

Behaviors of Middle School Principals that Impact Reading Outcomes

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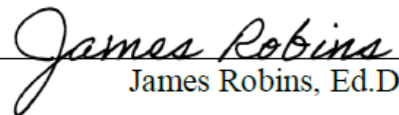
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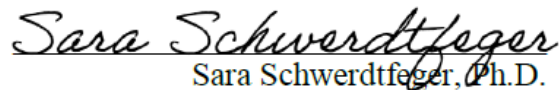


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Abstract

Literacy proficiency continues to decline across the United States for all students, particularly middle school students (Mahnken, 2019). The role of the principal as the instructional leader in schools relates to student academic success (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). This qualitative study was designed to identify the factors middle school principals perceive as leadership practices that advance reading outcomes. The researcher investigated a principal's professional development selection related to reading, the principal's prior experiences as a teacher of reading, what a principal perceives as factors that play a role in reading success, and the middle school principal's perception of how to best promote reading success. Nine Kansas middle school administrators participated in the study, three females and six males; seven were head principals and two assistant principals. The researcher compared the practices of principals from high and low ELA proficient middle schools. Four significant findings were identified related to professional development selection for middle school teachers, the experiences of middle school principals as teachers of reading, the principals' perceptions of student reading success, and how principals perceive themselves as an agent of influence for student reading achievement. The study results lead to implications for action regarding middle school student reading success. Candidates enrolled in graduate level principal licensure programs could benefit from added coursework that emphasizes training in the implementation science of reading strategies. Middle school principals should consider embedding data studies and assessment literacy into the professional learning community's weekly activities. Additional qualitative and quantitative research is needed to determine the instructional strategies and evidence-

based literacy practices that support reading achievement at the middle school level in all disciplines.

Dedication

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16 NIV). Nothing is more important to me than my Father in heaven and glorifying Him. To Him, all thanks for the perseverance to complete the task of this dissertation. I am blessed to have my wonderful husband, Joe. Without his encouragement, support, and love, I would be nothing. He is the love of my life, and I love him with my whole heart and soul. To my children, Matthew, Kiley, and Cody, you can do hard things and accomplish your dreams. I am so proud to be in your life and love you endlessly. My beautiful grandchildren, Evan, Avery, and Adeline, grandma loves you and will always support your dreams. Finally, to my parents. They have always loved and supported me, even when my dreams may seem silly. I love you both so much! Thanks to each of you for your endless love and support.

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To my family, my husband Joe, my children, and my parents. You are the ones that encouraged me when I felt weary, tired, and frustrated. Joe did extra housework, errands, and cooking while I worked endlessly on this document and encouraged me when I wanted to quit. I hope that I have made you proud. To my coworkers, friends, and students - thank you. Every person in these groups helped me to believe that I could do this thing and stayed by my side to encourage me along the way.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Instructional leadership has been studied formally since 1922. William Deffenbaugh of the Department of Interior, Bureau of Education (1922) stated, “Supervision is needed in every high school to help coordinate the work of several departments, to secure more uniformity in marking pupils, and to secure better classroom methods of instruction” (p. 59). For almost one hundred years, the need to enhance the capacity of those who lead schools has been documented. Nearly 100 years later, there has been little change in the definition of school administrators’ instructional leadership. Hallinger (2005) provided 12 roles of an instructional leader, including the descriptors given by Deffenbaugh. School administrators have been called instructional leaders for decades; conversely, this term lacks a clear definition (Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003). Pushed by the effective school’s movement, the focus on instructional leadership shifted in the 1980s when instructional leaders became more focused on classroom instruction and assessment data (Lortie, 2009).

Edmonds (1982) specified that in most effective schools, the principal has frequent discussions with teachers, which are “focused on the diagnosis and solution of instructional problems within the classroom” (p. 21). Murphy (1988) continued to explain that a principal’s time, which is not “devoted to administrative or management concerns” (p. 127), is defined as instructional leadership. A critical aspect of defining instructional leaders and leadership involved communication with teachers regarding instruction after in-class observations, shifting the definition’s focus to being more about

collaboration with the teacher and not solely dependent on the leader's focus (Blasè & Blasè, 1999).

Since 1999, the scope of instructional leadership has shifted. Hallinger (2005) wrote of the shift in instructional leadership, framing this shift into two dimensions. Hallinger's (2005) first dimension stated that principals must communicate the school's academic goals that support the school's daily practice. The second involves how a principal manages instructional programming in the form of curriculum coordination. Horng and Loeb (2010) accepted this idea and expanded on the shifts and complications of instructional leadership. They stated that regardless of the background or curriculum knowledge of a school leader, no one leader would have the capacity to serve all content areas at all grade levels as the instructional expert, inferring that leaders need to have instructional expertise. Horng and Loeb (2010) continue to define instructional leaders as those who communicate academic goals, effectively coordinate curriculum, and have knowledge of instructional pedagogical practices that promote student achievement.

As researchers have defined instructional leadership, more explicit examples of instructional leaders' characteristics include a shift of focus to learning and the importance of professional development. Bush (2011) theorized that instructional leadership has shifted its focus from teaching to learning in today's educational culture. Rainey and Honig (2015) provided an instructional leadership framework in which the school leaders' role in establishing and sustaining teacher learning is founded on identifiable student learning requirements and embraces the school's instructional framework.

District administrators need the principal to be a strong instructional leader (Crawford & Torgesen, 2007). Gale and Bishop (2014) stressed that the school principal has a meaningful impact on student academic outcomes, especially as the middle grades play an integral role in developing future lifelong success. The nation's high school dropout rate is linked to middle school reading, emphasizing the importance of strong instructional leadership to student success (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). Instructionally solid leaders impact student success or lack thereof.

Background

Despite the national focus on literacy instruction, reading proficiency scores for 8th and 12th grades continue to decline (Herrera, Truckenmiller, & Foorman, 2016). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), an eighth-grade reader at the basic level should be able to “identify statements of main idea, theme, or author’s purpose; and make simple inferences from text” (p. 6). The report also shows that eighth-graders have scored above this basic level since 1992. Mahnken (2019) reported that our national reading progress has slowed in the past decade, and our most needy students continue to fall behind, especially in the middle grades.

Reading performance in Kansas has been on a downward trend over the past several years. As noted in Table 1, English Language Arts (ELA) scores for Grades 3, 4, and 5 have been stagnant, as shown in the Kansas Assessment Program (KAP) assessment data from the Kansas State Department of Education 2016 (KSDE, 2021c). With less than half of Kansas elementary school readers being proficient, the necessity for effective reading instruction and support at the middle level is essential and needed.

Table 1

Percentage of Proficient and Advanced Readers in Kansas for Grades 3, 4, and 5

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021
Grade 3	44.52	40.62	39.50	40.58	39.31
Grade 4	51.72	48.68	47.96	47.64	46.99
Grade 5	44.96	43.90	43.19	43.51	42.98

Note. Adapted from *KSDE Progress Reports*, by the Kansas State Department of Education, 2021c.

Retrieved from https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/assessment_results.aspx?org_no=State&rptType=

Middle school literacy performance in Kansas schools has been on a decline in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades since 2016 (KSDE, 2021a). Table 2 includes the percentage of students scoring at the proficient and above proficient reading levels of three and four in Grades 6, 7, and 8 from 2016 to 2021. However, only 4.96% of sixth-graders, 7.82% of seventh-graders, and 4.32% of eighth-graders scored above proficient, level four, on the Kansas assessment of (ELA) during the years 2016 to 2021 (KSDE, 2021b).

Examining the data in Table 2, sixth-grade students gained proficiency in ELA on the KAP in 2019. Still, there was a significant drop between 2019 and the subsequent testing session in 2021. The same gain and significant decrease occurred with seventh-graders between 2018 and 2019. However, a concerning downward trend in achievement continued for Kansas middle school students. Reviewing the data presented in Table 2 led to the question of whether building administrators at the middle school level play a role in the success or lack of success of reading outcomes in their buildings and what middle school principals may perceive as strategies that influence reading outcomes.

Table 2

Percentage of Proficient and Advanced Readers in Kansas Middle Schools

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021
Grade 6	40.36	38.52	37.72	38.44	35.92
Grade 7	38.30	33.18	33.42	31.78	30.58
Grade 8	30.04	26.51	26.21	25.17	23.96

Note. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, no assessment data were collected for the year 2020.

Adapted from *KSDE Progress Reports*, by the Kansas State Department of Education, 2021a. Retrieved from https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/assessment_results.aspx?org_no=State&rptType=

There is no lack of approaches to teaching reading at the middle school level; however, “lack of systemic or building support limits the effectiveness of implementation” (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003, p. 16). Researchers have also found evidence that an instructional focus on reading comprehension strategies is effective with adolescent readers (Burns, Maki, Karich, & Coolong-Chaffin, 2017). The International Literacy Association (ILA, 2019) explained that principals must set high expectations for teaching reading among staff to address the importance of instructional focus. Gale and Bishop (2014) concluded that “Developmentally responsive middle-level leadership promotes a teaching and learning environment focused on the need for strong relationships between and among the young adolescent, the faculty, and the larger school community” (p. 6).

Intentional pedagogical shifts in middle school literacy instruction have been found in the research regarding disciplinary literacy. Hervey (2013) demonstrated that the specific reading strategy of discipline literacy is comprised of the following components and that middle school teachers must be supported in the following:

Each discipline possesses its own language, purposes, and ways of using text. There are special skills and strategies needed for students to make complete sense of texts from the disciplines. As students begin to confront these kinds of texts (especially in middle and high school), instruction must facilitate their understanding of what it means to read disciplinary texts. (p. 4)

According to Bogard, Sableski, Arnold, and Bowman (2017), disciplinary literacy is a manner of reading, speaking, thinking, and writing which models the experts in each domain. Shifting the emphasis of adolescent instruction to reading within the disciplines can provide students with a variety of complex and rich reading material, including narratives, word problems, infographics, personal communication, and primary documents (Lent, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

According to the KSDE's (2021c) Data Central webpage data on the KAP, fifth-grade students in ELA from the 2016-2021 school years averaged 21.85% proficient and advanced, while eighth-graders in the same timespan averaged a disappointing 13.19% proficient and advanced (KSDE, 2021b). The ability to read can transform lives, and being proficient in reading skills sets the foundation for global future success, including cultural connection, civic engagement, and post-graduation work success (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018). School leaders should be "students of best practice" with their knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to implement strategies for reading success (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 54). The problem is that the lack of success at the middle school level tends to have rippling effects on student outcomes.

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) stated, “Almost seven thousand students drop out of high school every school day” (p. 1), and reading achievement can be tied to this statistic. According to Hervey (2013), “Adolescent struggling readers in middle school, who stay in school, have difficulty meeting their coursework reading challenges” (p. 1). Having knowledgeable and capable instructional leaders may increase reading achievement. Fullan (2017) researched instructional leadership and concluded that the principals’ actions with the most significant effect sizes are teaching and learning development, followed by establishing goals and learning expectations. With the principal having such a meaningful impact on student achievement, the staggering numbers of middle school struggling readers are brought to light. The problem affects schools nationally and also in Kansas.

Students in elementary grades in Kansas have higher reading achievement than students in Kansas middle schools. Between 2016 and 2021, Kansas elementary reading gains remained between 40% and 48% proficient and advanced (KSDE, 2021c). However, as presented in Table 2, Kansas middle school students only ranged between 24% and 40% proficient and advanced (KSDE, 2021a). There are elementary and middle schools in Kansas with robust student reading data. Still, there are also elementary and middle schools in Kansas with unacceptable reading data. However, most Kansas ELA data trends between the typical end of elementary school (5th grade) and middle school (8th grade) continued a downward trajectory. Research was needed to determine the middle school principal’s behaviors that impact overall reading achievement, leading to this study’s purpose.

Purpose of the Study

This researcher sought to identify what middle school principals perceive as leadership practices that advance reading outcomes. Investigating these perceived practices would aid the researcher in identifying methods that contribute to student reading success, or lack thereof, at the middle school level. This qualitative study's first purpose was to discover what middle school principals select as professional development related to reading instruction for their teaching staff. The second purpose of the study was to explore previous reading experiences in the form of professional development, college coursework, or being a teacher of reading that middle school principals bring to their leadership roles. The third purpose was to ascertain middle school principals' perceptions of the factors that play a role in reading achievement. The final purpose was to learn what middle school principals perceive as their role in promoting reading achievement. Obtaining qualitative data allowed the researcher to analyze statements from the participants on their perceptions of reading achievement, and interviewing Kansas middle school principals from several locations across the state allowed this researcher to collect data to answer the research questions.

Significance of the Study

Various school personnel have demonstrated instructional leadership abilities: teachers, support staff, principals, and superintendents. However, school principals are the individuals who balance instruction and student outcomes for systems (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). This study contributes to the research on principals' perceptions of their impact on reading achievement at the middle school level. The scope of work surrounding dyslexia initiatives in states such as Kansas sparked the

investigation into the effects of building leadership on middle schools' literacy outcomes. This study's focus adds to the literature on reading instruction and the importance of education administrators having credentials in reading to meet the needs of the staff and students they serve. Therefore, this study's outcomes could influence middle school administrators' attitudes toward reading instruction and instructional leadership, thus impacting instructional methods regarding reading at the middle school level.

Delimitations

As defined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), delimitations "are conditions or parameters that the researcher intentionally imposed in order to limit the scope of the study" (p. 8). Therefore, delimitations for this study included:

1. The selection of participants for the study involved a review of school assessment data from the KSDE Data Central webpage. Possible principal participants were selected from Kansas districts where middle schools showed significantly high ELA scores on the KAP in grades 6, 7, and 8. Principals were also chosen from Kansas school districts with low ELA scores on the KAP in grades 6, 7, and 8. High ELA scores include an average at or above 45% proficient, and low ELA scores include those below 30% proficient.
2. KAP ELA assessment scores for the past five years of collected data were examined, and principals were selected based on this data.
3. No students, teachers, or superintendents were interviewed.
4. A qualitative research design was utilized in this study.

Assumptions

Wargo (2015) stated that assumptions are “statements that are presumed to be true” (par. 1). The assumptions that impacted this study include:

1. The data reported on the KSDE KAP performance measures in ELA were accurate.
2. Participants understood that their participation in this study was voluntary.
3. Participants understood that there would be no repercussions if they chose not to participate.
4. Participants understood the interview questions, answered honestly, and were forthcoming in their responses. Answering questions with honesty was encouraged by providing anonymity and the confidentiality of participants’ responses.

Research Questions

“Research questions are directly tied to the purpose of the study” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 6). The questions listed below served as a guide to discover what middle school principals perceive as the role they play in reading achievement in their buildings and how the impact and selection of professional development play a role, if any.

RQ1. What are middle school principals’ experiences in the selection of professional development related to reading?

RQ2. What experiences in teaching reading do middle school principals bring to their leadership role?

RQ3. What are middle school principals’ perceptions of the factors that play a role in reading achievement?

RQ4. What are middle school principals' perceptions of their role in reading achievement?

