, “My thought was that you have to know vocabulary. They have got to know the words in order to understand the content.”

Middle School 4 has many systems in place to train teachers in literacy with the help of literacy teachers through Professional Learning Communities. In addition to what is already a literacy focus, participants expressed that more training in foundational reading skills would help teachers understand the difficulties students have as well as being able to learn from peers. Participant AA is middle school trained but was a content teacher in an elementary school. She attended Reading Foundations training while in elementary and said, “I think middle school teachers need the Reading Foundations

training. We have pushed balanced literacy training with small groups, but this training will help teachers break down the reading process." Participant Y recognized the importance of such training and also noted that it requires 5 days out of the classroom to be trained. Participant Y said, "We can't afford to have teachers out of the building for five days and be able to make the progress we need. Having teachers visit each other's classrooms to see things from a different perspective would be helpful." Table 17 shows the focus group response to professional development from each middle school.

Table 17

Focus Group Responses to Professional Development Needs

School	Professional development needs
Middle school 1	Continuum of reading Identifying reading skill gaps
Middle school 2	Identifying struggling readers Literacy strategy training
Middle school 3	Differentiation with reading skills Specific skill training
Middle school 4	Reading foundations training Learning from peers

Research Question 3

How Does the Efficacy of a Traditionally Prepared Teacher Compare to a Non-Traditionally Prepared Teacher?

This research question compared the self-efficacy score of traditionally prepared teachers to the self-efficacy score of non-traditionally prepared teachers to determine if teachers feel prepared to teach literacy skills regardless of the content taught using an independent *t* test. The research question also examined how prepared teachers felt to

address literacy skills of middle school students when they completed their teaching training, regardless of the licensure path. The TEILE survey and focus group data were used to answer this research question.

Self-Efficacy and Licensure Comparison

An independent *t* test was calculated comparing the mean score of participants who completed a traditional teacher program to those who completed an alternative program for licensure. The independent *t* test measured the two types of licensure pathways, which was the independent variable, to the self-efficacy score of each participant, which was the dependent variable. The mean score for teachers who attended a traditional teacher preparation program was 60.5, with a standard error of 3.6. The mean score of teachers who completed an alternative pathway was 66.0 with a standard deviation of 2.0. Both groups have a high standard deviation score, signaling a wider range of responses. Table 18 represents the group statistics for the independent *t* test.

Table 18

Group Statistics for Independent t Test

	Licensure	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Preparation	Traditional	11	60.545	3.61562	1.09015
	Alternative	3	66.000	2.00000	1.15470

Based on the mean, a significant difference was found between the two groups ($t(12) = -2.463$, $p < .05$). With the level of significance set at 0.50, which is less than the significance of .292, equal variances can be assumed; and it can also be assumed that the distribution of scores is similar for both traditional and alternative licensure. The mean of the traditionally prepared teachers was significantly lower ($M = 60.62$, $sd = 3.62$) than the

mean of teachers attending alternative programs (M = 66.00, sd = 2.00). The mean difference between the two groups was -5.454. The data show that alternatively licensed teachers have a higher self-efficacy score related to teaching literacy skills to all students based on the TEIEL survey. Table 19 represents the results of the independent *t* test.

Table 19

Independent Samples Test for Teacher Self-Efficacy

	Levene's test for equality of variances		*t* test for equality of means					
	F	Sig	*t*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error differences	95% confidence interval of the differences	
							Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.213	.292	-2.46	12	.030	-5.45455	-10.28	-.629
Equal variances not assumed			-.219	2.699	.842	-5.45455	-9.313	-1.59

Traditional and Alternative Licensure

The TEILE was sent to ELA, science, and social studies teachers with up to 10 years of teaching experience. The overall self-efficacy scores were presented in Table 1. The average self-efficacy score of traditionally prepared teachers is 60.5 of a possible high score of 80. The average score of alternatively licensed teachers is 66 of a possible score of 80. Table 20 shows the average score of both traditionally and alternatively prepared teachers.

Table 20

Average Self-Efficacy Score of Traditional and Alternative Licensed Teachers

Licensure	Average score
Traditional	60.5
Alternative	66.0

At the start of focus group sessions, participants were asked if they received their teaching license through a traditional teacher preparatory program or an alternative program. For Middle School 1, 80% of participants indicated they were trained and certified through an alternative licensure program, 20% through a traditional teacher preparatory program, and 20% of participants have a K-6 traditional license. Middle School 2 participants indicated that 36% of them were trained and certified through an alternative licensure program, 64% through a traditional teacher preparatory program, and 45% have a K-6 traditional license. Middle School 3 participants shared that 25% of them were trained and certified through an alternative licensure program, 75% through a traditional teacher preparatory program, and 13% of participants have a K-6 traditional license. Middle School 4 had 11% of participants trained and certified through an alternative licensure program, 89% through a traditional teacher preparatory program, and 56% of those have a K-6 traditional license. Table 21 shows the percent of focus group participants with either a traditional or alternative license as well as the percentage of participants who started with a K-6 license.

Table 21

Percentage of Licensure Pathway for Focus Group Participants

	Traditional	Alternative	K-6
Middle school 1	20%	80%	20%
Middle school 2	64%	25%	45%
Middle school 3	75%	25%	13%
Middle school 4	89%	11%	56%

Overall, 47 educators participated in either the self-efficacy survey or focus group sessions. Traditionally prepared teachers were in the majority at 70%, with 30% alternatively prepared. In addition to being traditionally prepared, 36% of participants have a K-6 teaching license. Table 22 represents the overall percentage of teacher licensure pathways.

Table 22

Overall Percentage of Study Participant Licensure Pathway

	Traditional	Alternative	K-6
Participant licensure pathway	70%	30%	36%

Survey results indicated that alternatively licensed teachers had a higher level of self-efficacy than traditionally prepared teachers. When asked if they felt prepared for teaching literacy in middle school at the completion of their preparation program, participants overwhelmingly stated that they did not feel prepared for the reality of teaching reading skills in any content area. Only those teachers trained with a K-6 license stated they felt prepared to identify and address reading skills for middle school students.

