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# Self-Efficacy of Middle School Teachers Responsible for Teaching Struggling Readers

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# Self-Efficacy of Middle School Teachers Responsible for Teaching Struggling Readers

Alison Taylor Burdick, EdD

University of Connecticut, 2015

## **Abstract**

This study answers questions about school reform by utilizing professional learning for teachers who lack self-efficacy to teach reading to middle school students. The findings included higher self-efficacy and lower burnout rates for teachers. Implications from this study include a model for professional learning that recognizes teachers as adult learners and a system of professional development that provides daily opportunities for teachers to work together over problems of practice.

Self-Efficacy of Middle School Teachers Responsible for Teaching Struggling Readers

Alison Taylor Burdick

B.S., University of Connecticut, 2000

M.A., University of Connecticut, 2001

A Dissertation

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APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Education Dissertation

Self-Efficacy of Middle School Teachers Responsible for Teaching Struggling Readers

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2015

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## **Problem Statement**

Research and evaluation shows a continuing differential in literacy skills between more and less affluent students, many of whom are students of color. This problem is particularly pernicious in middle schools, where many teachers though teaching language arts do not see themselves as literacy instructors or lack the necessary skills to teach reading effectively.

Urban educators face the challenge of raising achievement scores higher and faster than their suburban counterparts to ensure that their students are able to compete in a global economy (Noguera & Wang, 2006). The data from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress ("NAEP Data Explorer") highlights that, on average, White students out performed Black students by 8.7% on tests that assessed skills in the areas of Reading and Mathematics. In Connecticut, the gap was larger with the scores of White students averaging about 10 percentile points higher than the scores of Black students on both the Reading and Mathematics tests ("NAEP Data Explorer"). This gap is noteworthy because of the 42 states that met the standard for reporting, only three states reported a bigger gap in scores by race than Connecticut. Moreover, this achievement gap between Black and White students is increasing as diversity in urban classrooms increases ("A Plan to Close the Achievement Gap")

In order to achieve closing the achievement gap in literacy, teachers need to provide instruction that meets the needs of all learners, especially those minority students who are underperforming as compared to their White peers. And yet, most of the national efforts to address the problem have been focused on early reading instruction targeted to primary grades. However, the research demonstrates that students who are reading on grade level in primary grades need continued literacy instruction in order to become proficient readers in middle school (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

“Research shows...that students who receive intensive, focused literacy instruction and tutoring will graduation from high school and attend college in significantly greater numbers than those not receiving attention. Despite these findings, few middle or high schools have a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy across the curriculum...Students require teachers who are knowledgeable in the subject they teach and can convey subject matter effectively.” (Joftus, 2002, p.9)

Students in middle school transition from reading simple, fictional texts to more complex text layered with content area vocabulary (Sturtevant, 2003). Furthermore, national longitudinal data show that students who leave the third grade reading below grade level will continue to read poorly in high school (Peterson, Caverly, Nicholson, O’Neal & Cusenbary, 2001; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Although many middle school educators recognize the importance of literacy, they do not see literacy instruction as the job of secondary educators. Moreover, secondary English teachers rarely have more than one course in how to teach reading, leaving them unprepared to teach students who are reading below grade level (“Standards for Middle and High School”). As such, it is often left to administrators to wrestle with how to best prepare teachers to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms (Elmore, 2000). In the meantime, newer teachers, specifically those with lower self-efficacy, leave the field of education citing lack of support and emotional burnout as main reasons for leaving (Hong, 2012).

Middle school teachers are more likely than elementary teachers to doubt their personal teaching efficacy (Marachi, Gheen & Midgley, 2002). Teacher education programs and licensure focus on either elementary or high school programming, leaving middle school teachers untrained to meet the specific needs of their students (Slavin, Cheung, Groff & Lake, 2008). Fewer than one in four middle school teachers have received specialized training to teach at the middle school level before they begin their careers (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2002). As such, it is likely that few middle school teachers conceptualize their instructional role as literacy educators and those that do may lack the necessary skills to actualize



this understanding. In response, I propose that additional and high quality professional development is needed to help ensure that middle school teachers have the necessary knowledge and skills to address our current literacy crisis.

The process of gaining an understanding as to how teachers feel about their ability to instruct students after experiencing a specialized professional development intervention has multiple benefits. First, such findings could help administrators to look critically at the professional development currently being provided to teachers in the district and whether it is encouraging teacher efficacy. Second, if teachers report a high degree of improvement in self-efficacy in response to the intervention then the administration may consider further replication. Alternatively, if teachers do not report any change in their self-efficacy then administration can use the results to reinvestigate what aspects of professional development need to be changed or enhanced to achieve this result. Therefore, regardless of the outcome, the information gained from this study of how teachers rate their self-efficacy after receiving a specialized professional development program will help the overall learning environment of this school to better meet the needs of students.

## Literature Review

In this section I provide background regarding middle school literacy gaps, the need for improved professional development for teachers, the role of mental models in teacher learning and blending adult learning and professional development. I do this to provide the context of the literacy problem as well as to identify the flaws in the current means to support teachers.

### *Middle School Literacy Gaps*

Students who leave middle school with poor literacy skills have a more limited chance of graduating high school, attending college or having a satisfying career (Slavin, Cheung, Groff & Lake, 2008). Joftus and Maddox-Dolan (2003) reported that in the United States, approximately 6 million secondary students read far below grade level and about 3,000 students drop out of U.S. high schools on a daily basis. Further, students who have low literacy levels are effected not only in Language Arts classes, also struggle in content area courses that are literacy based (Buly & Valencia, 2002).

The middle school literacy crisis is more prevalent in high poverty, high minority schools than other schools. Balfanz, Spiridakis and Neild (2002) review of this data reported that it is not unusual for 70% of the eighth-graders in high, poverty, high-minority middle schools to comprehend at “below basic” levels. 50% of these eighth grade students, from high-poverty, high minority schools graduate from high school in five years. Further research shows that many of these students drop out of high school before the eleventh grade due to the students’ inability to acquire new learning independently by reading high school level text (Neild & Balfanz, 2001; Neild, Stoner-Eby & Furstenberg, 2001).

At the same time many struggling readers in middle schools falter, middle school teachers are more likely than elementary teachers to doubt their personal teaching efficacy (Marachi, Gheen & Midgley, 2002). Teacher education programs and licensure focus on either elementary or high school programming, leaving middle school teachers untrained to meet the specific needs of their students (Slavin, Cheung, Groff & Lake, 2008). Fewer than one in four middle school teachers have received specialized training to teach at the middle school level before they begin their careers (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2002). As such, it is likely that few middle school teachers conceptualize their instructional role as literacy

educators and those that do may lack the necessary skills to actualize this understanding. In response, I propose that additional and high quality professional development is needed to help ensure that middle school teachers have the necessary knowledge and skills to address our current literacy crisis.

