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## **The Influence of Administrators on Literacy Instruction Through the Promotion and Selection of Professional Development**

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THE INFLUENCE OF ADMINISTRATORS ON LITERACY INSTRUCTION  
THROUGH THE PROMOTION AND SELECTION  
OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

by

Lucy Katherine Johnston-Josey

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School  
and the Department of Educational Research and Administration  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

# THE INFLUENCE OF ADMINISTRATORS ON LITERACY INSTRUCTION THROUGH THE PROMOTION AND SELECTION OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

by Lucy Katherine Johnston-Josey

May 2017

Literacy is a key component to success in school and in life. Literacy has been a focus of education since 1965 when President Jimmy Carter announced a “war on poverty.” Since then, history has shown that educators should place an emphasis on literacy within schools. Because literacy is so important, I set out to explore how administrators influence literacy through the promotion and selection of professional development.

Mississippi was chosen as a basis for the study because it falls below the nation in terms of literacy rates on the National Assessment for Educational Progress assessment. Nineteen participants from four school districts across Mississippi were interviewed in this qualitative study. The data was coded and two primary themes emerged, which were professional development and best practices in literacy instruction.

Professional development was described in the study as being praxis, research based, data driven, content area specific, and collaborative. Teachers described effective professional development as guiding participants through the process of a new task instead of just telling them about the task. Teachers also stated that effective professional development should be founded on some type of research. Data should also be considered when determining which professional development should be offered.

Teachers described that most effective professional development concerned their content area. Finally, teachers discussed the idea of collaborative professional development as being effective, especially professional learning communities. Discussion regarding PLCs and external professional development occurred during interviews as well. Examples of best practices in literacy instruction were also given. Professional development and best practices in literacy instruction came together to provide answers to the research questions posed in the study. Administrators influence literacy through promoting effective professional development practices that encourage best practices in literacy instruction. Conclusions that could be drawn from the research was listed and recommendations for future research was provided.

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I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Ann Blankenship, for her dedication and encouragement through this entire dissertation process. She has patiently guided me throughout this journey. Her expertise in education and policy, her genuine feedback, and her unwavering encouragement were vital to the completion of this project. Without her, I am not sure that I would be finishing up my dream of fulfilling a doctoral degree. Additionally, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to Dr. Lilian Hill, Dr. James Fox, Dr. David E. Lee, and Dr. Rose Jones for taking time to serve on my committee. Each of them brought unique perspectives to create a more worthwhile dissertation.

## DEDICATION

I would first and foremost like to thank my Lord and Savior for allowing me the opportunity to pursue and finish my degree at the University of Southern Mississippi. He is ever faithful and without Him, I would fail. Philippians 4:13 states “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Praise be to God!

I would like to dedicate this to my daughter, Maggie and to my husband, John. Maggie, you have tolerated my absence in your life for so long. Thank you for allowing me to complete this goal of mine. Never let anyone tell you that you can’t do something and remember that anything worth having is hard to come by. I am so proud of you! You will always be my angel!

John Josey, you are amazing. You have loved and supported me through every step in this journey. Thank you for taking such great care of our daughter in my absence. Thank you for talking to me on those long drives home. Thank you for believing in me when I did not believe in myself. When I wanted to quit, your encouraging words pushed me through. You are such a wonderful husband and I do not know what I would do without you. Words cannot express how appreciative I am of you. I can’t wait to see where our life takes us!

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents. Daddy, you have been a great example to me. I have always pushed myself in school because you pushed yourself through college. Thank you for being that example. Mama, thank you for your continued support and encouragement. Thank you for reading and editing what I sent your way. Thank you for telling me daily that you had faith in me. Thank you for loving me through the easy and the tough times. I am thankful God allowed me to have you both as my parents.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AYP</i>	Academic Yearly Progress
<i>CCSS</i>	Common Core State Standards
<i>EEOA</i>	Equal Educational Opportunity Act
<i>EMCED</i>	East Mississippi Center for Educational Development
<i>EOA</i>	Economic Opportunity Act
<i>ESEA</i>	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
<i>ESSA</i>	Every Student Succeeds Act
<i>IASA</i>	Improving America’s School Act
<i>IB</i>	International Baccalaureate
<i>IDEA</i>	Individuals with Disability Educational Act
<i>IRB</i>	Institutional Review Board
<i>ISLLC</i>	Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium
<i>MAP</i>	Mississippi Assessment Program
<i>MCT2</i>	Mississippi Curriculum Test 2
<i>MDE</i>	Mississippi Department of Education
<i>MS CCRS</i>	Mississippi College and Career Readiness Standards
<i>NAAL</i>	National Assessment of Adult Literacy
<i>NAEP</i>	National Assessment for Educational Progress
<i>NAS</i>	New American Schools
<i>NCEST</i>	National Council on Education Standards and Testing
<i>NCLB</i>	No Child Left Behind
<i>NEGP</i>	National Educational Goals Panel

<i>NESIC</i>	National Education Standards and Improvement Council
<i>NGA</i>	National Governors Association
<i>PARCC</i>	Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers
<i>PD</i>	Professional Development
<i>PLCs</i>	Professional Learning Communities
<i>RHS</i>	Richland High School
<i>RTTT</i>	Race to the Top
<i>USM</i>	The University of Southern Mississippi
<i>WCU</i>	William Carey University
<i>ZAP</i>	Zeros Aren't Permitted

## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Literacy is an integral factor in increasing student achievement in all areas of traditional learning (Harris, 2007) and acquiring knowledge (Harmon, Wood & Stover, 2012). It incorporates the features of listening, verbalizing, reading, and articulation through writing, speaking, and the portrayal of ideas through the arts (Farris, 2001). Therefore, literacy should not be just a focus of the elementary grades but all grades (Vacca, 1998).

### Historical and Political Context

#### *Federal Government Involvement in Education*

Through all of the educational reforms that have occurred within the United States government, a goal of increasing student achievement has been a common denominator (Vinovskis, 2009). Educators have been put under a tremendous amount of pressure due to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements of all students being proficient in math and reading by the year 2014 (Rebell & Wolff, 2009). The following is an overview of federal policies to show how the evolution of policies has affected the current educational system.

Nowhere in the federal constitution is education mentioned and prior to the 1950s, the United States federal government played a limited role in public education (McGuinn, 2006). The federal government began to play a larger part in education when it created programs and began giving supplemental funds to the individual states (McGuinn, 2006). When states began to rely heavily upon the financial means of Washington, the federal government became more influential in education (Bankston, 2010).

During the Civil Rights Movement, in the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools violated the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment (Hewitt, 2011; McGuinn, 2005, 2006). Due to states not following through with this decision regarding equal treatment of all students, the federal government made the decision to become more involved with the education of the nation's students by sending military officials to the schools to ensure that the law was being upheld (Hewitt, 2011; McGuinn, 2005, 2006). During the 1960s President Lyndon B. Johnson declared war on poverty (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013; McGuinn, 2006). President Johnson created the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) in 1964 that sought to put more men and women between the ages of 16 and 21 in the workforce (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013). However, Johnson concluded, "if education is the key to social mobility...it was clear that too many schools lacked the resources to provide the necessary skills to students from disadvantaged backgrounds" (McGuinn, 2006, p. 29). While EOA did not directly relate to K-12 education, the government discovered through implementation of this act that many students graduating from high school during this time did not know how to read, thus limiting their employability (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013).

Based on the results of a study commissioned by President Johnson in 1965 Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Trolan & Fouts, 2011). The government focused on improving educational opportunities through ESEA for children from poverty (Trolan & Fouts, 2011). Federal money was given to provide

programs for schools in the areas of library improvements, parental involvement, teaching innovations, and health programs (McGuinn, 2006). By establishing ESEA, the government created a foundation for all future federal educational policies (Bankston, 2010; McGuinn, 2006).

President Jimmy Carter further increased the influence of the federal government over local public schools by establishing the Department of Education in 1979 (McGuinn, 2006). The focus of the Department of Education in 1980 was on access and equity instead of increasing student achievement (McGuinn, 2006). When President Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, he wanted to reevaluate the role of the federal government in public education by eliminating the Department of Education (McGuinn, 2006). However, his Secretary of Education, Terrell Bell of the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation At Risk* in 1983 that highlighted weaknesses with the public education system including a drop in standardized test scores; with verbal scores dropped over 50 points and mathematics scores dropped nearly 40 points; only 23 million Americans were illiterate; and an abundance of 17-year-olds did not have the higher order thinking skills needed to complete necessary tasks such as developing an inference based on written material (Gardner, 1983; Johanningmeier, 2010; McGuinn, 2006). Due to a focal point on the public educational system of the United States being created, this report was used to prevent the federal government from abandoning public education (Bankston, 2010; McGuinn, 2006). A test measuring student achievement, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), had been used since 1969 but opposition from state officials made it difficult for the results of this test to be reported until this time when Terrell Bell posted the results for the nation to see (McGuinn, 2006;

Vinovskis, 2009). At this time policymakers and the American public began to perceive that there was a problem with public education and that states should be held accountable (Vinovskis, 2009).

In 1988, George H.W. Bush ran for office as the “education president” (McGuinn, 2006, p. 53). He thought that all other problems in the United States could be solved if public education was corrected (McGuinn, 2006). After Bush was elected he created the Educational Excellence Act of 1989 (McGuinn, 2006). While the act was not passed, Bush made headway with education reform during his time as president (Vinovskis, 2009). In his state of the union address in 1990, he declared that by the year 2000 students would be proficient in math, science, history, geography, and English (Bankston, 2010). He helped pass national education goals with the National Governors Association (NGA) and eventually helped create the National Educational Goals Panel (NEGP) (Vinovskis, 2009). The NGA created national educational goals, later named Goals 2000, which identified eight goals and 21 objectives that states would embrace by evaluating their education system and taking steps to increase student achievement (Vinovskis, 2009). One of the goals stated, “By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (National Education Association, 1991, p. 10).

President Bush continued with announcing the America 2000 Education in Excellence Act (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). Through this Act, the government would reward schools that showed a growth in student performance, give parents choice on where they want to send their children to school, provide alternate certification for

principals and teachers, and provide support for New American Schools (NAS) within American 2000 communities (Vinovskis, 2009). This Act was not passed during Bush's term as president, as leaders in Congress would not support the idea of using federal vouchers to provide private school education (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). This strategy did not pass through Congress but was embraced by 44 states without obtaining the permission of Congress (Vinovskis, 2009). Researchers, members of civil rights organizations, and members of educational organizations opposed the idea of national testing as discussed in the Act (Vinovskis, 2009).

President Clinton took office in 1993 and took elements from America 2000 to create Goals 2000 prior to the 1994 reauthorization of the ESEA (Vinovskis, 2009). Goals 2000 included the opportunity-to-learn standards as well as required the establishment of the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC) to oversee the implementation (Vinovskis, 2009). Clinton reauthorized ESEA as Improving America's School Act (IASA) and passed Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Vinovskis, 2009). However, eventually Clinton was forced by Congress to concentrate efforts on reduction of class size and hiring of more teachers instead of on Goals 2000; this was done so that he would encourage votes for reelection in 1996 (Vinovskis, 2009). Clinton was reelected in 1996 and created the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers program that focused on providing enrichment programs for students outside of non-school hours, especially for students in high-poverty areas; through the class size reduction initiative, the government attempted to reduce class size by hiring more teachers, additionally through funding the Reading Excellence Act the government provided money to "states

annually for scientifically based K-3 reading programs” (Vinovskis, 2009, p. 122).

ESEA was not reauthorized prior to 2000 (Vinovskis, 2009).

President George W. Bush was elected and took office in 2000 and immediately began working on reforming education policy; he proposed the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) only three days after he was inaugurated (Vinovskis, 2009). In 2002, the *No Child Left Behind Act* became law and through this, the government sought to provide a better education for the students of America; it required states to create a curriculum that would ensure students would reach a proficient level by the end of the school year and create a standardized assessment that would be taken yearly by students in grades 3 – 8 to monitor progress (Bankston, 2010; Vinovskis, 2009). NCLB relied heavily upon test-based accountability and schools were required to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals that ensured students were performing at or above the proficient level by the 2013 – 2014 school year (Linn, 2009).

NCLB is thought now to be ‘broken’ (Burke & Heritage, 2012) and some view the standards as being unrealistic goals for states to meet (Linn, 2009). President Obama’s administration has created the voluntary grant program Race to the Top (RTTT) to alleviate some of the issues that were found with NCLB (McGuinn, 2014). The perception of the public has been more positive with RTTT because it provides incentives for schools that willingly participate in the program and does not impose consequences if they choose not to participate (McGuinn, 2014). In contrast, NCLB tended to take a negative approach by imposing consequences if student success was not rendered (McGuinn, 2014).



Both the NCLB and RTTT have a main focus of improving student achievement (McGuinn, 2014). According to Manna and Ryan (2011), the Obama administration created RTTT from the idea of NCLB but there are several differences. One main difference is that NCLB allowed states to create their own curriculum which, according to the Obama administration, urged states to lower their standards while RTTT encouraged a national group of Common Core State Standards that all states could use to increase the student achievement (Manna & Ryan, 2011). While the federal government maintained control over NCLB and encouraged states to improve student achievement through the use of the RTTT, states are still given a choice (Manna & Ryan, 2011).

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to reauthorize ESEA (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015; Wong, 2015). A main goal of ESSA is to increase student achievement and produce students that are college and career ready by raising the academic standards (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). While schools may not see much of a difference regarding the new law, states are given more freedom to manage testing the way they see fit (Wong, 2015).

Throughout the history of education, government concern about reading has had an influence on laws passed (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). ESEA was created because students were not able to read upon graduating from high school (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013). Additionally, reading programs were addressed during President George H.W. Bush's term through proposed reading initiatives in America 2000 as well as in President George W. Bush's term through No Child Left Behind (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). While the federal government

plays a significant part in education through federal mandates, states are responsible for providing the actual education of the nation's students (McGuinn, 2006; Vivonskis, 2009).

### *Mississippi Government Involvement in Education*

After President Johnson began his war on poverty, Mississippi became home to 280 Head Start centers that served over 21,000 children during the summer of 1965 (Hale, 2012). Though this was occurring all over the United States, the beginning of Head Start in Mississippi was particularly important because it came about as a result of the Freedom Movement (Hale, 2012). Head Start centers were established to give a foundational education for students entering public schools (Hale, 2012). Schools in Mississippi were segregated during the 1960s and learning opportunities for whites and blacks were unequal (Clemons, 2014). Head Start along with the Freedom Movement pushed Mississippi to expand the “educational opportunity for all citizens and pushed questions about educational policy” (Hale, 2012, p. 511). Along with the rest of the nation, Mississippi eventually desegregated in compliance with federal mandates and went through numerous changes within the educational system due to federal government policy (McGuinn, 2005; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

One of the mandates by the federal government has been the No Child Left Behind Act (Al-Fadhl & Singh, 2010; McGuinn, 2005; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). While the particulars of this act have been mentioned previously, a study in Mississippi noted that teachers were appreciative of the changes that were precipitated by the No Child Left Behind Act (Al-Fadhl & Singh, 2010). Burke and Ying (2010) studied five school districts in the Mississippi delta that were moderately successful or lower and

noted that teachers mentioned that the standards set forth by the Mississippi Department of Education matched the Mississippi curriculum test, which was mandated by NCLB. State policy in the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) changes frequently as it does elsewhere within the United States.

Currently, literacy in Mississippi follows the Mississippi College- and Career-Readiness Standards, which are very similar to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The standards are separated by grade level. School districts provide instruction to meet these standards how they see fit and are held accountable through assessment of students at the end of the school year. The 2014 – 2015 school year was the only year that Mississippi used the Partnership for Assessment for Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) to measure the CCSS of the students in grades K – 12. The Mississippi State Board of Education adopted textbook lists that school districts could choose from to provide instruction but were not required to purchase specific materials.

## Literacy Theory

### *Description of Literacy*

“Literacy is the prerequisite to academic achievement in middle and secondary school and beyond” (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003, p. 5). Literacy is an essential factor in building student achievement (Harris, 2007). The primary goal of reading instruction should be to develop students that are strategic and independent readers and writers (Harmon, Wood, & Stover, 2012). According to Cunningham and Stanovich (2001), reading has effects that expand beyond the reading of a particular passage. Reading is correlated with lifelong learning and future academic success (Matsumura, Garnier & Spybrook, 2012, p. 35).

### *Instruction*

Readers who struggle often have difficulties in other content areas (*Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals*, 2005). Students could have future academic issues and other troubles in life if they do not become skilled readers by the fourth grade (Rasco, Cheatham, Cheatham, & Phalen, n.d.). Improved literacy results in decreased discipline issues in schools, decreased dropout rates, and greater success in higher education (Irvin, Meltzer, Dean & Mickler, 2010). Hage and Stroud (1959) suggested that:

...reading comprehension and reading rate correlated significantly both with the verbal and nonverbal intelligence scores... Further, the data suggest that at all levels of reading proficiency verbal intelligence scores give a somewhat better prediction of academic achievement than do nonverbal scores. (p. 261)

Hammill and McNutt (1980) indicated that there is a strong correlation between reading and written expression. Problems with reading cannot be attributed to one variable (Bell & Aftanas, 1972). Reed (1970) suggested that reading achievement could be related to the materials and methods for teaching. Educators should seek to help students become enabled through the power of literacy; students should use literacy as a tool to better their conditions of society (Au, 1998).

### *Improving Student Achievement Through Literacy*

There have been many suggestions about how to increase student achievement in the area of literacy (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Frey & Fisher, 2011; Klassen & Krawchuk, 2009; Li & Christ, 2007). Students should begin their reading career in a successful way; schools should focus efforts on decoding and word recognition abilities

in the early grades as to give students a solid foundation for reading (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). Schools should partner with parents to increase literacy achievement at home (Li & Christ). Students should be given opportunities for collaborative learning during reading instruction (Frey & Fisher, 2011).

### *Literacy Rates*

The way in which literacy is measured has changed since the 1980s (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, literacy prior to the 1980s was determined by whether a person could read or write (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). However, currently, literacy is measured by looking at whether a person can function in modern society (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). While the number of illiterate Americans has decreased since 1979 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), the reading ability of 32% of fourth graders and 25% of eighth graders was rated at below basic on the 2015 NAEP reading assessment (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Mississippi has a higher number of students rated at below basic than the nation on the 2015 NAEP reading assessment scores with 40% of fourth graders and 37% of eighth graders scoring below basic (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

### *Theoretical Framework*

Reading is related to future academic success as well as lifelong learning (Matsumura, Garnier, & Spybrook, 2012). Improvement in the area of literacy has been shown to decrease discipline issues in schools, decrease graduation dropout rates, and increase the success of students in higher education (Irvin, Meltzer, Dean, & Mickler,

2010). Research by Au (1998) suggests that students could use literacy as a tool to better conditions of society. Hage and Stroud (1959) stated:

Reading comprehension and reading rate correlated significantly both with the verbal and nonverbal intelligence scores... Further, the data suggest that all levels of reading proficiency verbal intelligence scores give a somewhat better prediction of academic achievement than do nonverbal scores (p. 261).