Focus group participants with alternative licensure did not feel prepared to teach literacy skills in content-area classes. Participant H said,

I was not even close to being prepared. In my lateral entry program, I had 5

> classes and the only one with literacy was writing and reading across the content areas and I wouldn't say that it was a true literacy course. Coming into a middle school science classroom that had already run off three teachers, no, I was not prepared for a lot of things and literacy was definitely one of those.

Participant L stated, "I wasn't really prepared. My focus was secondary math and there really wasn't a focus on literacy." Participant X said, "I was secondary mathematics, so I had very little literacy training. There may have been one online class, but that was it." Participant E began her career as an art teacher through an alternative program and said,

> I would say that I was not prepared at all. I was very naïve in the understanding of what role literacy played in the classroom coming in as an art teacher. Literacy was such a huge part of it…which is why I wanted to make that switch into the literacy role. I definitely think I was not prepared at all. And I did a lot of my own self teaching to learn more about it.

Participant B said,

> I was not at all prepared to teach literacy skills when I started and there are still things I don't do very well. Having a kindergartener and watching her learn to read and the ways her teacher teaches her to read has changed the way that I approach some things.

Traditionally prepared participants overwhelmingly stated that their preparation program was content focused and did not prepare them for meeting the needs of middle school students. They did not indicate that they had any training in specific literacy strategies to use to increase reading proficiency in content areas. Participant Q said, "I was a traditional pathway, but the way my program was set up, it was secondary so there

were extremely few, if any, classes that touched on basic literacy skills." Participant T, who is currently an administrator, stated, "I had a traditional teaching program as a PE teacher. I think I had one reading class that was in my education block and all we did was evaluated a book, so the reading was very limited." Participant U was also traditionally trained and said, "I was traditional, but my degree was in middle grades. I also did literacy, but it was not like I knew how to give help. We were not taught that in the middle school pipeline." Participant R is a music teacher but found herself in a literacy role in her first job, saying,

> I did feel prepared, although I didn't realize I was going to have to. When he hired me, he said I had general music and a reading class. I ended up as more of a reading coach, but it was definitely eye opening…and I was very grateful for my semester of reading in the content area.

Participant AA shared,

> I taught middle school ELA for 14 years and then I left to be an instructional facilitator in an elementary school. For all the years I thought I knew how to teach middle school language arts, it was not until I spent six years in an elementary school that I learned how to teach reading.

Participant Y, also a school administrator, said the following about her experience:

> I was a middle school educator and administrator for the majority of my career. And then I had an opportunity to go to an elementary school. I thought we were doing really good things in the middle school for kids, in terms of remediation and differentiation and if someone had asked me if we were doing a good job, I certainly would have said yes, we are right up there with the best of them. But the

> reality is , when I went to the elementary school and got to work with teachers who are K-6 certified, I realized that we, as middle school educators for the most part don't know how to teach children how to read. So we are good at teaching standards for middle school children, but if we have children that are behind in terms of identifying those root causes of why they can't read…we struggle with that.

Traditionally prepared focus group participants with a K-6 teaching certification are the one group that stated they felt prepared to address the literacy skills of middle school students. Participant D has a traditional K-6 teaching license and recalled, "I had classes as an elementary teacher that were focused. I had a kiddy lit class and I had a math methods and a science methods class…all core subjects because as an elementary teacher you teach them all." Participant K said,

> I felt like in my program we were very prepared. I felt more prepared because I was an elementary major from kindergarten through sixth grade, so coming to middle school to teach it was not a big deal. I had the background.

Participant P stated, "I felt very, very, prepared. We had a lot of literacy training when I taught elementary school." Participant AA noted,

> As a middle school teacher, you are not prepared to test them to see what their reading levels are. You are not prepared to assess them with a phonetic focus in middle school. We are just prepared to teach them reading and comprehension and the strategies that go along with that. But I have said over and over that the six years I spent in an elementary school made me a one hundred percent better middle school teacher.

Participant AC taught middle school and after taking time off returned to the profession as an elementary school teacher and then back to middle school, stating,

> Readers Workshop, my 2nd graders loved it, but how would my 7th graders take this? But they really love it because they do not have to worry about reading something they struggle with because they can turn and talk to share out. So elementary school helped me immensely.

Participant AD also started her career in elementary school and shared,

> I had the benefit of being at two elementary schools that had extensive training. So that was the only way I knew how to teach. In my case it was a smooth transition to middle school because I had so much of that foundational background.

Summary

The TEILE was sent to ELA and content-area teachers in four Title I middle schools. Participants were chosen based on the content they teach and the number of years of teaching experience. In addition to rating their self-efficacy as it relates to literacy instruction, participants were asked to identify whether they earned their teaching license through a traditional teacher preparation program or an alternative licensure program. A focus group session took place with each of the four middle schools after survey responses were collected. The focus group was made up of each school's Leadership Team. Each group had at least one member who also took the TEILE survey.

Data were collected from the survey and analyzed using a Pearson correlation coefficient test to determine the strength of relationship between self-efficacy scores and teacher licensure using survey questions directly related to teaching literacy strategies

and skills. A moderate relationship was found between the two variables, but no significant relationship correlation can be made between the self-efficacy scores and teacher licensure. An independent *t* test was calculated to compare the mean self-efficacy score of traditionally prepared teachers to alternatively prepared teachers. Based on the mean, alternatively prepared teachers had a significantly higher self-efficacy score related to teaching literacy.