Definition of Terms

Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) suggested that defining terms explicitly adds accuracy to confirm understanding. The following are terms and definitions used in this study that may not be familiar to all readers.

Instructional leaders. School administrators who invest time and resources into student achievement are defined as instructional leaders. Jenkins (2009) explained an instructional leader as one who “reflects those actions that a principal takes to promote growth in student learning” (p. 35).

Middle school. Middle school is typically a transition between elementary and high school made of Grades 6, 7, and 8 (K-12 Academics, n.d.).

Professional development. Mizell (2010) defined professional development as “a strategy that schools and school districts use to ensure that educators strengthen their practice throughout their career” (p. 1). Professional development allows teachers to focus on student needs, typically collaborating with a facilitator on learning outcomes.

Reading achievement. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019) defined reading achievement as expectations of student performance “to a range of text types and text difficulty and in response to a variety of assessment questions intended to elicit different cognitive processes and reading behavior” (para. 1). Successful reading achievement is determined by the ability to score at a level of proficiency defined by national norms.

Reading proficiency. According to Baker et al. (2017), reading proficiency has two components: decoding with automaticity and comprehension.

Organization of the Study

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the study's elements: the background, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the delimitations, the research questions, and definitions of terms. Chapter 2 is a review of compelling literature associated with the proposed research questions. The literature review includes topics of literacy curriculum, instruction, and assessment in middle school; the principalship and middle school literacy curriculum; the principalship and middle school literacy instruction, the principalship and middle school literacy assessment; discipline literacy leadership for the middle school principal; professional developments role in transforming literacy leadership practices; principals as literacy leaders - instructional leadership; and behaviors of principals who promote adolescent literacy success. The methodology used in this research is presented in Chapter 3, including the research design, the setting, sampling procedures, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, the researcher's role, and the limitations. The results of the study are included in Chapter 4. Provided in Chapter 5 are a summary of the study, the findings related to the literature, and the conclusions.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a general overview of educational leadership as it pertains to literacy achievement at the middle school level. The first part of this chapter contains an overview of the literacy curriculum, instruction, and assessment of adolescents in middle school. The next part of the chapter is a review of the research on the principal's role in middle school literacy instruction, professional development, and promoting a community of learners. A review of instructional leadership, particularly effective leadership practices and building and sustaining literacy instruction, is included. Finally, the literature review contains the behaviors of principals who promote literacy success with students.

Literacy Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment in Middle School

Extensive research on literacy and academic achievement exists at the elementary level. In contrast, there is limited research on the principal's role in literacy achievement at the middle school level. Stecher et al. (2002) argued that reading comprehension scores for high school students in the United States continued to decline, indicating a need to improve middle school literacy instruction. Comprehending technical and complex text is required for post-secondary success. The school principal plays a prominent role in ensuring the literacy success of all students. Snow and Biancarosa (2003) revealed that inadequate instructional leadership inhibits program implementation effectiveness.

Marzano et al. (2005) purported that administrators should model being learners and promoters of excellent instructional practices. The Wallace Foundation (2013)

concluded that the most influential principals relentlessly pursued academic achievement by focusing on quality instruction. When middle school leaders intentionally focus on literacy instruction, they ensure that teachers in all disciplines impact a student's ability to understand complex text. This purposeful instructional focus creates a culture of literacy and improves comprehension (Hervey, 2013).

The principalship and middle school literacy curriculum. Marzano (2003) emphasized the need for a “guaranteed and viable curriculum” in all schools (p. 15). Literacy instruction depends upon a guaranteed and viable curriculum to develop competent readers. Curriculum has many definitions and interpretations in U. S. education. Toombs and Tierney (1993) give five working descriptions of the curriculum: a plan for learning, an instructional system, a major subsystem of the university, a medium of student development, and an analog to knowledge structure. Classrooms are elaborate cultures where teachers translate their experiences and knowledge into student learning (Harms & Knobloch, 2005). Due to a teacher's prior experience, another definition of curriculum could be that teachers see that the curriculum comes from the circumstances of their experiences (Smith & Karr-Kidwell, 2000). A final description of the curriculum to be considered is that specified subject matter is taught and learned at specific grade levels (Dufour & Marzano, 2011).

The curricula in middle schools are vastly different in structure and content. Deshler (2003) found that the curriculum rigor between elementary and middle school increases and leaves many students unprepared for success. Steiner (2017) agreed in his study of curriculum and its importance in student success and discovered that curriculum plays a vital role in student academic achievement. However, the distinction between a

formal middle school curriculum consisting of goals and activities and the enacted curriculum is rarely fully aligned (Troyer, 2019).

Literacy curriculum typically focuses on the skills and knowledge students are expected to learn as established by local school boards of education and state or local standards. These skills can be further delineated into discrete components explicitly used in print-based texts to support middle school curricula (Thomas & Dyches, 2019).

Marzano (2003) stated that classroom curriculum affects student reading outcomes as the teacher makes the decisions regarding the experiences students have and the sequence and pace of the lessons. Since the classroom curriculum is what most teachers rely upon, textbooks and other resources tend to dictate the pace and sequence of learning despite the school system's identified curriculum.

One challenge of the middle school curriculum is to bridge the gap between the formative elementary school years and preparing adolescents for adult life after high school. There is no prescribed formula for curricula that meets all the needs of middle schoolers (Lummis, 2001). Therefore, having a robust middle school curriculum implies that pedagogical practices and professional development must be considered valuable curriculum design assets (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007).

Strong leadership from the principal is crucial in creating and supporting a solid literacy program at the middle school level. Principals involved in the planning, implementing, and sustaining of literacy programs are the difference between successful and unsuccessful programs (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2005). Understanding local and state curriculum standards and ensuring that teachers successfully deliver content are the responsibilities of strong principal literacy

leaders (ILA, 2019). The ILA also concluded that ensuring effective literacy practices requires quality instruction supported by the principal through continual open feedback and teacher observation. The adolescent literacy curriculum is complex, and evidence supports using a qualitative and quantitative hierarchy by instructional leaders to ensure quality curriculum in all classrooms (Kamil et al., 2008).

Dubois (2012) stated that students do not achieve without a clear curriculum vision. Implementing a clear vision in the literacy curriculum is one job of the middle school principal (Watts, Seed, & Franceschini, 2013). Kellough and Kellough (2003) agreed on the importance of the middle school principal's role in curriculum implementation, "The effective middle-level principal is well aware of the importance and ramifications, and is a proponent of, the key components of exemplary middle-level school organization" (p. 17). Watts et al. (2013) continued to report that the importance of a middle-level curriculum involves the principal setting high expectations for students and creating shared accountability for literacy.

The principalship and middle school literacy instruction. Since 1888, the education of adolescents has been under reform in the United States. The reform began when Harvard University president Charles Eliot set out to reorganize elementary and secondary schools (Krug, 1961). In 1934, Smith published her dissertation, which some consider the first complete historical description of reading instruction in the United States (Hoffman & Alvermann, 2020). Smith (1934/2002) claimed the autonomous pedagogical change from oral reading instruction to an emphasis on silent reading and memorization as the beginning of sorting students based on assessment results. In the 1950s, Lou LaBrant, president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTM),

began to push for the teaching of reading in all subject area courses in junior and senior high schools (Hoffman & Alvermann, 2020). This era could be considered a time when reading instruction for adolescents began to have a more national focus in U. S. schools.

Middle school instruction transformed in the 1980s as teachers and leaders created developmentally sensitive, engaging, and interdisciplinary resources for teaching (Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016). Research now links adolescent literacy proficiency to inferencing, retaining new vocabulary, making text connections, and the ability to summarize large pieces of text (Marchand-Martella, Martella, Modderman, Peterson, & Pan, 2013). Rigorous broad studies of adolescent reading proficiency began in the late 1990s (Herrera et al., 2016).

Gough and Tunmer (1986) specifically researched the components of reading comprehension and concluded that reading comprehension is a product of language comprehension and word recognition. Language comprehension includes the components of background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge, as also identified later by the National Reading Panel (NRP) (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). Major components of reading instruction include phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (NRP, 2000). Denton and Hasbrouck (2000) define reading fluency as reading with the automatic recall of words to enhance comprehension. As students increase automatic recall working memory is freed, and reading stamina increases (Hasbrouck, Ihnot, & Rogers, 1999). As word recognition, phrase reading, and sentence reading improve in connected text, students have greater stamina for reading text (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2011).

Instruction in reading fluency has been found to be a major component of reading instruction past Grade 3 (Rasinski, 2004).

Marchand-Martella et al. (2013) conveyed that before Grade 3, the instructional focus in reading was teaching students how to read. After Grade 3, the emphasis shifted from how to read to “reading to learn” (Marchand-Martella et al., 2013, p. 164). This shift in instructional focus and continued failing reading scores prompted Congress to ask the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to examine the effectiveness of literacy instruction in Grades kindergarten through 3. Consequently, the NRP was formed (NICHD, 2000). As the nation focused on elementary reading instruction, Biancarosa and Snow (2006) released their study on adolescent reading instruction, in which they describe 15 elements of instruction for adolescent readers. The 15 elements identify critical differences in adolescent and elementary reading instruction, including motivation and self-directed learning, extended time for literacy, professional development, teacher teams, and leadership.

Adolescents need their learning to be self-directed (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). When adolescents read, their intrinsic inclination toward reading, the self-confidence in reading they portray, and the value placed on reading for enjoyment result in positive reading outcomes (Guthrie, Klauda, & Ho, 2013). On the other hand, adolescents who feel they are ineffective readers and that reading is pointless experience a result of adverse reading outcomes (Guthrie et al., 2013). Furthermore, Guthrie et al. (2013) discovered that students who strive to self-direct their reading tend to be high achieving readers who value reading fiction and non-fiction texts. Teachers who embrace the

adolescent's need for autonomy are more likely to create highly motivating classroom engagement and higher reading outcomes (De Naeghel et al., 2014).

Harris and Serwer (1966) found a correlation between increased instructional time and increased reading performance. The findings provided evidence that teachers in New York City public schools that spent 55% or more of the instructional day on direct reading instruction had higher student reading achievement. The other teachers only spent 44% of their day on reading instruction and had lower student reading achievement gains. Other studies correlating the shift in increased academic learning time to increased student outcomes followed. In the 1970s, researchers wondered if there was a measurable correlation between academic learning time and increased student achievement. Harnischfeger and Wiley (1975) studied the shifts in American education and found that increased academic learning time in the curriculum, such as language arts, did show increased student learning and outcomes. Fisher et al. (1981) studied the impact of increasing academic learning time on improved results. The results indicated, "The amount of time that teachers allocate to instruction in a particular curriculum content area is positively associated with student learning in that area" (Fisher et al., 1981, p. 6).

In a review of the literature, Gettinger (1984) discovered that time for instruction is a factor that can be changed or improved within the classroom. The impact of extended time in middle school literacy instruction has been studied, and the results indicated that adolescents need up to two hours of active engagement in literacy per day to have positive reading outcomes (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Increased instructional time in reading combined with increased academic learning time in middle school

English language arts leads to student stamina in reading (Fisher & Frey, 2016). With limited time for literacy instruction in middle schools, all teachers must know how to teach vocabulary and comprehension strategies in their discipline (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012). Instructional time in core courses requires that all teachers be knowledgeable and capable of differentiation and intensifying instruction for students to succeed (Hougen, 2015).

As the school's instructional leader, principals are tasked with providing adequate time, up to 90 minutes per day, in a schedule for literacy instruction (Underwood, 2018). Downey, Steffy, Poston, and English (2010) stated that the principal's primary job is instructional leadership. This responsibility requires that principals spend time in classrooms to observe literacy instruction. One method of spending more time in classrooms without completing a formal teacher evaluation is the practice of walk-throughs. Defined by Kachur, Stout, and Edwards (2013), classroom walk-throughs are "brief frequent, informal, and focused visits to classrooms by observers for the purposes of gathering data on educational practices and engaging in some type of follow up" (p. 1). Walk-throughs alone will not fully impact literacy instruction in middle schools. The principal should create a climate in the school that promotes engagement and decision-making as part of a literacy leadership team with teacher leaders (NASSP, 2005). Principals and teacher leaders can improve literacy instruction in all classrooms by establishing protocols for scaffolding instruction, using explicit vocabulary routines, and incorporating the gradual release method of teaching (Graves, 2006; Hirsch, 2006; Marzano & Pickering, 2005; Nagy, Berninger & Abbot, 2006). Through instructional protocols and the establishment of measurable instructional goals, highly skilled

principals can create a focus and culture of improving teacher practices that increase student literacy outcomes (Meltzer & Okashige, 2001).

Principals should require high-impact literacy instruction in middle school classrooms, developed through evidence-based instructional practices. Evidence-based practices should positively affect student learning, be accessible for implementation, and be sustainable (Shelton, Wexler, Kurz, & Swanson, 2021). Principals are also responsible for ensuring that students of color and with disabilities have equitable, high-quality literacy instruction (Turner, 2019). The need exists to ensure that students of color, especially African-American students, receive culturally relevant instruction from teachers who have profound sociocultural perceptions (Wooten, 2010).

The principalship and middle school literacy assessment. NAEP (2020) compared eighth-grade national reading proficiency with the KAP. NAEP found that Kansas is one of only four states that assess reading proficiency that meets their level of proficiency (Ji, Rahman, & Yee, 2021). However, Kansas still ranks in the lowest 10 states nationally in eighth-grade reading performance (NAEP, 2020). Poor reading assessment scores in middle school can result in adverse school outcomes for students, with approximately 20% of the lowest level readers dropping out of school (Hock, Brasseur-Hock, Hock, & Duvel, 2017). The 2019 eighth-grade reading results on the KAP showed that 74.8% of students did not read at a proficient level, which could lead to more high school dropouts (KSDE, 2021b).

Reading assessment can be formative or summative. Without carefully designed assessments that entail each component of reading ability, teachers will find it challenging to target instruction for reading improvement (National Institute for Literacy

[NIL], 2007). Munger (2016) reviewed a “taxonomy of literacy assessments” (chapter 5) and found many assessments for middle school teachers to consider as they assess students in reading achievement. Munger (2016) classified literacy assessments into two distinct categories, informal and formal. There are a variety of assessments used to assess student progress in literacy. Assessment is indispensable to informing classroom instruction (Wren, 2002). The types of assessment for reading are varied but necessary to balance the appropriate instruction and improve reading outcomes. Some formal assessments that can be considered in middle school include universal screeners. Petscher, Stanley, and Pentimonti (2019) define a universal screener as “an assessment process that helps teachers identify students who are at risk for not meeting grade level reading outcomes” (p. 1). Torgesen and Miller (2009) stated that universal screening is just one comprehensive literacy assessment framework component. Using universal screening data may only benefit adolescent readers if teachers turn the data into usable information to enhance instruction (Torgesen & Miller, 2009). Diagnostic assessments in reading help teachers plan instruction by providing thorough information about the instructional needs of students (University of Oregon, n.d.). Typically, diagnostic assessments are administered to students when universal screening measures indicate a weakness. When weaknesses in reading are identified and intervention is planned, progress monitoring probes will determine if students are making adequate progress in their skill deficit area to remove the intervention or need more intensive intervention. Progress monitoring frequently occurs at least once per month and provides teachers with information on the need for additional assessment or intervention (University of Oregon, n.d.).