### **The Need for Improved Professional Development**

Principals in underperforming middle schools are charged with improving student achievement in reading by increasing the effectiveness of teachers to meet the needs of all students. However, the research literature provides these leaders with limited guidance on *how* to provide meaningful professional development to change the practices and beliefs of teachers. Although there is a great deal of research about what good professional development should look like, existing practices often neglect the research. (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006)

At the same time principals may feel frustrated as they try to provide effective support to teachers, as teachers look to professional development programs, they are also often disappointed with the ineffectiveness that characterizes most programs (Cross & Hong, 2012). Despite comprehensive research on effective approaches to professional development to enhance teachers' professional learning (See Pianta, 2011 for a review), the format most commonly used is a one-day workshop. This approach has a limited impact on changing teacher practice (Laine & Otto, 2000) and fails to build teachers' skills to support individual differences in students' learning needs.

Indeed, research finds that typical professional development opportunities are ineffective because they are offered on limited basis, the content of the workshop is not connected to the

specific work of the teachers, nor is the content intellectually challenging or supported by research (Sullivan, 1999; Hodkinson, 2005). Most professional development opportunities remain fragmented, poorly aligned with curriculum and instruction, and unable to meet teachers' needs (Borko, 2004). However, districts continue to invest in resources, in-services and other superficial forms of professional development which disregard what we know about how adults learn (Kyriakides, Creemers, & Antoniou, 2007).

Alternatively, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005) report that a culture that supports values and learning include collaboration, peer support, explicit focus on teacher learning, supported opportunities for growth outside of school, time to reflect on learning and problem solving with colleagues are effective approaches to professional learning. Similar studies confirm that successful professional development programs engage teachers in identifying a contextualized problem of practice and planning together on how to address it (Boyle, Lamprianou, Boyle, 2005; Bullough, Burbank, Gess-Newsome, Kauchak, & Kennedy, 1998; Ericsson & Charness, 1997; Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis, 2005) Therefore, in order to effectively change what happens in schools, reform efforts must address core processes of teaching and learning for adults as well as for children.

### **The Role of Mental Models in Teacher Learning**

If professional development is to effectively engage teachers as active learners, it needs to meet teachers where they are both in terms of their skills and how they understand and conceptualize their role (i.e., address their mental models). The field of adult learning emphasizes how mental models impact the way individuals interact with one another, the choices they make and how they learn (Sheckley, Lemons, Kehrhahn, Bell, and Grenier, 2008). Mental

models as defined by Seel (2001) are “inventions of the mind that represent, organize, and restructure domain specific knowledge” (p.408). To increase a teacher’s proficiency, the mental model must evolve from a simple model to a more complex, mature model (Kakkarainen & Ahtee, 2005). This research recommends that teachers unearth their mental models, reflect upon new experiences and contrast the experiences to their original mental model.

There is a strong relationship between teachers’ mental models (what they believe) and the instructional practices teachers use in their classrooms (how they teach) (Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 2001; Marks, Mathieu & Zaccaro, 2000). In related research, Eckert and Bell (2005) conducted a study of 10 farmers in the Northeast and concluded that prior knowledge, values and beliefs influenced how the farmers processed information to solve problems. However, teacher beliefs are difficult to define and study because they are not easily observable (Johnson, 1994).

For teachers to collectively shift their mental models, they must have an environment that supports their learning (Sheckley & Bell, 2005). The creation of norms of professionals puzzling together over a rich problem of practice creates an environment that can sustain the learning of each individual member of the group. As the team processes this information it allows for individuals to engage in quality experiences that create new or enhanced learning (Sheckley & Keeton, 2001). Research shows that the teams that work together best have a norm of engaging constructively in controversy over key experiences (Alper, S., D. Tjosvold, et al. 1998).

Experiences shape mental models and mental models guide an individual’s interpretation of an experience (Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hofstadter, 2001; Eckert & Bell, 2005). Good learners have a constant, dynamic interaction between new experiences and mental models that are based on prior experiences (Hofstadter, 2001). Therefore, it is critical to a

school trying to enact systemic change, to recognize the experiences of its teachers. A school could accomplish this by providing teachers with the time to share lessons that were successful as well as difficult situations in their classrooms.

When mental models align to the new experience, learning is regulated by the self-determination and self-regulation processes of the individual. (Eckert & Bell, 2005) The more individuals are self-determined and self-regulate the better able they are to accept new learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Activities that enable individuals to draw upon established patterns or create analogies will enable the individual's mental model to align to the new experience (Seel, 2006; Hofstadter, 2001). This self-regulation provides individuals with the opportunity to build upon identified strengths and weaknesses through a plan, monitor and evaluation process (Ertmer and Newby, 1996; Deci and Ryan, 2000). Reflection yields abstract thinking as a byproduct, which enables the learner to deepen the existing mental model (Kolb, 2001, Sheckley, 2003). In summary, Sheckley et al. (2007) emphasized that professional learning is most successful when it engages individuals in environment which supports their learning through experiential activities. Limited research exists, however, on how this process occurs as it relates to teachers shifting mental models to instruct the diverse learning needs in an urban classroom.

### **Blending Adult Learning and Professional Development: The TRIO model**

Research on how adults learn best, as outlined by the TRIO model, (Sheckley, Kehrhahn, Bell, & Grenier, 2007) provides a helpful perspective on ways to enhance professional learning to improve teachers' skills and how they conceptualize and understand their roles (i.e., their mental models). The TRIO model indicates that three factors contribute to adult learning: Factors related to the individual (e.g., the mental models they use to guide their practice); the

environment in which they work (e.g., the supports and challenges offered by their work setting); and the types of experiences in which they engage. Prior research provides ample insights into the characteristics of the individual (e.g. mental models) (Sheckley et al., 2007) and the role of the environment (e.g., constructive controversy) (Gadgil, Nokes-Malach, & Chi, 2012). ). Prior research, however, does not delineate the specific experiences that enable teachers in urban settings to develop the skills they will need to address the achievement gap in diverse classrooms.

One of the critical components of the TRIO model (Sheckley et al., 2007) is the emphasis on experience as the basis for all learning. Experiences shape mental models which guide an individual's interpretation of events (Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hofstadter, 2001; Eckert & Bell, 2005). The richer an adult's experience the more able her brain will be to determine patterns based on these prior experiences (Seel, 2006). Learners who participate in an experience-based process identified by Kolb attain knowledge that is more available and transferable than do learners who participate in more formal processes of instruction.

Informational learning needs to be part of quality professional development. According to a study conducted of 23 practicing nurses, Rossi (1995), most learning of their happened while the nurses were working through trial and error, with half reporting that their learning occurred through observation in the work setting, and a majority reporting that they learned most through coaching from a knowledgeable, experienced colleague. In a related study of corporate managers, Enos and Kehrhan (2002), managers reported a greater level of proficiency through informal learning opportunities. Johnson (2005) argued that professional development focused on improving instructional practices must connect to two aspects of a teacher's job (a) their daily work (b) to the learning needs of their students. This study will examine how and whether

teachers' self-efficacy is changed after content-driven professional development is delivered to them regarding how to improve the reading skills of the students in their classes.