Reutzel and Cooter (2008) stated that the idea of a relationship between language and cognitive development came from Jean Piaget. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1986, 1990) affirmed the idea that adults could enhance the language development and rate of learning in children by their interactions with them, such as modeling how to complete a jigsaw puzzle.

Problems related to reading cannot be attributed to just one variable (Bell & Aftanas, 1972). Reed (1970) suggested that reading achievement could be related to the materials and methods for teaching. Sanacore and Palumbo state that “reading good literature, including informational text, increases students’ knowledge base, and from this perspective, reading makes them smarter” (p. 180). It is imperative that all teachers understand how to teach literacy skills in all academic areas (Harris, 2007).

### *Models of Teaching*

The teaching of literacy has changed throughout history (Norton, 2007). The different models include balanced reading, phonics, sub-skills, whole language, and literature-based (Norton, 2007). These are all different ways to approach the teaching of literacy skills and all aim to increase student achievement in the area of literacy (Norton, 2007; Vacca, Vacca, Gove, McKeon, Burkey, & Lenhart, 2006).

## Professional Development

With changes in the curriculum and what students are expected to learn, reshaping of teaching should occur as well (Harris, 2007).

### *Description of Professional Development*

Professional learning should occur for teachers if they are expected to produce 21<sup>st</sup>-century learners (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Hagoood, Provost, Skinner, and Egelson (2008) suggested that professional development is necessary for teachers to learn new strategies to help students gain more knowledge. Teachers must be prepared to be learners throughout their career in teaching (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). Professional development has an impact on student achievement (Wenglinsky, 2000).

### *Implementation*

While professional development is necessary, it should be done correctly (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) suggest that if professional development lasts for 14 hours or less, it does not affect learning. For professional development to have an influence then it should last for a span of 30 – 100 hours over a 6 – 12 month period (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

Specific professional development should be conducted in the area of literacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). According to the Schools and Staffing Survey (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), 99% of public schools participate in professional development, while only 56.7% of the professional development is devoted to providing reading instruction. Gone are the days where teachers gain vital information from sitting in a conference or faculty meeting; teachers now have access to information at any time

of the day via the internet and should use this information to become better teachers (Cox, 2015).

### *Effective Professional Development*

Hattie (2008) stated that professional development can be most helpful in regards to teacher knowledge and behavior includes observation, microteaching, video/audio feedback, and practice. Some of the lowest effects come from guided field trips, lecturing, and dialogue (Hattie, 2008). School-wide professional development that is tailored to meet students' needs is one of the most effective strategies according to Fletcher, Grimley, Greenwood, and Parkhill (2011).

### Principal Leadership

Principals have different opinions on what their role is within a school (Leithwood, 1992). Research by Balyer (2014) suggested that principals have different roles within the school; these roles include: being leader of the school by completing the necessary paperwork and organizational tasks, forming the appearance of the school through maintaining during change and the creation of the vision, leading the staff and providing professional development for teachers, focusing on each person, and overseeing the community – school relationship. While the role of a principal has changed over recent years (Ediger, 2014), principals are now being required to not only function as a manager but also as an instructional leader (Balyer, 2014). As an instructional leader, principals can help teachers incorporate what they have learned in professional development sessions (Leithwood, 1992).

While one of the foci of principals was professional development (Balyer, 2014), principals were not truly mindful of the teachers when creating professional development



sessions. Research from Balyer (2014) suggests that principals spend more time in the managerial aspect than any other role. Those principals who do realize that it is their responsibility to be an instructional leader and help teachers, state that they do not feel like that is something that they do well (Leithwood, 1992).

### Statement of the Problem

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2005) National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), eighth-grade student reading scores in the area of basic or above increased from 73% in 1998 to 74% in 2003. However, the U.S. Department of Education (2013a) indicated the 2013 NAEP eighth-grade reading test results decreased from 66% in 2003 to 64% to 2013. Since 1998 Mississippi has scored lower than the nation's average on this assessment. In 2013, Mississippi scored 13 points lower (253) than the nation's average (266) in reading on the eighth grade NAEP test where the scores ranged from 248 – 277 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013b). I suggested, based on the data, that there is a need for increased focus on literacy in the United States, especially in Mississippi. Additionally, there is a need for research in the areas of “how school leaders and other staff foster and sustain in-school factors that raise reading achievement and improve schooling” (Fletcher, Grimley, Greenwood, & Parkhill, 2013).

Professional development is more effective when principals participate actively in the professional development process (Fletcher et al., 2013). Principals should rely on lead teachers to advocate for a shared commitment to professional development among their peers (Alam, 2012). However, while these lead teachers may have some influence over the school culture and climate, they may lack guidance (Alam, 2012). Balyer (2014) indicated that administrators do not genuinely consider their teachers when choosing

what kind of professional development should occur within their schools. However, there is a lack of research available on the topic of how professional development is chosen for teachers.

Smith (1976) suggests that literacy strategies and academic curriculum should be adapted to the needs of the students so that they can be effectively taught. To make teachers aware of effective literacy strategies, first administrators must understand which literacy strategies are effective, and then provide appropriate professional development to teachers in order to properly implement these strategies (Fletcher et al., 2013). There is a gap in the literature regarding whether or not administrators are aware of the best literacy strategies so that these can be implemented in the schools to achieve academic success.

Due to the numerous options for teaching the standards given by MDE, administrators at the district and school levels should be informed of good quality teaching practices in order to choose the curriculum that should be taught by the teachers of their school. Administrators should understand how to help teachers before they can actually help them develop (Fletcher et al., 2013). Professional development is necessary for teachers to improve their teaching skills (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). With Mississippi being one of the lowest academic achieving states in the nation, it is imperative to see what can be done to increase student achievement in middle schools.

### Research Questions

The main purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how administrators in Mississippi influence literacy instruction in middle school through the selection and promotion of professional development for teachers. A secondary purpose was to determine how professional development helps teachers incorporate best practices for

literacy instruction in their classrooms. The results from this study add to the limited current body of knowledge regarding the influence administrators have on literacy in middle school through the selection and promotion of professional development. The following are the research questions that guided the research:

1. What knowledge do administrators have about what is identified in the literature as the most effective literacy strategies for middle school students?
2. What is the process for determining literacy professional development needs within the school?
3. What input do teachers have regarding what professional development occurs?
4. Which professional development activities support best teaching practices?

#### Definition of Terms

*A Nation at Risk*: A report released in 1983 that tied together the idea that citizens of the United States were more concerned with the safety of their finances than they were with the education that their students were getting in school. This “report was a wake-up call that commanded that it was time to fix the public school” (McCaslin, 2006, p. 780).

*Common Core State Standards (CCSS)*: “Clear, consistent guidelines for what every student should know and be able to do in math and English language arts from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015).

*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*: The December 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that replaces the No Child Left Behind Act (The White House, Office of Press Secretary, 2015).

*Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards:* A set of guidelines describing what public school principals should be able to do as a leader of a school (Ramaswami, 2013). According to Van Meter and McMinn (2001):

The standards provide a “road map” for practicing principals, a blueprint for making a difference in fundamental areas such as fostering teacher professional growth, engaging sustained parental and community involvement, and accomplishing successful student learning (p. 33).

*Literacy:* Literacy is the ability “to carry out the complex tasks using reading and writing related to the world of work and to life outside of school” (Cases in Literacy, 1989, p. 36).

*Mississippi College and Career Readiness Standards (MS CCRS):* These standards “are the culmination of an extended, broad-based effort to fulfill the charge to create next generation K-12 standards in order to help ensure that all students are college and career ready” (Mississippi Department of Education, 2016).

*National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP):* It is the “largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

*No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB):* An act passed by Congress in 2002 that had a main purpose of closing “the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002).

*Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC):* “One of two state consortia that are developing a common set of K-12 assessments

aligned with Common Core State Standards” (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).

*Professional Development:* Includes activities that will better teachers and enable them to help the students that they teach (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002).

“Opportunities that will help them [teachers] enhance their knowledge and develop new instructional practices” (Borko, 2004, p. 3). “Professional development is the strategy schools and school districts use to ensure that educators continue to strengthen their practice throughout their career” (Mizell, 2010).

*Professional Learning Communities (PLCs):* An environment created by educators that encourages “mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone.” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. xii)

*Race to the Top (RTTT):* An initiative created by President Barack Obama that offers incentives for states that are willing to improve teaching and learning through reform in their educational system (The White House, 2015).

*School Administrators:* A person that supervises student’s performance levels as outlined by the Mississippi Department of Education (Mississippi Department of Education, 2012). This person makes success of students occur through the utilization of six principles adapted from the ISLLC standards (Mississippi Department of Education, 2012). For the purpose of this study, the words administrators and principals were used synonymously for the term school administrators.

## Delimitations

Due to the high number of below basic students on the nation's 2015 NAEP reading assessment (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) and the high number of adults functioning below basic on the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), the study sample was drawn from schools in Mississippi. This study was limited to public middle schools located in Mississippi serving grades 6 – 8. Participants of this study was limited to professional middle school literacy teachers as well as middle school administrators. Only four middle schools within the state of Mississippi met the established criteria of being a high-achieving level A school without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 Mississippi Accountability Report, one of which had a very low proficiency rate in reading while another was located in the school district in which I worked. The remaining two middle schools had a high reading proficiency rate of 92.1% and 95.9%. With only two schools meeting the established criteria, the sample size is small.

## Assumptions

It was assumed that participants of this study would answer all questions asked of them honestly and to the best of their knowledge. It was also assumed that the literacy teachers have passed the appropriate tests, such as the state licensure tests for teaching and certification tests in English language arts if necessary, in order to teach in their current literacy positions.

## Justification

Research was limited in the area of how professional development was chosen for teachers. Additionally, there was a lack in the literature regarding whether or not

administrators know which literacy strategies are effective. If administrators do not know which literacy strategies are effective, how can they choose appropriate professional development for English language arts teachers to attend? Teachers should participate in professional development if they expect to create 21<sup>st</sup>-century learners (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). In order for professional development to be effective, a number of factors should be taken into consideration; such as knowledge and beliefs, context, critical issues, and strategies (Loucks-Horsley, Stiles, Mundry, Love, & Hewson, 2009). Even though these factors include considering what the teachers know and should know (Loucks-Horsley et al., 2009), administrators tend to not regard the needs of their teachers when choosing professional development (Balyer, 2014).

The research conducted from this study contributed to the academic scholarship in the areas of literacy and professional development for middle school teachers and administrators. Results from this study may be used to help administrators better understand how to develop professional development within their schools as well as develop an understanding for effective literacy strategies for middle school students.

### Summary

Throughout the decades, the federal government has become more involved with education and as a result of attempting to increase student achievement, it has also become more involved in literacy (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). Recently there has been a focus on the weaknesses of students on national and international literacy assessments (Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011). If improvements in the area of literacy are made, it is likely to decrease discipline issues in schools, decrease graduation dropout rates, and increase the success of students in higher

education (Irvin, Meltzer, Dean & Mickler, 2010). This chapter provided definitions to important terminology that will be discussed within the following chapters. An explanation of delimitations, as well as assumptions, was discussed. The justification for the research was presented.



## CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature that is relevant to how principals influence literacy through the promotion and selection of professional development. The chapter begins by presenting the historical and political backgrounds of literacy policy in the United States and more specifically, in Mississippi. Next, the focus of research shifts to the topic of best literacy practices, the theoretical framework that supports the need for research of literacy, and how student achievement can be improved through improved literacy education. Different models of teaching literacy are described. Additionally, a description of best professional development practices is given. Finally, I discuss how principals influence literacy, student achievement, and professional development within schools.

### Historical and Political Context

The following is a discussion of the historical and political context relevant to the research topic. This includes the role of the federal government in education as well as the involvement of the Mississippi government in education.

#### *Federal Government Involvement in Education*

Education is not a federally protected right enumerated in the Constitution of the United States. In fact, until the 1950s, individual states had almost unfettered power to make decisions regarding education (Bankston, 2010; McGuinn, 2006). At the end of the nineteenth century, progressive educators sought to not only improve the quality of education but to provide access to education for all citizens (Bohan, 2003). Private schools emerged to accommodate the wealthy while those who could not afford to pay

relied upon public education (Spradling, 2009). From the 1890s to 1920s, the Progressive movement sought to give political control to all citizens rather than allowing political control to be placed only in the hands of the wealthy (Howell, 2011). Bankston (2010) stated, “the Progressive education movement aimed at using the schools to socialize students for the emerging national industrial society” (p. 186). During this time literacy was important for the involving biblical beliefs as well as American patriotism (Andes, 2010). This movement marked the beginning of the current public education system (Bankston, 2010; McGuinn, 2006).

Although the federal government expanded following the Civil War and World War I, it still remained rather small (Bankston, 2010; McGuinn, 2006). Consequently, the role of the government in public education was extremely limited until the passage of the GI Bill in 1944 (Bankston, 2010; McGuinn, 2006). Education became a focus following the 1940 census which reported that 10 million Americans and 14% of the military servicemen were functionally illiterate, meaning, according to Loss (2005), they had less than four years of schooling. Merrill and Galbraith (2011) explain that the term functional literacy came about by UNESCO description of the problem when people could not read or write well enough to function in the workplace. The GI Bill financially supported the secondary-education of the many servicemen coming back from military service after WWII (Bankston, 2010; McGuinn, 2006). As a result of the increase in military personnel, colleges and universities became more reliant on the financial support of the federal government; this increased the influence of the federal government in higher education (Bankston, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

The federal government began to really challenge state education systems during the 1950s and 1960s (McGuinn, 2005). In particular, the Civil Rights Movement and the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) targeted segregated public school systems. During the 1950s in the South, educational funding for segregated White schools greatly exceeded funding of Black schools; for example, in Mississippi in 1950, schools for Black students received \$22.29 per pupil, whereas White schools received \$71.00 per pupil (Margo, 1990). In the 1954 opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court declared the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) ruling, which stated that racial segregation in public places, was unconstitutional and not acceptable (Moore & Lewis, 2014). The Supreme Court ruled that the separate but equal doctrine be abolished, as it applied to public schools, and that all students be afforded a quality education regardless of skin color (Moore & Lewis, 2014). Mack (1996) stated it was "a decision calling for change so alarming to some that federal troops had to be called in to implement it" (p. 41). Subsequently, the federal government passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to support the desegregation and equalization efforts in all public spheres (Graglia, 2014). While advancement in the area has occurred, many areas of the country still suffer from racially segregated neighborhoods and school systems. (Moore & Lewis, 2014).

In the 1960s, the federal government began to focus more on K-12 education (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013; McGuinn, 2006). President Lyndon B. Johnson, as part of his War on Poverty, proposed the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) in 1964, which sought to put more men and women between the ages of 16 and 21 into the workforce (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013; McGuinn, 2006). This initiative uncovered the fact that,

even after extensive guidance, students were still not securing jobs due to their insufficient reading levels (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013). The government renewed its focus on literacy (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013; McGuinn, 2006).

In 1964, a group commissioned by President Lyndon B. Johnson and headed by the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, John Gardner, researched education funding and poverty issues (Hewitt, 2011). Based on the findings of this commission (Hewitt, 2011), President Johnson proposed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 in an effort to improve educational opportunities for the poorest students in the United States (Trolan & Fouts, 2011). Under ESEA, a number of programs were created for children living in poverty (Hewitt, 2011; McGuinn, 2006). Originally, the Act was not intended to allocate money for all schools, but only to temporarily expand the school experiences of the most poor and most disadvantaged students in the nation (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013; McGuinn, 2005; McGuinn, 2006; Trolan & Fouts, 2011).

Federal education policy continued to expand through the 1980s with the creation of even more educational initiatives (McGuinn, 2005). Though not to the extent of President Lyndon Johnson, Presidents Jimmy Carter, and Richard Nixon sustained federal involvement in public education (Vinovskis, 2009). For example, President Jimmy Carter established a cabinet-level Department of Education in 1979 (McGuinn, 2006), allowing the department to connect with every area and level of education (U.S. Department of Education, 2012) and further increase the presence of the federal government in local public schools (McGuinn, 2006).

During the administration of President Ronald Reagan in 1983, approximately 20 years after ESEA was established, the National Commission on Excellence published *A Nation At Risk*, which exposed the following:

- A drop in standardized test scores from 1963 to 1980
- The illiterate population in America numbered 23 million
- An abundance of 17-year-olds did not have higher order thinking skills necessary to complete minimal tasks. (Johanningmeier, 2010; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009)

Just weeks after this document was released, other reports were released that further scrutinized the public educational system, making education a political focal point (Bankston, 2010; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). In 1983, following the publication of these reports, Reagan's Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, remarked in an interview that educating students was the responsibility of the states, and it was not the federal government's job to endorse a curriculum or set of standards for states to use (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). Bell then revealed state rankings, highlighting the poor quality of state education systems and a need for improvement (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). Additionally, in 1988, ESEA was reauthorized and schools were forced to review the programs designed to serve disadvantaged students (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). The increase in awareness of educational deficiencies of the United States' public school system compelled states to spend more money on education in an attempt to better their school systems (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

In 1988, George H.W. Bush ran for president with the promise that he would become the "education president" (McGuinn, 2006, p. 53). Bush argued that if

educational issues were addressed, then the rest of the United States' economic and social problems would diminish (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). Bush stated during his campaign:

I'd like to be the education president. See, I believe as I look into the future our ability to compete around the world, our ability to solve problems of poverty that are unsolved in this county . . . whatever it is, education has got to be the priority. Better schools mean better jobs. (McGuinn, 2006, p. 53)

Although he wanted to help education at the federal level, Bush did not want the federal government to completely take over (McGuinn, 2006). During his first speech as president, Bush stated that he planned to improve the education system in the United States by creating state educational mandates (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). Only two months into his presidency, Bush presented the Educational Excellence Act of 1989, asking Congress to reallocate money from the Department of Education to the states to fulfill his promises of educational reform (McGuinn, 2006). This act supported financial rewards for teachers and schools identified as effective and increasing federal financial support for magnet schools (Stedman & Riddle, 1989). However, due to a lack of support from Congress, as well as a lack of funding, this Act never passed (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

Although the Educational Excellence Act of 1989 failed, President Bush was a part of a very important meeting with the National Governors' Association (NGA) in September of 1989, where the governors decided to create a list of national goals for public education (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). President Bush announced these

goals to the American public during his State of the Union address on January 31, 1990 (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). These goals included:

- By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.
- By the year 2000, we will increase the percentage of students graduating from high school to at least ninety percent.
- By the year 2000, American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including English, Mathematics, Science, History, and Geography.
- By the year 2000, U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
- By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning. (Office of the White House Press Secretary, 1990 as stated in Vinovskis, 2009, p. 27)

Following the announcement, the NGA met to determine 21 objectives to accomplish the six national goals (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). These goals along with two additional goals were incorporated into the Equity and Excellence in Education Act of 1990 (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). The two new goals stated “every child will have competent teachers, and all barriers to higher education will be removed” (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009, p. 29). A group of fourteen appointees were chosen by NGA and Congress to oversee the national education goals, later named Goals 2000

(McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). This group, later named the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), consisted of governors, senior level administration, and non-voting congressional leaders (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). However, the NEGP disagreed on the role of the federal government in education and quickly became bogged down with controversy (McGuinn, 2006).