Teachers may utilize informal assessments when students are not progressing in reading (Munger, 2016). Informal assessments should be used throughout the school year as these assessments provide valuable information regarding student weaknesses and strengths. Suppose universal screener data from an informal assessment indicates a reading deficit. In that case, administering informal diagnostic assessments might assist teachers in identifying the domains of the deficit (“Guidance on Diagnostic and Formative Assessments,” 2020). Just as the name implies, informal diagnostic assessments should be used to assist teachers in diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of the reader and inform intervention instruction. Foorman, Dombek, and Smith (2016) outlined the importance of universal screening and monitoring progress for struggling readers. Foorman et al. (2016) also determined that once the universal screening and informal diagnostic assessments have been administered to students and an instructional plan developed, teachers must monitor students for progress. Using progress monitoring assessment data, teachers and principals can measure growth in skill development and adjust intervention instruction accordingly. As outlined by Forman et al. (2017), the significance of early screening for learning difficulties must be done so that remedial instruction can be embedded and retaught as needed. St. Martin, Vaugh, Troia, Fien, and Coyne (2020) concurred, stating that teachers should regularly examine student progress to ensure reading outcomes.

Formal assessments of reading are standardized and compare individual student proficiency to other students (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Formal assessments, in general, do not isolate specific skill deficits in reading as the primary intent is to determine overall comprehension of grade-level reading or investigate lack of progress after intervention

(Diamond & Thorsnes, 2018). The NIL (2007) reported that most reading assessments in middle school are summative and offer little instructional data. However, NIL also affirmed that formal assessments provide necessary data for the overall academic progress of students in a class, school, district, or state.

Principals play a critical role in the assessment practices of their schools. The variety of summative and formative assessments in middle schools is extensive. Yet, as Noonan and Renihan (2006) reported, principals must identify and reduce the number of assessments administered to students as measures of accountability increase. When teachers administer fewer assessments and ensure that assessment measures show intended outcomes, schools can collect accurate data that impacts student achievement. As data directors, principals limit the assessment footprint in their schools when fewer assessments are administered. Noonan and Renihan (2006) further explained that assessment leadership is fundamental for building leaders. Stiggins (2002) claimed that principals should easily distinguish the differences between assessment of learning and assessment for learning. Fullan (2001) further affirmed that principals must be assessment literate to critically examine student performance, make sense of the data, and translate the data to teachers to impact student outcomes. Principals can provide context to school literacy initiatives by analyzing assessment data as evidence of the success or failure of an implemented literacy plan (Knipe, 2019).

Middle-level principals should have experience and expertise in middle-level instruction, intervention, and assessment (Gale & Bishop, 2014). Struggling adolescent readers rely upon experts, such as the principal, to ensure adequate formative assessment and progress monitoring occur and that the data are analyzed and reflected in instruction

and intervention (NCTE, 2006). Prytula, Noonan, and Hellsten (2013) researched Canadian principals' instructional leadership within the context of what principals think are the best ways to increase student assessment outcomes. In this study, four topics emerged. Principals determined that assessment increased collaboration between teachers, improved teaching, amplified parent and student accountability, and fostered collaboration with the Canadian ministry of education. Furthermore, the study found that principals recognized assessment as an opportunity to engage teachers in curriculum and data. Finally, Prytula et al. (2013) ascertained that when principals monitor student assessment performance data, they have increased situational awareness, enabling them to become solid instructional leaders.

Discipline Literacy Leadership for the Middle School Principal

A shift in understanding has taken place in middle schools as the move from reading in the content areas is now disciplinary literacy (Lent, 2016). As students enter the middle grades, there is a common assumption that students can read; therefore, instruction focuses on the content (Zygouris-Coe, 2012). Secondary teachers are considered experts in their subject area. Still, they are also expected to have the pedagogical skills to teach a diverse set of adolescent learners and increase students' literacy in the content areas (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Research shows that struggling adolescent readers benefit from having reading strategies embedded into content area classes (Anders & Guizzetti, 2005; Ivey, 1999). Therefore, students need content area teachers to give them the necessary literacy skills to learn from subject matter texts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

The NCTE Policy Brief on Literacies of Disciplines (NCTE, 2011) included a statement that literacy and texts vary depending on the discipline. As students read within disciplines, they better understand how purpose and context apply to the text and reading (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Secondary teachers who use disciplinary literacy instructional routines can enhance students' comprehension better than standard literacy practices. Middle school principals are not typically trained in all disciplines, and leading disciplinary literacy implementation requires an intentional focus on teaching and learning (Ippolito & Fisher, 2019).

Teaching reading in middle school discipline areas requires a focus on the perspective of the discipline. Reading a historic document requires the ability to automatically recall words while using a historian's perspective (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2002). Middle school leaders should invest in content area teacher experts and move away from the idea that all teachers are teachers of reading (Jacobs, 2008). As principals lead with a vision of literacy success, Burbank and Kauchak (2003) suggest that teachers engaged in professional learning across disciplines have increased student outcomes. Clark and Clark (2008) confirm that highly successful middle school principals implement disciplinary teaming, adding value to literacy instruction. Leaders need a clear vision and plan to implement successful disciplinary literacy frameworks. Howell, Barlow, and Dyches (2021) ascertained that disciplinary literacy practices in middle schools should engage students in the practices, languages, and strategies of the specific discipline. Leaders should provide professional development in discipline literacy for content teachers, as many do not understand how to

teach the reading process using strategies for each domain (Clary, Stysliger, & Oglan, 2012).

One way to support the implementation of disciplinary literacy in middle schools is through ongoing classroom observation of standards-aligned instruction within disciplines (Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Disciplinary Literacy Task Force, 2019). Principals who understand that disciplinary literacy is becoming the mainstream in middle-level education have aligned visions and conversations with teachers so that all students benefit from multifaceted instruction (Lee, 2014). Moje (2008) suggested that middle-level teachers lack opportunities to collaborate within and across disciplines and often ignore the rigid structure of the middle school day. Moje (2008) continued to describe how principals can support teachers with these challenges by incorporating common languages and approaches to instruction and altering the structure of middle school to meet the needs of students and teachers.

Professional Developments Role in Transforming Literacy Leadership Practices

The Gates Foundation (2016) reported that over \$18 billion is spent annually on teacher professional development and that teachers spend an average of 90 hours per year in professional development. In the Gates Foundation (2016) study, 70% of the participating teachers reported not having a voice or having little voice in selecting professional development. For adult learning to be effective, learners must be able to construct knowledge and view themselves as lifelong learners (Akyildiz, 2019; Zmeyov, 1998). Martin, Polly, Mraz, and Algozzine (2018) researched the impact of professional development and how it influenced teaching. Martin et al. (2018) reported that teachers

consider professional development valuable when there are positive student outcomes. In their study of middle school teachers' perceptions of literacy and mathematics professional development, Martin et al. (2018) found that teachers react positively when professional development deepens their literacy knowledge. The success of professional development dramatically depends on how teachers perceive and implement the training and whether mandated professional learning adds to the ability to teach reading (Kragler, Martin, & Kroeger, 2008). Mandated professional development frequently fails if no intentional follow-up training has been planned by the principal (Roseler & Dentzau, 2013; Van Tassell, 2014). Typically, most systems use professional development to increase teacher performance and improve student outcomes (Mizell, 2010). Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) stated that when professional development is job-embedded so that teachers can collaborate and share ideas, there is a positive change to the culture surrounding professional learning opportunities. Having long-term, job-related professional development is more valuable than a single one-time session for teacher learning to transfer to classroom practice (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005).

Regardless of the programs used in middle school, the teacher and their expertise are considered the most critical variables in literacy success (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Flippo, 2012). Gupta and Lee (2020) investigated the effects of professional development regarding methods of reading instruction and student outcomes in reading. Gupta and Lee (2020) indicated that "high-quality professional development training positively influences student achievement in general, including student achievement in reading" (p. 417). Gupta and Lee (2020) continued to identify that highly qualified literacy teachers significantly impact all students, particularly those academically at-risk

for reading failure. Due to a possible lack of core knowledge of literacy development, secondary teachers must rely on high-quality professional development to support adolescent literacy (NCTE, 2006). High-quality professional development should be cost-effective and have systemic effects on adolescent literacy (Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996).

Many frameworks support teacher professional learning and quality teaching for adolescent readers, and one such framework is professional learning communities (PLCs), whose primary purpose is continual professional learning (Hord, 2015). Louis and Marks (1996) stated that the distinguishing traits of PLCs include shared values and a focus on student learning. Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) define PLCs as groups that share a reflective and collaborative practice. DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) explained PLC as a group of teachers that make shared explorations to achieve better results for the students they serve and commit to working together throughout the process.

As described above, PLCs can have a positive impact on student outcomes. However, principals also play an essential role in the success of PLCs (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). PLCs are a professional development model related to accountability for student academic success (DuFour et al., 2008). Valckx, Devos, and Vanderlinde (2018) found that secondary schools can have productive professional learning when conducted in the PLC model. Middle school principals must use data collected during PLCs to analyze student achievement and increase pedagogical practice while avoiding utilizing data to control teachers, as manipulating data in this manner has been proven to be counterproductive (Bouchamma, Giguère, & April, 2019).

When the principal's fundamental role in a PLC school is providing ongoing teacher collaboration and instructional support, at-risk students can experience academic improvement (Benz, Linstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Klinger, Arguelles, Hughes, & Vaughn, 2001; Schechter & Feldman, 2019).

Another framework that supports professional learning includes the planning of regular professional development. Principals must remove the barriers to professional development and utilize learning styles that meet the needs of teachers to ensure student success (Doppelt et al., 2009). Middle school principals should understand that a shift in literacy instruction is made between elementary and middle school. The change focuses solely on teaching content knowledge. Therefore, many middle school teachers may not teach cross-curricular literacy instruction (Carney & Indrisano, 2013; Smith & Robinson, 2020). Due to this shift in instructional practice, principals must choose professional development that will impact middle school teachers' willingness to integrate other content-area skills, such as literacy, into their instruction (Reed, 2009).

Considerations of external factors regarding school or district-based professional development include administrator support, financial concerns, and alignment to district goals (Kent, 2019). Principals must ensure that professional development opportunities lead to positive change in the school and are well received by teachers (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapely, 2007). As principals consider the factors that make professional development successful, Whitworth and Chiu (2015) stated that professional development extended over the school year is much more successful than one-time workshops. With multiple professional development sessions, providers can emphasize

and expound content and better support teachers in implementing the new knowledge (Lewis, Baker, & Holding, 2015).

Developing a Culture of Literacy

As students enter middle school, motivation to learn plays a crucial role in academic achievement (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Therefore, it should be considered unavoidable for middle school teachers and leaders to create classrooms where students want to engage and succeed (Daniels & Steres, 2011). Literacy instruction in middle school requires strong and effective leadership. Spillane and Orlina (2005) described the practice of leadership as knowing why, how, and when to make a significant impact on constituents as essential traits of influential leaders. Numerous researchers confirm that having literacy as a top priority in a middle school requires that leaders and teachers have high expectations for students, that time is managed productively, and opportunities must exist for staff to attend literacy-focused professional development (Murphy, 2004; NASSP, 2005; Torgesen et al., 2007). Building administrators can support this work by protecting teachers' time and resources for learning and professional development. However, the key to this support is attending literacy training with their teachers to develop the foundational practices needed for highly effective literacy leaders (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, & Murphy, 2014).

Knowing how to involve discipline area teachers and reading specialists to engage in evidence-based instruction creates uniform actions that intentionally improve reading at the middle school level (Torgesen et al., 2007). Creating a literacy culture begins with regular classroom walkthroughs so that principals can give frequent feedback on essential classroom instructional practices considered central to improved reading outcomes for

students (Torgesen et al., 2007). Marchand-Martella et al. (2013) support this notion by stating that students must be encouraged to effectively respond to complex questions to demonstrate comprehension of middle school text.

Creating a teaching community of continual learners can be a challenge that principals face with faculty. Many principals lack the content knowledge and skill to be influential leaders for literacy (Hoewing, 2011). In middle schools, teachers tend to work alone based on their content specialty and need a principal to develop a culture of collaboration focused on literacy (Fisher, Everlove, & Frey, 2009). Schools need an effective principal to guide the work (Routman, 2012). Working in literacy-focused professional groups is one way to develop a community of adult learners (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Professional learning community time will not guarantee successful literacy outcomes unless encouraged by the principal (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Fullan (2008) stated that teacher effectiveness is significantly influenced when teachers understand the higher intent. Principals who engage teachers in discussion about literacy research, theory, and practice and expose them to effective teaching improve literacy instruction (Routman, 2012).

Novak and Houck (2016) determined that principals need the tools and resources to evaluate the literacy knowledge of their teachers to provide professional learning that develops a culture of literacy. The authors further stated that developing a culture of literacy in a school requires that the principal create a common language and belief system regarding literacy instruction and development. Developing a culture of literacy is demanding for leaders and, according to research, takes approximately 50 hours of engagement on a specific topic to see any substantial change in student outcomes (Wei,

Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Furthermore, James, Derksen, and Alcorn (2014) affirmed that schools could not generate increased results without coherence in professional learning. One method of developing a literacy culture is for the principal to cultivate instructional leaders in their buildings, such as creating instructional coaches or ELA team leaders who are strong literacy advocates (Taylor, Moxley, Chanter, & Boulware, 2007).

Principals as Literacy Leaders - Instructional Leadership

Middle school administrators have an enormous responsibility. Principals are responsible for adhering to the district mission and vision, enforcing policy, creating budgets, managing daily school operations, conducting staff evaluations, addressing student discipline, and, perhaps most importantly, being the instructional leader (Sharif, 2020). Principals who cultivate instructional capacity in schools with diverse students should involve teachers as instructional leadership partners (Howard, 2016). The idea of instructional leadership has evolved to having principals who can focus on intentional, goal-setting practices for teaching and learning (Lang, 2019). Salo, Nylund, and Stjernstrom (2015) also purported that instructional leadership now focuses on purposefully targeted practices in which principals specifically communicate teachers' responsibilities for teaching and learning. Robinson et al. (2008) stated that the influence of instructional leadership on student achievement was found to be up to four times as high as the transformational leadership style.

With the numerous demands on the school principal, it is ultimately the principal's job to allocate appropriate amounts of time to their daily responsibilities, or as two national principal organizations state, "focus on the right stuff" (NASSP & National

Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013, p. 5). Impacting student achievement as an instructional leader requires that principals choose the most impactful parts of the school to spend their time and attention (Leithwood et al., 2004). Placing value on staff and student success with a well-established, learning-focused environment can accomplish the goal of instructional leadership for school principals (Rice, 2010). Instructional principal leaders share leadership responsibilities by developing and relying on the expert knowledge of content area teacher leaders to improve overall school effectiveness (Shaked, 2018). In this study, Shaked (2018) described that school systems across the world now require that principals take on the full responsibility for instructional leadership. Shaked's (2018) research findings provided evidence that principals do not wish to take on the role of instructional leaders due to their lack of available time, discrepancies in content knowledge, and established organizational norms.