### **Focus of the Research**

This study is designed as a case study (Creswell, 2003) of a group of middle school teachers receiving a professional development intervention that integrates adult learning theory called the TRIO model (Sheckley, Kehrhahn, Bell, & Grenier, 2007) to enhance their reading teaching. The setting for this study will be an urban middle school, Grades 5-8, in which I serve as the Principal. In this descriptive study, I will survey nine middle school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers regarding the way they think about their teaching, sense of efficacy and willingness to stay in the field. These are the only nine teachers in the school that teach ELA. The study was bound by time and place (Creswell, 2003) in that the data collection will take place over a period of 3 months. The study was bounded by the specific set of professional development that will be offered by the school. The unit of analysis will be a group of teachers at the school.

### **Methods**

This study is designed as a case study (Creswell, 2003) of a group of middle school teachers receiving a professional development intervention that integrates adult learning theory called the TRIO model (Sheckley, Kehrhahn, Bell, & Grenier, 2007) to enhance their reading teaching. The setting for this study is an urban middle school, Grades 5-8, in which I serve as the Principal. In this descriptive study, I surveyed seven middle school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers regarding the way they think about their teaching, sense of efficacy and willingness to stay in the field. There are only eight teachers in the school that teach ELA. The



study was bound by time and place (Creswell, 2003) in that the data collection took place over a period of 3 months. The study was also be bounded by the specific set of professional development that will be offered by the school. The unit of analysis was a group of teachers at the school.

### Sample

All of the teachers responsible for ELA instruction (n=7) were surveyed to explore the impact of this professional development on how they would rate their self-efficacy, content knowledge, ability to apply content delivered in professional development to their practice and their overall feelings of connectivity to the school (desire to stay and contribute, motivation, empowerment). The teachers included in this sample represent seven out of the eight ELA teachers employed at the school. The teachers were all provided preliminary information regarding the research study and were given time to think about whether they wanted to participate. Once IRB consent was received, the teachers engaged in the first survey.

The teachers vary from one another across a number of demographic features. Although this information was not collected from the teachers as a part of this research to protect their anonymity, the researcher has access to public documents which provide a more robust background of the teachers. Consistently, Table 1 represents this information, but is not tied to a teacher name as described in this study.

Gender	Race	Age Range	Certification	Years teaching	Years teaching
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				at the school	
Male	White	20-30	K-6	1	1
Female	Black	30-40	K-6	12	14
Female	White	30-40	7-12 & Reading	1	10
Male	White	20-30	K-6 & Reading	2	2
Female	White	50-60	K-12 Reading & k-12 Special Education	2	30
Female*	White	40-50	7-12	1	1
Male*	White	30-40	7-12	1	1

It may also be interesting to note\* that two of the staff members are veterans of the United States Army.

## Context

The school district in this study is a small urban district, that has been involved in financial difficulties, low performing schools, state intervention, and multiple changes in leadership. The school system endured five years of flat funding, which prompted a major reduction in staff. The per pupil expenditure declined from 2008-2013. Additionally, state testing results from that time period revealed that all six schools within the district were performing below standard with less than half of students reading on or above grade level. In 2013, for example, the eighth grade Connecticut Mastery Test scores demonstrated that only

29% of students were at Goal in reading, 52% in math and 45% in writing. In contrast, the state averages for the same test were 65% of students at goal in reading, 76% in math, and 67% in writing. As a result of the continued flat funding and low student performance, the Superintendent of this district went to the State Department of Education and asked for state intervention. As a result of this request, the state assigned a “Special Master” to oversee the functioning of the district.

Since the assignment of the Special Master there has been a redesign of the Central Office administration, including five different Superintendents from June 2014 to present time as well as the addition of ten new Central Office administrators. Despite the changes at the Central Office, building administration has remained relatively stable with the transfer of one principal, leaving a vacancy filled by someone who was working as an administrator within the district. The constant change of administrative staff was also reflected in the teaching population, especially with the new teachers to the district.

The school that was studied serves a diverse population of fifth through eighth grade students in a small city in Connecticut. The school services about 625 students in grades five through eight, with only one class (28 students) being in fifth grade. Otherwise, there are about 200 students in each grade. The school studied has a rich diversity of students with 27% of the students identifying as Black, 12% White, 55% Hispanic, and 6% as mixed race. 20% of the students are identified as learning English as a Second Language (ELL), with the primary first language as Spanish. There are also about 20% of the students at the school identified as Special Education. This middle school is the only middle school in the district, and has undergone major staffing and instructional changes to address the low performance of students. In addition, the

school faces some of the highest rates of disciplinary infractions in the state. In 2011, the school was noted as having one of the highest arrest rates in the state.

In order to address the deficits the Principal of the school redesigned multiple systems at the school and replaced staff the school. Since 2010, for example, there has been a complete turn over in secretarial, custodial, and administrative staff. Consistently, approximately 80% of the teachers have been newly hired. This turnover means that the typical new teacher is right out of a teacher preparation program and has limited experience working with the high needs population at the school. For the simple reason that such a high number of staff were new to the building, the principal created a system of professional development, Professional Learning & Practice (PLP), that supports the new teachers. This system was created absent the support of the Central Office administration, who also did not put roadblocks in place to impede progress.

PLP is a system of professional development that was created based on Principal's assessment that instructional practices needed to change. The vision of the program was to combine best practices from professional learning communities, data teams, and other professional development in a way that reflected the TRIO model of professional development. The initial year was primarily directed by the Principal who delivered the professional development to gather consensus around what the classroom environment should look like. The following year, there was a more blended approach with teacher-coaches leading most of the professional development guiding teachers to establish consensus on what an effective lesson should look like. In its third year, PLP was nearly entirely led by the coaches and had a focus on how to plan effective lessons and how to provide students with feedback that supports their learning. This is the fourth year of PLP and there has been an intentional transition, with few exceptions, from an administrative directed professional development to teacher-directed

professional development, sharing of best practices, and common planning. The Principal's perception, based on informal conversations and data collected at the school, is that the teachers favor this system of professional learning and feel valued as professionals with the autonomy noticed this year. However, the Principal could be out of touch with the perceptions of the teachers and misrepresenting the feelings of the teachers to benefit her own professional growth.

The professional culture of the school has been gaining attention across the state through schools from neighboring towns conducting visits to the school and most recently, the principal was selected to participate in a webinar spotlighting the success of the PLP program. Although there is still room to grow, the culture is generally regarded as something that the school staff is proud of.