Polling conducted near the end of Bush's first term revealed that education remained a concern of Americans (McGuinn, 2006). In an attempt to make his reform more aggressive, President Bush replaced the education secretary and began to openly support both school choice and national standards (McGuinn, 2006). On April 18, 1991, President Bush announced his new America 2000 strategy (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). If passed, America 2000 would have financially rewarded schools that progressed towards the NEGP goals and given parents a choice on where to send their children to school (McGuinn, 2006). Eventually, 44 states incorporated objectives from the America 2000 strategy but it did not pass in Congress (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

During the 1990s, national standardized testing also became increasingly popular but many educational organizations, civil rights organizations, and researchers were concerned about the idea (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). While there was much debate on national testing, eventually a 32-member National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST), formed of governors, congressmen, and education officials, provided suggestions for national testing and academic achievement standards (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). NCEST suggested that students take both a state assessment as well as a national assessment, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), as a way to maintain state accountability for student



achievement (Vinovskis, 2009). Congress did not receive the suggestions given by NCEST well, but they played an important role in the future educational policies of the Clinton administration (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

While education was not a major issue in the 1992 presidential elections (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009), all three candidates expressed concern for America's education system and agreed there was a "need for high national academic standards and called for more attention to student outcomes" (Vinovskis, 2009, p. 63). Presidential candidate Bill Clinton focused on revamping Goals 2000 rather than the expiring 1993 reauthorization of ESEA (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

Secretary of Education, Bill Riley was forced to revise Goals 2000 after proceedings of the House and Senate disrupted an initial version, stating "that while legislation set high standards for students, it required too little of the school districts in terms of giving students adequate opportunity to learn" (Vinovskis, 2009, p. 70). Riley's redraft of Goals 2000 included specifically defined opportunity-to-learn standards and the suggestion of oversight of these standards from a National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC) (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). The revision of Goals 2000 upset many members of Congress, but President Clinton was unwilling to risk political capital to ease the minds of the liberal Democrats (Vinovskis, 2009).

Ultimately Goals 2000 passed, including opportunity-to-learn and NESIC standards. However, the Republicans became the majority in Congress in 1994, and Goals 2000 survived only for political purposes, rather than to provide guidance and support for state and public schools as originally planned (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). The Republican majority threatened to revoke Goals 2000 altogether (McGuinn,

2006; Vinovskis, 2009). However, during Clinton's time as President, Congress did pass Goals 2000: Educate America Act. While certain aspects of ESEA were difficult to negotiate in the Senate subcommittee, the March 1994 reauthorization did occur, not because all parties agreed upon the bill, but because time eventually ran out (Vinovskis, 2009). The reauthorization of ESEA was known as Improving America's School Act (IASA) (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

In 1996, President Clinton was reelected, and Congress enacted several new programs, such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, the Class Size Reduction initiative, and the Reading Excellence Act (Vinovskis, 2009, p.131). Since the 1999 reauthorization of ESEA did not occur and Goals 2000 expired, President Clinton shifted his focus to new education programs (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). He emphasized the Class Size Reduction Initiative and the Reading Excellence Act as part of a proposed 1999 reauthorization of ESEA (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). In 2000, although the Democrats and Republicans came to a tentative agreement concerning funding for education, reauthorization did not occur during this time (Vinovskis, 2009).

On December 12, 2000, after a five-week delay for election results, the Supreme Court ruled that George W. Bush would be the 43rd president (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, n.d.). President George W. Bush was inaugurated on January 20, 2001, and announced his plan for *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), an ESEA reauthorization, only three days later (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, n.d.; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). This plan sought to close achievement gaps through mandated accountability, yearly academic assessments, and consequences for schools that failed to give disadvantaged students the education they deserved (McGuinn,

2006; Vinovskis, 2009). It set the goal of having all students on grade level in reading and math by the year 2014 (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

President Bush was working on NCLB when he heard of the attacks on the World Trade Center (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). According to McGuinn (2006), “the attacks apparently created a sense in leadership of both parties that completing work on a bipartisan education bill could reassure the jittery public by providing a symbol of a unified and functioning government” (p. 176). After Congress passed the bill, President Bush signed NCLB on January 8, 2002, which included the following provisions: annual testing, academic improvement, teacher and paraprofessional qualifications, Reading First, and Early Reading First (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

The Reading First Initiative influenced education in the United States by introducing the use of a reading coach as a form of professional development (Mundy, Ross, & Leko, 2012). However, NCLB was thought to be impractical by some (Linn, 2009; Vinovskis, 2009). For example, Vinovskis (2009) noted, “state education officials were concerned about being able to meet the expanded mandates on such short notice” (p. 173). To accomplish the goal of having all students on grade level by the year 2014, schools were mandated to determine their current Academic Yearly Progress (AYP) and set target goals to reach the following year; as the process of increasing AYP occurred each year, the number of schools that failed to reach the escalating goals increased (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

Congress implemented NCLB quickly, not giving states a chance to recover from IASA (Vinovskis, 2009). Under NCLB, states were required to begin academic testing in grades 3 - 8 and 10 - 12 in language arts and math; they were also required to create

academic standards and performance levels for student achievement (Chapman, 2007; Vinovskis, 2009). The immense requirements of NCLB overwhelmed the states (Chapman, 2007; Vinovskis, 2009). Some highlights of NCLB included:

- Requirement that a highly-qualified teacher be in each core academic classroom beginning with the 2005-2006 school year (Chapman, 2007; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009)
- Required annual testing by the 2005-06 school year in reading and mathematics for grades 3 – 8
- Teaching of science in all grades by 2007-08 school year
- Each state was required to establish and implement academic proficiency standards. However, if a school did not meet academic improvement for two consecutive years then that school would receive assistance from the district. Additionally, students received a choice of public school. After the third year of a school not making academic proficiency, a school was mandated to provide additional student services. If a school did not make academic proficiency by the fourth year, the school district was required to take certain measures, such as replacing staff members, changing curriculum, etc.
- A new program called Reading First helped states set up appropriate reading programs for grades K – 3.
- A new grant program called Early Reading First helped provide 3- to 5-year-olds in high-poverty areas with reading instruction. (Vinovskis, 2009)

According to NAEP results from 1999 to 2004, performance of students in grades 4 and 8 improved in reading and math while high school results remained the same (Vinovskis, 2009). However, another NAEP test conducted in 2005 indicated that students in grades 4 and 8 showed academic growth from years 2003 to 2005 but no significant change in test scores (Vinovskis, 2009). Because of the inconsistent academic improvements, Congress was divided on whether to reauthorize NCLB; however, it continued to be sustained by continuing resolution because an agreement could not be reached (Vinovskis, 2009).

When President Barack Obama took office, he created the 2009 voluntary grant initiative Race to the Top (RTTT) in an attempt to avoid the issues that came along with NCLB; he hoped that the optional federal financial support would entice states to revamp their educational systems (McGuinn, 2014). The \$4.35 billion RTTT was funded as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Manna & Ryan, 2011; McGuinn, 2014). Since RTTT was a voluntary initiative, it allowed states to decide whether they wanted to participate (McGuinn, 2014). Some features of RTTT included changing of teacher evaluation and tenure, creating a common set of assessments and academic standards, and increasing the number of charter schools (McGuinn, 2014). Manna and Ryan (2011) suggested that this is only the beginning of the educational changes that will occur in the 21st century.

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a reauthorization of ESEA (The White House, Office of Press Secretary, 2015; Wong, 2015). ESSA is a dramatic departure from NCLB and RTTT in

that it severely limits the federal role in public education (Wong, 2015). The goals of ESSA are as follows:

- Ensure states set high standards so that children graduate high school ready for college and career.
- Maintain accountability by guaranteeing that when students fall behind, states target resources towards what works to help them and their schools improve, with a particular focus on the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, high schools with high dropout rates, and schools where subgroups of students are struggling.
- Empower state and local decision-makers to develop their own strong systems for school improvement based upon evidence, rather than imposing cookie-cutter federal solutions like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) did.
- Preserve annual assessments and reduce the often onerous burden of unnecessary and ineffective testing on students and teachers, making sure that standardized tests don't crowd out teaching and learning, without sacrificing clear, annual information parents and educators need to make sure our children are learning.
- Provide more children access to high-quality preschool, giving them the chance to get a strong start to their education.
- Establish new resources to test promising practices and replicate proven strategies that will drive opportunity and better outcomes for America's students. (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015, pp. 1 – 2)

The focus of ESSA is to increase student achievement and raise the standards to produce students that are college and career ready when graduating from high school (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). While literacy was not mentioned in ESSA, it still plays an important role in education and preparing students for college and careers.

In summary, education was not considered a priority by the federal government until after the Civil War (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). It was then that the government discovered that students were unprepared for many job positions after graduation because they did not know how to read (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013), ultimately leading to the adoption of ESEA to provide educational opportunities for the poorest students (Trolan & Fouts, 2011). Throughout the decades, the federal government became more involved in education, and particularly literacy, through various educational initiatives, such as National Reading Improvement Program of 1974, America Reads Challenge of 1996, and the Reading Excellence Act of 1998 (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). Consequently, reading has remained a legislative priority throughout the history of education (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). Recently there has been a focus on the weaknesses of students on national and international literacy assessments (Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011). ESSA, the 2015 reauthorization of ESEA, was passed to increase student achievement and further ensure that states are educating the nation's students to the fullest capability (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). While the federal government plays an important role in education, ultimately states are given

freedom to educate students as they determine as long as federal mandates are followed (McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009).

### *Mississippi Governmental Involvement in Education*

During the early 1960s, schools in Mississippi were segregated, and learning opportunities for White and Black children were unequal (Clemons, 2014). After President Johnson began his war on poverty, during the summer of 1965, Mississippi became home to 280 Head Start centers that served over 21,000 children (Hale, 2012). Although this was occurring all over the United States, the beginning of Head Start in Mississippi was particularly important because it emerged from the Freedom Movement (Hale, 2012). The Freedom Movement, also known as the Civil Rights Movement, occurring during the 1950s – 1960s, supported equal rights for all citizens no matter their color (Gillespie, 2014; Hale, 2012). Head Start, along with the Freedom Movement, pushed Mississippi to expand the “educational opportunity for all citizens and pushed questions about educational policy” (Hale, 2012, p. 511).

Due to federal mandates, Mississippi experienced numerous changes within the education system including desegregation (McGuinn, 2005; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovskis, 2009). Mississippi receives money from the federal government and as such abides by federal mandated programs such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), the Equal Educational Opportunity Act (EEOA), and the Individuals with Disability Educational Act (IDEA) (Education Law Center, n.d.).

In response to the Race to the Top Initiative, literacy in Mississippi follows the Mississippi College and Career-Readiness Standards (2015 Mississippi College and



Career Readiness Standards for English Language Arts, 2015). According to the 2015 Mississippi College and Career Readiness Standards for English Language Arts (2015):

The primary purpose of the 2015 Mississippi College- and Career-Readiness Standards is to provide a basis for curriculum development for Grades K-12 English Language Arts teachers in Mississippi. This document provides an outline of what students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade level in preparation for college and career. The primary purpose of this document is to provide a basis for curriculum development for K-12 English Language Arts teachers, outlining what students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade level and course. (p. 8)

School districts determine how to provide instruction on these standards and are held accountable through state assessment of their students at the end of each school year (2015 Mississippi College and Career Readiness Standards for English Language Arts, 2015). According to the MDE website, beginning spring 2016 Mississippi will use the Mississippi Assessment Program (MAP) to assess students on the Mississippi College and Career Ready Standards whereas the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) test was used in the 2015 school year.

### Literacy Theory

The following section gives a detailed description of literacy, followed by literacy in terms of instruction, improving student achievement through literacy, and literacy rates across the United States, specifically Mississippi.

#### *Description of Literacy*

The goal of any reading and literacy program is for students to be able to understand what they are reading, speak clearly on a subject matter, and apply what they have read to all areas of life (Norton, 2007). Literacy is an integral factor in increasing student achievement in all areas of traditional learning (Harris, 2007) and acquiring knowledge (Harmon, Wood & Stover, 2012). It incorporates the features of listening, verbalizing, reading, and articulation through writing, speaking, and the portrayal of ideas through the arts (Farris, 2001). Irvin, Meltzer, Dean and Mickler (2010) stated that literacy is more than just being able to read and write; “literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and think in order to learn, communicate, and make meaning of increasingly complex print and online texts” (p. 2). If a student struggles with reading, they will typically struggle with writing as well (Irvin, Meltzer, Dean & Mickler, 2010). According to Harmon, Wood, and Stover (2012), “the end goal of any reading instruction is the development of independent, strategic readers and writers” (p. 51). Reading has influences that extend beyond the actual reading of a particular passage (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001).

### *Instruction*

Literacy begins at home before any formal reading instruction occurs (Norton, 2007; Rasco, Cheatham, Cheatham, & Phalen, n.d; Tompkins, 2003). It begins when children are very young and continues throughout adulthood (Tompkins, 2003). Snow and Biancarosa (2003) stated, “literacy is the prerequisite to academic achievement in middle and secondary school and beyond” (p. 5). If students begin school with fragile academic backgrounds and poor vocabulary, then appropriate progression is less likely to occur (Lobron & Selman, 2007). Comber (2014) stated, “enhanced school-home

relationships and communication can improve children's performance" (p. 119).

Students could have future academic issues and other troubles in life if they do not become skilled readers by the fourth grade (Rasco, Cheatham, Cheatham, & Phalen, n.d.).

Because of the varied literacy instruction and the difference of students across the United States, students do not reach the same standards of learning at the same time (Cohen & Bhatt, 2012). Literacy instruction is primary in elementary schools because it is thought to be foundational (Stevens, 2010/2011). However, literacy focus in elementary and middle school may result in higher graduation rates from high school for those students (Irvin, Meltzer, Dean & Mickler, 2010). Research by Slater and Horstman (2002) suggests that complexity of student learning increases throughout middle and high school as students are expected to take control of their own learning; therefore they must have the appropriate literacy tools to do so. Blunch (2014) states "literacy and numeracy unarguably are at the heart of human and economic development..." (p. 209). Although literacy has been shown to be an integral part of development, research by Hull (1998) suggests that students entering the workforce upon graduation are not prepared for employment in terms of literacy. Additionally, Slater and Horstman (2002) state:

if our goal is high literacy in reading and writing for all students, we are definitely falling short, especially when we consider the large numbers of middle and high school students performing at or below the Basic level: 66% and 53%, respectively, in reading, and 73% and 78% in writing. (p. 164)

This confirms that literacy should not be just a focus of the elementary grades but all grades (Vacca, 1998).

### *Improving Student Achievement through Literacy*

There have been many suggestions as to how to increase student achievement using literacy skills (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Frey & Fisher, 2011; Klassen & Krawchuk, 2009; Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011; Li & Christ, 2007; Norton, 2007; Reutzel & Cooter, 2008). Research findings presented by Cunningham and Stanovich (2001) indicated that students benefit from beginning their reading career with successful partnerships. Schools that partner with parents can help to increase literacy at home (Li & Christ, 2007). Research by Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011) stressed the idea that for higher student achievement in literacy to occur, all stakeholders must be involved in the education of students. Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011) state “There, is, indeed, a very strong connection between schools and the communities they serve such that what happens outside of the school has a great bearing on students’ literacy achievement” (p. 3).

In addition to supportive partnerships, students should be given opportunities for collaborative learning during reading instruction (Frey & Fisher, 2011). Lin, Chen, Yang, Xiet, and Lin (2013) stated that students in their study felt collaborative learning was effective in increasing the interactions among their peers. Student’s confidence in their answers increased when working collaboratively because the answers to questions were settled upon as a group (Lin et al., 2013). Additionally, Lin et al. (2013) stated, “collaborative learning alone helped build positive learning attitudes and enhance students’ learning interests and confidence” (p. 79). Some of examples of collaborative learning in reading would be the collaborative strategies reading (CSR) method,

collaborative reading groups, and learning together (Klinger & Vaughan, 1999; O'Brien, 2007; Rojas-Drummond, Mazon, Littleton, & Velez, 2014).

Research suggests that students construct meaning from authentic and meaningful experiences and should be able to connect what is learned to other issues outside of their lives (Comber, 2014; Rupp, 2015). The use of young adult literature in the English Language Arts classroom can provide meaningful literary experiences for young students, thus motivating them to read more and increase comprehension (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). Ames (1992) states that learning goals and higher motivation are more likely to be accomplished when a student has a variety of their interests and meaningful activities incorporated into the lesson.

Research also suggests that independent reading can improve student achievement in language arts and other content areas (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). Sanacore and Palumbo (2010) pointed out that “independent reading is an empowering part of the advancement of young adolescents’ literacy growth” (p. 184). Students should be guided in setting goals for themselves while being encouraged to read independently (Serravallo, 2014). Cuevas, Irving, and Russell (2014) stated that having students read independently and follow through with monitoring their comprehension can increase literacy rates.

Blanton, Wood, and Taylor (2007) stated that reading materials that are scripted, materials that are read verbatim by teachers instead of used as a guide, are not ideal for middle school students because the materials do not allow students to dig deep into a subject matter and think critically about a text. Additionally, Blanton, Wood, and Taylor (2007) noted that in order to get students to the level they should be teachers should go beyond lecture, regurgitation, and simply drilling skills. In order to better meet the needs

of their students, teachers should be aware of effective literacy practices (Greenwell & Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

### *Literacy Rates*

According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Adult Literacy (1993), literacy prior to 1980 was measured by how well a person could read or write; however, today functional literacy is measured on whether a person can function in modern society (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Prior to the 1980s, there was a significant number of low literate black people in comparison to white people; however, this gap has decreased over the years (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

The U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Adult Literacy (1992) gathered data in 1992 by profiling 1,947,474 adults to assess their literacy abilities. Adults who are below basic are those who have no more than the most concrete or basic literacy skills (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Tasks associated with this level would be searching a simple text to identify what a patient is allowed to eat or drink prior to a medical procedure, signing one's name, and simple addition and subtraction related to making a deposit at the bank (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). The adults that were classified below basic in prose literacy skills in 1992 varied from state to state (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). However, Mississippi ranked the highest with 25% scoring below basic in the prose literacy skills category (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). When assessed again in 2003, Mississippi was eleventh from the top with 16% ranking below basic in prose literacy skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). According to the 2015 Nation's Report Card, 32% of fourth graders and 25% of eighth graders were below basic on the NAEP reading achievement assessment (U.S.