The focus group transcripts were coded for common themes. Overall, focus group participants stated that content-area teachers do not view themselves as literacy teachers and do not have the necessary skills or mindset to do so. Survey participants do recognize that students have difficulty with reading content material, but they felt confident in their ability to address these concerns and implement effective strategies. The fact that literacy skills are not being addressed effectively in all content areas was overwhelmingly attributed to lack of proper training, skill deficits of students, and student poverty. Participants who have an elementary teaching certification felt confident in their ability to address the literacy needs of middle school students. Participants in focus groups stated that there are strategies being implemented that have been successful for their students, such as independent reading time and the use of literacy coaches within the school. They also stated that professional development is essential for all teachers.

Chapter 5 focuses on a discussion of the research study. The discussion contains a summary of the findings, implications of the study, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter includes a summary of the findings, recommendations from the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research. The purpose of this study was to explore the preparedness of middle school ELA and content-area teachers to address the reading skills of middle school students. The study also explored teacher levels of self-efficacy as it relates to the teaching of literacy skills to all students.

The research questions to be answered in the study were

1. How do middle school teachers rate their self-efficacy as it relates to the use of literacy strategies for teaching literacy skills?
2. How prepared are ELA and content-area teachers to address the literacy skills for all students?
3. How does the self-efficacy of a traditionally prepared teacher compare to a non-traditionally prepared teacher?

This mixed methods study took place in western North Carolina. A total of 47 teachers from four Title I middle schools took part as either a survey participant or a focus group participant, in some cases participating in both. Quantitative data were collected through a self-efficacy survey, and statistical tests were conducted to analyze results. Focus group discussions were transcribed, and the qualitative data were coded for themes.

This chapter provides answers to the research questions based on the collected data. Also included are recommendations for districts to improve adolescent literacy

skills in middle schools, which are based on the data collected from middle school teachers and the research included in Chapter 2. This chapter also includes limitations to the study and recommendations for further research.

Research Question 1

How Do Middle School Teachers Rate Their Self-Efficacy as it Relates to the Use of Literacy Strategies for Teaching Reading Skills?

Research Question 1 addressed the level of self-efficacy of middle school ELA, science, and social studies teachers in their ability to teach literacy skills within their content. Selected participants took a survey to assess their level of self-efficacy. The survey can be found in Appendix A. Focus group participants responded to seven questions, which can be found in Appendix C. The specified survey questions in Table 8 and all focus group questions were used in assessing teacher levels of self-efficacy in their ability to teach literacy skills.

A Pearson coefficient correlation test was calculated with the survey questions to determine the strength of relationship between the two variables, teacher licensure and self-efficacy scores. Results showed that self-efficacy scores were moderately related to teacher licensure pathway, but no statistical correlation was found between teacher self-efficacy related to the use of literacy strategies and licensure pathway.

Survey results show participants rating themselves relatively high when asked if they consider the job of teaching literacy skills to be a major part of their job, with all participants either strongly agreeing or agreeing. When asked if they are confident in their ability to recognize students who struggle academically due to low literacy levels, participants also rated themselves high. All participants, except one who did not answer

the question, responded with either strongly agree or agree. Poulou et al. (2019) found that high self-efficacy in teachers will create a learning environment that includes "high-quality lesson planning, meaningful instruction, and effective classroom management" (p. 28).

When focus group participants were asked if teachers in their schools viewed themselves as literacy teachers, the answer was overwhelmingly no. Participants felt that teachers understood their role as a reading teacher regardless of what subject they taught, but not all the teachers have the capacity to meet those needs. Participant F stated,

> When talking to other colleagues, especially those in the history department, I hear them say a lot of times, well, our testing is basically a reading test, but it focuses on history. So, I am not sure if they necessarily see themselves as literacy teachers.

Participant AA responded,

> I think it is true across the board that it is not just that we do not understand literacy as a whole. I think we are just content driven, and everybody still has that mindset. I am in my own little box.

Cantrell et al. (2009) wanted to learn more about the perception that content-area teachers held concerning their role in integrating literacy instruction into their content-area classes. Literature was reviewed that showed the resistance of middle school teachers due to factors such as teacher beliefs about their responsibilities and lack of confidence in their ability to teach literacy skills (Cantrell et al., 2009). Cantrell et al. and Greenleaf et al. (2001) stated there was research to support that content teachers frequently exhibit high self-efficacy in their content area but do not believe they have the background or

necessary skills to effectively integrate literacy into their instruction.

All but one of the science or social studies teachers responded with disagree or strongly disagree when asked if they find it difficult to teach students with reading problems. Regarding content teacher views of their role with literacy, focus group Participant Y said, “You don’t know what you don’t know. We are asking teachers to do something they have never seen. I think part of the problem is the buy in because it is overwhelming, and it is such a different mindset.” In their research on teacher self-efficacy, Poulou et al. (2019) found significant differences in the observation of instructional strategies compared to teacher self-efficacy ratings.

Survey results indicated that participants recognize when their students are struggling with reading in the content area, and many of them indicated that they found it difficult to teach these students. Participants also rated themselves high in questions related to teaching students with lower reading skills and the use of literacy strategies to address these skills. Survey Question 6 asked participants to rate their confidence in recognizing students who struggle with academics due to low literacy levels. All participants indicated they are confident in recognizing students who have difficulty reading, with 35.7% strongly agreeing and 64.3% agreeing. They also indicated on Question 14 that their students had difficulty with the content reading in their classes, with 33% strongly agreeing and 66.7% agreeing. None of the participants disagreed with this statement. Survey results showed that responses varied more when asked in Question 4 if teachers are limited in teaching content in core classes because of low literacy levels, with 46.7% strongly agreeing, 13.3% agreeing, and 40% disagreeing. They also had more disparity with Question 7 which asked teachers if they found it difficult to teach students

with reading problems. For this question no one strongly agreed, but 26.7% agreed, 66.7% disagreed, and 6.7% strongly disagreed.