#### Data Collection

Data collection through surveys provided quantitative data to be analyzed using descriptive statistics. The survey was deployed in February of 2015 and April of 2015 after the teachers received 15 hours of professional development aligned with the fundamentals of the Trio Model. The purpose of the survey was to determine whether this professional development, targeted to the fundamentals of literacy instruction, and implemented in a manner which aligns to the research on adult learning theory, will influence teachers' perception of their teaching and their feelings towards their practice. The eight reading teachers that were surveyed will received targeted professional development on the fundamentals of reading instruction. These eight teachers represented the entire ELA department.

The surveys were administered using paper and pencil by a neutral third party. The neutral persons will collect all surveys. The subjects were provided time during their day to

complete the survey. This is a normal procedure at the school, when teachers are asked to complete a task that requires them that could take time away from their professional planning. The surveys were linked through an anonymous identification code known only to the subjects. Serving as the research, I did not know of any connection between the survey results and the subject's identification numbers. Although the school uses survey data on a regular basis, the outcome of these surveys will be for the purpose of research only. Due to the relatively small sample size, descriptive statistics of the quantitative survey questions will be used to see if there are changes from one survey administration to the next.

The survey was divided into seven major headings, with a varied number of questions in each category (e.g. Self-efficacy about guiding groups in a differentiating way, Self-efficacy beliefs about involving pupils in tasks, Self-efficacy beliefs towards the use of innovative educational practices, Self-efficacy beliefs towards the school, Maslach Burnout Inventory & Emotional Exhaustion, and Personal Accomplishment). Questions within each category helped the researcher better understand how teachers felt about themselves, although it may be important to note that at no time were teachers evaluated on their application of new learning.

The first section of the survey asked teachers about their self-efficacy beliefs about guiding groups in a different way through six different questions. Sample questions include, "If a pupil shows unmotivated behavior, I am able to find out the reason for it" and "I am able to foster cooperation in a group when the pupils experience difficulties in this." The full survey is available in Appendix 1. The next section asked teachers four questions about their self-efficacy beliefs about involving pupils in tasks. One question was, "If pupils experience difficulty in carrying out a task involving reading skills, I can make them think about finding solutions themselves." The next section, self-efficacy beliefs towards the use of innovative educational

practices, asked two questions, “In general I can cope quite well with the stress that attends the implementation of teaching reading skills in my classroom” and “Even when skeptical colleagues comment on it, I am able to keep focused on teaching reading skills to students in my classroom.” The third section helped to identify how teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs towards the school may have changed. These questions probed about the degree to which teachers feel like they can ask for help, “I’m likely to ask for help if I feel overwhelmed teaching reading to my students.” The final three sections of the survey gave the researcher information about how the toll that teaching reading has on them emotionally.

The first section provided eight questions regarding the teachers’ sense of burnout and emotional exhaustion. Sample questions from this section include, “I feel emotionally drained because of my work” and “I feel frustrated by my job.” The next section provided data regarding how personally accomplished the teachers felt. Sample questions include, “I deal effectively with the problems of my students” and “I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.” Finally, the teachers were asked to rate the degree to which they feel depersonalized or depersonalize the students. Questions included, “I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally” and “I don’t really care what happens to some students.”

## Data Analysis

First the initial survey data was reviewed using descriptive statistics. Each teacher’s individual response was charted in an Excel spreadsheet from their original survey document. From there, the data was averaged by individual question and by section for each teacher. Next, the data was averaged for all of the teachers and were reviewed for trends and patterns. The

researcher then wrote a detailed profile of each teacher based on the responses of his or her survey questions. These detailed profiles were reviewed for major themes and were consolidated to a more synched profile for each teacher. Next, the averages of the survey data were reviewed for trends within each of the seven major categories. After receiving the surveys from the second implementation, the researcher repeated the processes described above by analyzing the individual responses from teachers, collective responses from each teacher and a group analysis. Each step of these processes was reviewed by someone with expertise in data collection and analysis. Detailed feedback was provided by the person with expertise to the researcher.

## Limitations

To ensure that the design and implementation of the study would be regarded as trustworthy, it was necessary to address the following limitations: (1) transferability and (2) dependability (Merriam, 1998). Several techniques were used to minimize these threats to the trustworthiness of the research. These techniques included description of the setting and the limited number of subjects being studied, full and repeated disclosure that the researcher is also the principal of the building, a neutral third party collecting and distributing all surveys and consent forms, and private identifiers known only to the subjects to decrease the risk that they would inflate their survey answers for the researcher. Even with several procedures in place to address these issues, the threats may not be fully eliminated. For this reason, they were included as possible limitations in the study.

## Statement of Subjectivity



Given my role as the principal and researcher, I had access to all aspects of the school (Kratwohl & Smith, 2005) and had relationships with the teachers within this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Familiarity with the setting may have caused inherent biases. These biases were a result of my values, perspectives, and knowledge of the organization over an extended length of time and through multiple roles.

I have been involved with this district for the past 30 years. I began my relationship in the district as a kindergarten student, graduated from the high school, became employed as a substitute teacher, an elementary teacher, and an administrator at the Central Office before becoming the principal of the school in January of 2010. Throughout this time, I conducted and attended professional development trainings.

Since 2010 I have been responsible for the oversight of all systems and development of policies within the school and am directly accountable for their success or failure. I evaluate all of the teachers who were subjects in this study as well as the assistant principal and coaches who delivered the professional development. While this study was occurring routine observations occurred of all staff. However, in awareness of my role as researcher, I did not use any of the information presented in the professional development as a standard for the evaluations and instead relied on the guidelines set forth in the district's teacher evaluation guide to evaluate staff.

I believe my participation in the professional development as leader and researcher may have helped to deepen my understanding of the challenges teachers face as well as offer more targeted suggestions to teachers. The quality of our conversations was richer, knowing that all members of the learning community had a shared language around reading instruction.

## Findings

The findings in this study are limited to two sets of survey data. The first survey was given prior to a professional development series on teaching reading to middle school students. The second survey was given at the conclusion of the professional development. The survey was divided into two major sections (i.e. teacher practice and feelings of burnout), with seven subsections (Self-efficacy beliefs about guiding groups in a different way, Self-efficacy beliefs about involving pupils in tasks, Self-efficacy beliefs towards the use of innovative educational practices, Self-efficacy beliefs towards the school, Maslach Burnout Inventory/Emotional Exhaustion, Personal Accomplishment, and Depersonalization).

The professional development series consisted of approximately fifteen sessions that were held over a five week period of time, with two to three sessions happening each week. The fifty minute sessions occurred during the school day, in a room that was designated for teacher development. The sessions were led by a variety of people including a Central Office Literacy Specialist, the Principal, Assistant Principal, and Instructional Coaches. Generally, the intervention seemed to work as teachers together reported improved self-efficacy regarding their practice had a lower average score in time two regarding feeling emotionally exhausted. To highlight my findings, I will first provide data regarding teachers' responses to the survey prior to the intervention, a description of initial findings for the group of teachers, an analysis of their results after the professional development sessions, a discussion regarding the findings and finally any implications that may be drawn from this small study. It may be important to note that demographic data (i.e. years teaching, prior experiences, certification, etc.) was not available to the researcher in order to best protect the identities of the teachers from the researcher who is also the principal of the school.