Effective instructional leadership is a significant factor influencing teacher practices that impact student learning. Principal supervision of instruction that includes frequent classroom observation, post-instruction conversation, and encouragement of various literacy strategies are the hallmarks of influential instructional leaders (Nelson & Sassi, 2006). Ippolito (2009) stated that principals must participate in literacy professional development to increase teacher accountability in formats of instructional leadership. Lingard, Hayes, Mills, and Christie (2003) concluded that pedagogical routines and assessments are the most effective instructional leadership practices that influence student performance.

For pedagogical routines to positively impact student outcomes, Podsiadlik (2007) stipulated that if middle school literacy scores are to improve, school administrators

should have excellent skills with literacy instruction. Having a background in literacy allows principals to assist teachers with understanding and implementing the necessity for teaching changes. Principals' capacity with instructional leadership is a fundamental component in secondary schools' literacy outcomes (Crum, 2008). According to Leithwood et al. (2004), instructional leadership from the principal is second only to classroom instruction in impacting student growth. Principals as managers are not as successful as instructional leaders in the principalship. Instructional leaders are tied more closely to teachers and school improvement than managerial principals (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). Principals with successful experience teaching add value to student outcomes and positively impact achievement (Goldhaber, Holden, & Chen, 2019).

Blasè and Blasè (1999) provided three characteristics of effective instructional leadership: teaching alongside teachers, promoting effective professional development, and nurturing self-reflective routines that improve student outcomes. Principals must display the characteristics of lifelong learners, such as eagerness to learn, having a collaborative attitude, and being vulnerable to take risks. Furthermore, thinking like a teacher takes courage, especially when principals are expected to be problem-solvers and answer teachers' questions (Fahey, 2013). Systemic changes in literacy instructional practices and leadership must occur in secondary schools as teachers prepare students to enter society, and proficient reading is vital to success (Crum, 2008; Jacobs & Kritsonis, 2007).

Behaviors of Principals Who Promote Adolescent Literacy Success

Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) conducted a study to determine effective principals' characteristics, skills, and behaviors. The researchers ascertained that those

influential principal instructional leaders increased student achievement by 0.09 standard deviations in reading, equating to a learning growth of 2.7 months for the typical student. Characteristics of successful middle schools with effective leadership include frequent instructional-focused engagement with faculty, creating a positive school climate, and guiding productive learning communities (Grissom et al., 2021). The researchers described the seven critical findings of the principal as the instructional leader. First, principals are essential to student achievement, possibly more than the current research has found. Principals have results that extend beyond student achievement. Third, when principals create a positive school climate, facilitate professional learning time, and strategically manage human and curricular resources, their impact increases. Next, framing student success with a lens of equity increases outcomes for all students, especially those from culturally and economically diverse backgrounds. The researchers stated that effective instructional leader principals are not equitably allocated to schools. Sixth, principal racial and ethnic diversity does not represent the student population served. Finally, more cohesive research on instructional leadership is needed (Grissom et al., 2021).

Principals of middle schools have shifted the focus of the workday from time management to instructional leadership through classroom observations and evaluations (Grissom & Youngs, 2016; Neumerski et al., 2018). Reid (2020) reported that principals could not impact student achievement through teacher instructional observation without increased and targeted training on the evaluation process. Reid (2020) also stated that teachers could not improve their practice and impact student achievement without ongoing communication and conferencing with principals post-observation. Another

attribute of principal behaviors that promote literacy success is family and community connections (Lear, 2017). Fletcher, Greenwood, Grimley, and Parkhill (2011) purported that trust between the principal and teaching staff determines principalship success related to high literacy outcomes. Additionally, Fletcher et al. (2011) determined that literacy achievement increases when a shared vision is conveyed and well-known amongst staff.

School climate has been defined as “The physical and psychological aspects of the school that provide the preconditions necessary for teaching and learning to take place” (Tableman, 2004, p. 2). McDaniel and Jones (2013) stipulated specific strategies that principals can implement to increase reading achievement. The methods are creating a curriculum with standard practices for lesson planning and structure, increasing rigor in all courses, offering professional development on literacy, engaging the faculty in book studies, and using effective questioning strategies in class. Johnson, Johnson, and Johnson (2014) detailed the work and planning needed of the principal to improve student outcomes. Knowing student assessment data, the values and beliefs promoted by staff regarding achievement, and prioritizing improvement steps are part of the process (Johnson et al., 2014). Principals can profoundly impact school culture by regularly discussing student achievement with students, parents, and staff (Ray, 2017).

Principals can impact student outcomes by increasing teacher efficacy through professional development, observations, monitoring student achievement data, and being highly visible in classrooms (Fancera, 2016). Teacher self-efficacy is the belief in one’s competence and conviction in the ability to be successful at a task (Shahzad & Naureen, 2017). According to Fancera (2016), creating a culture of teacher efficacy has improved

student outcomes even when student populations have high numbers of students with low socioeconomic status. Fancera (2016) continued to state that “As an individual’s sense of efficacy improves, the efficacy of the group follows” (p. 77). Özdemir, Şahin, & Öztürk (2020) conducted a mixed-method study of teacher efficacy in terms of the principal’s instructional leadership behaviors. The qualitative portion of this study sought to discover why and how teachers increase their self-efficacy when their principals are strong instructional leaders. Özdemir et al. (2020) found that the principal behaviors contributing to increased teacher self-efficacy are increased motivation for teaching method flexibility, task orientation, and creating a supportive culture.

Principals use teacher observation and evaluation to build teacher leaders. There is an unfortunate disconnect between what the principal observes during a lesson and how it improves literacy instruction (Overholt & Szabocsik, 2013). Additionally, Overholt and Szabocsik (2013) claimed that a principal’s limited knowledge of literacy practices impedes creating high-impact literacy practices in their schools. In conclusion, Overholt and Szabocsik (2013) stated that the principal’s understanding of the content taught in a teacher observation is limited to the prior knowledge and training of the principal. Stein and Nelson (2003) ascertain that lack of knowledge of content during an observation directly impacts protocols for instruction, professional development, and the purchase of instructional materials. Principals who lack literacy knowledge plan intentional collaboration with expert literacy teacher leaders and delve into current research about literacy increase the capacity of their teachers, which correlates to higher literacy achievement for students (Overholt & Szabocsik, 2013).

Summary

The literature review provided a general overview of a principal's lens of adolescent literacy instruction, curriculum, assessment, and literacy leadership. The literature showed that middle-level principals need to understand literacy instruction and practices to supervise teachers effectively. Middle school leaders' professional development selection should be prioritized with literacy routines and procedures. Embedded disciplinary literacy strategies into all middle school classrooms is a hallmark of successful principals. For principals to develop a literacy culture and promote student success, regularly distributing research and instructional material should occur. To become the literacy instructional leader of their school, principals should have frequent classroom observations and critical conversations with teachers. Finally, principals promote literacy success by developing a positive school culture focused on literacy, ensuring professional learning communities analyze student data and adjust instruction to have positive literacy outcomes. The methodology utilized in this study is presented in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

Methods

The focus of this study was to determine middle school principals' behaviors that promote or inhibit student reading outcomes. The purpose of this study was to determine middle school principals' perceptions of the factors that play a role in reading achievement at the middle school level. This chapter contains information on research design, setting, sampling procedures, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, the researcher's role, and limitations.

Research Design

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), qualitative research is most appropriate for disseminating the study's participants' perspectives. Qualitative research emphasizes the importance of the investigation, findings, and explanation of those involved. This research is phenomenological. Lunenburg and Irby (2008) explained that a phenomenological study clarifies and recognizes phenomena through the lens of the participants. This researcher sought to explore how middle school principals make sense of their experiences as leaders and how they transform that experience into a shared level of understanding, which leads to reading achievement. Responsive interviewing was used to collect data in this study. This method allows the researcher to understand experiences through the participant's words and stories to create meaning (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Setting

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) state that “This section describes and justifies the selection of the research setting, thereby providing the history, background, and issues germane to the problem” (p.11). The setting for this study was Kansas and specifically middle schools in Kansas. The middle schools in this study were in two typical school settings, one being a middle school made of grades six, seven, and eight and the other as part of an elementary school that housed grades kindergarten through eight. In Kansas, the middle schools were a collection of small, mid-size, and large schools located in urban, rural, and suburban areas.

Sampling Procedures

Patton (2015) stated that purposeful sampling brings light to the questions within an information-rich study. Middle school principals hold a wealth of knowledge. The researcher sought to capture insight into building leaders’ experiences and how their experiences impact their leadership regarding literacy instruction within this lens; therefore, purposeful sampling was used. The participants in this study were middle school principals or assistant principals in Kansas during the 2021-2022 school year and were employed in the position for at least one year. To ensure participants’ anonymity in the sample, a pseudo name was assigned to each participant, such as Principal A, Principal B, and so on.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stipulated that artifact review includes built-in data sources readily available to the researcher. These data types can be physical artifacts such as public papers and personal documents printed on paper, journals, or books or online in a digital format. This researcher used public domain testing data from KSDE’s

Data Central webpage to collect state assessment data for the schools of the principals interviewed for this study. Principals were selected to represent the many types of public schools in Kansas: rural, urban, and suburban and small, mid-size, and large. The researcher chose participants to interview who led middle schools with high and low proficiency in ELA scores.

The middle school principals interviewed for the study serve in Kansas middle schools. Some participants came from districts with a principal in each middle school building, while others were the only middle school principal in the entire district. In contrast, other participants served on a team of administrators in the middle school and may have been assistant or associate principals. There can be a significant variance in the dynamics of management and leadership for principals employed in such dissimilar settings (Uzun & Ayik, 2017).

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was an interview script that ensured question consistency (see Appendix A) and indicated demographic questions. Using interviews allowed the researcher to create connections with participants, which increased the opportunity for robust conversation. Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated, “Responsive interviewing brings out new information, often of startling candor, and often suggests unanticipated interpretations. The freshness and depth of the interviews make them exciting to do and, later on, to read” (p. 7). Qualitative interviews are conducted, according to Patton (2015), “to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind to gather their stories” (p. 426).

Interview questions developed by the researcher were formatted to obtain data to answer each research question. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) specified structured interview components as all question wording and order are predetermined, and the interview is oral and recorded. The structured interview consisted of 15 open-ended questions, additional follow-up questions, and demographic questions. This researcher incorporated expert review on all research and interview questions to ensure ethical standards. Two peer question reviewers with qualitative research knowledge and a middle school administrative background evaluated all questions and advised on revisions as needed. The reviewers evaluated the interview questions and discussed them with the researcher, making minor adjustments. Interview question one, to one reviewer, was confusing. However, this reviewer did not suggest changes. The second reviewer indicated that interview question one did not need to be changed. Based on the suggestions from both reviewers, interview question 2e was altered to make it easier to understand by interviewees. The researcher also conducted a mock interview to determine if question one was confusing for participants. After the mock interview, the researcher made slight changes to question one as it was difficult for the mock interview participant to answer. The peer reviewers did not recommend any other changes to the interview questions.

Interview questions (IQ). The research questions, structured interview questions, and follow-up questions are listed below.

RQ1. What are middle school principals' experiences in the selection of professional development related to reading?

IQ1: Describe the role of professional development in your school, which is associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment as it relates to reading achievement.

IQ2: Describe your process of selecting professional development in your building as it relates to reading achievement.

IQ2a: If there are no specific curricular constraints on your professional development hours, describe how you divide the professional development into specific discipline areas.

IQ2b: Describe your decision-making process in the selection of professional development for reading across all disciplines.

IQ2c: When planning professional development, how do you determine which sessions, if any, you will lead?

IQ2d: Following professional development, how do you set goals and learning expectations regarding reading achievement for teachers and students.

IQ2e: Following a professional development session, describe how you determine if the training was helpful for your staff.

IQ2f: Following a professional development session, describe how you determine if the training is transferred into classroom practice.

RQ2. What experiences in teaching reading do middle school principals bring to their leadership role?

IQ3: Describe any training or professional development regarding reading instruction you have had during your career.

IQ4: Tell me about any experiences you have had as a teacher of reading.

RQ3. What are middle school principals' perceptions of the factors that play a role in reading achievement?

IQ5: Tell me about specific teacher practices that you encourage, leading to your school's reading achievement.

IQ6: Tell me the specific factors that promote middle school students achieving reading success.

IQ7: Tell me the specific factors that hinder middle school students from achieving reading success.

RQ4. What are middle school principals' perceptions of their role in reading achievement?

IQ8: What are the specific instructional leadership strategies that you practice which encourage effective reading instruction?

IQ9: What are the specific instructional leadership practices you engage in that impact reading achievement?

Demographic Interview Questions: Participants in the study answered demographic questions to assist the researcher with organizing the data. The six questions included:

1. With what gender do you identify?
2. What is your age?
3. Is your school considered small, mid-size, or large?
4. What year did you graduate with your Bachelor's degree?
5. What year did you obtain your building administrators' license?
6. How long have you been a middle school administrator?

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to the interviews with the participants, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) form was submitted to Baker University for approval to conduct the study. IRB approval was granted on October 19, 2021 (see Appendix B). The researcher gathered email addresses from the KSDE Data Central webpage. The researcher sent an email (see Appendix C) to Kansas middle school principals to solicit potential participants for the study. The researcher selected a cross-section of principals from various school sizes and locations. Specifically, to address the study's purposes, the researcher chose middle schools with low and high ELA achievement on the KAP for Grades 6, 7, and 8. The schools were selected from the list of participants that included schools in various locations in Kansas, both rural and suburban, and a variety in school and district sizes, both small and large.

The researcher solicited participants from middle schools with high and low achievement on the ELA KAP. After individuals were selected to participate in the study, the researcher emailed each potential participant a letter of introduction and consent form (see Appendix D). Consent forms consisted of an outline of the research and required a signature from the participant to be involved in the study. By signing the consent form, participants understood that they could opt-out at any time during the process. A script was used for each interview to ensure that all information conveyed to participants was consistent. Electronic methods were the preferred means to conduct interviews due to COVID restrictions on gatherings and social distancing protocols. Therefore, the Zoom platform was used for each interview. Interviews were projected to last, on average, from thirty minutes to one hour. The conversation was recorded and

loosely transcribed using Zoom's software during the interview. The researcher used a backup recording employing the Voice Recorder application on the researcher's iPhone to ensure that no information from the interview was lost or damaged.

When the Zoom transcription was downloaded, reviewed, and corrected as needed, it was sent to the interviewee to review. After the interviewee examined the Zoom transcript and approved the contents, the researcher uploaded the information to Transcribe, an online transcription software system. After finalizing the transcripts, the researcher sent a handwritten note of thanks to each participant.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Unlike quantitative research, the purpose of qualitative research is to encourage a profound understanding of a social setting "as viewed from the perspective of the research participants" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 27). Data analysis is meant to depict a cohesive picture of a social setting. The volume of data collected in qualitative research can be overwhelming as it contains the participants' words, stories, and observations. The researcher must have the skill, aptitude, and thoroughness to maintain credibility throughout the study.