Department of Education, 2015). Mississippi currently ranks higher than the nation with 40% of fourth graders and 37% of eighth graders scoring below basic on the 2015 reading NAEP assessment (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

### Theoretical Framework

Reading is correlated to lifelong learning and future academic success (Matsumura, Garnier, & Spybrook, 2012). Furthermore, reading is a component of living a wholesome, untroubled, and prolific life (Reutzel & Cooter, 2008). Improved literacy results in decreased discipline issues in schools, decreased dropout rates, and greater success in higher education (Irvin, Meltzer, Dean, & Mickler, 2010). Readers who struggle often have difficulties in other content areas such as science and social studies (*Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals*, 2005). According to Temple, Ogle, Crawford, and Freppon (2005), “surveys show that people who can read and write well tend to have a wider range of options in life” (p. 5). Hage and Stroud (1959) stated that:

Reading comprehension and reading rate correlated significantly both with the verbal and nonverbal intelligence scores... Further, the data suggest that all levels of reading proficiency verbal intelligence scores give a somewhat better prediction of academic achievement than do nonverbal scores (p. 261).

Additionally, Hage and Stroud (1959) stated that high comprehension scores could be correlated to high verbal scores as well as a high rate of reading. Herrell and Jordan (2002) stated:

With increasing pressure to teach to national reading standards, raise test scores, and begin to use performance assessments to measure the competency levels of

readers in our schools, teachers are asking for support and assistance in findings ways to teach strategies that actively involve students in processing and understanding text. (p. xvii)

The belief that there is a relationship between language and cognitive development came from the work of Jean Piaget (Reutzel & Cooter, 2008). Vygotsky (1986, 1990) confirmed the idea that adults could enhance the language development and rate of learning in children by their interactions with them. Vygotsky (1986) maintained the idea that thoughts precede words; however, experiences teach how to explain the thoughts. While there is a strong correlation between reading and written expression (Hammill & McNutt, 1980), problems with reading cannot be attributed to just one variable, meaning there are many components that contribute with problems in reading (Bell & Aftanas, 1972).

Additionally, Reed (1970) suggested that reading achievement could be related to the materials and methods for teaching. Educators should seek to help students become enabled through the power of literacy; students should use literacy as a tool to better their conditions of society (Au, 1998). Sanacore and Palumbo (2010) stated that students who read vast and diverse texts are in a meaningful situation as far as reading is concerned; these students are setting themselves up for a lifetime of reading and learning literacy skills such as comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary. Sanacore and Palumbo also state that “reading good literature, including informational text, increases students’ knowledge base, and from this perspective, reading makes them smarter” (p. 180).



## Models of Teaching

It is important to understand the models of teaching, as this is related to the topic of best practices in literacy instruction. As with politics, conceptions of literacy have changed throughout history. Donna Norton (2007) specified the trends that are present in literacy throughout the years. There is much disagreement on the best framework to teach reading comprehension (Norton, 2007). Three different frameworks or models of teaching reading include text-based method or bottom-up method, reader-based method or top-down method, and a method that combines the two previous methods (Norton, 2007). First, using the text-based method reading can be taught by focusing on the text rather than the reader's understanding (Norton, 2007). This method is rooted in the beliefs of B. F. Skinner (1968) that students "learn to read by being taught a sequence of skills that form the building blocks of reading" (Norton, 2007, p. 20). According to Norton (2007) "in this model, rules for word patterns and sounding out words are more important than understanding longer texts" (p. 8). Additionally, Norton (2007) stated reading can be taught through "a reader-based model because the reader brings his or her own knowledge, culture, and experiences to the interpretation of the text" (p. 9). A combination of the previous two methods is considered to be the best model for the teaching of reading and reading comprehension (Norton, 2007).

The models influence the different methods that are used for teaching reading (Norton, 2007). These different approaches include balanced reading, phonics, sub-skills, whole language, and literature-based (Norton, 2007). "In a balanced reading approach, skills are taught by the teacher both directly and indirectly as students read texts and develop their own understandings" (Norton, 2007, p. 12). The phonics

approach is similar to a bottom-up model and “teaches phonics skills but emphasizes the application of those skills while students read whole, meaningful texts, rather than learning only sound-symbol relationships and practicing decoding words in isolation” (Norton, 2007, p. 139). Some educators prefer using the sub-skills approach to teaching, reading in which students are expected to master a set of sub-skills before they can be able to read proficiently. These subskills include the following:

- Word attack, including identifying rhyming elements in words, knowing sight words, and understanding letter sounds;
- Comprehension, encompassing listening skills, context clues, and understanding complete stories;
- Study skills, incorporating following directions, using dictionaries and encyclopedias, and organizing information;
- Self-directed reading, involving recreational reading, conducting research, and enjoying a variety of literature;
- Interpretive skills, consisting of reacting to stories, recognizing implied ideas, and reaching conclusions on the basis of information in a text;
- Creative skills, involving engaging in dramatic play, participating in choral speaking, and composing original story poems. (Norton, 2007, pp. 14 – 15)

The next approach is known as the whole language approach, which is the closest model to a top-down model of reading (Norton, 2007). According to Norton (2007), this model is:

...based on the belief that reading is a natural process like speech, and since children naturally acquire speech by exposure to the spoken language, in a similar

fashion they will naturally become literate as long as they are exposed to whole texts, rather than isolated words, sound, or vocabulary-controlled stories. (p. 15)

The whole language approach is more concerned with comprehension of the whole text than with the precision of reading (Norton, 2007). Therefore, the beliefs of the whole language approach are similar to the speech that students will be able to read and write as long as students are exposed to whole text frequently (Norton, 2007).

Next, the literature-based approach focuses on the quality of literature that is needed to teach reading (Norton, 2007). This approach represents a combination of the top-down and bottom-up models (Norton, 2007). With this approach, the text is used as a springboard for writing and students are allowed to choose the text they want to read instead of being forced to read something they may not like (Vacca, Vacca, Gove, McKeon, Burkey, & Lenhart, 2006).

### Professional Development

Professional development is as important as literacy with regards to this study. The following gives a description of professional development as well as implementation followed by a description of effective professional development.

#### *Description of Professional Development*

“Professional development (PD) is a familiar approach to providing teachers additional training to meet specific subject content standards and expectations as well as challenging student behavior” (Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015, p. 117). Porche, Pallante, and Snow (2012) suggested that professional development should be founded on scientifically based research in order for it to be effective. The following are many different types of professional development:

- Teachers can go to conferences and get information; these are referred to as ‘sit and get conferences’.
- Professional organizations and associations are available for teachers to join that provide professional development opportunities as well as opportunities for networking.
- Subscribing to professional journals is a way that teachers can delve into their field and find current information that pertains to their subject area.
- Teachers can also take part in workshops and courses at colleges or other institutions.
- The Internet is another great source of professional development for teachers.
- Co-teaching Professional Development (CoPD) involves having two teachers in the classroom as to meet the needs of all students within the classroom. (Cox, 2015; Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015)

Many states around the nation are incorporating job-embedded professional development for their teachers through the use of a literacy coach (Dean, Dyal, Wright, Carpenter, & Austin, 2012). Research by Au (2013) suggests that teachers are more likely to respond to professional development and gain continuous improvement when they are allowed to take part in creating the change. Peer coaching is a professional development tool that is noted to be effective (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2011). Wilder (2014) stated, “coaching is more likely to affect students if the instructional coach is a former or current teacher of that discipline.” An instructional coach is more likely to make a difference in student achievement if they have mastered the subject area they are providing assistance with (Wilder, 2014). While there is not much research on the

influence of literacy coaches on student achievement, districts are hoping that literacy coaches will effectively help raise student achievement through their ongoing support of teachers in their area by providing teaching strategies and modeling lessons when necessary (Dean, Dyal, Wright, Carpenter, & Austin, 2012). Wilder (2014) stated:

If school districts continue to use instructional coaches as generalists and expect them to improve adolescent literacy in all disciplines, administrators, coaches, and teachers must realize disciplinary knowledge matters and structure coaching as one piece of collaborative disciplinary inquiry. (p. 175)

A second source of professional development is through the use of a reading specialist; Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011) stated:

When reading specialists model lessons observed by classroom teachers, each practitioner learns from the other. Teachers and the reading specialist can discuss the lesson together afterward so that the teachers can comment and pose questions and the reading specialist can reflect and provide a rationale. By watching a literacy expert at his/her craft, teachers gain new perspectives on planning and implementing instruction for their own students, and processing what was observed, especially the deliberate interactions of the reading specialist with the students, is invaluable to improving instruction and developing increased understanding for why specific instructional decisions were made. (p. 10)

### *Implementation*

According to Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), “teachers must learn to teach in ways that develop higher-order thinking and performance” (p. 46). Additional research suggests that for teachers to be effective, they must be able to apply research-

based strategies and stay current in teaching practices (Greenwell & Zygouris-Coe, 2012). Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) explained that teachers can accomplish this by attending professional learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Jaquith, Mindich, Chung Wei, and Darling – Hammond (2011) stated:

Research supports the notion that investing in and supporting professional development that is ongoing, intensive, and connected to practice and school initiatives; focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; and builds strong working relationships among teachers makes a difference in student achievement. (pp. 37 – 38)

Based on the findings of a study by Ruppap (2015), teachers of adolescents with severe disabilities appear to struggle with applying research-based practices in the area of literacy. Teachers such as these could benefit from professional development to address the various needs of students with disabilities (Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015).

Concerns arose in a study by Leko and Brownell (2009) that teachers are receiving training on students with disabilities but they are not getting training on how to meet individual's specific needs. Thus, there is a major need for specific professional development to help teachers that struggle in these areas.

### *Effective Professional Development*

Hattie (2008) stated the instruction found to be the most beneficial in regards to teacher knowledge and behavior include observation of actual classroom methods where teachers would go into a classroom and observe the proposed teaching methods; microteaching where a teacher would do a mini-lesson and then have a discussion with the facilitator to discuss what worked and what could have been done better; video/audio

feedback where perhaps someone is giving the teacher directions as to what to say through a headset; and practice. Hattie (2008) suggested that the lowest effects on professional development came from guided field trips, games, dialogue, and presentations. Fletcher, Grimley, Greenwood, and Parkhill (2011) reported the following:

...school leaders should endeavor to create a supportive and collaborative learning environment for students and teachers; school-wide professional development is more effective when led by a person with expertise and credibility and when the principal is an active participant in the professional development; when assessment data are used school-wide to identify student needs, inform teaching strategies, track progress across the school and form the basis of the school-wide plan for improvement, reading outcomes are likely to be enhanced; reading programmes in the upper primary school are more effective when they are regular, sustained, and facilitated by teachers with strong pedagogical knowledge about reading. (pp. 166 – 167)

Effective professional development should also be data driven. According to Hayes and Robnolt (2007), “data-driven professional development can assist school leaders in their efforts to provide appropriate and effective development for their teachers.” (p. 105). Good, Miller, and Gassenheimer (2004) state that professional development should be data-driven, research-based, and ongoing in order to be effective.

## Principal Leadership

Principal leadership is a vital component to this study. The following section will discuss the change in leadership, different styles of principal leadership, and the importance of effective principal leadership.

According to Ediger (2014) “the role of the principal has changed from being a manager of a school to a leader in curriculum improvement” (p. 153). Principal leadership influences what is accomplished at a school through supporting change, actively participating, modeling collaboration, building relational trust, and making things happen (Au, 2013; Kral & Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse, 2012). Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996) stated that it would be important to understand how “principals shape effective educational programs by working with teachers, staff, parents, and students” (p. 545). In order for schools to improve, effective leadership must be in place (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). With all of the responsibilities principals have, research indicates that principals should primarily focus on academics in their school (Roney and Coleman, 2011).

Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2009) indicated that principals affect student achievement through the protection of instructional time and the development of professional learning communities within the school. Kohansal (2015) stated that principals who are also instructional leaders have a positive effect on teacher learning. According to Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011) “district leaders must encourage and sustain reflective communities of practice both within and among schools and make resources available for teachers to use according to their needs and preferences” (p. 85). Mackey, Pitcher, and Decman (n.d.) described effective principals



as those who helped at-risk students, revealed successful instructional leadership skills, and met teachers' and students' needs. One study indicated that principals who were more instructionally competent made better instructional decisions for their schools than those that were not (Kohansal, 2015).

Even though today's principals have many different duties such as creating and maintaining a safe learning environment, monitoring instruction of students, meeting with stakeholders, dealing with discipline issues, their number one goal should be raising student achievement (Sanzo, Clayton, & Sherman, 2011). Marzano, Walters, and McNulty (2005) stated that principals affect 25% of student achievement. While teaching is identified to be the primary influence on student learning within the classroom (Sammons, 2007), Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996) suggested that principals have an indirect influence on student achievement through the promotion of student achievement and promoting a school-wide learning climate. An academic improvement of schools reduces the number of underachieving students and raises the number of high achieving students (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979). Roney and Coleman (2011) identified that "principals who press for academic success do so by establishing learning environments that encourage students to work hard and to meet high standards" (p. 22). Ediger (2014) emphasized the idea that "the school principal must take the lead in promoting in-service education programs to improve instruction" (p. 155). Since principals have an effect on student achievement (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Davis, 2006; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Kohansal, 2015; Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005), specifically reading and math achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2014),

they must be knowledgeable of current instructional strategies (Mackey, Pitcher, & Decman, n.d.). Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011) state:

...individuals who provide literacy leadership within the school must be well versed in what literacy instructional practices work for all students, including struggling readers, gifted readers, and English Language Learners, as well as how literacy instruction must and can be differentiated to accommodate these diverse learning populations. (p. 5)

Additionally, Kohansal (2015) stressed the importance of principal knowledge by stating, “one of the important findings of this research revealed how important a principal’s knowledge of reading instructional practices is in his or her management and decision making” (p. 632). Ediger (1999) states “the principal of the school needs to assist teachers in teaching reading to all pupils so each may become a successful reader” (p. 9). They should be able “to translate their knowledge into instructional applications that others can benefit” (Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011, p. 5).

### Summary

In order to determine how principals influence literacy through the selection and promotion of professional development, one must understand the historical and political aspects of education in the United States and in Mississippi since the early 1900s. This section looked at what literacy is and what effective literacy looks like. The section discusses teaching models such as text-based method, reader-based method, and other methods for teaching literacy. Also discussed was a description of professional development and what effective professional development looks like as well as different types of professional development such as peer coaching, observation, and

implementation of reading specialists. The section concludes by explaining what a principal's role is in the school as well as what the literature explains about how the principal influences literacy and professional development.

## CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This research study was conducted using qualitative methodology. I used general qualitative inquiry to collect data researching how administrators in Mississippi influence literacy in middle school through the selection and promotion of professional development for teachers and how professional development helps teachers incorporate best practices for literacy in their classrooms (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This section outlines the research processes that were used in this study. Particular elements included in this section include the purpose of the study, the research questions, the study design, information on study participants, data collection and analysis techniques, trustworthiness, study timeline, limitations, and my positionality.

### Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how administrators in Mississippi influence literacy instruction in middle school through the selection and promotion of professional development for teachers. A secondary purpose was to determine how professional development helps teachers incorporate best practices for literacy instruction in their classrooms. The results from this study added to the limited current body of knowledge regarding the influence administrators have on literacy in middle school through the selection and promotion of professional development.

### Research Questions

1. What knowledge do administrators have about what is identified in the literature as the most effective literacy strategies for middle school students?

2. What is the process for determining literacy professional development needs within the school?
3. What input do teachers have regarding what professional development occurs?
4. Which professional development activities support best teaching practices in literacy instruction?

### Design of the Study

In order to understand how principals influence literacy through professional development, this study used a basic qualitative design. The study followed the emergent design principle; that is the data was constantly being studied and refined so that all new evidence was taken into consideration (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Merriam, 1998). I began evaluating the data after the first interview was completed.

### Selection of the Sample

I wanted data that would be most insightful (Merriam, 1998). I used purposeful sampling to select participants based on criteria set forth prior to conducting the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to the U.S. Department of Education, (2013b), there is a need for increased focus on literacy in the United States, especially in Mississippi. For this reason, Mississippi was chosen as a state of focus to conduct this research. Due to the state's transition from using the Mississippi Curriculum Test 2 (MCT2), to the PARCC test, and finally to the Mississippi Assessment Program Test (MAP), I was limited on which test score data could be used for the selection of the sample. Since the accountability model being used in Mississippi changed due to the Mississippi College

and Career Readiness Standards being implemented in the 2013 – 2014 school year, schools were able to retain the letter received in the 2012 – 2013 school year if the test scores were higher. To have students graduate high school and be college and career ready, literacy instruction should continue through all grades and not just be a focus of primary grades. For this reason, I chose to research middle schools within the state of Mississippi.

Initially, I chose to research only schools within the state of Mississippi that were awarded a level A without waiver on the 2014 Accountability Report. However, only four middle schools within the state of Mississippi met the established criteria, one of which had a very low proficiency rate in reading while another is located in the school district in which I worked during the beginning of the research process. The remaining two middle schools had a high reading proficiency rate of 92.1% and 95.9%. The last two identified middle schools were both located in Urban Public School District and both have a high population of black students. Urban Public School District contains 60 schools, 13 of which are middle schools. While the school district as a whole maintains a level D rating, both schools maintained a level A standing on the 2013 – 2014 accountability report. The other middle schools within Urban Public School system have ratings of C, D, and F. However, when soliciting participation, only one of the schools agreed to participate in the study.

Due to the lack of participation, I was forced to reevaluate criteria for consideration of participation in the study. I decided to continue to solicit participation from the top performing middle schools within the state of Mississippi since one of the research questions were to identify literacy best practices. Thus, I changed the criteria

from focusing on only middle schools that were awarded a level A without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 Accountability Report to middle schools that were awarded either a level A or B without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 Accountability Report. Twenty-nine schools from 20 school districts were identified using these criteria. Since the goal was to look at the highest performing schools in reading, schools that had below a 70% in reading proficiency were eliminated. This left me with 20 schools. Again, I eliminated the district in which I worked during the beginning of the research process. This left me with 18 schools within 14 school districts. All fourteen school districts were solicited for participation. Seven school districts agreed to participate in the study. I then resubmitted paperwork to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Southern Mississippi and was approved to conduct research at these seven school districts. At this point, I solicited participation from principals of the identified schools. Altogether four principals agreed to allow me to solicit participation from the middle school language arts teachers at their schools.