## **Bob**

Compared to the average ( $m=7.6$ ), Bob's reported rating of personal accomplishment (i.e. defined as understanding how students feel about things and influencing other people's lives) was the highest. This teacher also reported a higher than average burnout rating, and the highest average score on feeling that her job is depersonalizing. Such results suggest that, although the teacher felt accomplished in his job, these accomplishments have taken a personal toll. Indeed, Bob has the second highest rating for burnout and emotional exhaustion and reported that he felt drained at the end of the workday. He also felt that teaching is hardening him emotionally.

Bob believed that he has strong skills relating to her students and can easily foster cooperation within her class. He also felt that she can easily set students to task and is able to redirect students to help them work cooperatively together. He had high self-efficacy in her ability to involve pupils and felt that she can facilitate students' ability to independently find solutions when they experienced difficulty carrying out a task involving reading skills. However, despite his strong belief in her ability to manage the students, Bob had a lower than average rating on the use of innovative educational practices. That said, Bob felt the highest sense of personal accomplishment from his job and identified keeping herself focused on teaching reading skills in his classroom as an area of growth.

Taken together, Bob's responses suggest that, prior to the intervention, he felt generally capable and open to increasing her skills regarding teaching reading. At the same, time he may also be somewhat less able to deal with critique given her reported emotional state and would likely respond more positively to an intervention focused on building on existing strengths.

## **Ellen, Ben, Jane, and Abigail**

Ellen, Ben, Jane, and Abigail all had similar profiles to one another. These teachers appeared to be a highly confident teacher in every aspect of their profession and rated themselves above average in every category from managing student behaviors and knowing reading content. They had a high self-efficacy regarding their ability to plan for and engage students in lessons. Therefore, it is perhaps not a surprise that these teachers had low burnout ratings and reported that they do not personalize their job (i.e. defined as how they treated students, becoming emotionally hardened, and how students perceived them. This would suggest that the teachers felt confident in their ability to teach reading to their students. These teachers might describe themselves as good teacher, competent in their content knowledge and able to manage students.

In view of the fact that these teachers already had such high self-efficacy, they were likely to be responsive to professional development because it would result in small tweaks in their classrooms rather than major changes. Alternatively, these teachers may instead feel as if they doesn't need professional development given their relative success up to this point.

### **Richard**

Richard is highly confident in his ability to motivate students. Overall, this teacher believed that she is able to redirect students to help them work cooperatively together. Teacher seven had the lowest self-efficacy in her ability to involve pupils in tasks involving reading skills ( $x=5$ ). Richard had the lowest ratings in her beliefs towards the use of innovative educational practices. Richard had lower than average self-efficacy beliefs towards the school, but believed if he needs help teaching reading to his students, he is able to ask for it. This ability to access help may be related to this teacher reporting a low sense of burnout and emotional exhaustion. Richard believed that he was able to motivate students, but had a more difficult time involving students in tasks and disregarding the comments of negative colleagues.

## **Elizabeth**

Elizabeth was least confident in her ability to motivate students, involve them in a task, and implement innovative educational practices, compared to her peers. She has the lowest sense of support from her colleagues. She had a relatively low burnout rate and a high sense of personal accomplishment.

Elizabeth was also the least confident teacher compared to her peers in her ability to get students to work together. Overall, this teacher believed she is not able to reengage a group that is not working well, and lacks confidence when students experience difficulties. Elizabeth had low self-efficacy in her ability to involve pupils in tasks. Elizabeth had lower ratings in her beliefs towards the use of innovative educational practices, which may be a result of her low self-efficacy to manage students. If she was unable to redirect off task students, she might have felt that she would have a more difficult time implementing innovative educational practices. Elizabeth has the second lowest self-efficacy beliefs towards the school.

Overall, this teacher doubted her ability to motivate and engage students, involve students in a task, and had a lower than average belief that she was being supported by her learning community. Elizabeth is not likely to burn out, as she was able to depersonalize her experiences teaching reading to middle school students in an urban environment. This is a teacher who showed high potential to be influenced by the professional development treatment.

In summary of the initial survey data, on average, the teachers believed she fostered collaboration, involved students in tasks, used innovative educational practices, had a high self-efficacy towards the school, and felt personally accomplished without personalizing their work or feeling emotionally exhausted. There was a strong sense of collaboration between teachers being able to work with one another and to ask for help if they feel overwhelmed teaching

reading skills to the students. Teacher 8 felt personally accomplished for her work with her students, but find the work to be slightly draining.

#### *Self-Efficacy Beliefs About Guiding Groups in a Differentiating Way*

Looking across the teachers findings from the first survey show that there was a high, collective belief that they could get students to work cooperatively (m=7.8). The teachers believed they were able to point out to the pupils that they are responsible for good academic behavior (m=8.6) and are able to get a disruptive group back to work again quickly (m=7.8). They also felt that they are able to foster cooperation when the pupils experience difficulties (m=7.6) and can quickly set a pupil to work who is thwarting cooperation with others (m=7.5). Together, this portion of the data suggests that before the professional development, the teachers have a high, collective belief that they are able to get students to work cooperatively. In view of this data, the professional development may be most effective if teachers are provided the opportunity to build upon the strategies they currently find effective towards getting students to work together. Given this, there is an opportunity to strengthen the teachers' skills in this area through the professional development.

#### *Self-Efficacy beliefs about involving pupils in tasks*

The teachers had varying degrees of confidence about their ability to involve pupils in tasks involving reading skills (m=7.4). The teachers believed that if a pupil experiences difficulties in doing a task, they are able to help the student get on the right course (m=8.1). Of all the questions that specifically asked about reading skills, the teachers were least confident that if pupils were experiencing difficulty carrying out a task involving reading skills, they could facilitate students independently thinking about finding solutions (m=6.9). The teachers were moderately confident in their ability to check whether a task involving reading skills had the

appropriate level of difficulty (m=6.9). Teachers rated themselves as slightly agreeing that they were able to provide the necessary clues to pupils as they searched for relevant information for a task involving reading skills (m=7.1). On the condition that teachers had relatively low beliefs about their ability to involve students in tasks, this area shows high potential to be influenced by the professional development. It may be true that if the teachers know more about the content of teaching reading, they will be more able to engage students in tasks involving reading skills.