Thomas (2006) describes that inductive analysis in qualitative research permits the researcher to determine findings by noticing themes in the raw data. Themes in data are developed through the process of coding. As Thomas (2006) explains, coding develops through the analysis of words or phrases that align with a critical narrative that links with other categories. The coding process is refined by close reading and assignment of categories by the researcher, which aligns with the scope of the research problem.

The interview files were transcribed and loaded into the Quirkos Qualitative Data Analysis software program. Qualitative investigations have specific research focuses, and the Quirkos software assisted with sorting the data by themes connected to the research questions compared to the coding done by the researcher. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) defined codes for data as “a type of shorthand” (p. 142); therefore, the coding of data permitted this researcher to reference transcript data for analysis and synthesis. Creswell and Creswell (2018) encouraged researchers to use multiple transcription methods to ensure validity. Therefore, this researcher meticulously analyzed data to ensure the validity of the analysis and find data themes. Data transcription offers a natural transition from the field to analysis; it was critical to be an active participant in the data transcription to preserve validity. After transcribed interviews were coded in Quirkos, the researcher reviewed the coded data methodically. This data synthesis permitted the researcher to analyze the participants’ actions and perceptions to form a conceptual framework to review.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

Qualitative research’s social nature makes it essential that the researcher details the strategies used to minimize bias. Guba (1981) offered four qualitative research measures credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Patton (2015) adds that the researcher’s background adds to the study’s credibility. Furthermore, Tracy (2013) offered eight principles for conducting “excellent” qualitative research. These principles are “rich and holistic, provide an understanding of the sustained process, have a focus of experiences placed in context, explain quantitative data, interpret participants’

stories, preserve chronological flow, celebrate that research constitutes reality, and illustrate a multitude of interpretations” (p. 5).

Data analysis in qualitative studies involves reviewing data by delineating information from non-numeric sources, such as interviews. To ensure reliable data, a matrix was developed to analyze results, interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations. Patton (2015) stated that constructivists must have credibility in their findings by establishing trustworthiness. Patton (2015) also emphasized that time invested in interviews and building relationships with participants creates credibility for the researcher. Shenton (2010) emphasized that the trustworthiness of qualitative studies must ensure the results are the understandings and opinions of the participants and not the preferences of the researcher.

Researcher’s Role

At the time of this study, the researcher was employed by a private nonprofit school and research center. The researcher’s prior work experiences include consulting for KSDE, which involved leading a state-wide reading initiative, elementary building administration, extensive reading instruction training, and 14 years teaching elementary school. Teaching children to read and helping teachers and leaders understand the importance of reading instruction fueled interest in this research. The researcher holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education and a Master of Science degree in Curriculum and Instruction and Education Leadership. The researcher acknowledges that past work experiences could lead to bias in this study. Therefore, self-reflection through dialogue with other researchers and advisors was essential for keeping bias from being introduced by the researcher in this study.

Limitations

Limitations, defined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), “expose the conditions that may weaken the study” (p. 114). This study contains limitations that were outside this researcher’s control. There was no method to ensure that a beneficial number of principals would agree to participate in the study. There was no exact method to balance the group’s diversity for those participants who agreed to participate in the study. Finally, this researcher could not be confident that an equal number of large and small or rural and suburban school principals would agree to participate in the study.

Summary

Chapter 3 was comprised of the research methods employed in this study. The chapter included the research design, setting, sampling procedures, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis, reliability and trustworthiness, the researcher’s role, and the limitations. The results of the qualitative analysis of the data are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of this study was to discover what middle school principals select as professional development related to reading instruction. Also, to explore previous reading experiences in the form of professional development, college coursework, or as a teacher of reading. The final purposes were to ascertain middle school principals' perceptions of the factors that play a role in reading achievement and to learn what they perceive as their role in promoting reading achievement. The researcher desired to provide an enhanced understanding of the principal's role in improving reading outcomes for students. This chapter is organized by the results related to the four research questions.

The researcher desired principals to be the only participants in the study. However, seven principals and two assistant principals joined the study, three females and six males. Pseudonyms A through I were used to identify the participants to protect their identity. Experience in the classroom ranged from three to over 20 years before becoming a principal. The nine middle schools served between 75 and 867 students enrolled in Grades 6, 7, and 8. Schools are located across Kansas, with two in western Kansas, three in south-central Kansas, and four in eastern Kansas. The participants had experience as middle school administrators and varied educational background experiences. Four participants interviewed were from middle schools with high percentages of student proficiency on ELA state assessments in Grades 6, 7, and 8. High student proficiency levels were middle schools with more than one-third of students in level three or four on the ELA state assessment since 2016. The other five participants

were from schools with students with low levels of ELA proficiency since 2016. Low proficiency levels were middle schools with less than one-third of students in levels three and four on the ELA state assessment since 2016. Table 3 displays more detailed demographic information for the participants.

Table 3

Participant Middle School Demographics

	High ELA Proficiency	Low ELA Proficiency	Economically Disadvantaged Students	Students with Disabilities	Number of Years as MS Principal
Principal A	X		13.3%	15.3%	11
Principal B		X	49.8%	27.6%	8
Principal C		X	53.3%	10.5%	15
Principal D	X		3.6%	12.4%	9
Principal E	X		44.9%	11.9%	7
Principal F		X	90.1%	23.5%	5
Principal G	X		21.3%	16.7%	6
Principal H		X	79.5%	11.5%	5
Principal I		X	43.5%	16.6%	14

Note: Data reported for the school year 2021-2022.

The following sections describe the themes that resulted from the qualitative analysis of the responses to interview questions. Major themes were identified by examining data related to principal behaviors that impact literacy outcomes. The identified themes included in this chapter were formed around the selection of professional development for reading, prior teaching experiences of the principal, the

principal's perceived factors that promote middle school student reading achievement, and the principals' perceptions of their role in promoting student reading achievement.

Finding 1: The Selection of Professional Development Related to Reading

Upon reviewing the responses to structured interview questions two a-f, the researcher discovered that most principals reported that professional development involving reading or ELA at the middle level is mandated. All middle school ELA and special education teachers must participate in state-mandated dyslexia professional development annually in Kansas. All four participants from the schools with high student ELA proficiency mentioned that state-mandated training was the only reading professional development offered for their teachers. The participants from the schools with low student ELA proficiency noted the state-mandated training and discussed additional reading professional development for all teachers, not just ELA teachers. Other areas relating to Finding 1 include the time and place of professional development and professional development related to resource adoption.

Mandates. Participants reported that most professional development is district or state-mandated regarding literacy or reading. Some participants did say that if the training was not mandated, it was aligned with a resource or program used for reading instruction. The participants reported that teachers in their middle schools who receive literacy or reading professional development are typically teachers in ELA classrooms or reading specialists, interventionists, or coaches.

Principals B, C, G, and I directly stated that mandates from the state and district levels regarding dyslexia drive professional development for literacy in their buildings. Principal F stated that the building teachers and leaders are required to participate in

outside professional development to improve literacy instruction due to low state assessment performance. Principals A, D, and H specified that building professional development was directly aligned to district initiatives regarding reading. Principal E indicated that programs and curricula drive reading and literacy professional development at the building level.

During the interview, Principal B stated that professional development regarding literacy was aligned with the science of reading requirement by the department of education for all middle school ELA, special education, and specialists. Principal B stated,

The science of reading, that's been our main focus and making sure that all staff have those requirements We also just adopted a new reading resource [and] for that middle school teacher, we focused on getting PD [professional development] directly from the company so that she can use it with fidelity.

Principal B also stated, "We follow whatever the state guidelines are" regarding literacy and reading training for middle school staff. When asked about training other teachers in discipline literacy, this participant stated, "I think it comes down to what our current needs are" and added that discipline area teachers work with the ELA teacher to meet their needs regarding literacy.

When asked about choosing professional development related to reading achievement, Principals C and G specifically mentioned mandates from the state regarding dyslexia. Principal C specified, "So some of it is state-mandated in that . . . we just went through a process last year where everyone had to be trained in dyslexia, what it is, how to screen for it [dyslexia]." While Principal G stated,

[The reading professional development] I want to do [with] this new state requirement . . . is definitely upping the expectations. And now it's more driven from the district office level than just the building level, so [I] didn't have as much control over that [choice in professional development].

Finally, Principal I pointed out the state mandates are changing professional development at the building level, “[It’s a] little different now than it would have been two or three years ago with everything, with the dyslexia mandates coming down.” Principal I indicated that professional development regarding reading might be mandated, but their staff provides quality PD in which the team takes pleasure in participating.

In addition to the required professional development, Principal I added,

[We] have two highly trained people that have gone through the Take Flight program. So, it’s an Orton-Gillingham-based program. That’s, got tremendous results and so [they] are national trainers for that organization. As these dyslexia mandates come down, what they [the highly trained teachers] can provide is much better than what the state can provide for us.

The participants from schools with low student ELA proficiency (Principals B, C, F, H, and I) reported a much deeper investment in human and fiscal resources to train their teachers than the principals from schools with high student ELA proficiency. These schools serve students with high levels of poverty, ranging from 43 to 90% student population that is economically disadvantaged. In the study, schools with higher ELA student achievement invested in only the mandated or required state training and relied on teacher feedback to determine if and when further professional development was needed.

Time and place for professional development. Participants reported that specific literacy professional development typically occurs during school-based professional learning communities (PLC), faculty meetings, or in-service, which are not mandated. Seven of the nine interview participants stated that the principal ensures enough time for literacy professional development through these alternate training options. Three principals from highly proficient ELA schools stated that PLCs are the best way to distribute training throughout the school year. However, four of the principals from low ELA proficiency middle schools also reported that PLC time ensures that all teachers get reading training focusing on their discipline.

Principal C stated that his school had moved much of the personalized training to PLC time, which is guaranteed weekly for teachers to review data and conduct specific skill training. “We have built in time for professional learning communities. That’s a time when they’re discussing those practices. [We are] making and having an opportunity to see that we are really focusing on the right things,” stated Principal C. Furthermore, Principal C said that training is conducted by department or content area, which lends itself to the PLC model. This principal also explained that to increase training time, he uses faculty meetings when the entire staff needs the information, “areas that we can push into some of our faculty meetings” is an effective strategy for meeting the demands of professional development.

Principal D stated that his school uses a PLC schedule with a specific daily focus. At this middle school, disciplinary teams meet each Monday to solve problems using data collected from teams the prior week. Tuesday is used only for professional development, Wednesday and Thursday are content team meetings, and Friday is instructional planning

time. Principal D explained the PLC schedule but clarified that all instruction in this middle school has improved, not just reading instruction,

I think if they see a deficiency or a gap that's brought to our Monday professional learning community, and [this] problem-solving is where we might . . . talk about a kid and [specific] areas that we can push into some of our faculty meetings. I think it [PLC meetings] just drives instruction, period, not just reading achievement.

Principal D explained that this middle school emphasizes returning to the foundations of the PLC process, and by having a dedicated day for professional development, the faculty is growing in all instructional practices.

Other participants also mentioned that the PLC process drives instructional improvement and professional development. Principal E indicated that teacher collaboration time is when instructional strategies that support reading instruction occur. Principal E explained that PLC time "Offer[s] collaboration time with teams to look at instructional strategies that support reading in all curriculum areas." Principal H stressed that PLC time is focused and emphasizes improvement. Having PLC time allows for instructional connections and data review to identify and select future reading professional development for the building. Principal E continued to explain PLC time for his teaching teams as,

[Teachers] have a common plan; twice a week, they go into professional learning communities where all my ELA teachers from one grade are together. And so, they can lesson plan . . . during that time as well. I meet with my PLC leaders,

and then we discuss what follow-up or additional professional development they need in reading.

Principal B uses PLC time for the professional growth of teachers with a focus on personalizing instruction in reading. This principal explained,

My middle school instructor is in grade six and seven band team meetings. I think that another factor is being able to . . .not only be sure that they're serving students in their classroom, [but that] they get that time set aside to develop personally as well. We personalize a lot of PD, and so we meet in these grade band teams [for this purpose].

Personalization of instruction for students in this middle school is a priority and part of the school's mission and vision for improved student outcomes. Principal B has a small staff and finds it essential to have team meeting time so that teaching and learning are well aligned with the school's vision and continually evaluated.

Principal F's middle school has a unique requirement for reading professional development in the building. Even with the demands of the additional training requirement, Principal F uses PLC time for more focused professional learning. In this middle school, one day a week, the disciplinary teams meet with an instructional coach to learn a new instructional practice, obtain resources, or have a question-and-answer time, "Two days a week, they use that time to plan together as a team. And then one day they meet with the instructional coach." Since Principal F's instructional teams are divided by discipline, each team gets content development directly tied to reading instruction. Finally, Principal G elaborated on PLC and indicated that teachers only get reading specific information upon their request. This principal stated that PLC time is for

questioning, “Why are teachers asking for that professional development? Is it [professional development] an asset and . . . PLC-driven stuff? If not, [then we do] whole building [training].” Principal G also indicated that most training conducted at his middle school PLC is conducted in small groups or at the team level unless all staff are mandated to receive the training relating to literacy.

Professional development related to resource adoption. Another connection to Finding 1 that emerged from the data was that training often assists staff with implementing a new resource or curriculum. However, this training is only for teachers implementing the new resource. Two participants from schools with high ELA student proficiency mentioned that interventionists or ELA teachers implementing a new resource, assessment, or system received specialized additional professional development. Four participants from low-performing schools emphasized that these teachers needed additional training to ensure fidelity and improve reading outcomes for students.

Principal E offers reading professional development for specific programs that only the interventionists use. When asked why interventionists received this training, Principal E suggested that it was due to the mandated reading training that other teachers received. Explaining that the interventionists use the program and share the data; therefore, he felt that not all teachers needed the training. Principal I named a specific program that his teacher leaders have expertise in, which allowed these teacher leaders to assist other teachers in reading instruction intervention. Principal I stated that this program enables his teacher leaders to impact reading instruction for all teachers in the building and felt that receiving the additional training for these teacher leaders was in his

teacher's best interest. Due to the lack of district-focused reading professional development, Principal C stated, "We also have teachers that we identify [as] workshop teachers for our reading support class . . . [these teachers] get individualized and specific professional development specifically for the [program] that they teach."

On the other hand, two participants reported that their entire middle school teaching staff has gone through reading professional development, which aligns with the curriculum or a new resource. One principal indicated, "Obviously, we're all teachers of reading in some sense," and said he feels that all teachers benefit from reading professional development, primarily when new programs are implemented. For one middle school, a district initiative required that all teachers receive reading professional development. This district recently adopted a new K-12 reading curriculum, and all teachers received training and attended a summer reading institute to follow up on the professional development. Principal F explained that the focus on reading was embedded district-wide.

So, a lot of our professional development is dictated by our new reading program and by our director or superintendent of curriculum. All teachers do the progress monitoring in reading for their students, even if they don't teach ELA. The purpose of that was for science, social studies, [and] math teachers to see the reading levels that their students were at. So, PD was developed for them...when we started interventions [to assist teachers] on [understanding] what those test scores meant.