Focus group Participant S is a science teacher and stated in the focus group that "it is one thing to sort of modify your lessons to a lower level, but it is another thing to actually teach the skills as to why they are not reading any better." This teacher recognized the need to address the literacy skills within her teaching but also recognized that not all content teachers know how to do that. Martin and Mulvihill (2019) made the observation that if we base teacher self-efficacy on student outcomes, we can assume teacher perceptions of self-efficacy will be based on reality rather than their own view of instructional practices. It should be noted that all four middle schools from this study met or exceeded student growth in reading for the 2018-2019 school year. Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erickson (2013) saw teacher efficacy as a powerful theory that deserves attention due to the cycles it can take on in educators. Those with higher levels of efficacy tend to work harder and put in more effort, leading to higher student achievement and teaching ability. This then leads to higher efficacy levels.

Research Question 2

How Prepared Are ELA and Content-Area Teachers to Address Literacy Skills for All Students?

Research Question 2 addressed the level of preparedness of middle school ELA and content-area teachers to teach literacy skills to all students. Middle school teachers recognize their need to incorporate literacy strategies in their teaching but often do not feel prepared to do so. This research question also explored some reasons why teachers do not feel prepared as well as effective professional development around literacy

instruction. Greenleaf et al. (2011) supported the need for literacy integration in the middle grades, stating, “it is now widely recognized that even skillful reading at early grade levels will not automatically translate into higher-level academic literacy” (p. 654).

Two survey questions addressed the preparedness of teachers to teach literacy skills. Question 9 asked if the teacher had enough literacy training to teach literacy strategies and deal with literacy problems in students. No one strongly agreed with this question, but 66.7% agreed and 33.3 disagreed, with content-area teachers disagreeing more often than ELA teachers. Question 10 asked if teacher literacy training and coursework during teacher preparation gave them the skills to effectively teach literacy. Responses for this question were more spread out, with 13.3% strongly agreeing, 46.7% agreeing, and 40% disagreeing. Especially in content-area courses, direct instruction is no longer enough for adolescent readers; therefore, teachers need to feel confident and prepared to integrate literacy. Jacobs (2008) stated that the best steps moving forward are those that clarify and support meaning-based strategies for reading in and across content areas.

Focus group participants cited a lack of training as the reason middle school teachers do not incorporate literacy strategies into their content-area teaching. Participants believe that teachers are not opposed to doing so, but they are just not prepared. The data from all four focus groups coded lack of training as the most prevalent reason for the lack of instruction. Participant H said, “It isn’t that teachers do not feel it’s important, they don’t have the capacity. With so many new teachers we are building the plane as we fly it.” Participant Z noted,

Content teachers will eventually come to realize that they are a literacy teacher.

> It's a book and the content require reading it at one point or another. They are going to have incorporate a reading lesson, but they don't have the skills to do so and they don't know what to teach and how to go about teaching.

Bandura (2006) noted that teacher views of their self-efficacy can establish how they perceive opportunities for new learning as well as influence their choice of activity and effort put into the new learning. Rowan and Towend (2016) found that when teachers exhibit a lack of confidence and self-efficacy with a specific task, they will likely refrain from engaging with it. Focus group Participant S commented, "I think teachers are aware of it, but I think the actual how do I do it is that part that makes it a little difficult."

Focus group participants also noted that time constraints often hold teachers back from integrating literacy skills into their content. Participant H said,

> It is very difficult, and as well as being difficult, there is the time constraint. If you are an advanced math teacher, you have the test at the end of the year. Yes, it is important to implement the strategies, but time constraints are there.

In their research on how adolescents engage with new literacies to make sense of the world, Hagood et al. (2008) worked with teachers in middle schools with high poverty and low-student achievement. They found that teachers tend to fall back on traditional methods of instruction due to the school culture of being low performing and being under the stress of high stakes testing. In discussing teacher views on literacy integration, Participant Q stated, "I think they are all aware of it, but they don't always have the time. Sometimes it gets shuffled in the priorities." While most middle school teachers are content focused and time is critical, O'Brien et al. (2001) indicated that many content-area teachers are unaware that if they could build the background knowledge of their

students and increase their ability to read assignments, they could increase the depth of content to be covered effectively.

The four middle schools involved in this study are all Title I schools and indicated that the poverty level of their students also impacts literacy instruction. Participant B noted, “They still don’t have that reading stamina. They don’t have that drive to just push through when it gets boring for two pages and it’s because literacy isn’t supported at home.” Participant A spoke about the importance of providing time for students to read at school, adding,

> I think we realize that when kids leave here they are taking care of younger siblings or they are the ones cooking dinner or they are being the parent at home. So they are not going to sit down and read at home.

Carter (2016) noted, in his series of articles on the impact of social issues on schools, that teachers need to be reminded that children do not decide on their families or home environments.

The focus group participants mentioned that their schools work to build a reading life at school to offset the lack of support often seen at home. Participant T noted,

> Poverty is such a massive issue for us. It is hard to differentiate the haves and the have nots when they are all have nots. We have tried to provide opportunities for them to read at school because I know that there are not opportunities at home. Also, when we purge our books, we provide a free book selection in the front of the school to give them an opportunity to increase their home libraries. We try to encourage parents to get involved…if we are building those home libraries then in the future those younger kids will have a better opportunity to increase their

literacy skills.

Middle School 4 uses their Restart funds to build wraparound services for students with full-time social workers, counselors, and a nurse. Each grade level has a literacy teacher, assistant principal, and counselor who moves with them up to each grade level. The school identifies relationships as a key to improving reading skills for their low-income students. Participant AE noted, "for relational learners, it is really a big deal to have those people in your corner." Chen and Weikart (2008) noted that school climate has been found to impact the academic performance of at-risk students. Adolescents from low-income backgrounds often do not have an ideal home environment and lack the support adolescents need both academically and socially. When the school environment is perceived in a positive manner, students have more opportunity for success (Li et al., 2017).