### *Schools*

*School 1.* School 1 had a proficiency rate of 95.9% in reading. The school is an International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program School. The requirements for the students to attend this school are that they have an 80% or higher grade average; score Proficient and/or Advanced in Mathematics and Language Arts on State Standardized Tests; and submit teacher recommendation. Students from this area of Urban District 1 that are not enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program will attend one of the other three middle schools based on their school zone. According to the MDE website, 97.45% of students are black and there are no other subgroups recognized on the website.

*School 2.* School 2 is in Rural District 1. The school serves students in grades 5 – 8. The school scored a level B without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 accountability report. School 2 is located within a very small school district. Being that the district is very small, it was acknowledged that the school does not get a lot of federal funding. Additionally, the area in which the school is in a low socio-economic area. The school is the only middle school within the district and serves approximately 1030 students. Demographically, 75% of student population identify as White while 21% identify as Black. At School 2, I interviewed seven language arts teachers (Teachers 4 – 10) and the principal (Principal 2) of the school.

*School 3.* School 3 is in Urban District 2. This school scored a level B without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 accountability report. School 3 serves students in grades 7 – 8. This school has a wide range of diversity, both culturally and socio-economically. Some families are very wealthy and some are very poor. The school is the only middle school within the district and serves approximately 640 students. School 3 has the most diverse student population with 52% identifying as White, 38% identifying as Black; Asian and Hispanic populations each making up less than 5% of the population. I interviewed two language arts teachers (Teachers 11 and 12) and the head principal (Principal 3) of the school.

*School 4.* School 4 is in Rural District 2. The school scored a level B without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 accountability report. School 4 serves students in grades 6 – 8. This school is the only middle school within the district and serves approximately 1050 students. Eighty-six percent of the student population identify as White, 7% Black; Hispanic and multiracial each making up less than 5% of the population. I interviewed



two language arts teachers (Teachers 13 and 14) and the lead teacher (Lead Teacher 2) of the school.

### *Individual Participants*

I asked head principals, lead teachers, and reading teachers at the schools to participate in the study. I sought participation from all middle school language arts teachers at the four schools.

*School 1.* Teacher 1 was a 6th-grade language arts teacher who had been teaching for three years. Teacher 1 was an alternate route educator with prior experience in banking. Teacher 2 was a 7th-grade language arts teacher with eight years of teaching experience. Teacher 3 was an 8th-grade language arts teacher with five years of teaching experience. Lead Teacher 1 had 15 years of experience in education with five years in the current position. Principal 1 had 28 years of experience in education but only one year as a principal at School 1.

*School 2.* Teacher 4 was a 6th-grade language arts teacher who spent her entire career, 28 years, in the same position. Teacher 4 grew up in the community and went to school where she was currently teaching. Teacher 5, a 5th-grade language arts teacher, had 14 years of experience. Teacher 6, a 5th-grade language arts teacher, had 25 years of experience. Teacher 7, a 6th-grade language arts teacher, had 14 years of experience, with two of those years being in 6th grade. Teacher 8, a 7th-grade language arts teacher, had four years of teaching experience. Teacher 9, an 8th-grade language arts teacher, had seven years of experience. Teacher 10, a 7th-grade language arts teacher, had eight years in education. Principal 2 had five years of experience in education with three of those being as principal. His teaching experience was in high school biology. It was

mentioned during the interview that he was taught by Teacher 4 when he was a middle school student.

*School 3.* Teacher 11 had four years of experience in education, two of them being in the current position. Teacher 12 had nine years of educational experience, six of them being in the current position. Teacher 12 also served as the head of the language arts department. Principal 3 had a total of 21 years in the field of education, 11 of those being a principal with two being in the current position. The teaching background of the principal was in language arts.

*School 4.* Teacher 13, a 13-year educator, spent 12 years teaching 6th grade but was teaching 7th grade for the first time at the time of the interview. Teacher 14 had 28 years of teaching experience and has been teaching both 7th and 8th grades for four years. Lead Teacher 2 had 36 years in education and had been in the current position for ten years.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

After receiving permission from The University of Southern Mississippi's Institutional Review Board, the data collection process began. Interviewing participants allows researchers to collect data on subject matter being studied (Lichtman, 2006). I conducted 45-60 minute semi-structured interviews with each participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Interviews took place in a location of the participants choosing as well as the time of their choice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were recorded by two digital recorders and later transcribed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After transcription, the transcripts were sent to each participant for review as a

form of member-check (Lichtman, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I then analyzed the data to determine themes and write-up the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, I used another qualitative method, field notes (Creswell, 2013). I took notes during and immediately after each interview to note any occurrences that might influence the validity of the interview process (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I entered thoughts concerning the interview into a reflexivity journal to take into consideration when analyzing the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Merriam (1998) suggested that the notes taken during the interview process be very detailed to include descriptions of the setting, people, and activities occurring as well as memorable quotes from the participants, observer's thoughts, feelings, and interpretations. Following each interview, I sent the digital recording files to a transcriptionist who then transcribed the interviews and send them back as actual text data ready for approval and review.

I served as the primary instrument in both the data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Due to this, I acknowledged any personal biases that might affect the data collection and interpretation and communicate how their background influenced her interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2013). I was responsive "to all personal and environmental cues that exist" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 193). Additionally, I was also adaptable to any situation that arose during the interviews (Lichtman, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, I clarified and summarized on the spot to give the participants needed clarification, correction, or further elaboration (Lichtman, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, I applied tacit knowledge towards the

data collected in order to create an analysis that presents an holistic representation of the data (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

With qualitative research, I was able to begin data analysis as soon each interview was complete (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, I began data analysis by reading the interviews after the member checks have been completed for accuracy. For each transcript, I developed common themes that occurred throughout each interview. This occurred by grouping the data into sections. The parts were then coded and similar groupings were put together. Themes were then determined. I used the constant comparative method when analyzing the data (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The constant comparative method is the “process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories” (Creswell, 2013, p. 86). This method was used for describing, not just a means of processing data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

#### Trustworthiness

Validation or trustworthiness is known in qualitative research to be an effort to evaluate the exactness of the research findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state the criteria for establishing trustworthiness includes internal as well as external validity, objectivity, and reliability. These terms are also known in qualitative research as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility is described by McMillan and Schumacher (2001) as referring

...to the extent to which the results approximate reality and are judge to be trustworthy and reasonable. Credibility is enhanced when the research design

takes into account potential sources of error that may undermine the quality of the research and may distort the findings. (p. 166)

Transferability “is the extent to which results can be transferred to other settings” (Lichtman, 2006, p. 194). Dependability is described by Lichtman (2006) as the requirement of “the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs” (p. 195). Confirmability is described as Lichtman (2006) as being the most difficult criteria to establish. It “looks at the degree to which results could be confirmed or corroborated by others” (Lichtman, 2006, p. 195). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest establishing confirmability through triangulation and the keeping of a reflexive journal.

Creswell (2013) states that researchers should use validation strategies when conducting qualitative research. Creswell (2013) suggests that researchers use at least two validation strategies to accurately validate the process. During the study, I employed three of the validation strategies suggested by Creswell (2013).

Triangulation is a method suggested by Creswell (2013) to validate the accuracy of a study. Lichtman (2006) suggested that triangulation be used as a means of reducing the subjectivity and increasing the objectivity of a study. This method requires the use of multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide confirming evidence to interpret themes developed within the course of the research (Creswell, 2013). I used triangulation in this study by incorporating multiple data sources. The semi-structured interviews were supplemented with field notes. Field notes were used to notate events that occurred during the interview process as well as comments of the participant’s

behavior during the interview process. These notes were referred to for researcher clarity during data analysis.

Member checking is another suggested strategy made by Creswell (2013) to validate the research. After the transcripts were completed, I sent copies of the transcripts to the participants for them to review. Participants could give clarity to anything that might have been typed incorrectly or been misunderstood during the transcription process. Additionally, during the interviews, I repeated back to the participant what she understood them to say to ensure that the participants were able to recognize their experience as interpreted by the researcher (Merriam, 2009).

I must be aware of any biases that are brought to the research that may impact the results of the research. For this reason, I used the validation strategy that clarifies researcher bias from the beginning (Creswell, 2013). I took notes of these biases and added them within the limitations section of this chapter.

To ensure confidentiality, participants' responses were identified using an assigned pseudonym. Participants' identities or the name or locations of schools were not disclosed. When not in use, the digital recordings, as well as transcriptions, were stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home.

#### Limitations

Due to the recent state of testing in Mississippi, I was not able to use the most recent test scores. I used the 2014 accountability model results to determine which schools to focus on for participants. The accountability model only showed three schools within the state of Mississippi that would fit the requirements set forth by me. Due to this, the sample size is smaller than favorable.

I anticipated that School 1 could maintain a high academic level due to being able to choose which students can attend the school. Although this statement may be true, best practices must be in place for even the advanced students to achieve at such high proficiency rates in reading.

### Qualitative Design and Positionality

Each researcher brings to their research personal biases and thoughts that will affect their interpretation of the research. Creswell (2013) states “all researchers shape the writing that emerges, and qualitative researchers need to accept this interpretation and be open about it in their writings” (p. 215). For this reason, I will identify my positionality about the research.

Education in my family was not always a priority but for some reason I was different. The journey has not been very easy but I am proud to say that I have made it this far and finding my dissertation topic has been a journey within a journey. I am thankful for the strong reading teachers I had in my early grades. I attribute my success in high school and college to them.

Being the youngest of three children, my parents dealt with my education much differently than they had my older sister and brother. At the beginning of my tenth-grade year, my parents pulled me out of the private school that I was in and allowed me to homeschool myself. They were tired of the politics of private school. Being that we lived in a small rural community, public school was not an option at that time. I was tired of the drama in high school so being pulled was probably the best thing for me.

I completed my tenth – twelfth-grade years of homeschooling in a two-year time frame and went to college early. My brother, however, went to college the year before I

did and dropped out the next year. College just was not in the cards for my brother or sister. Looking back, I see that a lot of their issues with not being prepared for college probably began in early elementary school and particularly had something to do with reading and comprehension.

While in college, I studied elementary education. I was more interested in the reading aspect and tended to do better in that area than I did with math. I graduated in 2006 with my bachelor's degree in elementary education and began teaching kindergarten at Lucedale Elementary School. I have to say that this is when my love for literacy really began. My eyes began to open to how important it was for children to learn how to read at an early age. I completed my master's degree at William Carey University during my first year teaching.

During my second year of teaching, I worked at Utica Elementary and Middle School as a special education teacher for fourth graders. My heart became broken for the students who desperately wanted to learn but really struggled to grasp the concepts of fourth grade. My time at Utica was limited. I resigned after 6 months to go overseas and teach English in South Korea. While my time there was short as well, I did learn that people struggle with the English language in other countries as well. However, I feel as though the motivation to learn was completely different overseas than it was in Mississippi.

After spending some time away from teaching, I began working in Rankin County School District at McLaurin Elementary School teaching fourth grade. McLaurin Elementary is a title one school in a rural area. I struggled initially to find my grounding in teaching again but with the help of my mentor, I finally found my way. I had one



student in fourth grade that read on a first-grade level while others read on various grade levels. I could not believe the gaps that the student reading on first-grade level had and he was not even a special education student. I began working with him daily on reading and comprehension skills. He progressed through the tier process and eventually was entered into the special education program. I was amazed at the growth he made that school year. The struggle with this one student made me wonder what was missing with this child's education.

Two years later, I began teaching second grade at McLaurin Elementary. The struggle with reading was very difficult. I had students with various degrees of comprehension and decoding capabilities. We had daily reading groups to help move students along with their reading and comprehension. I stayed in second grade for two years but realized I needed a change.

I moved to Richland High School (RHS) where I taught eighth grade English. RHS is a title one school with approximately 900 students in grades 7 – 12. My first year at RHS, I was assigned, by my standards, probably the roughest group of eighth-grade students. I had students who read on various grade levels. The apathetic attitude of some of the students really discouraged me. Some really tried and wanted to do their best but others did not appear to care at all about their academics.

When I began my education at the University of Southern Mississippi, I was working in a self-contained classroom in a lower elementary setting. I moved to teaching middle school a year after I began my coursework and began to develop a passion for literacy. I noticed so many struggling students in the middle school and my heart ached for them. I did everything that I could to make them love reading and employ the

strategies that I was teaching. However, I noticed that administration did not always ask for the opinions of teachers when creating professional development topics.

Throughout my teaching career, teaching literacy has been the common denominator. I see now that students struggle in all grades if they are not given a solid literacy foundation early in their schooling. As Dr. Meeks at Blue Mountain College used to say, “You must read to succeed” (personal communication, August 19, 2002). I feel that reading is the beginning of success in a student’s academic career.

In conclusion, my background in education has led me to the ideas for my dissertation. Eventually, I would like to become an instructional leader in some capacity. I would like very much to help teachers develop best practices to improve student achievement within their classrooms. When I began at The University of Southern Mississippi three years ago, I was not concerned with my background and how it has changed my view on literacy. However, now I feel that my background has drawn me to my dissertation topic. I feel that without my family experiences, I would not be where I am today and that I would not be the same person that I am today. I want this research to help future educators be prepared to teach students literacy strategies in the most effective way possible.

### Summary

I conducted a qualitative study using a general qualitative approach. The study was conducted to explore how administrators in Mississippi influence literacy in middle school through the selection and promotion of professional development for teachers as well as how the professional development helps teachers incorporate best practices for literacy in their classrooms (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I sought

participation from principals, lead teachers, and reading teachers at four middle schools in Mississippi. Those that agreed to be interviewed by me were interviewed using a digital recorder through a 45-minute semi-structured interview protocol. In addition to interviews, I took field notes and recorded thoughts into a reflexivity journal to support the data collected during the interview. The data was analyzed using the constant comparative method as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, member checking, and clarifying researcher bias. My positionality influenced the dissertation topic and was identified to help the reader understand how I interpreted the data.

## CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

### Introduction

The main purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how administrators in Mississippi influence literacy instruction in middle schools through the selection and promotion of professional development for teachers. A secondary purpose was to determine how professional development helps teachers incorporate best practices for literacy instruction in their classrooms. In this study, I interviewed three administrators, two lead teachers, and fourteen middle school language arts teachers and analyzed their responses using the constant comparative method.

### Review of Research Questions

Participants were interviewed with the goal of answering the following research questions:

1. What knowledge do administrators have about what are identified in the literature as the most effective literacy strategies for middle school students?
2. What is the process for determining literacy professional development needs within the school?
3. What input do teachers have regarding what professional development occurs?
4. Which professional development activities support best teaching practices?

### Participants

Participants were interviewed from four schools in four Mississippi school districts. Schools were identified based on their student achievement scores on the 2013 – 2014 accountability report. Schools identified were either a level A or B without

waiver on this report. Additionally, schools solicited for participation had a high percentage of students achieving “advanced” or “proficient” in reading. This meant that the schools were ranked as high achieving during this time.

### *Participant Information*

The participants interviewed in this study included 19 educational professionals employed at four different schools within four different school districts. They held the positions of teacher, lead teacher, and administrator. Their years of experience ranged from 3 to 36 with a mean of 14.37 and a median of 13, while the number of years they held in their current positions ranged from 1 to 28 with a mean of 4.56. The 11 teachers who participated in the study provided language arts instruction at the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade levels. One also served as a technology foundations teacher. Two teachers also served as social studies teachers. Two lead teachers participated, as did the three administrators, who were all principals. Table 1 provides information about the participants including the school at which they are employed, their years of experience in education, years in their current position, and their job title. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, they are referred to as teacher 1, 2, 3, etc., lead teacher 1 and 2, and administrator 1, 2, and 3. Likewise, the schools are referred to as school 1, 2, 3, and 4 instead of being named.

Table 1

*Participant Information*

District	School	Study Name	Years of Experience in Education	Years in Current Position	Job Title
Urban District 1	1	Teacher 1	3	3	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Teacher 2	8	4	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Teacher 3	5	3	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Lead Teacher 1	15	5	Lead Teacher / IB Coordinator
		Administrator 1	28	1	Principal
Rural District 2	2	Teacher 4	28	28	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts & Social Studies Teacher
		Teacher 5	14	2	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Teacher 6	27	2	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Teacher 7	14	2	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts & Social Studies Teacher
		Teacher 8	4	4	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts & 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Technology Foundations Teacher
		Teacher 9	7	4	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Teacher 10	8	2	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Administrator 2	6	3	Principal
Urban District 3	3	Teacher 11	4	2	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Teacher 12	9	6	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Administrator 3	21	2	Principal
Rural District 4	4	Teacher 13	13	1	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Teacher 14	32	4	7 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher
		Lead Teacher 2	36	10	Lead Teacher

This table include information about the participants that participated in the study, including pseudonym and job title.

*School 1.* School 1 was rated as level A without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 accountability report. School 1 is an international baccalaureate middle school serving grades 6 – 8. It serves students from all over the district. However, students had to apply and be chosen if they were to attend the school. Due to the school being an international baccalaureate middle school, there are specific criteria for those attending. Total enrollment for School 1 is approximately 390. The student population at School 1 is 95% black and 5% other races.

At School 1, I met with the three language arts teachers (Teachers 1 – 3), the head principal (Principal 1), and the international baccalaureate program coordinator, who also served as the lead teacher (Lead Teacher 1).

The teachers of School 1 all had less than 8 years of teaching experience, while the lead teacher and principal each had 15 years of experience in education each. Teacher 1 was a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts teacher who had been teaching for five years; all but one year was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Teacher 2 was a 7<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts teacher who had been teaching for eight years, with three years in the current teaching position. Teacher 3 was an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts teacher, who had been teaching for three years in the same position. Lead Teacher 1 also served as the International Baccalaureate program coordinator and had been in the field of education for 15 years. Principal 1 had 28 years of experience in education with a background in language arts.

*School 2.* School 2 is in Rural District 1. The school serves students in grades 5 – 8. The school was a level B without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 accountability report. School 2 is located within a very small school district. Since that the district is

very small, it was acknowledged that the school does not get a lot of federal funding. Additionally, the school is located in a low socio-economic area. The school is the only middle school within the district and serves approximately 1030 students. Demographically, 75% of student population identify as White while 21% identify as Black. At School 2, I interviewed seven language arts teachers (Teachers 4 – 10) and the principal (Principal 2).