#### *Self-Efficacy beliefs towards the use of innovative educational practices*

The teachers initially had varying beliefs about whether they were able to focus on innovative educational practices in their classes (m=7.8). In general, the teachers felt they can cope quite well with stress that occurs in regards to teaching reading in their classrooms (m=8). When asked about whether they were able to keep focused on teaching reading skills in their classrooms, even when voice their skepticism, the teachers had a large range of responses (m=7.6). This area shows the potential to be affected by the professional development particularly if it provides innovative practices that these middle school teachers can implement with their struggling readers.

#### *Self-Efficacy beliefs towards the school*

Results also reveal that teachers are comfortable working together (m= 8.3) and asking for help (m=8.6), However, despite this willingness to engage with one another, they are not as confident in their ability to keep up with the demands of teaching reading skills to their urban middle school students (7.5). The teachers had an initially high, collective self-efficacy about their beliefs towards the school (m=8.1). One of the highest scored responses was whether the teachers are likely to ask for help if they feel overwhelmed teaching reading skills to their students (m=8.6). The teachers moderately agree (m=8.3) that they feel comfortable working

with their colleagues if they experience difficulty teaching reading skills in their classrooms. Teachers felt that they are able to keep up with the demands of teaching reading skills to their urban middle school students (m=7.5).

### *Emotional Exhaustion*

The teacher initial ratings of whether they are feeling emotionally exhausted revealed a range of answers, with an overall sentiment that teachers were feeling slightly overwhelmed and exhausted (m=3). Ratings for feeling used up at the end of the workday were slightly higher (m=5.1) and coupled with feelings of being emotionally drained because of their work (m=4.5) suggest that teachers felt like they are giving teaching their all. Subsequently, seven out of eight teachers replied that they strongly disagree that they feel like there are at the end of their tether (m=1.1). Teachers initially slightly disagreed that they were working too hard at their job (m=3.5). The questions about feeling fatigued when teachers get up in the morning and have to face another day at the job suggests that most of the teachers disagree (m=2.9). Teachers moderately disagreed that they felt burned out by their work (m=2.6). Most teachers moderately disagreed that they feel frustrated by their job, (m=2.6). Since these initial, collective ratings are relatively low, there seems to be little opportunity for the professional development to ease the feeling of exhaustion. Conversely, the professional development may increase these initial feelings of exhaustion by pulling teachers from their normal team meeting time and may be viewed by the teachers as 'one more thing to do.'

### *Personal Accomplishment*

The initial survey data from this section suggests that teachers feel personally accomplished through their work (m=8.8), believe they are able to understand students' feelings (7.3), and can deal very effectively with the problems of their students (7.3). The teachers



surveyed felt a high degree of personal accomplishment, with the average ratings on some of these questions being the highest rated of any question asked on the survey (m=8). On average, the teachers felt strongly that they positively influence other people's lives through their work and felt that they have accomplished many worthwhile things in their current job (m=8.8). Similarly, teachers felt exhilarated after working closely with their students (m=8.4). Seven out of the eight teachers surveyed believe they can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with their students (m=7.9), with one teacher neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Two questions regarding whether teachers could easily understand how their students feel about things and whether teachers feel that they deal very effectively with the problems of their students elicited the lowest average score of 7.3. For the simple reason that teachers initially felt a high sense of personal accomplishment (m=8), it may be unlikely that the professional development will influence this score in either a positive or negative direction. Said differently, it may be true that the teachers working in this setting have chosen to do so and enjoy their work.

### *Depersonalization*

It can be suggested that the teachers did not initially depersonalize their experiences with students. The results show that none of the teachers felt as if they treat some students as if they were impersonal objects (m=1) and they care what happens to all of their students (m=1). All but one subject reported that they have not become more callous toward people since taking the job (m=1.1). Of the 8 teachers 4 teachers worry that the job is hardening them emotionally, with two teachers rating this question at a 6, and one teacher rating it at a 3 and one rating it at a two (m=2.6). Teachers believed that students partially blame for some of their problems (m=2.8). Although there is some variance in responses, this category of questions had the overall lowest

ratings ( $m=1.7$ ). Seeing that the initial average responses (1.7) were so low, the professional development may be unlikely to influence a change in this number.

Looking now at the individual level, the teachers who initially had the three lowest self-efficacy ratings, and highest ratings for burn out and exhaustion, showed the largest changes in ratings. Bob, Richard and Abigail initially had the lowest ratings in all of the categories of questions. It is a possibility that when teachers have a lower self-efficacy they may either be highly responsive to effective professional development knowing they need to improve or may have little response to professional developing thinking that they either don't have any problems (it's the students fault) or have such low self-efficacy that they believe they are beyond receiving help. The professional development could have improved their feelings towards teaching reading through its emphasis on relevant strategies for middle school students through the development of lesson plans and activities. Sheckley et al (2007) emphasized that professional learning is most successful when it engages the individual in an environment which supports learning through experiential activities.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this professional development intervention was to improve the self-efficacy of middle school reading teachers and reduce teachers' feelings of emotional exhaustion and burn out. Unlike many existing professional development programs, this intervention was different in that it was embedded within the school day, occurred on a regular basis, (two to three time per week), and provided time for collaboration around instructional needs. The teachers were given an opportunity to meet around a problem of practice, how to best teach their struggling students, read current literature of effective strategies, before developing lesson plans

for their classrooms based on the learnings in the professional development. At this school, the professional development system is called Professional Learning & Practice because there is an emphasis on applying learning in classrooms. In this case, 7 participants – all teachers within one schools, participated in a targeted, literacy based, five week professional development program within the context of the schools Professional Learning & Practice. Further, the professional development was delivered by a combination of a central office administrator, the principal, assistant principal, and teacher coaches. The professional development intervention could have served as a vehicle to increase their relatively strong, initial beliefs regarding their practices of teaching reading.

In contrast to the research of Marachi, Gheen & Midgley (2002) the teachers at this middle school initially rated themselves as feeling relatively confident in their ability to teach reading to struggling readers. Descriptive data from the initial survey suggested that overall teachers felt relatively confident in their ability to implement reading curriculum in a middle school, with relatively low average data regarding teachers feeling overwhelmed or burned out. Such high values are worth deeper investigation. On one hand, such numbers could imply a strong overarching professional culture at the school. Indeed, prior to this intervention the school went through a period of reform in which professional development became a daily practice for teachers. Prior to this research, teachers had been meeting in teams, setting their own agendas, recording notes from the meetings, and inviting guest presenters in to deliver new learning (ex. Close reading). Alternatively, it may be that teachers' positive responses indicate a lack of understanding about the complexity of teaching reading in this context and believe that they are doing a good enough job with their struggling readers.. Either way, these early high

scores do have implications for replication as later success may be dependent on some of these foundational elements.