Teachers having a kindergarten through sixth grade (K-6) certification was another factor impacting literacy instruction which was heavily coded in focus groups. Participants saw a K-6 certification as an advantage when addressing reading difficulties with middle school students. Participant T noted,

> When we hire middle school teachers sometimes, we have to look at elementary and drop down a certification. With middle school teachers you rarely have anybody who has taught reading or has any type of experience with teaching reading or reading skills.

Participant P said, "I did teach elementary before I taught middle school…and I was taught the basics of phonics and phonemic awareness and how to teach children in that way." NCES (2019) reported that the 2019 NAEP assessment results for reading show

that eighth-grade scores are down by two points from 2017. Wexler (2018) reported no significant gains in reading scores since 1998. Educators have considered comprehension to be a reading skill, but Wexler argued that reading comprehension really depends on what the reader already knows. Buly and Valencia (2003) studied reading difficulties in students, which resulted in the students placing in the below proficient category. The data showed that 18% of students lacked word attack skills, and 41% of the students struggled with fluency, which affected comprehension skills (Buly & Valencia, 2003). Salinger (2011) predicted that students from this study more than likely experienced difficulty moving from elementary to middle school.

With middle school teachers not trained to address foundational reading skills, professional development was another factor that was discussed in focus groups. Participant AE said, "when you are teaching elementary school you are trained in all areas, but once you get to middle school, your training is more specialized." Similarly, Alvermann and Wilson (2011) noted that adolescent literacy needs and the unique skills needed for literacy instruction at the middle school level often go unnoticed by policy makers and the general public.

All the middle school focus groups identified training in foundational reading skills as a high need for teachers as well as literacy training for content-area teachers. Participants stated that being able to address foundational reading skills and still teach the curriculum is challenging. Other participants felt more focus on vocabulary skills would help teachers. Participant Q stated,

> I have some students who cannot decode and then I have some who are able to decode, but they don't understand what the words mean. How do we effectively

differentiate that far and still be able to teach our curriculum.

Participant V added, “My thought was that you have to know vocabulary. They have got to know the words in order to understand the content.”

Fisher et al. (2016) claimed that vocabulary instruction is a strong predictor of reading comprehension. They also stated that vocabulary instruction should be taught so students can use the new learning authentically. Swanson et al. (2016) studied literacy and text reading in secondary social studies classes and noted that secondary content teachers are not using literacy strategies, including vocabulary, that have been recognized as effective methods of instruction and that allow students to access and engage in the complex texts found in content-area classes. In their study, Swanson et al. found that vocabulary instruction was higher in language arts classes than social studies classes. They determined that 67% of the time, vocabulary was observed in language arts classes, with definition work being most common. In social studies classrooms, direct instruction of definitions was the most common method of teaching vocabulary. It was also noted to be of low quality. All survey participants either strongly agreed or agreed when asked if students struggled with reading the course textbook or materials.

Research Question 3

How Does the Efficacy of a Traditionally Prepared Teacher Compare to a Non-Traditionally Prepared Teacher?

Research Question 3 looked at the relationship between the self-efficacy score of a traditionally certified teacher compared to that of an alternatively prepared teacher to determine if teachers feel prepared to teach literacy skills regardless of the content taught using an independent *t* test. The research question also examined how prepared teachers

felt to address literacy skills of middle school students when they completed their teaching training, regardless of the licensure path. The TEILE survey and focus group data were used to answer this research question.

Using an independent *t* test to determine significance between the mean self-efficacy score of traditionally prepared teachers and the mean self-efficacy score of alternatively prepared teachers, a significant mean difference was found. The mean score for alternatively prepared teachers was significantly higher than the mean score of traditionally prepared teachers. These data contrast with a 2017 research review by Jang and Horn. In a study comparing traditionally prepared teachers to a group prepared through alternative licensure, those who completed a traditional preparation program demonstrated a higher level of self-efficacy with preparation and teaching strategies (Jang & Horn, 2017). In a study on the time commitment of secondary social studies teachers, Kenna and Russell (2015) found that there was no statistical difference in teacher responses to a questionnaire based on whether they followed a traditional or alternative path to certification. In the current study, the researcher found the average self-efficacy score of traditionally prepared teachers is 60.5 of a possible high score of 80, and the average score of alternatively licensed teachers is 66 of a possible score of 80.

Between the survey and focus groups, a total of 47 educators participated in the research study. All participants were asked how they received their teaching license: 70% indicated they went through a traditional pathway, and 30% went through an alternative pathway. In addition, 36% of participants started with a K-6 teaching license. While survey results indicated that alternatively licensed teachers had a higher self-efficacy score than traditionally prepared teachers, none of the focus group participants stated they

felt prepared to meet the needs of middle school students with reading difficulties. Only those with a K-6 teaching license stated that they felt comfortable identifying and addressing the literacy skills of middle school students. Portes and Sales (2009) noted that children's rights to a quality public education have been habitually violated as schools continue to be underfunded and staffed with teachers who are inadequately prepared to teach. Rowan and Towend (2016) stated they found there is little knowledge about how beginning teachers assess how well prepared they are when it comes to the challenges of meeting the needs of a diverse population of students. They also found that the gap in knowledge for these teachers was seen as significant when considering the many pressures put on beginning teachers (Rowan & Towend, 2016).

Focus group participants who completed a traditional teacher preparation program stated that their preparation program was content focused and did not prepare them to meet the needs of middle school readers. No one indicated that they had any training with specific literacy integration to improve the reading skills of students in the content area. Participant AA shared,

> I taught middle school ELA for 14 years and then I left to be an instructional facilitator in an elementary school. For all the years I thought I knew how to teach middle school language arts, it was not until I spent six years in an elementary school that I learned how to teach reading.