Teacher 4 was a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts teacher who spent her entire career, 28 years, in the same position. Teacher 4 grew up in the community and went to school at School 2. Teacher 5, a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts teacher, had 14 years of experience. Teacher 6, a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts teacher, had 25 years of experience. Teacher 7, a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts teacher, had 14 years of experience, with two of those years being in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Teacher 8, a 7<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts teacher, had four years of teaching experience. Teacher 9, an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts teacher, had seven years of experience. Teacher 10, a 7<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts teacher, had eight years in education. Principal 2 had five years of experience in education with three of those being as principal. His teaching experience was in high school biology. Teacher 4 mentioned during her interview that Administrator 2 was taught by her when he was a middle school student.

*School 3.* School 3 is in Urban District 2. This school was a level B without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 accountability report. School 3 serves students in grades 7 – 8. This school has a wide range of diversity, both culturally and socio-economically. Some families are very wealthy and some are very poor. The school is the only middle school within the district and serves approximately 640 students. School 3

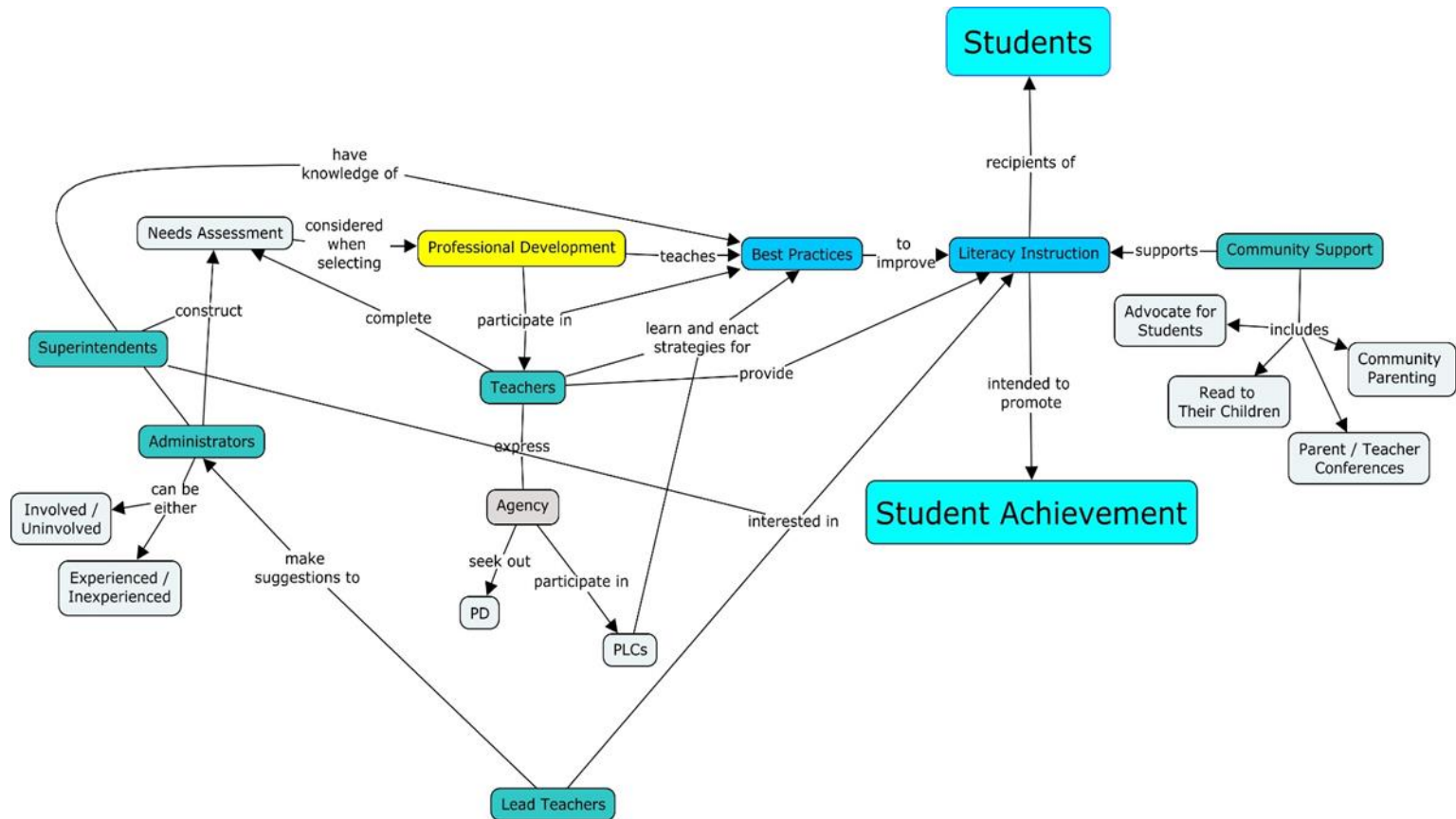


has the most diverse student population with 52% identifying as White, 38% identifying as Black, and Asian and Hispanic populations each making up less than 5% of the population. The researcher interviewed two language arts teachers (Teachers 11 and 12) and the head principal (Principal 3).

Teacher 11 had four years of experience in education with two of them being in the current position. Teacher 12 had nine years of educational experience, six of them being in the current position. Teacher 12 also served as the head of the language arts department. Principal 3 had a total of 21 years in the field of education, 11 of those being a principal with two being in the current position. The teaching background of the principal was in language arts.

*School 4.* School 4 is in Rural District 2. The school was a level B without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 accountability report. School 4 serves students in grades 6 – 8. This school is the only middle school within the district and serves approximately 1050 students. Eighty-six percent of the student population identify as White, 7% Black, and Hispanic and multiracial students each makeup less than 5% of the population. I interviewed two language arts teachers (Teachers 13 and 14) and the lead teacher (Lead Teacher 2) of the entire school.

Teacher 13, a 13-year educator, spent 12 years teaching 6<sup>th</sup> grade but was teaching 7<sup>th</sup> grade for the first time at the time of the interview. Teacher 14 had 28 years of teaching experience and had been teaching both 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades for four years. Lead Teacher 2 had 36 years in education and had been in the current position for ten years.



*Figure 1.* Concept Map Describing Data Analysis.

This figure describes the data analysis completed by the researcher.

## Organization of Data

I used a constant comparative approach to analyze the data in this study. Through analysis of the interviews, I identified two central themes in the data. These concepts, along with the ancillary findings, are shown in Figure 1. The concepts include professional development and best practices in literacy instruction. These concepts are tied together through the experiences expressed by the participants in the study, including administrators, lead teachers, and teachers. While community members were not interviewed during the study, participants identified their support of the schools as a factor that also directly impacts the focus of the study. This information arose naturally during participant interviews but does not directly speak to the research questions presented in this study. As such, it is included in an “ancillary findings” section later in this chapter. These research themes in addition to the experiences provided by participants and others contribute to providing answers to the research questions developed at the beginning of this study.

The central focus of this study was professional development. The participants and central themes all work together to increase student achievement through professional development. Professional development is used as a means of educating teachers on best practices, which helps to improve literacy instruction, which in turn increases student achievement.

Professional development is selected by administrators using teachers’ needs assessments as well as other extraneous factors. Though administrators choose which professional development should occur at their schools, administrators can be

experienced or inexperienced in literacy, as well as involved or uninvolved in terms of literacy instruction. These factors affect the type of professional development that occurs at the school. Lead teachers also influence what professional development occurs at the school by their communication with the administrators. Although teachers take part in professional development at the school level, teachers can also seek out their own professional development and participate in PLC groups, which also provide strategies for best practices in literacy instruction. Community support also assists literacy instruction at the school level by advocating for students; they also read to their children and take part in parent/teacher conferences, as well as participate in community parenting.

In this chapter, I will first discuss the findings in terms of the major themes: professional development and best practices in literacy instruction. While discussing professional development, I will identify how the participants described effective professional development. I then describe best practices in literacy instruction as described by participants. Finally, I describe the importance of best practices in literacy and how it impacts professional development. At the end of this chapter, I will discuss ancillary findings, which do not directly address the research questions, but are interesting and should be considered by future researchers.

### Professional Development

As stated, effective professional development occurs to help teachers learn new techniques to improve their literacy instruction, thus improving student test scores. Professional development was described in the study as being praxis based,

research based, data driven, content area specific, and collaborative. When discussing professional development with participants, mention of PLCs and other professional development also occurred. The following is an overview by study participants of professional development in terms of the study.

Teacher 2 stressed the importance of effective professional development, stating it is “essential for every educator to have.” Teacher 8 communicated the importance of effective professional development, “It’s anything that’s going to help me career wise. Anything that can help me grow.” Teacher 1 described effective professional development as being based on the “needs of the teachers.” Administrator 2 stated that effective professional development was something that could be taken back and used immediately in the classroom.

### *Praxis*

Green, Hibbins, Houghton, and Ruutz (2013) describe praxis as being “personally transformative learning that involved collective action in the wider socio-cultural context of teaching.” Teacher 1 mentioned that presenters of effective professional development do not lay out what to do but guide the participants through the process of doing the task. Teacher 5 stated that professional development should be interactive. Teacher 14 reiterated the point stating:

I need something that I can use in my classroom. I need something interactive. When I go to professional development, I’m looking for something that I can bring back to my students. Not just sitting down and listening to

something but something that I can use. I tend to look for things relating to ELA literacy.

Lead Teacher 1 articulated that effective professional development should be praxis as well:

Anything that I can get at work and actually use it, something that's logical and practical for me. You know it's not necessarily something that I'll just sit and get but it's active and ongoing.

Teacher 7 stated she wanted something that she could take back into the classroom and help influence student achievement. Teacher 5 articulated, "give me ways to help children." Teacher 11 stated that effective professional development "needs to directly touch your kids and it needs to benefit them."

#### *Research Based*

Teachers mentioned that effective professional development should be research-based and practical, as well as relevant. Teacher 2 stated that those in charge of professional development are not on the front lines and just throw topics out to teachers that are not useful. The topics presented to the teachers must be relevant to the needs of the participants. Administrator 1 stated that professional development should be "data driven" and should reflect the teacher's needs to help the students. The ideas expressed by the study participants support the findings of Fletcher, Grimley, Greenwood, and Parkhill (2011), that school-wide professional development should be tailored to meet student's needs.

Teachers at School 3 research instructional methods prior to using them in the classroom. Teacher 11 stated:

We were trying to trudge through literature circles and we wanted it to be done right. We were looking at all kinds of things and we would just take notes. “Okay I’m going to do this on Tuesday and do this on Wednesday.” And then the next week we would come back and say, “This didn’t work. This is how the kids handled it. We need to go back and change this.”

Teacher 11 stated that each nine-week period the PLC groups at her school do a different book study. She continued on to state that effective professional development is something that should come from an “accredited source.”

#### *Data Driven*

Participants during the study mentioned that professional development should not only be research based but data driven as well. Administrator 1 stated that effective professional development begins by pre-assessment. She stated that after she looks at the state assessment data she has her teachers comb through the data in cumulative records to see what issues have been identified. She implied that from these two data sets they determine where to focus their efforts and what professional development should occur. Teachers from School 3 stated that they use the data to drive instruction at their school. Administrator 3 communicated the importance of using data. She explained that the data drives the instruction at her school. Teachers use their data to determine if a strategy is working or if something needs to change to increase student achievement. Not only does

the data drive the teaching instruction at School 3 but it also drives the professional development that occurs at School 3.

*Content Area Specific*

The teachers expressed that they wanted ways to help students and that effective professional development would directly touch the students in the classroom. Others stated that it should be specific to their subject area. Teacher 3 stated that she went to a district professional development on interventions. She stated that it was useful but not relevant to her job. At the beginning of the school year, administrators at School 2 conducted 30-minute professional development sessions for the teachers. Among these professional development sessions was a classroom management session. Teacher 4 mentioned that it was nice to have a refresher on the topic of classroom management. While Teacher 10 stated that this session, along with another on the school's computer management program, were ineffective, Teacher 8 expressed mixed feelings:

There was a really good professional development about the difference in teaching a child that comes from middle class versus a child that comes from poverty. That was something that was really pertinent to our area. But nothing was English Language Arts specific and that would have been useful to start out the school year.

Lead Teacher 2 mentioned something similar occurring at the beginning of the school year at School 4, but, instead of the administrators doing the sessions, the teachers presented things that they had done in their classrooms. Both teachers interviewed at this



school were presenters during this session. One mentioned that she felt like it went well and was excited to be a participant in the next session.

### *Collaborative*

Collaboration among peers was noted as being important. Teacher 10 mentioned that she liked to hear what other people were doing in their classrooms. She also stated that she went to an outside professional development over the summer that was beneficial in the sense that she got to collaborate with her coworker, but ineffective in the sense that the other schools in attendance were from a lower performing school district and thus there was no effective collaboration among schools. Administrator 2 mentioned that he relied on a team-based approach concerning professional development. He stated that his teachers are knowledgeable and if they say it works, he relies on that knowledge. He also relied on his teachers to let him know if they need help from him.

*PLCs.* An example of collaborative professional development would be PLCs. Administrator 3 stated that in her eyes effective professional development would be “PLCs, authentically done.” This affirms the findings of the research conducted by Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) that for professional development to have an influence then it should last for a span of 30 – 100 hours over a 6 – 12 month period. Over the span of the school year, PLCs occur continuously in School 3. The teachers constantly meet to research best practices to increase student achievement.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) were mentioned by nine of the teachers from the four schools when discussing effective professional development. Teachers from School 3 appeared to be fully invested in PLCs. They meet daily with their PLC

groups. Each day they have a different purpose to accomplish within the meetings. These PLC meetings are held at the department level. Teacher 12 stated that PLC meetings are the best resource a teacher can have at their school. Though she was not a huge fan of them at first, now Teacher 12 stated she knows that when problems arise they can be worked out together within their PLC group. Teacher 12 recapped a scenario between herself and another teacher in her team:

My next door neighbor, she says every morning, “I’m just trying to hold my head above the water.” I’m like “Listen PLC is your best resource because that gives us the time to have a conversation. You know, if you have no idea what you’re doing tomorrow it’s cool - there’s three of us. We’ll work it out and we’ll figure it out together.”

This does mean, however, that their group must be closely knit for them to work effectively. Administrator 3 described what this looks like at School 3:

I tell everybody that I interview, “You’re going to show every bit of your data. Because with like a common assessment, we’re going to lay it across the table and if your kids are totally outscoring mine, I’m going to have to put my big girl panties on and say, ‘What did you do differently? I got to come watch you. What are you doing?’”

PLCs at School 4, however, work completely different than at School 3. These PLC meetings are not controlled at the department level, but instead are random and occur with those that are off during that planning period. This means that during their off block language arts teachers might meet with a science or social studies teacher but not

necessarily another language arts teacher. These meetings do not occur daily but only a couple times a month.

Teachers from School 1 meet on Mondays to plan in their PLC group. Teacher 2 describes the Monday PLC meeting:

We have all Language Arts teachers off 2<sup>nd</sup> period, all you know Math teachers off 3<sup>rd</sup> period they have it like that on Mondays. So that's when we're able to come together and we may talk about what objectives we're going to be covering you know or what we're going to be doing in our classrooms.

This teacher did not consider meeting in a PLC group to be professional development but described it as collaboration:

It's kind of like us just collaborating to see what we can do... us sharing sheets you know like if we do . . . or if one of us is working on theme because we've been doing interactive notebooks this year. So if one of us has a pull out like a sheet for theme that the kids can do interactively and cut out to put in their interactive notebooks, we'll share that type of stuff. We share across the board.

Teachers at School 3 research everything together during their PLC time. If data shows their students are struggling with a problem, then as a PLC group the teachers will research different strategies. They would then try out the strategies and come back together to discuss results of those strategies. They would continue with this method until they arrived at a solution to the problem. The teachers at this school were encouraged to research everything that they did in their classrooms. This initiative was

brought about by Principal 3, who encouraged teachers to continue their own learning through PLCs.

*External Professional Development.*

Participants from all schools mentioned that they do seek outside professional development both through research, as previously mentioned, as well as professional development sessions. The teachers mentioned that they can attend these professional development sessions with the permission of the administrator. Some of these professional development sessions were described as effective while others were ineffective. Teacher 5 stated that at School 2 they are allowed two professional development days a year. Teachers at School 2 can go to trainings that are provided for free through East Mississippi Center for Educational Development (EMCED). When an event occurs nearby, Administrator 2 lets his teachers know so they can sign up if it is needed. Having EMCED nearby is convenient for the school district because they do not receive a lot of federal money; thus, professional development is not as readily available.

Teachers at School 3 stated that money was not an object concerning professional development. They are required to share with their coworkers if they go to any outside professional development. Teacher 11 stated that generally if the reason for going to the professional development is justified, then teachers can attend. Teacher 12 stated much the same as Teacher 11 but said that their administrator has 4 questions that must be answered before they are able to attend professional development, “How does it tie to the student? How does it tie to the curriculum? Does it show standards? You know things like that. And if it follows what our vision is, we go.” When asking whether teachers

could go to outside professional development, Administrator 3 gave the following response:

They do research on it, they bring it back to the group, and they hash it out. What does this look like in our classroom? You don't really have to go, what I have found is that you don't have to go somewhere. When you go somewhere, the problem with that is that it's a fly by and there's no consistency. There's no follow-up to it. But if you say we're going to research best how to best teach ELL. Like right now social studies, they are struggling with, we have so many new ELL students that they want to be able to reach these kids. And so after they get through with Todd Whitaker's book, they're all going to start researching best practices in ELL. And so that one day a week, they'll come back to the table and say this is what I've learned. This is what I'm going to try. And so it's all about trial and error.

Administrator 3 did not answer the question initially but stated later that if teachers went to an outside professional development, they would be required to share that information with the rest of their PLC group upon their return.

Teachers from School 4 described various outside professional development opportunities. Teacher 14 has been a part of what she describes as very effective professional development through the University of Southern Mississippi. She stated that she grew so much through this professional development. She stated that she could bring what she learned back to her school and help further the curriculum at School 4.

## Best Practices in Literacy Instruction

Professional development gives teachers opportunities to learn best practices in order to increase student achievement. Examples of best practices in literacy instruction were given during the process of interviewing participants. Additionally, participants also explained the importance of best practices in literacy instruction.

### *Examples of Best Practices in Literacy Instruction*

To effectively understand what sets these schools apart in terms of student achievement, participants were also asked to describe effective literacy based best practices. The following is a synopsis of best practices identified by the participants. Although the following best practices were not identified during the literature review, they were mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews and are noted as being important.

Teacher 1 discussed the idea of ZAP being a best practice that she used in her classroom:

I researched a homework strategy called ‘Zeros Aren’t Permitted’, so the kids know what it as ZAP. It’s basically where you allow them the flexibility to get additional help. Sometimes students don’t understand the work and that’s why they’re not doing the work and sometimes it’s because they actually don’t want to do the work and maybe other times it’s because they don’t have the resources to do the work. So you provide them with an atmosphere so that you can figure out, “Hey we’re going to eliminate all those possibilities of other distractions and we’re going to work on this together on a team,” and it’s not a punishment.