PLC time in Principal F's middle school is dedicated to identifying struggling readers, analyzing data, and designing instruction to meet their needs. The reading resource

adoption has added to the intensity of the reading professional development in this school. This school uses a new informal diagnostic assessment program, FastBridge. Due to this new assessment program, Principal F stated, “Our interventionists have been using that; we have done a lot of professional development around that [FastBridge].” Although reading intervention teachers received more intensive professional development on this assessment system, all teachers in the building received overview training on procedures and data analysis.

All participants in the study reported that professional development related to reading curriculum, instruction, and assessment occurs at the building level. The extent of the professional development varied from school to school. Surprisingly the four schools with high ELA student proficiency only did the minimum required training mandated by Kansas. Only one of the four participants in this group mentioned that he and the district leadership had discussed additional reading professional development due to the new mandates. This principal indicated that he feels that all his teachers need to know how to teach students to read in their discipline, and the training needs to expand from the mandated ELA and special education teachers. The principal who mentioned additional training has the highest student poverty levels and the lowest special needs population of the schools with high ELA reading proficiency (KSDE, 2021c).

All the participants from the schools with low ELA student proficiency mentioned the state mandates. However, this group of principals focused on teacher needs and used additional means to provide reading training to staff. They all mentioned that reading professional development needs to involve a broader group of stakeholders in the school.

The two participants from the schools with the lowest student ELA proficiency have the most intensive training for all staff members.

Finding 2. Prior Teaching Experiences

Upon reviewing the responses from structured interview questions three and four, the researcher discovered that the participants indicated that their previous teaching experiences impacted their desire to learn more about effective reading instruction. The participants reported a wide range of prior teaching experiences. The interviews revealed that principals rely on district or building level experts to deliver reading professional development. The five participants from the lowest ELA proficient schools have prior elementary teaching experiences. In contrast, one participant from the high ELA proficient schools taught in the elementary setting as a physical education teacher. The remaining three participants from the high ELA proficient schools did not have experience in an elementary setting or teaching students to read.

Prior experience as a teacher of reading. Principals B, F, H, and I reported that they worked directly with students learning to read as a teacher. Principals A, C, D, E, and G have middle or high school discipline area teaching experience. During the interviews, four participants indicated their prior knowledge of reading and struggling readers directly impacted decisions on instruction and training relating to reading instruction.

Principals B, F, H, and I were either elementary or special education teachers. Principals B and H reported special education experience, while Principals F and I both taught in elementary classrooms. Principal B was a former reading specialist and literacy coach. Before these experiences, Principal B was an early childhood special education

teacher and first-grade teacher. Along with prior experience, Principal B reported that reading PD is typically sought when she attends conferences, and she attends PD with her staff to demonstrate support for new programs and training. Principal H is a former special education teacher with a specialized focus on reading. She also has district-level curriculum experience and was a teacher of reading for 12 years. Following her teaching experiences, Principal H then became an instructional coach.

Principal F is a former kindergarten teacher, first-grade teacher, reading instructional coach, and is Orton-Gillingham trained. The Orton-Gillingham method of instruction is “direct, explicit, multisensory, structured, sequential, diagnostic, and prescriptive instruction in reading, writing, and spelling” (Orton-Gillingham Academy, n.d., first paragraph). With prior experiences as a teacher of reading, Principal F reported that she encourages her staff to attend reading PD, and she often attends with staff to stay abreast of the newest instructional protocols and initiatives. Principal F reported the most experience in elementary schools, “I was in elementary for 18 years.” She continued to state that although she understands evidence-based reading instruction and could positively impact elementary teacher instruction, she feels more “at home” working with middle school teachers and students.

Principal I taught upper elementary and reported, “I knew what I was supposed to teach at my upper elementary grade levels, but I never felt like I was teaching reading.” As Principal I continued his career, he worked at the district level as an instructional coordinator. He worked to create curriculum maps and common assessments for all subject areas in this role. As a middle school principal, he reported attending all literacy PD with teachers to demonstrate his commitment to new learning and emphasize literacy

PD's importance. Principal I mentioned that his background as an elementary teacher reflected his hiring preferences, "Half of my staff are elementary trained." He uses his elementary experience to discuss the importance of reading in the disciplines with this staff, "What does reading look like in a science classroom? A social studies classroom? Or a PE classroom?" He wants his middle school teachers to assist students with word analysis to be effective readers in all disciplines.

The five participants from the low-performing ELA proficient schools clearly stated a depth of understanding for reading professional development at the middle school level. Each of the participants in this group has worked in an elementary school, and they bring this experience to their leadership role as a middle school principal. These five participants were able to elaborate extensively on prior training and experience as a teacher of reading.

Lack of experience teaching reading. Interview questions three and four received a variety of responses from Principals A, C, D, E, and G as they reported lacking experience in teaching students to read. Principal C is the only one from this group of participants working at a low ELA proficiency middle school. Principal A works in a middle school that is part of a K-8 building. The remaining three participants work in large school systems with over 400 students in their middle schools.

Although Principal A said that before becoming a principal, he was a health and physical education teacher, he always connected the importance of reading in his classroom. "I did some cross-curricular [activities] with some other subjects. [I would] try to tie in those [reading] pieces . . . into the health activity I was doing." Principal A reported that he would communicate the importance of reading to his students "Reading

is everywhere you go.” Since Principal A was not a reading teacher, he now receives reading training prior to his teaching teams. He expressed that he does this to gain the knowledge and understanding needed to encourage and support teachers in implementing reading professional development.

Principal C reported that his prior teaching experience was as a high school science teacher. Other than college coursework and recent mandated training, he has not received specialized PD in reading. Principal C stated that the best way he supports his teachers is to “work alongside reading teachers....to get a better feel for some of the strategies that they are using in the classroom.”

As a former high school Spanish teacher, Principal D indicated that he had led PD when reading in the content areas was an instructional focus for middle and high school teachers. He mentioned that he felt the training offered was ineffective, “I would characterize that as not all that effective.” Principal D conveyed that he has not received any reading professional development since the early 2000s. When he taught Spanish, he commented that his only connection to reading would be to assist students with “Learn[ing] the basics . . . what to look for in sentences or key ideas or phrases” to assist with context. He said that this type of connection to ELA was “the extent” of his experience with teaching reading.

Principal E, a former middle school social studies teacher, reported no reading PD, training, or experiences. However, he did point out that during his teaching career, he was trained in Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), which he felt had the most significant impact on his career. AVID did include reading training, but Principal E described it as professional development that works for all classroom

teachers. Principal G described his undergraduate goal of becoming an elementary reading teacher. As an undergraduate student, he has given comprehensive reading assessments to students but changed his career trajectory to a middle school focus. Other than the recent dyslexia training mandates, he reported no additional specific reading training or professional development.

All the participants from schools with high ELA student proficiency have little training in the elementary classroom. Two of the principals, C and D, reported no current or recent training in reading or literacy. Principal C works in a school with low ELA student proficiency, and the student population of his school has more diverse needs than those of the high ELA proficient students of Principal Ds school. Principals A, E, and G reported recent training or experience in their formal roles with engaging students in reading.

Finding 3: Factors that impact middle school reading achievement.

All participants reported similar factors that impact middle school reading achievement. Participants from schools with high and low ELA proficiency had similar responses to these questions. The significant themes in Finding 3 include increased student stamina for reading connected text, providing students with time each day to have silent sustained reading, and addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social-emotional needs. Research question three and interview questions 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 were used to form common themes related to Finding 3.

Stamina and interest. All participants reported that student stamina for reading was reduced over the past few years. Stamina was reported as the attention and

endurance to complete the task of reading connected text from beginning to end. One participant reflected on the past three years from a middle school student perspective as,

Our elementary kids went to school 30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the afternoon last year. So, when we look at our sixth graders . . . [by] one o'clock . . . we're like, come on [kids] . . . They're thinking, what is up with you? Like I've already worked so much more than I did last year!

Participants described this behavior as “apathy” or “lack of endurance” as one of the main factors that play into the reading success of middle schoolers. One participant stated that most middle school students “just don't want to read,” and this apathy impacts student success. Another participant said to have students “be able to read that book to completion” takes patience and modeling of reading.

All participants from schools with high ELA student proficiency schools stated that student stamina is one thing that must be improved for middle school students to be successful readers. Principal D works in an affluent school district, but he admitted that all middle school students struggle to stay on task to read a book to completion. He stated, “I think our students' brains are evolving into a much shorter attention span capacity, and reading takes stamina, energy, time, and concentration. And I think those are the things that are hindering kids.” He continued to say that students, in their free time, are using technology and not turning to books as seen in the past. In his district, students come from homes where reading is encouraged and supported. However, he said, “[They] don't read, they don't free read. They'll read when they're here because that's what they're told to do.”

Other participants from schools with high ELA student proficiency mentioned that technology and distractibility impact reading success in middle school students. Principal G stated, “They’re not going to do it on their own. They’re not going to go home and sit in front of a book and read; they’re going to go play on the phone or play video games.” Participants reported that to overcome the technology issue, stressing the importance and benefits of reading must be done regularly. Principal G offered his solution to ensuring that students have the necessary skills to promote reading achievement, “Explicit reading instruction and practice, using research-based instructional practices and approaches, [and] creating intrinsic motivation with students.” To increase student stamina, Principal A stated, “Just getting that practice in, getting them going and getting them understanding why reading is important, but also allowing them to read what they want to read.” He continued speaking of changing student resistance to reading as, “Students can be stubborn at times, and building that sense of reading” is a critical method to increase interest in reading.

Participants from schools with low ELA student proficiency also reported that increasing student reading readiness would improve reading outcomes. Principal F said that having frank conversations with students about technology and the time spent on social media and video games helps them see that reading is essential. To address the stamina issue, Principal F’s teachers use small group instruction to handle the extreme needs of the students in her building. She reported that using small group instruction allows teachers and students to understand their current level of reading ability, and by setting goals and working at the student’s instructional level, they will increase student stamina. Principal I stated that celebrating all student growth in reading is a priority for

his staff and students. All students are sent to the principal and praised when their reading improves. He stated that this allows students to see that their time dedicated to reading matters, which he hopes will improve their stamina and motivation to read.

According to the participants interviewed, student interest in self-selected reading has also declined in the past five years. The selection of reading material, using school media centers, and encouraging teachers to promote reading could increase student success in reading. Four participants from schools with low ELA student proficiency mentioned that having available materials that interest students is a priority for successful engagement. Using graphic novels, reading non-content related text, and reading for enjoyment could combat the issue. Participants also reported that “forced reading” of material has further driven gaps in achievement.

All participants from both schools with high and low ELA student proficiency commented that increased student stamina is one method to improve student reading achievement; however, the methods to promote stamina varied by school. In more proficient schools, the issue was technology and interest in reading. In less proficient schools, the solutions focused on individual students rather than the whole student population.

Protected time to read daily. According to the participants, another method to improve reading achievement in middle school is to preserve time for sustained silent reading during the middle school day. This theme emerged as many principals reported adding time to schedules for students to read a book for 15 minutes per day. Three participants from high ELA proficient schools mentioned altering daily schedules to

embed time for students to read each day. Four participants from low ELA proficient schools mentioned time to read but have not altered their school schedules.

Participants from schools with high ELA student proficiency have added time for sustained silent reading. One participant reported adding 15 minutes to the lunch period to return to homeroom and read a book. Another said that the ELA block is 10 minutes longer than other blocks in the day for the purpose of sustained silent reading. Principal G mentioned that students in his middle school who do not have reading intervention have 25 minutes of sustained silent reading. Students are encouraged to use the school library and read books of their choice. Principal A mentioned that his school had dropped a strict reading comprehension program, Accelerated Reader, and added a 10-minute bell ringer silent reading time that has helped student interest in reading.

The participants from schools with low ELA student proficiency also mentioned that adding time for student reading should increase ELA outcomes. Principal C stated that when students finish lunch, they are encouraged to get out a book and read until the end of class. Principal F said that more independent reading has occurred since teachers now tell students to get out a book and read when they finish their work. Her teachers now feel comfortable seeing kids get library books out and read for entertainment, which there has been no time for this over the past three years. She said changing the mindset of teachers on sustained silent reading is essential. Principal B did not mention time to read as much as promoting student interest in reading. She said she feels that when students are motivated, they will naturally want to read more.

Building in time to read was a common theme among all participants. However, the high ELA proficient schools physically altered schedules to add sustained silent

reading. The schedule changes were reported as beneficial to students. In the low ELA proficient schools, time to read was highlighted. The participants at these schools preferred to encourage intrinsic motivation to read and offer students access to libraries and books of choice rather than a set ‘forced’ time to read each day.

Social/Emotional needs and COVID. All participants reported that the current environment in schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the reading achievement of middle school students. Students have experienced interrupted schooling since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants all reported that the impact of interrupted schooling has created achievement gaps in reading.

Participants from the five schools with low ELA student proficiency specifically addressed the gaps in reading proficiency arising from the COVID-19 pandemic as an urgent need to address. Principal I mentioned that “Kids have bigger hills to climb after the pandemic, just because of the way instruction was delivered for the last couple of years.” Over the past several years, Principal B said, “We spent much more of our devoted time on social, emotional learning and trauma-informed.” She continued to say that the at-risk student population in her school has increased, creating an academic achievement gap where students need personalized instruction. Participants reported that coping with the increased needs of students shifted the focus away from explicit instruction in reading. This shift was needed to address the social-emotional needs created by COVID and has reportedly negatively impacted student reading scores.

Participants reported that building strong relationships with students can positively impact reading achievement. Principal F suggested, “I especially think after COVID, building relationships and connections . . . that’s probably the biggest thing that

we can do for our kids, is give them a couple minutes of undivided attention . . . and we'll reap benefits . . . academically." She continued to share that relationship building is just as important for staff and principal relationships as it is for student and teacher relationships.

So as an instructional leader, trying to balance the [teacher] with the academics so that the teachers can [balance both] ... is the biggest challenge ever, but even bigger now. We've got teachers that have kids at home on quarantine, and they are here [at school], and they're, ... staying at somebody else's house because their kids are home with their spouse [due to COVID]. So, we have to keep finding that balance.

Another participant mentioned that getting past the pandemic should allow a stronger focus on academics. He said his teachers' capacity is "maxed out," so it feels "counterintuitive" to push more professional development onto teachers as their social-emotional needs are equally important.

All participants from the schools with high ELA student proficiency mentioned COVID and how it has altered instruction. However, none of these participants mentioned specific needs arising from the pandemic tied to reading performance. In general, the four principals in this group stated that they have adjusted and pivoted many times in the past three years but did not mention specific ongoing concerns with reading achievement due to COVID.

The participants from schools with low ELA student proficiency reported making significant adjustments to instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These instructional adjustments addressed the achievement gaps in reading and other academic

areas. On the other hand, participants from schools with high ELA student proficiency reported making many adjustments due to the COVID-19 pandemic; they did not specifically mention an adjustment to reading instruction to address achievement gaps.