Participant Q said, "I was a traditional pathway, but the way my program was set up, it was secondary so there were extremely few, if any, classes that touched on basic literacy skills." Multiple studies have shown that the self-efficacy of novice teachers can increase with specific literacy instruction. Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erickson (2013) studied

novice teachers and their growth in content knowledge for reading instruction as well as their self-efficacy as a reading teacher. Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erickson noted, "as both the literacy demands within our society and the diverse needs of our nation's children increase, it is critical that our preservice teachers leave their training programs highly effective and efficacious teachers of reading" (p. 204). Participants took additional reading courses and engaged in tutoring struggling readers. Upon completion of the study, participants stated that while in the beginning they believed they could teach reading, at the end they knew they could teach reading (Leader-Janssen & Rankin-Erickson, 2013).

Focus group participants who followed an alternative pathway to licensure also stated that they were not prepared to address the many literacy skills their middle school students were lacking. They also indicated they did not feel prepared to teach literacy skills within the content area. Participant E, who began her career as an art teacher through an alternative program and now teaches ELA, said,

> I would say that I was not prepared at all. I was very naïve in the understanding of what role literacy played in the classroom coming in as an art teacher. Literacy was such a huge part of it…which is why I wanted to make that switch into the literacy role. I definitely think I was not prepared at all. And I did a lot of my own self teaching to learn more about it.

Participant B said,

> I was not at all prepared to teach literacy skills when I started and there are still things I don't do very well. Having a kindergartener and watching her learn to read and the ways her teacher teaches her to read has changed the way that I

approach some things."

In their research with an alternative teacher education program, Kavanagh and Rainey (2017) studied the redesign of an alternative licensure program at the University of Washington. Their rationale was that adolescents are routinely receiving remediation and test prep; and with so many teachers in the beginning stages of their career, there was a need to confirm that they have the knowledge and skills to effectively reach all students. Novice teachers taught 2-hour sessions of summer school to secondary students, as well as taking methods courses and preparing lessons. Kavanagh and Rainey did not find evidence that the method of preparing novice teachers impacted the method of teaching by the novice teachers. They also stated that regardless of the level of rigor, the 6-week program is not sufficient time for novice teachers to gain the professional standards needed to enter the classroom (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017).

Traditionally prepared focus group participants with a K-6 teaching certification was the one group that stated they felt prepared to address the literacy skills of middle school students. Participant K said,

> I felt like in my program we were very prepared. I felt more prepared because I was an elementary major from kindergarten through sixth grade, so coming to middle school to teach it was not a big deal, I had the background.

Participant AA noted,

> As a middle school teacher, you are not prepared to test them to see what their reading levels are. You are not prepared to assess them with a phonetic focus in middle school. We are just prepared to tach them reading and comprehension and the strategies that go along with that. But I have said over and over that the six

years I spent in an elementary school made me a one hundred percent better middle school teacher.

Focus group participants with a K-6 teaching license were able to identify reading skills lacking in students, such as decoding, fluency, and vocabulary, and other foundational reading skills. Wexler (2018) also noticed that the root of the problem may lie in the way we teach reading. Simply mastering comprehension skills does not guarantee that a child will be able to transfer that new skill to any text they encounter (Wexler, 2018). Frey et al. (2016) identified prior knowledge, vocabulary techniques, and reading comprehension as effective strategies for adolescent literacy, but they also recognized that linguistic processes of language are necessary first. Phonemic awareness and phonics, in addition to fluency skills, are reading foundations in which K-6 certified teachers have been trained. The foundational background allows them to identify deficient skills in their middle school readers.

Recommendations from Findings

The four middle schools participating in the study clearly understand the importance of literacy and the need to increase the literacy skills of their students. Working in Title I schools, participants also understand the significant impact poverty has on their students' home lives, achievement levels, and relationships within the schools. The administrators and staff of each school have worked to build a culture within their school that focuses on literacy, but they are not without their challenges. Findings from the research indicate that lack of training for the integration of literacy strategies is a major factor for not integrating literacy into content-area classes. Focus group participants agree that teachers are not opposed to literacy integration, but they do

not have the skills, training, or mindset to do so. Other factors that emerged as essential to literacy achievement in the schools were the lack of foundational reading skills, lack of teacher preparation to address skill deficits, student poverty concerns and how to counteract them, and effective professional development.

Heller and Greenleaf (2007) noted that many secondary teachers report that they are not equipped to assist students with reading deficiencies and do not believe that teaching these skills is their responsibility. The researcher found that this is still an issue in middle school; and with NAEP (2019) scores indicating only 34% of eighth graders are proficient in reading, it is time to change that mindset. Professional development for middle school content-area teachers would be beneficial to all students and has the potential to strengthen both literacy and content skills. Frey et al. (2016) identified content-area literacy skills that are helpful in developing content knowledge. These were also skills the participants noted as essential for improving the literacy skills of their students.

1. Leveraging prior knowledge–teaching with the intent to build on existing knowledge and a predictor of reading comprehension on topical text.
2. Vocabulary techniques–techniques that allow students definitional understanding and apply the words through reading and writing.
3. Reading comprehension instruction in context–linking concepts within documents, annotating text, and re-reading for understanding.

The district used for this research recognized the importance of literacy skills in middle school as they transitioned from the junior high model to the middle school model in the fall of 1991. The reorganization plan included recommendations from a committee

that included concentrated reading instruction within the curriculum support services. The committee wrote,

> To the extent that vocabulary, concept development, development of background knowledge, and proficiency in reading comprehension are crucial to understanding any content area and to functioning effectively in further school, all teachers are teachers of reading. Each teacher in a team would have the primary responsibility for the concentrated reading instruction. Students who have not acquired adequate skills will be provided remedial help through the consultative model.