After the intervention, there were noticeable improvements in the areas of self-efficacy and a decrease in teachers' feelings of emotional exhaustion and burn out. There were several patterns that emerged from the data in terms of areas of improvement. This included stronger and high ratings in all of the implementation categories. Additionally, teachers reported feeling highly supported by the school environment, and there was an increase in teachers' reported belief that they know how to involve students in tasks, and three teachers reported particularly large positive differentials in their scores. Considering these feelings, a larger study of the school, by an impartial party may help to identify a transformational school that has successfully implemented a professional development program that reflects current literature on adult learning theory (Boyle, Lamprianou, Boyle, 2005; Bullough, Burbank, Gess-Newsome, Kauchak, & Kennedy, 1998; Ericsson & Charness, 1997; Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis, 2005). Conversely, such an impartial look at the school, could reveal a principal and group of teachers out of touch with reality, based on their high ratings of the systems of support within the school. Above all, knowing this was a small study, there appears to be some sort of phenomenon that is influencing teachers to feel good about the professional environment at the school. Should the professional development system be successful, other principals may be able to support teachers in a more robust way, without incurring any cost to the district. Such a shift could radically change the delivery of professional development, and although not measured in this research, student achievement.

Descriptive statistics of the four implementation categories of survey questions (ex. Guiding groups, involving pupils in tasks, implementing innovative practices, and self-efficacy

towards the school) appeared to improve such that the mean on the final survey was one point higher than at the beginning of the study. Additionally, there was a one point difference in teachers average rating of their feelings of emotional exhaustion and burnout during this same period. What is more, there was a slight positive difference in the average teachers' feeling of accomplishment. Given the findings of Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005), this may suggest that the teachers responded to the professional learning and felt better able to contextualize the problem of teaching reading to struggling middle school students. By way of contrast, the teachers may also have felt pressure to provide favorable results on the survey knowing that the investigator is also the principal of the school.

The final survey given to teachers demonstrated a strong sense teachers' self-efficacy with the average ratings: Guiding groups;  $m=8.5$ , involving pupils in tasks;  $m=8.8$ , implementing innovative practices;  $m=8.7$ , self-efficacy towards the school;  $m=9.1$ ). There is a strong relationship between teachers' mental models (what they believe) and the instructional practices teachers use in their classrooms (how they teach) (Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 2001, Marks, Mathieu & Zaccaro, 2000). It may be suggested that based on the high ratings of self-efficacy, the teachers may have shifted their mental models to believe that they are more capable to instruct their students through an improvement in the knowledge about how to teach the students. Again, this data could be inflated due to the principal being the lead investigator.

The largest change occurring in the descriptive data was in the category of teachers' self-efficacy to involve students in tasks, with a mean positive change of 1.4 points from the first to the final survey. The research indicates that when informational learning is a part of professional development, practice improves (Rossi, 1995). Even more, when professional development is coordinated and aligned to curriculum and instruction, it is better able to meet the needs of

teachers (Johnson, 2005). The professional development offered at this middle school was focused on giving teachers the information about the different stages of learning to read as well as applying this information through learning strategies and techniques to use with their students. The increased exposure to the necessary components of robust reading instruction, may have influenced teachers to improve their self-efficacy in several key areas regarding involving students in a task including: giving necessary clues to students who struggle with a task (m=8.9), help students who are experiencing difficulty (m=8.9), and check to see whether a task has the appropriate level of difficulty (m=9). Without having a larger survey sample over multiple years, it is difficult to say that this gain was related to the professional development as the gain could be the result of the normal growth of teachers over a six week period of time through February and March.

Although most principals feel unable to provide effective support to teachers through professional development (Cross & Hong, 2012), the final survey results showed that school support as the highest rated category (m=9.1). These results could be indicative of a strong school culture where reform efforts are addressing the core processes of teaching and learning for adults as well as for children. Conversely, it could reflect a culture where teachers are comfortable working with one another, absent any leadership from the principal. Overwhelmingly, teachers reported feeling comfortable asking for help if they experience difficulty (m=9.7). Again this may be an indication of a strong school culture or it could be a reflection that teachers do not believe they have any areas for improvement with their practice and therefore could ask anyone for assistance, knowing they don't really need it. Under similar circumstances, the teachers reported feeling comfortable working with each other if they experience difficulty (m=9.3).

Taken together this research is promising because it could effectively address the core processes of teaching and learning for adults as well as for children. Even more, this type of professional learning structure could serve to benefit middle school teachers who are tasked with teaching underperforming students reading skills, but who may not have the necessary background to accomplish this. Indeed as (Borko, 2004) suggests that when professional development is tightly aligned with curriculum and instruction it will likely meet teachers needs and support them in feeling better about their teaching. Balfanz et al (2002) review of the high poverty, high-minority middle school raises the issue of the national literacy crisis across the United States. Although this was a small study, looking further into a culture that supports collaboration, peer support, is explicitly focused on teacher learning and provides time to reflect on learning and problem solving with colleagues is exciting for both teachers and principals (Boyle, Lamprianou, Boyle, 2005; Bullough, Burbank, Gess-Newsome, Kauchak, & Kennedy, 1998; Ericsson & Charness, 1997; Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis, 2005).

## **Implications**

Though this study is small and somewhat limited, it does provide some insights regarding potential opportunities and challenges to enhance middle school teachers reading instruction and with it the opportunities for our neediest students. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to explore the potential implications of this work to practitioners at the building level, at the district level, and for policy implementation. Principals who are effective instructional leaders can bring about school improvements that address inequities in student achievement (Rosenholtz, 1985;

Hightower, 2002; Agullard and Goughnour, 2006). Consistent with this research, there is a need for principals to have a key role in developing systems that support effective professional development implementation within the environment of the school and the district. District policies and practices can support or impede building based efforts.

### *Implications for the Principal*

Although this study was conducted on a small scale there are a number of implications that may be worth considering. First, given the high baseline values regarding teachers' perceptions of efficacy and support, and the corresponding success of the intervention, this work suggests that when revamping or creating any system within a school, it is important to assess the environment and whether it is primed for change. For example, the principal should review data from all stakeholders including current professional culture, academic, discipline and climate data. The data may help to identify a schism between the principal's vision and the core values and beliefs of the staff. These beliefs may be noticed in teachers' collective patterns of behavior, influence mental models, and create an unwritten climate for the school that may adversely effect the principal's vision (Peterson & Deal, 2002). This data collection will help the principal better align the vision to the individual needs of the school.

Connected to this point, vision and specifically the teachers' knowledge and buy in regarding the underlying goal of enhancing their ability to teach reading at the middle school level and its relationship to overarching district goals, appeared to be another essential component of the intervention's success. Therefore, if a principal desires to change the culture of the school, they will need to investigate the degree to which the current vision is clearly defined



and in alignment to the priorities of the district. This alignment includes allocating funding for or the repurposing staff to support the professional development.