Finding 4: Principals' Perceptions of Their Role Promoting Reading Achievement

After reviewing responses to the interview questions, another theme became apparent: principals play a critical role in student reading achievement. The participants perceive their role in promoting reading achievement as monitoring and reviewing data, modeling instructional leadership practices, and being present in classrooms. Finding 4 correlates to research question four that examined principals' perceptions of the factors that play a role in student achievement. The responses to interview questions eight and nine are addressed in Finding 4.

Regular data review and discussion. All participants mentioned data review as a vital role of an instructional leader. No matter the level of ELA proficiency, all principals discussed data review as the foremost method of ensuring student academic success. Reviewing and discussing screening, formative, and high-stakes assessment data were all reported. All nine participants said they felt that being involved in data conversations with teachers positively impacted reading outcomes. Principal D shared, "My leadership strategy is I participate in those Monday problem-solving sessions as well I participate in data discussions with teachers." He continued to state, "Our teachers pay attention to standardized test scores," which allows for natural conversations regarding improvement in academics to happen.

Principal I related that reviewing building data is like performing an "autopsy" on data to break the big picture down into addressable and meaningful units. After each

academic year, Principal I does this autopsy data review with staff to determine “what we are going to do differently next year.” He even mentioned that data discussions could be raw data or conversations and analytical reviews on student scores in a holistic method. Principal I’s school is devoted to ensuring that students take assessments seriously. He said, “If the kid is blowing off a test, we’re not gonna let them get away with that. We’re going to do it again.”

Principal E said that he looks at data from a building level to assist with breaking down information for teachers. He shared that he begins by

diagnos[ing] and break[ing] each individual score or class scores to decide who needs what and focus on a specific area. We are heavy into data now, so we have specific building teams that break down information . . . whether it be from RI or math scores, to go over and figure out who needs what and how to best serve each kid individually.

Principal E said the process allows him to set goals for teachers and students in the building. He also mentioned that universal screening data is monitored and discussed with his teachers. After reviewing reading progress data on the screeners, his team plans for future instructional shifts and additional intervention as needed.

When addressing goals using data, Principal H stated that her building sets a goal each year based on universal screening. Using universal screening data goals allows her teachers to understand where students have academic gaps, and then teachers can begin to address needs on a student-by-student basis. Since all teachers are involved with universal screening administration, data discussions can focus more on addressing student intervention needs and adjusting core instruction. Principal H mentioned that

after reviewing data and seeing that students “did not learn” the material, she discusses with teachers how to address this in core instruction.

Increasing academic achievement scores “comes down to what the data says,” reported Principal B. Data assists with driving decisions about professional development in her building. Participants in the study revealed that they use data spreadsheets and reports with staff to show areas of strength and areas needing growth. Principal A shared that all teachers “look at reading data and look at iReady data and see how we can help with other curricular areas.” Reviewing data with the entire staff allows him to set quarterly, semesterly, or yearly goals to show student reading growth. Principal F stated that her data reviews involve having conversations with the teachers. They work together to find solutions. Principal F said she does this to avoid teacher frustration with implementing initiatives, “Listen to the educators as well as look at our data and figure out what we can do to meet the needs of kids...because teachers [are] getting frustrated.”

Data review and discussion are imperative perceptions of instructional leadership based on participant responses. Engaging in data review and having conversations with teachers about instruction, student success or lack of success, and planning for future instruction is critical for principals to impact reading outcomes. Data review was a universal theme among all participants, no matter the ELA proficiency of their students.

Instructional leadership. Overwhelmingly, the participants stated that being an effective instructional leader promotes stronger student academic outcomes. There were few differences among the principals from high and low ELA proficient schools regarding the perceptions of instructional leadership. However, the view of the role an instructional leader plays in a middle school varied across responses and schools.

The participants from schools with low ELA student proficiency reported that instructional leadership is demonstrated through conversation and enhancing their own skill sets. Principal I shared, “My job is to grow them [teachers] as much as I absolutely can.” He continued to say that instructional leadership is not a “cookie-cutter approach,” and it takes a savvy skill set to be an effective instructional leader. When having instructional conversations with teachers, Principal I shared that his physical presence lets his teachers know he has “credibility” and is “on this journey with them.” Principal I requires his teachers to present to staff anytime he approves professional development requests. He stated, “I really like my folks to learn from their peers. People need to know there’s experts in the building.”

Principal F stated that being an instructional leader in the age of COVID is a “balance” between academic rigor, personal relationships, and classroom responsibility. She continued by saying that being a solid instructional leader is “Keeping the sense of urgency” as the undercurrent of supporting struggling teachers. Principal C shared that he must “Expand my knowledge set and skill set” to be a solid instructional principal leader.

Participants from schools with high ELA student proficiency added that instructional leadership requires the development of teacher leaders. Principal D shared that he only leads professional development occasionally and added, “I think any leader has to realize there are times when you’re going to be tuned out and having peers share expertise gives more credibility.” Another participant, Principal G, shared that being an instructional leader requires a building leadership team of teacher leaders. Having teachers represented in professional development sessions, “I definitely found that when

we get coaches and teachers to lead [it is] more effective even than when the principal leads,” said Principal G. He also said that instructional leaders must always keep the pulse of the building in mind, “As an administrator, I have found that you’re focusing on so many more things than just one thing.” Principals rely on the teachers in the building to lead reading professional development to establish credibility with peers, allow teachers to demonstrate content mastery, and represent other teachers who have strong abilities to teach adult learners.

Participants reported that instructional leadership is one needed asset to being a successful principal. Whether this leadership comes from conversation, observation, or the development of teacher leaders, all respondents mentioned their role as instructional leaders as critical to student academic success. Participants from higher-achieving schools focus on developing teacher leaders. In contrast, participants from low achieving schools reported their day-to-day interactions with teachers and addressing their skill deficits as methods of instructional leadership.

Walk-throughs. Another theme that emerged regarding the principal promoting reading achievement was walk-throughs and evaluation data. Participants reported that ensuring that professional development is transferred to classroom practice is established using walk-throughs. Walk-throughs also enable principals to ensure fidelity to training. Walk-throughs can be formal or informal, and participants reported using both types to collect data on implementation. Overwhelmingly, principals from low ELA proficient schools reported using walk-throughs as a positive method to improve student outcomes.

Participants from schools with low ELA student proficiency reported that walk-throughs improve teacher accountability for professional development. Principal C

shared, “We follow up by doing classroom visits.” He also mentioned that sometimes, he might bring a book and read during a walk-through, “I think it is important for students to see the principal reading. So being in classrooms and demonstrating that, I think is good.” Principal H uses walk-through data to plan professional development. She shared, “A lot of the data that I get for PD on the building level is from my walk-throughs.” When Principal H goes into classrooms, she mentioned that she could determine “if they need training” if the practices are not observed. She stated that follow-up from professional development using walk-through data allows her to have “the biggest impact” on instruction.

Principal B confirmed what the other principals mentioned regarding walk-throughs. She stated, “As much as possible to be in and out of classrooms...so that I can see the different classes and the lesson delivery.” Principal B uses walk-through information to “keep a thermometer on what’s happening in classes” and then follows up with teachers with private conversations. Principal F uses a combination of walk-throughs and other data to determine the effectiveness of reading instruction following professional development. “We’re trying to use the data from our walk-throughs, as well as discipline data” to determine if it is an instructional issue or classroom management issue.

On the contrary, only one participant from high ELA proficient schools mentioned using walk-throughs. Principal D stated that he goes to classrooms to ensure time spent on a particular initiative is represented in classroom instruction. He added that getting into classrooms is a critical component of effective instructional leadership. Principal A mentioned walk-throughs to verify data but not to improve academic

outcomes. None of the other three participants from the high ELA schools mentioned walk-throughs as a method for positively impacting student academic success.

Summary

A summary of the four findings from the interviews indicated that middle school principals use mandated training. The time allotted for professional development related to reading is connected to new resources or curriculum and is done in a PLC setting. Principal expertise in teaching reading can impact reading success in a middle school. Students reading stamina, increasing interest in reading, offering protected time in the school day for silent sustained reading, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic play into students achieving reading success. Principals collecting data through walk-throughs leads to increased instructional leadership. Participants from high and low ELA proficient schools responded similarly to interview questions eight and nine. The only discrepancy was the use of walk-throughs to improve teacher outcomes. Chapter 5 provides a study summary, the findings related to the literature, and conclusions.

Chapter 5

Interpretation and Recommendations

Investigated in this study were middle school principals' behaviors that influenced reading achievement at the middle school level. Chapter 5 is organized into three major sections. The first section contains the study summary, an overview of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, a review of the methodology, and the major findings. The findings of the study related to the literature follow. The final section of the chapter, conclusions, includes the implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

Study Summary

This study was designed to identify Kansas middle school principals' perceptions of the behaviors that impact middle school reading achievement. This section provides an overview of the problem and the purpose of the study. The section concludes with the findings and the findings related to the literature.

Overview of the problem. Student reading proficiency across the nation and in Kansas has been on a downward trend. Since 2016, Kansas middle school reading proficiency for eighth-graders averaged 13.19% (KSDE, 2021b). Low reading outcomes at the middle school level could impact students throughout their lifetime as they enter the workforce or pursue post-secondary education (Castles et al., 2018). As principals are considered instructional leaders (DuFour & Marzano, 2011), they are critical components of student and school success. Effect sizes of the principals' impact on student outcomes range from 0.05 to 0.33 (Bluestein & Goldschmidt, 2021). Therefore, with school principals having such a significant impact on student outcomes, the

researcher sought to determine the behaviors middle school principals perceive impact reading outcomes for students.

Purpose statement and research questions. This researcher sought to identify what middle school principals perceive as leadership practices that advance reading outcomes. The first purpose was to discover what middle school principals select as professional development related to reading instruction for their teaching staff. The second purpose was to explore previous reading experiences in professional development, college coursework, or being a teacher of reading that middle school principals bring to their leadership roles. The third purpose was to ascertain middle school principals' perceptions of the factors that play a role in reading achievement. The final purpose was to learn what middle school principals perceive as their role in reading achievement. Obtaining qualitative data allowed the researcher to analyze statements from the participants on their perceptions of reading achievement, and interviewing Kansas middle school principals from several locations across the state allowed this researcher to collect data to answer the four research questions.

Review of the methodology. The researcher used a phenomenological approach to study middle school principals' perceptions of the behaviors that impact middle school reading success. Using a phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to explore participants' perceptions through a responsive interview process. Using the participants' words and stories created meaning and understanding for the researcher. Only Kansas middle school principals or assistant principals were interviewed for this study. After approval from the IRB, the researcher reviewed Kansas middle schools using the KSDE Data Central webpage and then identified possible principals to interview. The

participants in the study lead Kansas middle schools with either high overall proficiency on the KAP ELA or with low overall proficiency. The researcher solicited participants using a standard email template (see Appendix C). After solicitation attempts for participants, seven principals and two assistant principals agreed to be in the study. Once participants agreed to take part in the study, a responsive interview was conducted using the Zoom video conference platform or phone call. The interview consisted of 15 open-ended questions, unstructured follow-up questions, and six demographic questions. After the interviews were conducted, transcribed, and reviewed, they were uploaded into the Quirkos Qualitative Data Analysis software system for analysis. Quirkos software allowed the researcher to code and identify data for the study that represented the opinions and understandings of the participants.

Major findings. There were four noteworthy findings related to this study. The first was that middle school literacy professional development is primarily conducted due to recent state mandates regarding dyslexia. Participants reported that typically only ELA teachers and those teachers who work with students receiving Tier II or Tier III interventions received specialized literacy training. Due to the new Kansas reading initiative regarding dyslexia, school district leaders require more professional development focused on reading achievement at the middle school level. All principals reported that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has not allowed for typical professional development over the past three years, other than what is state-mandated. This finding also revealed that the time and place for literacy professional development at the middle school level typically occurs during PLC meetings or is aligned with resource adoption. Professional development was generally offered as new curricula or resources

were introduced to assist struggling readers. As middle school teachers are organized by content or department, the PLC model tends to be the most effective method for training ELA teachers. Most districts pre-determined many professional learning days, making PLC time a more effective method for teachers to receive training.

Reviewing the data of Finding 1, the participants of high ELA proficient schools relied on mandated reading training. Some participants from the high ELA proficient schools added additional training, but only for specialists or those delivering tiered intervention to struggling readers. The participants from low ELA proficient schools invested additional time and resources in training. Some of these participants trained their entire staff in deep literacy and reading training, while others trained all staff in areas of reading, such as vocabulary.

The second finding was that principal expertise in providing reading instruction to students shaped the direction and commitment to professional learning in reading. The principals with previous special education or elementary teaching experiences expressed their understanding of the need and importance of PD for literacy. Participants with elementary and special education teaching experiences and those from low ELA proficient schools have the most rigorous training in their buildings for literacy. Participants with limited experience as a teacher of reading and those from high ELA proficient schools rely on mandates and district-level decisions regarding literacy PD.

The third finding was that decreased student stamina, waning student interest, the absence of daily protected time to read, and the social-emotional impact of COVID have negative effects on student reading outcomes. Almost all participants stated that the effects of limited face-to-face school experiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic had

impacted students' stamina for reading connected text. Participants have observed that students see reading as laborious and do not invest in reading for pleasure; therefore, having increased stamina for reading will improve student outcomes in literacy.

Participants reported that a typical schedule does not allow for time for silent sustained reading. All the participants said the importance of intentional time for students to have a book in their hands and read for 10-20 minutes uninterrupted daily is needed for increased reading stamina. With this added time for reading in schedules, principals feel this could improve literacy outcomes for their students. Finally, the participants stated that COVID had created a negative association with the act of reading for middle schoolers. Middle school students are trending to shorter attention spans and continual technology interruptions for gaming and social media. The increase has been significant due to the lack of structure for schools throughout the pandemic. All the administrators from high ELA proficient schools encouraged sustained silent reading during the school day, yet the principals from low ELA proficient schools did not mention this.

The final finding was that participants perceive their role as instructional leaders is imperative to student success in reading. Reviewing data, having a presence in PLC meetings and training, and having conversations with staff are ways reported that have a significant impact on student achievement. Participants reported two most common ways to ensure their continuing role as an instructional leader: conversations and walk-through data. All participants in the study reported that frequent data review and conversations with teachers are vital to successfully implementing all building initiatives, including reading. Participants from low ELA proficient schools are more likely to invest in

conversation and training for reading and literacy than those from high ELA proficient schools.

All principals mentioned teacher leader development, but those from high ELA proficient schools relied on the development of teacher leaders as the primary way to enhance professional learning in their buildings.

Findings Related to the Literature

In contrast to the results of this study, most schools conduct professional development related to literacy or reading due to mandates or requirements. Adult learners are more engaged and have better follow-through when professional development aligns with their personal professional goals. Smith and Robinson (2020) stated that mandated professional development at the middle level is ineffective. They found that middle-level content teachers prefer training related to their area of expertise, and mandating literacy professional development reduces teacher efficacy. When teachers are mandated to attend professional development, lack of implementation follows (Roseler & Dentzau, 2013). It is unproductive when administrators quickly implement required professional development without ensuring the skills are embedded in what teachers already do (Van Tassell, 2014). Andragogy, adult learning theory, outlines that when participants self-select their learning, it is more impactful and more likely to be implemented (Zmeyov, 1998). All schools in Kansas have mandated professional learning for reading. Schools have limited time available in their calendars for professional development, and long-term PD is more effective than a required one-time session (Ingvarson et al., 2005).