As educators are asked to do more with less, training teachers to meet the needs of all learners has become increasingly difficult. Evers et al. (2016) looked at the job demands of teachers and noted that professional learning has not been proven to be effective and that although "teachers need to be an expert in their field, they also need to be able to cope with professional change, more diverse student populations, and higher social expectations and responsibilities" (p. 228). Modeling of expected instruction and long-term coaching have been effective ways to increase teacher efficacy with incorporating literacy strategies (Cantrell et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2010). When asked about effective professional development, focus group participant K noted, "it would be really beneficial for other content areas to be able to attend some literacy professional development…with the same strategies that we are using in language arts." Participant Y added, "I think that having teachers visit each other's classrooms more to see things from that perspective, where it is going well, would be helpful."

Teacher certification pathways were found to have no significant impact on self-

efficacy levels of teachers. Survey participants who followed an alternative pathway to licensure had a significantly higher mean score than teachers who followed a traditional pathway to licensure. Focus group participants, regardless of their certification pathway, stated that they did not feel prepared or have the capacity to address the needs of struggling readers in middle school. Participant F stated that she did not feel prepared to address the learning needs of her students when she began her teaching career. This participant was licensed through an alternative program and stated,

> I was with teachers who were doing primary and secondary and a lot of our focus was on classroom management. Once we did split up it was definitely with the assumption that you are going to teach middle school and they already know how to read.

Participant I completed a traditional K-6 certification but never intended to teach elementary school. This participant said,

> I student taught in fourth grade and then jumped right in to teaching middle school. I felt like the focus for teaching literacy was on the primary grades…I did not have a thorough grasp on what a middle schooler would need in terms of literacy in the content area.

Novice middle school teachers, regardless of certification path, need more specialized training in the foundational skills that elementary trained teachers receive. Interest in reading by policy makers is directed entirely to early literacy in the lower elementary grades (All4Ed, 2004). School districts are struggling to maintain reading proficiency and growth of students as they move from elementary grades to middle grades. While there is no question that students should be proficient in reading by the end

of third grade, this has proven to be a difficult task (Lee & Spratley, 2010). Middle schools must be prepared to support the literacy needs of students. If students have struggled with learning to read, they will fall further behind as they read to learn. Participant AA shared what made her a better middle school teacher with the following statement:

> I taught ELA in middle school for 14 years and then was an instructional facilitator in elementary school for 6 years. For all the years I thought I knew how to teach middle school language arts, it was not until I spent 6 years in elementary school that I learned how to teach reading. The time I spent in elementary school made me a 100% better middle school teacher.

Teacher self-efficacy as it relates to teaching literacy skills to all students will increase with accomplishment, experience learned by observing others who do the task well, and feedback on performance (Bandura, 1995).

It was evident that each focus group team understood the importance of literacy within their school as well as the role that poverty has taken on within their school. Previous studies found that school climate can be a predictor of middle school students achievement (Li et al., 2017; Ma & Wilkins, 2002). Lower academic levels in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have been directly associated with school disorder.

While the researcher found that each middle school worked to mitigate the effects of poverty within their school, one of the schools employed culturally responsive practices and additional support staff for each grade level. Middle School 4 is a Restart school and uses Title I funds and per pupil spending funds to employ an assistant principal, literacy teacher, and school counselor for each grade level. Participant AE

explained the process and reasoning for this:

> Having the assistant principal, the literacy coach, and the counselor that goes with them, we really are able to build relationships that motivate and they get to have a small group lesson with their literacy coach for perhaps three years. This provides a safe place. And then they also know that counselor and assistant principal. We are able to encourage them for their middle school career…for relational learners it is really a big deal to have those people in your corner.

These staff members loop up with students as they go from sixth to eighth grade, recognizing the relational needs of their students. A safe classroom characterized by respect and care, positive and trusting relationships between teachers and students, and collaboration among students are what represent the work of a culturally responsive classroom (Powell et al., 2013).

The district the researcher used for this study has approximately 60% of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Every middle school has students who are considered at risk due to poverty and academic challenges. Taylor (2009) stated that teachers lack training in working with students from a low socioeconomic background and frequently do not have the knowledge or experience in understanding poverty.

In a study to examine the relationship between poverty and school performance, Hegedus (2018) noted that prior research showed a strong connection between student academic performance and family income. There may be less of a correlation between academic growth and family income. Hegedus found that half of a school's achievement can be accounted for by the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch but that the analysis of data as it relates to growth showed different results. If students are both

low performing and not making growth, “it is more likely that they are not being served well” (Hegedus, 2018, p. 13). Middle School 4 exceeded student growth overall in 2018-2019 and was within the top 5% of the state for growth. Results from this study lead to the recommendation that cultural responsiveness training for administrators and staff would improve the overall climate of a school as well as positively impact the achievement of students.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of research on improving adolescent literacy. Specifically, this study explored the preparedness of middle school ELA, science, and social studies teachers to address the reading skills of middle school students as well as how their licensure pathway affected their self-efficacy with the teaching of reading. Through surveys and focus group sessions with four middle schools, the researcher made several findings: the perceived self-efficacy of teachers as it relates to teaching literacy skills, the perceived preparedness of middle school teachers to teach literacy skills, the perceived self-efficacy and preparedness of teachers based on their licensure pathway, and the preparedness of teachers to address the reading skills of low-performing students. These findings suggest further areas of research related to the topic of adolescent literacy.

Future research could replicate this study within the same district or other districts to look for commonalities in the data. A similar study could use all teachers instead of only those with less than 10 years of experience as well as expand the data collection to all middle schools within the district. Is teacher self-efficacy higher in teachers with more experience or in more affluent schools?

Another area for future research would be the readiness and self-efficacy levels of school administrators as instructional leaders. A researcher could survey and interview school administrators to determine their level of self-efficacy with literacy instruction. Knowing that many administrators did not teach content-area courses, such a study could lead to identifying areas of need for prospective principals.

Another research topic would be to study how the allocation of Title I funds impact student achievement. The researcher could identify how a district allocates these funds to each school as well as how each school allocates the funds. The study could include a breakdown of the spending in each school compared to student achievement data.