Teacher 1 utilizes this strategy in her classroom to help ensure her students practice the strategies that they are learning in her classroom.

Close reading was mentioned by several of the participants, especially those from School 2. While it was not directly stated that close reading was researched and shared among the group, it can be inferred that this was done because of the use of the strategy is widespread among the language arts classrooms at the school. Teacher 7 articulated the following about close reading:

It makes them more aware of what they're reading. As they're reading it, rather than just going to the question and you know answering it, they're looking for there's little different symbols that they can mark as they're reading. If they think it might be important, they circle it or underline it or highlight it or whatever. Or if they are unsure about what a word is or what it means, they put a question mark. It really requires them to think as they're reading not just typically reading something and then forgetting what it is. You know they dig deeper into the reading. They remember a lot more that way than just reading through it and going straight through the questions. It causes them to dig a little deeper.

Another strategy mentioned by teachers of School 2 was annotation. Teacher 10 explained that she begins the year by teaching her students how to annotate the text using sticky notes. She explained another strategy that she uses in her classroom as well:

We use a method called SIFT where they're looking for symbolism, shifts, imagery, figurative language and we're marking it with sticky notes, and theme.

We're marking it with sticky notes that they can use on their test and the test revolves around some of those questions so you know.

She continued to explain that this enables the students to break down the text and understand what they are reading.

Among other responses, participants also mentioned that it was important for students to have something that piqued their interest. Teacher 12 stated, "it always really helps when it's something exciting or something fun." It is not always obvious what will pique their interest, however. As mentioned by Administrator 3 when talking about literature circles, students at her school spent weeks discussing the Serbian refugee crisis when she thought they would rather want to read about something else:

A lot of choices were happening with the kids. In fact, there was one, in particular, it was right when the Serbian, the refugee camp happened. I bet they stayed on that for four weeks. The kids were just so invested in what was happening; mainly because the stories that were coming out were about the kids, kids their age. And so they had a choice of, I mean it was like basketball, there were all kind of topics that 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade would want to read and they were all going for all those refugee conversations. That was very interesting. But that's again they want to write about it. They wanted to talk about it. They wanted to read about it. And it only lasted for about a month, but it was a month longer than I thought that it would.



Lead Teacher 1 stated that students need to be motivated at times:

You just have to find out how to motivate those, because you know some kids are just really really smart and they're lazy like they won't turn in work and it's like you're so smart but they just feel like they know it, so you kind of have to find what's going to reach them.

In addition to giving students something that interests them, Teacher 1 stated that best practices should have some real-world connection. Teacher 4 expressed that she tries to make the real-world connection with the students posing the question, "Why am I learning this?" The main way teachers connected the curriculum to the real world were through thematic units. Teacher 13 talked about a thematic unit used in the past on the Great Depression. She stated that the class read poetry, novels, and non-fiction articles on the topic. They use "Discover Kids" magazine to engage the students in learning about the Great Depression. Teacher 13 stated that using the magazine allowed students to visualize what they were learning about.

#### *Importance of Best Practices in Literacy Instruction*

Best practices help to improve literacy instruction and effective literacy instruction then increases student achievement. Without effective professional development, teachers are not able to stay abreast of current best practices that are needed in order to improve student achievement (Hagood, Provost, Skinner, & Egelson, 2008). Research has shown that improved literacy results in decreased discipline issues in schools, decreased dropout rates, and greater success in higher education (Irvin, Meltzer, Dean & Mickler, 2010). Professional development has an influence on student

achievement (Wenglinsky, 2000). Participants mentioned similar thoughts during the research of this study.

Lead Teacher 1 stated, “if you teach a student how to attack an informational text or annotating margins or highlighting information, that goes a long way in any subject area not just in language arts.” Administrator 1 discussed the importance of literacy in all subject areas as well:

Even in a math class, the math teacher has to do the same thing because much of the problem that is presented is not given in numbers; it’s given in scenarios. So we have to make sure that a student has strong literacy skills in all subjects.

Teacher 6 believes fully in literacy instruction, “If a child can read, there’s no limit to what they can achieve.” Administrator 3 stated, “the higher Lexile level you can read, the higher salary you will receive.”

Administrator 3 continued to tell me how all teachers in her school were reading teachers, no matter the subject area:

Everybody in this building knows that they’re a reading teacher. If you ask that social studies teacher across the hall, “Are you a reading teacher?” he’s going to tell you “yes.” He’s going to tell you, “I teach my kids how to read like a historian.” You go ask that science teacher or that social studies “are you a literacy teacher?” and she’s going to say “yes,” he’s going to say “yes, I teach mine how to read like a scientist.”

Teacher 12 described how important literacy is by stating, “Everything falls back on it. Even in math, if you can’t read the problem, you can’t analyze what it’s asking you to do.

Then literacy is still the root of the problem.” When talking with Teacher 4, she mentioned that the other subject areas at School 2 are all encouraged to teach reading. Literacy instruction at all schools was thought to be essential.

Effective professional development goes hand in hand with best practices in literacy instruction. Without effective professional development, teachers would lack essential knowledge to help increase student achievement through their teaching.

Teacher 6 described effective professional development:

When you spend the time at the workshop, and you develop knowledge. You interact, you’re able to share with other teachers and talk about whether it worked, how it works. You know things that are very applicable.

This type of professional development creates an environment where teachers are able to learn new strategies from each other in order to help their students. As mentioned previously, there are several types of professional development that promote effective literacy practices. Many participants implied that effective professional development was important to their growth as a teacher.

#### Ancillary Findings

After analyzing the data, I found there were several groups of individuals in the study that influenced the role of professional development within the school system. These individuals support improved student achievement and helped to reinforce professional development efforts. The following information arose naturally during participant interviews but does not directly speak to the research questions. However, it was found to be interesting by me and could be beneficial to future researchers.

## *Students*

The individuals mentioned in this study work to ensure the students are given the best education possible to ensure their academic success. During the process of interviewing, I heard great things about the students and their success. Teacher 4 stated, “A lot of our children are self-motivated.” She continued to discuss the students at her school by stating that they want to be the best; she attributed the competition to helping them achieve at a higher level. Teacher 1 attributed the self-motivation of the students at her school to the fact that there is a dismissal piece to the program at her school. Students at School 1 could possibly be sent to other schools within the district if they do not perform at a certain level due to the school being an International Baccalaureate Middle School.

Participants from Schools 1, 2, and 4 mentioned rewards help the students to be motivated to do their best. Teacher 1 mentioned that students are given dances and dress out days for academic performance. Teacher 4 stated that students are given a chance to go on reward trips to encourage students to do their best. Teacher 10 stated, “The kids are definitely motivated by some bribery. Like for example, this past time they took the test, if they made advanced or proficient we’re taking them to High Heaven [a sports facility].” Teacher 13 discussed incentives put forth by administration to encourage attendance as well as high academic performance. She gave an overview of some incentives in the following:

We have the Pride Club for kids who are really succeeding academically and are keeping their behavior in check. They go on a field trip every 9 weeks. So two

weeks ago they started out with the kids who are already in Pride Club and then they got to go bowling.

Students are extrinsically motivated, which causes them to be successful at school. This motivation allows teachers to engage students in learning, thus increasing student achievement. Students without motivation might not learn as well because they are not able to see what is in it for them. Students, especially middle schoolers, do not tend to see the bigger picture. Motivation helps with this issue.

#### *District Administrators*

Administrators at the schools and district office have an indirect impact on student achievement. Teacher 8 stated that you never know when the superintendent may be walking down the hall in the school visiting. Teacher 8 also attributed success to district office administration:

The central office, they're visible in all three schools. And I think that that's an advantage that we have that larger schools do not. The kids get to know not just their teachers but the administrators as well. All the kids know our superintendent. He walks down the hall and high fives the kids all the time. And it's just building a rapport with them because students want to work for people that they like and that they're encouraged by.

Teacher 14 attributed success at her school to collaboration among teachers as well as the support of administration:

On the administration level, and the district level . . . very supportive . . . always providing us with tools that we need technology wise. And also any new practices

out there that are getting good results, and I really think that and implementing and all the years of experience and because we do collaborate and we help each other. Even our new teachers, that's a success.

Support from district and school level administration allows teachers to voice concerns and receive necessary help, thus improving student achievement. This support allows teachers to gain knowledge from professional development sessions within their school so they can learn new strategies to increase student achievement.

### *Teachers*

The teachers in this study directly influence the learning of the students. Lead Teacher 1 stated that the teachers are what make the school perform so well:

Teachers . . . their dedication to the integrity of the program. There's a lot of extra stuff that goes on beyond the IB [International Baccalaureate] teachers. Teachers doing the context, um making their lessons real world applicable, um a learning community, it's communication . . . I don't know what parts that goes along with and I think also that the it's the school culture. You know we're like a family here, and we want to see each other succeed and so we support each other a lot.

Administrator 1 affirmed this fact by stating, "I think that our staff and the culture that they create about the nature of how the business is done to educate on children."

Administrator 1 also told how data helps improve her students learning:

Our teachers own the data, and they own the results of it even if it's something in a pacing guide that we didn't get to. We take ownership of that, why didn't we get to it? What are some ways that maybe we should have been able to scaffold the

material and linking those connections or maybe if we do a connectional map, that there are ways that we could have clustered these things together. I think that's another way for us to make sure that our teachers can ensure that we can close those gaps to improve literacy as the informational skills that we need in literacy.

Teacher 7 attributed the academic success of the school to high expectations of the students and the teachers. Teacher 8 stated that the teachers are very invested in the school and this makes the school so successful. She stated that a lot of the faculty and staff at the school were students at the school at some point in time.

Teacher 13 attributed the success of School 4 to the support of the staff and administration, "I think that everybody's willing, administration and teachers and staff, even I mean all the staff. They're all conscious of the outcome that we need to have our students be successful." She stated that the school works to do what is best for the students:

We're all out to help each other. Like you know if I have a kid, and I say, "I don't know what to do with this kid. I need some help." I can go to my fellow teachers or my administrators, without judgment, and say, "Help me. Do something for this kid because I'm not, you know I'm not getting there."

Collaboration among teachers and the efforts made by individual teachers help to increase the achievement of students in their classrooms. When teachers work together through professional development sessions, students are benefited.

### *Lead Teachers*

The value of the lead teachers at the schools was noted as important. Lead teachers at both School 1 and School 4 carry out administrative duties such as leading professional development, observing teachers, and assisting when problems arise. Lead Teacher 1 played a key part in conducting professional development at School 1. Teachers at School 1 stated they received professional development from Lead Teacher 1 on the required IB standards. While talking with Lead Teacher 1, she described an effective professional development session that she implemented with the teachers at School 1. She took the teachers through the development of an interdisciplinary unit plan. This session took place over a couple of different sessions throughout the school year. She started with showing the teachers an interdisciplinary unit plan and then moved into creating one. After the teachers created what they thought to be effective, they had a discussion with their peers about what should be changed. The valuable part of this lesson, per Lead Teacher 1, was that the teachers could get instant feedback from each other about what should be changed within the plan.

While it was clear that Lead Teacher 1 was very involved with the planning and implementation of professional development at School 1, the role of Lead Teacher 2 in professional development at School 4 was not as clear. Lead Teacher 2 had been in the same position for 10 years. Among her administrative duties as lead teacher, she stated that she supported teachers and administrators with needs of curriculum. However, when asking her about professional development, she did not describe her role in it at all, nor could she remember the last time she had modeled a lesson for a teacher. She stated that



the last time she modeled a lesson was at least 3 or 4 years ago. It was evident that the role of this lead teacher was more suited for administrative purposes.

While Lead Teacher 1 actively supported teachers and developed professional development sessions, Lead Teacher 2 played more of an administrative role within the school. The role of lead teachers in the terms of their impact on student achievement through professional development is unclear and should be further examined.

### *Community Members*

Community members were viewed as an important aspect to three of the four schools in the study. Teacher 4 attributed success of School 2 to it being within a small school and community; the investment of the teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders; and the self-motivation of the students. She stated that though they are a poor school, the businesses within the community donate as much as they can to help support the school. Teacher 6 also stated that the small community has a very close-knit relationship and the support from the district office contributes to the success of the school.

Teacher 8 mentioned that the school is one of the main employers of the city and is “the heart of the community,” therefore, everyone wants it to succeed. She stated that the community members are just as invested in the school as the teachers. Teacher 9 also talked about the community and how it affects student achievement:

I think part of what makes the school good is so many of our students it’s just a little town. Their parents went here. You know, it’s a community. And you have the community dynamic of it. Everyone knows everyone so I think that makes a

huge difference. Expectations are really high. And I'm one of those teachers, I believe if you set your expectations high the kids will have something to reach for and eventually they will.

Teacher 10 was not originally from the community where she worked so she described the community and parental involvement as craziness. She stated that to get parents to come to the school she worked at prior "you would have to drag them kicking and screaming" but that was not at all like it was at School 2. She jokingly described the community as the town of Mayberry where everyone knows everyone and parents are involved in the school by bringing snacks and reading to the students. She stated that the community "rivals behind the school." Administrator 2 repeated the idea that the community supports the school and has very high expectations. He stated that the expectations of the community are high because they want the best for their students.

School 3 additionally attributed a lot of their student success to the community support. Teacher 11 stated described the community as helping when needed:

If we need something, we have so many members of our community that just say, you know if it's a book that we need that the school can't afford or something or you know the money is going other places, they say "how many do you need? What can we get you?" The PTO helps us with any school supplies; any projects and they're in our schools. We have parent volunteer tutors that are in our schools multiple times a week helping us help kids.

Teacher 12 stated that a local university helps in any way possible and describes it as being a resource to the school:

I know a lot of times we'll do an activity or we'll read an article and there are so many people at the university that we can connect with. Last year we had a professor's kid who wrote two books on Hitler and the holocaust. And we had him come in and talk, so it's real life for them so using them as a resource for you know their own the people there so you know also like having the math and science institute there we can beg, plead, borrow, and steal from them.

Administrator 3 also discussed the aspect of community support. She stated that they help in any way that they can and that the parents have high expectations of their students. She described some of the activities put on by the community to support kids from the low socio-economic backgrounds:

I house love packs in this building because I have space. And so we send kids home with backpacks and food on the weekend. It's not uncommon to see community members. Every Friday we have club day and so there's a whole group of men that come and mentor other young men in this group.

She goes on to describe club day:

We have a club that meets on Fridays and volunteers that come in and help kids. We have volunteers that are willing to come. People with kids from the university come and work with our kids. They build relationships with our kids. They started at the little school. I was not here when it happened, but I'll have parents come in volunteers come in and they have been with the same person, the same kid, since like second grade.

She continued to tell me that these volunteers act as advocates for students who may need them. She described the relationship of one advocate with a student:

I can think of one person in particular. She knows everything about that kid. And she is like an advocate for that entire family, so it's not just her helping that one child. Like she's not even at my school anymore. She went with him to the high school. He's a 9<sup>th</sup> grader now. So she comes in, she would tutor, she would check, she would check his grades. That was her kid. And so she'll be with him for the next four years and then she's going to pick somebody else and then that's going to be the way. But that has been a sustained difference with those kids. With those kids who are the most at risk.

Administrator 3 continued to describe how the community has helped with the school:

The university is a great partnership because the pharmacy students will come over and they get in a lecture center and show different things to our science classes. The Junior Auxiliary will call and say "Hey we're doing a book drive. What do you want?" And we have a very strong PTO presence here. I mean there's a lot of ties that we have with community members. I mean they're invested.

The support of the community allows teachers and administrators to do what is needed for students. While community members do not have a direct link to professional development, they support the teachers and administrators at the school level. This support is substantial in terms of student achievement in the school.

## Summary

I sought to answer the four research questions at the beginning of Chapter IV. I collected data from field notes as well as participant interviews. After interviewing participants, I analyzed responses using a constant comparative approach. The data was reported under the themes of professional development, best practices, and literacy instruction. Professional development was described as praxis, research based, data driven, content area specific, and collaborative. Additionally, participants mentioned PLCs and other professional development during the process of interviews. Best practices were described as being group study or trial and error. Participants thoughts of literacy instruction were also discussed. These concepts are tied together through the experiences expressed by the participants in the study, including students, administrators, lead teachers, and teachers. Furthermore, individuals in the study who made unanticipated contributions were community members. The findings from these results are discussed in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

### Introduction

In this study, I set out to explore how administrators in Mississippi influence literacy instruction in middle school through the selection and promotion of professional development for teachers. A secondary purpose was to determine how professional development helps teachers incorporate best practices for literacy instruction in their classrooms. This chapter first reviews the methods and procedures used for data analysis. From there, I provide a discussion of the results based on the research questions, recommendations for practice and future research, and lastly conclusions that could be drawn from the results.

### Methods and Procedures

This study was conducted in four school districts located in Mississippi. Schools assigned a grade of A or B without waiver on the 2013 – 2014 accountability report were considered for participation. Twenty-nine schools were identified based on this criterion. I eliminated schools that had anything below 70% proficiency in the reading. I also eliminated schools that were within the school district in which she worked during the research. After elimination, 18 schools within 14 school districts remained. I sought participation from all school districts. Permission was granted from seven of the school districts. I then sought permission from IRB to complete the study. After permission was granted from IRB, I sought permission from the administrators at the identified schools. I received permission from four schools to conduct research at their school. I interviewed three administrators, two lead teachers, and fourteen middle school language

arts teachers and analyzed their responses using the constant comparative method. This brings the total number of participants to nineteen.

### Discussion

The purpose of this section was to discuss the findings of the study, which resulted from the analysis of qualitative interviews conducted as well as field notes. The findings were categorized based on the recurring themes that emerged throughout the study. The discussion was organized around the following research questions:

1. What knowledge do administrators have about what are identified in the literature as the most effective literacy strategies for middle school students?
2. What is the process for determining literacy professional development needs within the school?
3. What input do teachers have regarding what professional development occurs?
4. Which professional development activities support best teaching practices?

#### Discussion Related to Research Question One

The following section provides an overview of the discussion related to research question one, which asked, “What knowledge do administrators have about what are identified in the literature as the most effective literacy strategies for middle school students?”

Question one directly ties to the theme “best practices in literacy” that emerged from data analysis. The 14 teachers described numerous best practices that are used in their classrooms. By using information provided by the teachers and looking for

similarities amid information given by the administrators, I found the answer to this first research question. The information given by administrators was varied.

Kohansal (2015) stressed the importance of principal knowledge by stating, “one of the important findings of this research revealed how important a principal’s knowledge of reading instructional practices is in his or her management and decision making” (p. 632). Mackey, Pitcher, and Decman (n.d.) stated that principals must be abreast of current instructional strategies. Roney and Coleman (2011) identified that “principals who press for academic success do so by establishing learning environments that encourage students to work hard and to meet high standards” (p. 22). The following discusses the knowledge of best practices exhibited by each administrator interviewed.