The results of this study show that professional development occurs in PLCs. The literature states that the purpose of PLCs is to assess instruction and analyze data, which is contrary to what this study found. The majority of participants in this study report using PLCs as an alternate method to embed professional learning for literacy. Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2017) describe the impact of teacher efficacy in professional learning communities as focused on improving instruction based on assessment. However, the true purpose of PLCs concentrates on the foundations of the four questions of all PLCs, which are founded on improving student outcomes through collaboration and conversation (DuFour et al., 2008). Professional development in a PLC model steers away from the purposes described by DuFour et al. (2008). The scope of the work completed in a PLC model should be based on the four foundational questions. What do we expect the students to know? How will we know when they have learned it? How will we respond when some students do not learn? How will we respond when some students already know it? Therefore, ongoing professional development could occur during the PLC model if the four foundational questions are answered and acted upon (Valckx et al., 2018).

Schools are affected negatively by limited time to train teachers, and the participants in this study embed training in alternate methods, such as PLC and faculty meetings. High-quality professional development is job-embedded and focuses on teacher instructional practice to improve outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Having instructional leaders, coaches, or peers follow up, provide feedback, or address implementation concerns is required for systemic change (Lotan & Burns, 2019). Using

a PLC model for professional growth emphasizes shared understanding and works toward school-wide student improvement and growth of pedagogical skills (Reed, 2009).

The results of this study showed that those participants with experience as an elementary or special education teacher have a greater depth of knowledge in the pedagogical practices of reading. Having a depth of knowledge to support pedagogical practices in literacy supports the literature. Being an effective classroom teacher equates to being an effective principal (Goldhaber et al., 2019). Principals with successful experience teaching add value to student outcomes and positively impact achievement (Goldhaber et al., 2019).

The results of this study indicate that sustained silent reading is a preferred method to increase student proficiency. However, the literature does not support implementing sustained silent reading to improve literacy outcomes. According to Gough and Tunmer (1986), students need access to both language comprehension and word recognition for successful comprehension. Students who are not automatic fluent readers are not automatic silent fluent readers. Implementing a sustained period for silent reading will not necessarily improve a student's stamina or comprehension (Hiebert & Daniel, 2018). Furthermore Rasinski (2004) found that poor readers lack prosody, the ability to read without expression. This lack of prosody in silent reading negatively impacts reading comprehension. Marzano (2003) stated that classroom curriculum affects student outcomes. Teachers make decisions regarding the experiences students have, including adding time for additional reading during a class block.

Another result of this study indicated that implementing additional time for sustained silent reading might increase student stamina for reading and therefore boost

student reading proficiency. Increasing stamina requires that students have automatic word recognition (Hasbrouck et al.,1999). Reading stamina requires explicit instruction in word recognition, phrase reading, and sentence reading in connected text (Hudson et al., 2011). The research states that simply adding time to the school day for independent, self-selected reading will not increase student stamina unless the deficits in reading proficiency are addressed.

Conclusions

This qualitative study was designed to examine middle school principals' behaviors that impact reading outcomes. Specifically, current professional development models for reading instruction, the effectiveness of professional development on reading success, and principal perceptions on what leads to successful reading outcomes in middle school were examined. In this section, implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks are included.

Implications for action. This study demonstrated that the principal positively impacts reading achievement at the middle school level. Participants from both high and low ELA proficient schools reported that the instructional leadership practices they participate in have a positive outcome on reading scores. Participants in this study spoke of the importance of continual learning regarding reading professional development for teachers. All participants reported that middle-level teachers received training due to district or state level mandates as the number of struggling readers at the middle school level continues to grow. The results of this research established the need for literacy-specific training for all middle school teachers, not just ELA teachers or reading specialists. In the high ELA proficient schools, the ELA teachers and reading specialists

receive reading professional development. However, the low ELA proficient schools train all teachers. Those participants reported that their teachers and students have benefited from a better understanding of reading instruction and intervention for struggling readers.

This study also provided evidence that literacy professional development should not be conducted in one session. For the high ELA proficient schools, other than the mandated one-time literacy training, there was no follow-up other than discussion in PLC meetings. The low ELA proficient schools used many different approaches to ensure that literacy training was embedded throughout the school year. Many participants reported that continued professional growth in PLCs assisted continued learning and improved teaching. Using protected PLC time to disaggregate data, review instructional protocols, and discuss the implementation of teaching protocols all benefit literacy achievement at the middle school level. The influence of reading data review and instructional modeling provided by coaches in the PLC setting was reported to be effective by both low and high ELA proficient schools.

Participants with more knowledge of reading instruction were found to have more structured and extensive professional learning. However, the participants from low ELA proficient schools have more depth of knowledge and experience as teachers of reading. Interestingly, the participants from high ELA proficient schools do not focus on literacy but understand that student reading deficiencies continue to grow and chose not to train all teachers in science-based literacy instruction. Therefore, this study provided evidence that principals need coursework or experiences with the foundational structures of reading to implement and support reading professional development effectively.

Providing coursework at the Master's degree level on evidence-based reading instruction will lead to middle school principals having the knowledge base to understand the depth of the reading crisis for adolescents. Higher education institutions could focus on the efficacy of the principalship when the principal has the knowledge to impact sustainable change through studies in implementation science.

The results of this study provided an indication that having a schedule with embedded time to read each day is needed for middle-level students to succeed in ELA proficiency outcomes. The schools with high ELA proficiency reported that adding sustained silent reading time will improve student motivation and interest in reading. Most participants reported that silent sustained reading increased student stamina for the act of reading. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted student stamina and has created more significant gaps in reading ability due to interrupted schooling over the past three years. The participants expressed that reading for 10 to 15 minutes each day could improve student stamina and outcomes. Additional studies could focus on strategies that increase student efficacy in silent reading comprehension through intentional, explicit reading instruction on word-level automaticity and prosody.

Finally, the results of this study provided evidence that principals as instructional leaders have two domains to practice regularly, data review and conducting walk-throughs. Principals need to be aware of reading assessment data and its impact on student outcomes. All participants reported that involvement in regular data review assists with instructional decision-making and future professional development needs. Student reading data review should be done weekly and discussed weekly with all teachers. Adhering to regular walk-throughs allows principals to see instructional

improvement and its impact on data. Practicing regular walk-throughs could enable principals to see instructional improvements that might ultimately impact reading data. All discipline area teachers influence reading outcomes, and the participants all commented that regular walk-throughs demonstrate the desire to see effective literacy instruction in action.

Recommendations for future research. Research is vital for the establishment of effective practices for principals. Promoting strategies and procedures that have positive student outcomes can only be accomplished through research. More research is needed on the selection of sustained professional development in literacy. Specifically, discipline literacy instructional practices have little current research. Additional qualitative and quantitative research is needed to determine the instructional strategies and evidence-based literacy practices that support reading achievement at the middle school level in all disciplines.

This study could have been enhanced by the inclusion of a quantitative component. Future studies could embed data review with professional development instructional strategy implementation to address implementation science. Implementation science in education studies methods that promote the school system embracing evidence-based practice into routine classroom practice (Duda & Wilson, 2018). One of the major findings from this study was that data review is thought by principals to be a primary characteristic of their instructional leadership practice. Utilizing a survey with a Likert scale would assist with collecting quantitative data. Data could enhance future studies to compare perceptions, behaviors, or practices to student

growth in ELA state assessments by sending a request to middle school principals with the questionnaire attached.

Additional research could be conducted with middle school principals from across the United States. This study was limited to current Kansas middle school administrators. There was a small sample size in this study; a more in-depth study of Kansas principals with a larger sample size would be more representative of Kansas middle school principals. A more extensive participant base could identify areas across the country with highly effective principal practices that correlate to student achievement or vice versa. Having a study with more females and more diversity would also prove effective. According to a survey of middle school principals, more middle school principals are male, so comparing middle school principal behaviors between males and females could offer additional insight (Zippia, 2019).

Another implication for future research could be reviewing middle school literacy proficiency according to the building's socioeconomic status (SES) and students with disabilities populations to determine if students are disproportionately represented in the overall data. Interviewing principals from schools with low SES and low special education numbers and then interviewing principals from schools with high levels of low SES and special education students and comparing principal behaviors could provide critical evidence. In this study, only two participants were interviewed with high numbers of low SES students and high numbers of special education and only one participant with low numbers of low SES and low numbers of special education students. More research is needed in this area.

The field could benefit from further studies on graduate-level principal training courses or professional development focusing on implementation science.

Implementation science coursework might expose future or current administrators to the structure and processes involved with new reading initiative implementation. Successful implementation, based on implementation science, could enhance reading outcomes for all students.

Concluding remarks. Reading instruction at the middle school level must have a knowledgeable and effective principal to ensure proper protocols, provide instructional leadership, and ensure professional development meets the needs of all teachers in the building. Principals who are effective instructional leaders are assessment literate and can interpret data. Aligning assessment data and walk-through instructional data will positively impact the implementation of literacy protocols for all students. Ensuring that all teachers at the middle school level receive relevant and timely professional learning on evidence-based literacy instruction is the responsibility of the principal. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has increased student apathy toward reading and created larger achievement gaps (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2020). Therefore, it is now imperative that every principal grow in instructional leadership and have a deep understanding of literacy practices to support and increase student proficiency.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview questions (IQ). The structured interview questions are listed below.

1. Describe the role of professional development in your school which is associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment as it relates to reading achievement.
2. Describe your process of selecting professional development in your building as it relates to reading achievement.
3. If there are no specific curricular constraints on your professional development hours, describe how you divide the professional development into specific discipline areas.
4. Describe your decision-making process in the selection of professional development for reading across all disciplines.
5. When planning professional development, how do you determine which sessions, if any, you will lead?
6. Following professional development, how do you set goals and learning expectations regarding reading achievement for teachers and students?
7. Following a professional development session, describe how you determine if your teachers' training was helpful for your staff.
8. Following a professional development session, describe how you determine if the training is transferred into classroom practice.
9. Describe any training or professional development regarding reading instruction you have had during your career.
10. Tell me about any experiences you have had as a teacher of reading.

- 11.* Tell me about specific teacher practices for middle school student instruction leading to your school's reading achievement.
- 12.* Tell me the specific factors that promote middle school students achieving reading success.
- 13.* Tell me the specific factors that hinder middle school students from achieving reading success.
- 14.* What are the specific instructional leadership strategies that you practice which encourage effective reading instruction?
- 15.* What are the specific instructional leadership practices you engage in that impact reading achievement?

Demographic Interview Questions: Participants in the study answered questions to gather demographic information to organize the data. The six questions included:

1. With what gender do you identify?
2. What is your age?
3. Is your school considered small, mid-size, or large?
4. What year did you graduate with your Bachelor's degree?
5. What year did you obtain your building administrators' license?
6. How long have you been a middle school administrator?

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter



Baker University Institutional Review Board

October 19th, 2021

Dear Cindy Hadicke and Susan Rogers,

The Baker University IRB has reviewed your project application and approved this project under Expedited Status Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please be aware of the following:

1. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
2. Notify the IRB about any new investigators not named in original application.
3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents of the research activity.
4. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.
5. If the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentation at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts are requested for IRB as part of the project record.
6. If this project is not completed within a year, you must renew IRB approval.

If you have any questions, please contact me at npoell@bakeru.edu or 785.594.4582.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Nathan D. Poell'.

Nathan Poell, MLS
Chair, Baker University IRB

Baker University IRB Committee
Sara Crump, PhD
Nick Harris, MS
Christa Manson, PhD
Susan Rogers, PhD

Appendix C: Solicitation Email

Solicitation Email

Hello, Kansas education leaders. Today, I am reaching out to you to ask for your assistance in my doctoral research study at Baker University. The study that I will conduct relies on input and information from Kansas middle school principals about the practices used for literacy leadership at the middle school level.

As a former teacher and building principal, I understand the demands of your time. To collect data for my study, I would need to interview you should you choose to participate. I will interview using Zoom, Facetime, a phone call, or in-person; your preference will be. Interviews can be conducted outside of your workday and/or workweek to protect your precious work hours for your teachers and students. All interview data, participant identification, and school information will be kept strictly confidential. If your collected information is used in the study, I will assign pseudonyms to protect your identity.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please contact me using the information below. Should you have any questions about this request, please reach out, and I will be happy to assist you. You may also contact my major advisor, Dr. Susan Rogers, at srogers@bakeru.edu or 785-230-2801. Your participation is valued and appreciated.

Sincerely,

Cynthia (Cindy) Hadicke
Baker University Doctoral Student
620-343-0587 (call or text)
cynthiafhadicke@stu.bakeru.edu

Appendix D: Consent Form and Authorization

Consent for Participation in a Research Study

Research Title: Middle School Principal Behaviors that Impact Reading Outcomes

Researcher: Cynthia Hadicke

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Cynthia Hadicke about your experiences in leading middle school reading initiatives. Your participation will take approximately 45-60 minutes. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

This qualitative study's first purpose was to discover what middle school principals select as professional development related to reading instruction for their teaching staff. The second purpose was to explore previous reading experiences that middle school principals bring to their leadership roles. The third purpose was to ascertain middle school principals' perceptions of the factors that play a role in reading achievement. The final purpose was to describe what middle school principals perceive as their role in reading achievement. Obtaining qualitative data allowed the researcher to analyze statements from the participants on their perceptions of reading achievement. Interviewing Kansas middle school principals from several locations across the state allowed this researcher to collect data to answer the research questions.

The study will consist of one interview; I am asking your permission to take notes and record the interview to produce a transcript of our conversation part of this research study. The recording is used to ensure fidelity to the dialogue that ensues. All interview notes, recordings, and transcripts will be digitally password-protected, and only the research analyst and researcher will have access to the raw data until the dissertation is defended, at which time they will be destroyed. Your interview will be anonymous, and at no time will this researcher utilize the recording for any other purpose beyond what is stated in this consent form.

By signing below, you consent to participate in this research study and permit me to record you during your participation. Additionally, you allow me to send you the transcript of our interview for your review. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may leave the study at any time without penalty. You may refuse to answer any question(s) asked. Your anonymity will be maintained in all published and written data subsequent to this study

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Cynthia Hadicke at cynthiahadicke@stu.bakeru.edu or 620-343-0587. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records. Thank you for your consideration.

Advisor:

Dr. Susan Rogers
Baker University
913-344-1226
srogers@bakeru.edu

By signing below, you consent to participate in an interview regarding Cynthia Hadicke's research study, which includes recording our conversation. Your signature also authorizes you to receive a copy of the transcript of the interview. Return this signed document to Cynthia Hadicke at cynthiafhadicke@stu.bakeru.edu

Signature of participant

Date

Printed Name of participant