A final research topic would be to examine the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs. The researcher could randomly select face-to-face and online universities as well as alternative licensure programs to determine the courses offered that address literacy. In addition, the researcher could cross examine the effectiveness of a sample of teachers from each of the programs being studied.

Limitations of the Study

The data from this study were collected from four Title I middle schools and a total of 47 participants. The survey responses were gathered from ELA, science, and social studies teachers who had up to 10 years of teaching experience; and a total of 34 teachers were identified. Only 14 of those participated in the survey. The remaining 33 participants took place in focus group sessions. The small size of the sample for the survey could limit the ability to draw broad generalizations from the data.

The focus group sessions included members of each school's Leadership Team.

This group was able to bring additional perspectives to the study, including from school administrators; but interviewing the survey participants would have given the researcher more in-depth information about each of those participants. It also would have allowed for more comparison between the survey and in-person discussion.

Each focus group had at least one school administrator participate. This could have caused teachers to be less forthcoming, and they often presented a different perspective than a teacher may have.

As the survey was being sent to participants and focus group sessions were being scheduled, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of schools. Several requests were sent to survey participants, but participation was still low. Focus group sessions were conducted virtually through Google Meet. A virtual meeting made it more difficult to generate discussion from the group, and many members seldom spoke. Face-to-face meetings would have allowed the researcher to establish more of a camaraderie with participants and encourage more feedback.

Summary

The literacy demands on public schools have increased with high stakes testing, and schools struggle to maintain reading proficiency as students move from elementary to middle school. Middle school teachers must recognize their role as a literacy teacher and have the ability to integrate effective literacy strategies within their content in order to increase both literacy and content-area skills.

It has been well documented that content-area teachers do not see their role as a literacy teacher. Schools will need to provide ongoing professional development if they wish to engage content-area teachers in an effort to effectively integrate literacy

instruction (Haynes, 2016). As stated by Protheroe (2008), teachers who think they have the ability to effectively educate students and support their academic growth to a level that meets these higher standards are more inclined to engage in teaching methods that actually achieve that goal.

The study district has a literacy focus in all of their middle schools, but the four schools participating in the study have clearly stated that teachers do not view themselves as literacy teachers and do not have the skills needed to effectively integrate literacy strategies within their content. This knowledge creates more of a sense of urgency as middle school students generally receive no explicit reading instruction; and at the same time, adolescent literacy skills are falling flat.

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Appendix A

Survey

Teacher Efficacy Instrument for Literacy Education

For the purpose of this survey, literacy is defined as the ability to read and write at a level adequate for the written communication and generally at a level that enables a student to successfully function at their current grade level (Mustain, 2006, p. 111).

Instructions: Read each item and circle to appropriate response 1-4.

Response Key:

1=Strongly Agree 3=Disagree

2=Agree 4=Strongly Disagree

1. Literacy levels in children are the single most important factor in how well they do in school.	1	2	3	4
2. I consider the job of teaching literacy skills to be a major part of my job.	1	2	3	4
3. Increasing literacy levels in students should be the main instructional focus in middle schools.	1	2	3	4
4. Teachers are limited in teaching content in core classes because of low student literacy levels.	1	2	3	4
5. Teachers should differentiate instruction based on a students' literacy ability.	1	2	3	4
6. I am confident in my ability to recognize students who struggle academically due to low literacy levels.	1	2	3	4
7. I find it difficult to teach students with reading problems	1	2	3	4
8. The grades of my students have improved based on literacy strategies and activities I employ.	1	2	3	4

9. I have enough literacy training to teach literacy strategies and deal with literacy problems in my students.	1	2	3	4
10. My literacy training and coursework during my teacher preparation gave me the skills to effectively teach literacy.	1	2	3	4
11. All teachers are reading teachers	1	2	3	4
12. I have the ability and training necessary to motivate my students to read.	1	2	3	4
13. I am confident in my ability to gauge reading comprehension with my students.	1	2	3	4
14. Reading the course textbook and materials is difficult for many of my students.	1	2	3	4
15. I incorporate reading comprehension skills within my lessons.	1	2	3	4
16. My school emphasizes a school-wide reading program.	1	2	3	4
17. I provide daily writing exercises for my students.	1	2	3	4
18. All teachers are writing teachers	1	2	3	4
19. I have the ability and training necessary to motivate my students to write.	1	2	3	4
20. My school emphasizes a school-wide writing strategy.	1	2	3	4

Appendix B

Permission Letter

Elementary School
"Home of the Tigers"

Dr. Michael Mustain

December 12, 2019

Dear Dr. Michael Mustain,

I am a doctoral student from Gardner-Webb University writing my dissertation tentatively titled *The Preparedness of Middle School Teachers to Teach Reading Skills* under the direction of my dissertation committee chaired by Dr. Stephen Laws.

I would like your permission to use your survey instrument from your study *A Study of Literacy Efficacy and Student Achievement Among Beginning Middle School Teachers in an Urban Context* in my research study. I will use this survey only for my research study and will not sell or use it for any other purpose.

Please indicate your permission by signing one copy of this letter and returning it to me through postal mail or email. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at

Sincerely,

Lorinda Brusie
Doctoral Candidate

M. J. M 12-12-19

Signature

Appendix C

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. How do teachers in your building view their responsibility for teaching reading and literacy skills, regardless of content taught?
2. What types of on-going professional development do you think are needed to make sure your teachers are prepared to teach literacy skills throughout all content areas?
3. What skills do you believe are necessary to teach students so that they can be successful with the comprehension of content in textbooks?
4. How does high poverty affect the literacy skills of your students and how does your school work to counteract that?
5. What literacy strategies has your school implemented that have been successful in promoting student growth?
6. Did you complete your teacher certification through a traditional teacher preparation program or an alternative pathway?
7. Did you feel prepared to teach literacy skills to middle school students when you began teaching?