#### *Administrator 1*

Administrator 1 stated that she considered herself knowledgeable in the area of literacy because her prior experience was in language arts. When talking with Administrator 1, she gave examples of best practices as discussed by teachers in the study, “At this level, we have to make sure that our students have something that is rich and engaging and exciting for them to read.” She continued to state that previewing the text was essential so that every student is engaged. She also mentioned that literacy circles are an integral component to the language arts classroom. Frey & Fisher (2011) suggested that students should be given chances to work with other students during reading instruction. Literacy circles, as mentioned by Administrator 1, would be considered a best practice because it allows students to work collaboratively.



### *Administrator 2*

Administrator 2 was described by five of the language arts teachers at School 2 as being one that researches and sends information to teachers when pertinent information is found. Administrator 2 stated that he was not as knowledgeable in literacy as he wished he were. He explained that his background was in science and while he was good at English in school, he tends to rely more on a team-based approach when decisions for planning occur. Although he does not consider himself to be as knowledgeable as the other administrators interviewed during the study, he mentioned several best practices. Administrator 2 stated he took a trial and error approach when determining what needed to be done for the students. He explained this:

We'll go out and see what's worked with those kids before and if that's worked with them then we'll carry on with that but if we figure out that that's not working because for whatever reason then we're going to switch it and try something different.

He also described close reading as being a best practice that occurs typically within the 5th and 6th grade at his school. He described close reading as reading a text multiple times and taking it apart with the use of a highlighter. Research (Cuevas, Irving, & Russell, 2014) suggested that literacy rates can be increased by having students read on their own and then follow through with monitoring their comprehension. This coincides with close reading being a best practice in literacy instruction.

Another best practice Administrator 2 described was Socratic seminar, also known as text-based seminar. He stated that this type of practice can lend itself to peer

tutoring, which really benefits all students. The benefit to peer tutoring is that the tutor must apply the knowledge learned in order to teach the struggling student. To teach someone, the tutor must first understand the concept to be taught. The struggling student benefits by receiving help from a peer instead of a teacher. The idea of collaborative learning is supported in the literature as a best practice as well (Klinger & Vaughan, 1999; O'Brien, 2007; Rojas-Drummond, Mazon, Littleton, & Velez, 2014).

### *Administrator 3*

Administrator 3 considered herself to be knowledgeable in the area of literacy, not because of her background in literacy, but because she sits in the PLC meetings with her teachers and listens to what they say. Administrator 3 described best practices as those that are research based as well as data driven. Administrator 3 discussed how her teachers are encouraged to research ideas before trying them in the classroom. She also talked about the use of literacy circles within the language arts classrooms; this was an example of a research-based best practice (Klinger & Vaughan, 1999; O'Brien, 2007; Rojas-Drummond, Mazon, Littleton, & Velez, 2014). Students at School 3 are very familiar with their test data. Administrator 3 encourages the students to know where they are and where they need to be. The teachers are encouraged to use the data to guide the best practices in order to get the best results for all students.

Although the three administrators had varying backgrounds as well as years of experience, they all had some knowledge of best practices within their schools. This knowledge of best practices helps their students achieve at a higher rate. Research found during the literature review supports close reading (Cuevas, Irving, & Russell, 2014),

peer tutoring, and literacy circles (Klinger & Vaughan, 1999; O'Brien, 2007; Rojas-Drummond, Mazon, Littleton, & Velez, 2014) all being best practices in literacy instruction.

### Discussion Related to Research Questions Two and Three

The following section provides an overview of the discussion related to research question two and three, which asked, “What is the process for determining literacy professional development needs within the school?” and “What input do teachers have regarding what professional development occurs?”

Professional development was discussed in length throughout the interviews with administrators, teachers, and lead teachers. Among all interviews, the same process was mentioned: a teacher's needs assessment is provided for teachers to complete at the end of the school year. After completion, this needs assessment is given to administration to use when making decisions regarding professional development for the next school year. Research by Au (2013) suggests that teachers are more likely to respond to professional development and gain continuous improvement when they are allowed to take part in creating the change. What better way to be a part of the change than to choose what professional development is needed? While teachers are officially only asked once a year what their needs are, many teachers mentioned that they were comfortable asking the administrators for help when necessary. The lines of communication appeared to be open at School 2. Teacher 5 stated that she would send Administrator 2 an e-mail if she needed help with anything. I asked others if Administrator 2 ever asked what their needs were in terms of professional development. Teacher 6 responded, “No, because I think

we feel comfortable going and asking him. We have a very open line of communication with our administrators here.” Teachers 7, 8, and 9 said much the same as Teacher 6. Teachers at School 3 stated that along with the needs assessment, their professional development needs are communicated through the department chair to administration. The teachers mentioned that the communication between administration and teachers is very open. These teachers appeared confident that if a problem arose they would be given guidance and direction needed to solve the problem. Administrators use data to determine which professional development should be offered at their school. This aligns with research provided by Hayes and Robnolt (2007) that states “data-driven professional development can assist school leaders in their efforts to provide appropriate and effective development for their teachers.” (p. 105).

While it does appear that teachers have a say in what professional development is offered at their schools, other factors must also be considered when determining which professional development will be offered the next school year. For example, Administrator 2 stated that he sits down with the superintendent of the school district to determine a budget for the next school year. Because School 2 is within a very small school district, funds are limited for professional development. Administrator 2 stated that they use the high school English teacher as a source of professional development. He also mentioned that they received grant money and as a result had to have training on classroom management. He indicated that this was probably unnecessary but was required nonetheless.

To answer research question two, teachers complete a teacher's needs assessment at the end of each school year. This assessment is then utilized by administration to determine which professional development should be offered the following school year. Concerning research question three, teachers have a say in what professional development is offered at the school. However, other factors should be taken into consideration when making these decisions. Prior research did not uncover how teachers' needs should be formally assessed. However, I found it disappointing that administrators only officially asked their teachers once a year what needs they had in terms of professional development. In spite of this, the majority of the teachers interviewed stated that for the most part the professional development that occurred actually met their needs. Nevertheless, administrators should formally ask more often what teachers' needs are.

#### Discussion Related to Research Question Four

The following section provides a discussion related to research question four, which asked, "Which professional development activities support best teaching practices?" Teachers in the study described effective professional development as being research based, data driven, collaborative, and interactive. Prior to discussing the components of professional development activities, I must discuss an abnormality of the participants and the research.

##### *Participant Abnormality*

The schools in the study appeared to have a broader definition of professional development than that in the literature. School 3 had daily professional development

sessions called PLCs. This appeared to be abnormal in comparison to the other schools in the study. Although teachers at School 3 met daily, teachers at School 1 met weekly in PLCs, while teachers at School 4 met when there was a need. Teachers at School 2 did not mention how often they met with their teams. This abnormality leads me to believe that the schools in study went above and beyond what the literature stated, possibly leading to a higher rate of student achievement.

### *Research Based*

Porche, Pallante, and Snow (2012) suggested that professional development should be founded on scientifically based research in order for it to be effective. Effective professional development should be researched prior to implementation. Teacher 2 stated that those in charge of professional development are not on the front lines and just throw topics out to teachers that are not useful. If professional development has been researched, then the topics presented to the teachers would be relevant to their needs. Administrators should consult with their teachers to see what needs there are, as well as what needs the students have. Greenwell and Zygouris-Coe (2012) suggested that for teachers to be effective, they must be able to apply research-based strategies and stay current in teaching practices. If teachers are receiving professional development that has been researched and is being taught in an effective manner, teachers should be able to go back to the classroom and apply those research-based strategies.

### *Data Driven*

Administrator 1 stated that professional development should be data driven. Research also supports the idea that professional development should be data driven

(Hayes & Robnolt, 2007; Good, Miller, & Gassenheimer, 2004). Administrator 3 stated that teachers and administrators at School 3 use the data provided by student assessments to determine what needs to be retaught. Teachers at School 3 use time during their planning block to submerge themselves into the student data and research what methods could effectively help their students. Administrator 3 stated:

They (the teachers) go in the data room and they answer those four essential questions: What do we want kids to know and be able to do? How are we going to measure it? What are we going to do if they don't learn it? What are we going to do with it if they already know it?

Student data is a very important component to developing effective professional development for teachers.

#### *Collaborative*

Teacher 10 stated that she liked professional development where she could hear ideas of others in her subject area. While not a lot of teachers within the study used the word “collaborative” when describing effective professional development, nine of the teachers mentioned that great ideas were gained through their PLC meetings. PLC meetings are collaborative meetings where teachers share ideas to increase student achievement. Teacher 12 mentioned that PLC groups really help the teachers at her school. Teachers at all four schools mentioned some type of collaborative professional development that is used. This type of professional development appeared to be more prevalent in School 3 where Administrator 3 described effective professional

development as being “PLCs, authentically done.” It was obvious that Administrator 3 spearheaded the idea of PLCs occurring within School 3.

### *Interactive*

Teachers discussed the idea that effective professional development should be interactive. Teacher 1 mentioned that presenters of effective professional development do not lay out what to do, but they guide the participants through the process of doing the task. Thus, it is interactive. Teacher 14 also stated she needed something interactive. She stated that effective professional development should be run as an effective lesson would be:

That [effective professional development] is where the teachers or the participants are engaged as well as what you would see in a classroom...thinking maps, group work. Basically, if you run that professional development a lot like you would a good lesson in a classroom, it's effective. If you go in there where something is being projected and it's being read to you, I mean don't insult me I can read you know.

In reference to research question four, effective professional development should be research based, data driven, collaborative, and interactive. When teachers are given quality professional development there is a greater chance that they will be able to take the knowledge gained back to the classroom. The goal is that the knowledge gained in the professional development sessions will be turned into effective teaching practices that will increase student achievement. Literature researched prior to the study indicated much the same as which was discovered during this study. Research indicates that



professional development should be research based, data driven, collaborative, and interactive.

### Implications

This study added to the literature in educational leadership. To effectively support their teachers, administrators should seek knowledge in the area of literacy. Having this knowledge will ensure teachers are being led effectively. It will also ensure that appropriate professional development practices are occurring to support best practices in literacy instruction.

As stated previously, professional development should be research based, data driven, collaborative, and interactive. This study provides support to prior research about effective professional development methods. This study may also support the theory that administrators who know about literacy best practices and those that research ways to increase student achievement are more likely to have a higher influence on the increase of student achievement in the area of literacy. This cannot, however, be concluded, but is purely a hypothesis and would need to have further study.

There were some surprises that came about because of this study. I had some personal biases during this study that proved to be completely inaccurate. The research conducted in this study was originally geared to look at just level “A” schools but there were only two that met the predetermined criteria. This was a disappointment to me and I felt like I would not gain as much knowledge from conducting research at schools that were level “B.” However, this proved to be completely inaccurate.

School 2 is located within what might be considered as a poor school district. However, the teachers at School 2 have such high expectations of their students that it would be difficult not to thrive. While interviewing participants at School 2, I learned that the community was incredibly supportive of the school. I know from prior teaching experience that this is not the case in many schools. However, I feel that this community support helps the school to thrive. Many of the teachers interviewed at School 2 attended the school when they were in middle school. Many participants stated that they came back to School 2 because they wanted to help students succeed as they were made to succeed. Not only do the teachers have high expectations of the students, but the community has high expectations as well. One of the teachers at School 2 described it as “Mayberry” meaning that everyone knows everyone. If a student is not performing as expected, teachers and administrators have the support and knowledge of the community to help remedy the situation. Teachers stated that parents come to parent-teacher conferences and come to read to students. Community support clearly makes a difference at School 2.

Community support was also noted as a strong component to the success of School 3. School 3 is in a different financial situation than the other participating schools. School 3 has the financial backing of the community. School 3 receives financial support from the local university as well as the local community. Teacher 12 stated that there was never a need for anything at the school. If the community was made aware of something that was needed, the school would receive it. This community did not only provide financial support to School 3 but appeared to have an active presence in

the school as well. There are mentoring programs that occur, as well as community advocates that come in to provide support for the students and families who need it. The university sends students to read to the students as well as students to come in and provide science lectures and demonstrations.

### Recommendations

At the beginning of this study, I was limited on which research I could use to identify high performing schools. Mississippi has been in a transition period for the past few years in terms of state assessment as well as the state accountability model. This limited what I could use as a foundation for my research. Since this situation has changed and there is a more current accountability report that could be used as a foundation for research, I would encourage future research on similar research questions to see if the same results would occur.

As a result of the unforeseen community support, I would urge future studies to research the impact of community support on academic achievement of middle schools. It would also be interesting to see whether the high schools in these districts had the same level of community support that the middle schools appeared to have.

Administrators should seek to communicate with their teachers on a consistent basis concerning their needs for professional development, not just address this once a year with a needs assessment. Additionally, teachers should be open and honest with their administrators concerning what needs they have to effectively teach their students. An open line of communication by both parties would increase the chance of the needs getting met. Teachers should seek other means of professional development outside of

the school when an issue arises. They should share this information with their coworkers as they may be having the same problem in their classroom. Lead Teachers should be accessible to the teachers and open to share ways to increase student achievement.

## Conclusions

### *Primary Purpose of the Study*

My primary purpose for this study was to explore how administrators in Mississippi influence literacy instruction in middle school through the selection and promotion of professional development for teachers. From the beginning, I felt like I knew that administrators did influence literacy instruction but the question then became how. This research helped me to see that effective administrators do not have to have a background in all subject areas and they also do not need a lot of money for professional development in order to increase student achievement.

Administrators can either influence literacy in a negative or a positive way. Administrators make the choice to be either uninvolved in the learning that occurs at their school, thus influencing literacy in a negative way or they can become involved in the learning that occurs at their school thus influencing literacy in a positive way. Administrator 1 took a hands-off approach to professional development and allowed the administering of professional development up to Lead Teacher 1. Administrators 2 and 3 took a hands-on approach concerning professional development at their schools. Although Administrator 2 did not have a background in English Language Arts, he was considered knowledgeable by the teachers at his school because he constantly researched for ways to help his teachers. Administrator 3 had a background in English Language

Arts and this did help her as an administrator; however, she, like Administrator 2, was constantly researching ways to help her students as well as teachers. Both Administrators 2 and 3 influence literacy in a positive way because they choose the right professional development to help their teachers.

Effective administrators listen to the needs of their teachers; they have open conversations with teachers to see what is needed to grow the students in their schools. Effective administrators and teachers are going to use student data to guide professional development and best teaching practices. Effective administrators are researchers as well; they are constantly looking for ways to help increase student achievement.

#### *Secondary Purpose of the Study*

A secondary purpose for this research was to determine how professional development helps teachers incorporate best practices for literacy instruction in their classroom. Without professional development, teachers would reach an impasse in prior learning experiences. Professional development allows teachers to explore research-based, data driven, collaborative, interactive practices that they will be able to take back to their classroom and transfer into their teaching.

Administrators should not rely primarily on their teaching background but should seek to research best practices in all areas to ensure the teachers of their schools are meeting the needs of the students. Just because an administrator has a background in English Language Arts does not mean that they are effectively helping the teachers. Administrators must go past the role of manager and supervisor and seek to be an

instructional coach if they truly want students at their school to achieve at a higher rate of learning.

As our world constantly evolves and changes, so do the students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In order for teachers to reach the needs of 21<sup>st</sup>-century students, teachers must stay abreast of current teaching techniques. Effective professional development sessions must regularly occur to ensure teachers are learning current techniques. Without professional development experiences, there would be limited ways for teachers to stay current ineffective teaching practices. Teachers must seek professional development sessions out if their needs are not being met at their school.

Lead teachers should remember the purpose of their job is to help the teachers. If they are not providing the necessary guidance and support to teachers to increase student achievement, they are not fulfilling their purpose. Administrators and lead teachers should work together to provide professional development for the teachers of their school.

## APPENDIX A Initial IRB Approval Letter



**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**  
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001  
Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | [www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board](http://www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board)

### NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.  
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 16032909  
PROJECT TITLE: The Influence of Administrators on Literacy Instruction Through Promotion and Selection of Professional Development  
PROJECT TYPE: New Project  
RESEARCHER(S): Lucy Johnston-Josey  
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology  
DEPARTMENT: Educational Leadership and School Counseling  
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A  
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval  
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 04/18/2016 to 04/17/2017  
**Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.**  
**Institutional Review Board**

## APPENDIX B Second IRB Approval Letter



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

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**NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION**

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.  
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: CH16032909

PROJECT TITLE: The Influence of Administrators on Literacy Instruction Through Promotion and Selection of Professional Development

PROJECT TYPE: Change to a Previously Approved Project

RESEARCHER(S): Lucy Johnston-Josey

COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology

DEPARTMENT: Educational Leadership and School Counseling

FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 07/08/2016 to 07/07/2017

**Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.**

**Institutional Review Board**



## APPENDIX C Teacher Interview Protocol

### Teacher Interview Protocol

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you been in your current position?
3. How many years of experience do you have in the field of education?
  
4. Your school has a very high percentage of advanced and proficient students based on 2013 – 2014 test scores, in your opinion, what makes your school unique?
5. How are students encouraged to maintain such high academic performance?
  
6. How would you define “best practices” in literacy instruction?
7. Describe some best practices in literacy of your classroom.
8. Which of these best practices are used in your classroom? How?
9. Describe a typical literacy lesson in your classroom.
10. Do you consider your administrators to be knowledgeable in the area of literacy instruction? Why or why not?
11. How often does administration visit your classroom?
  
12. Describe effective professional development.
13. Give examples of times that this type of professional development has been used at your school.
14. How is professional development decided upon at your school?
15. Are you ever asked what needs you have in terms of professional development?
16. In your opinion, does professional development at your school meet the needs of the teachers? Explain.

## APPENDIX D Administrator Interview Protocol

### Administrator Interview Protocol

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you been in your current position?
3. How many years of experience do you have in the field of education?
  
4. Your school has a very high percentage of advanced and proficient students based on 2013 – 2014 test scores, in your opinion, what makes your school unique?
5. How are students encouraged to maintain such high academic performance?
  
6. How would you define “best practices” in literacy instruction?
7. Describe some best practices in literacy of your school.
8. Which of these best practices do you see routinely in the language arts classrooms at your school?
9. Describe a typical literacy lesson in your school.
10. Do you consider yourself to be knowledgeable in the area of literacy instruction? Why or why not?
11. How often do you visit the language arts classrooms?
  
12. Describe effective professional development.
13. Give examples of times that this type of professional development has been used at your school.
14. Describe the process for determining professional development at your school.
15. Do you ever ask what needs there are in terms of professional development?
16. In your opinion, does professional development at your school meet the needs of the teachers? Explain.

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