Beyond resource alignment, the vision should also guide the action plan. In the case of the school studied, the theory of action was multi-stepped and could be described in the following way, “In order to improve student achievement, all students must be engaged in the lesson. In order to engage students in a lesson, the lesson must be well-developed. In order for teachers to deliver a well-developed lesson, the environment of the classroom must support student learning.” This theory of action was delivered to the teachers repeatedly at staff meetings and other gatherings under the mantra, “The expertise to move this building is sitting in this room. We can do it if we together.” In the same way, the principal should consider creating a visual representation of the theory of action so that it can be referred to on a regular basis.

Developing a schedule to support the development of a professional development structure is the next key step. The structure of the student schedule can be reconfigured so that all students of a common grade level are engaged in another activity, thereby allowing the teachers to meet. This can be accomplished at no cost by engaging community partners, parent volunteers or through student elective courses. The stage must be set for intruding the professional learning structures. This may be done by surveying teachers regarding their perceived obstacles to planning together. If teachers identify time as one of the factors limiting their ability to meet, then the structure would be responsive to their concerns. One of the most important aspects of implementing a new system is gaining the support of the teachers and building a collective vision for the school. Further, it will help to create an environment of learning for adults and for students.

This work also has implications for the principal herself. Principals who expect teachers to take risks in professional development and within their classrooms should also be open to change (Zimmerman, 2011). The principal must be engaged in a constant state of reflection regarding all systems and structures. In the instance of this study, the researcher was also the principal of the school and subsequently announced the research project to the entire faculty. Although not measured, multiple members of the staff made comments such as, “It’s great that you are getting your degree and doing your research within the school. It is admirable that you are looking for ways to improve our structures.” Feedback regarding the perceptions of teachers about the effectiveness of the professional development, leadership, and any policies that may support or interfere with the professional development structures could all be areas worth exploring. An environment where all learners are able to safely reveal their knowledge and experiences will unquestionably benefit the members of a collaborative group or network who are willing to engage with one another, as the network’s ideals are constantly contrasted with the collective goals and purpose of the group (Elmore, 2000). Professional learning that produces widely distributed knowledge and a shared professional language has the potential to tighten the coupling between the work of educational leaders and classroom practices.

Beyond the principal and her duties, the environment of the school and of the bigger social context of the teachers is important to consider when planning professional development. The professional development researched in this paper occurred during February and March in a New England state, during a year that had a particularly high amount of snowfall. There were a few days where the professional development had to be cancelled because of a delayed opening, early release, or no school at all. It is important to note that cancelling these sessions was received by the teachers as a relief. They told the principal/researcher that they felt valued when

the decision was made not to try to rush a planned professional development into a shortened day. It is for this reason that a principal may want to consider not just the content of the professional development in relation to the needs of the school, but also the way that the professional development is delivered. For example, when teachers come back to school in the fall, it is appropriate to have group discussions and planning around the ‘big picture’ for the school year. Teachers are typically concerned with answering the questions, “What will be different this year? What is expected of me?” After this initial training, which should be highly collaborative so that teachers interact with one another and get to know new staff, the team planning should continue and may serve to enhance the consistency of practice between teachers (Sheckley et al., 2007).

As the fall turns to winter, teachers begin thinking about planning for holidays and are occupied with their children’s obligations and their own engagements. At the school researched, winter professional development tends to focus on providing teachers time to read and collaborate around a common text as the teachers reported not having time at home to conduct reading. In the spring, teachers in the school studied tend to focus on the closing of school, end of the year activities, and communication with parents. However, this is the ideal time to have teachers share out practices that have been learned in professional development and have been tried in their classrooms since the students are familiar with routines. In addition to all of the environmental factors that need to be considered, the principal must also consider who is delivering the professional development to teachers.

In order to maintain teachers’ attention and focus, it may be important to vary who is presenting to the teachers or if the teachers are presenting to another audience. At the school studied, presenters vary between teachers presenting to each other, a literacy expert from the

Central Office, building based administrators, and coaches. Varying the person in the room allows the teachers to hear a different perspective on the same topic and it allows them time to share effective practices with each other. The sharing that occurs within the grade level professional development may help to set the tone at a larger staff meeting.

Staff meetings and full day professional development days are typical in every school calendar, and are an opportunity for a fully engaged principal to lead. These days or times can be carefully planned and can reflect the ‘master classroom.’ This type of modeling of good instruction may help teachers feel that the principal not only supports their professional development, but also can implement an equally as effective lesson with the staff. When the staff at the school studied has time to meet, it is often for the purpose of collaborating around a new idea, sharing progress of various working teams, or to share out the collective learning gained from the professional development offered. Above all else, it sends the message to the teachers that “we are in this together.”

Although the scope of this research was small, the results may have larger implications for districts and schools desiring an opportunity to change the system of professional development. The leaders of the district and the school may be able to design a no-cost opportunity to model for teachers how to best instruct their students by providing relevant, engaging professional development that is responsive to their needs as both learners and professionals.

### *District Implications*

In such a system where professional development is more localized it may also require greater district investments in principals’ capacity to facilitate this development. Data may need

to be collected and professional development delivered to principals regarding their beliefs on how adults learn best. This type of data can be used to provide principals with professional development so that they can best support the learning of their teachers. Further it may prevent principals from replicating the more common, ineffective professional development practices that are repeated cited by researches as being ineffective (Peterson and Deal, 2002)

An important implication of this work is how professional development is and should be meted out by the district. The results here suggest that there may be real benefit from allowing schools to self-identify and respond to areas of need. Indeed, the research is clear, regarding how unsuccessful ‘one and done’ or ‘drive by’ professional development is (Kriakides et al., 2007). Consequently, structures within the schools may need to be altered to support more regular professional development sessions. First, this would require the district to both provide greater flexibility to schools and to be aware of and supportive to schools that have been able to create and implement successful models. Such knowledge would enable better resources alignment and provide opportunities for taking strong practices to scale.

Although there may be implications to bring this type of professional development model to scale, the capacity of the principals in the district could be assessed. Before implementing any new system or structures on a larger scale, it may be advisable to gather data regarding the culture and climate of the schools within a district. A district leader may ask, “Do the principals value professional development? Are principals willing to prioritize the development and growth of a practice-driven professional development program? Do the teachers at each school believe they need new learning? Do we have staff to deliver professional development who understands the environments at each school and will the presenters adjust the materials and delivery according to the needs of the individual schools?” Consistently, Ogawa and Bossert

(1995) suggest that principals who are effective instructional leaders (a) have a solid understanding of what effective teaching entails and (b) use this understanding in an evaluation process that helps them correct teachers' behaviors that may deter students' learning.

In order to draw out the mental models of the principals to learn more about how they view effective teaching and learning and evaluation, the district could engage the principals in discussion and observational practices. The district could convene the principals in roundtable discussions, learning walks with the specific intention of identifying effective elements of professional development in each school. These observations could be finessed into a document which not only represents the consensus of the group, but identifies what effective teaching and student learning looks like. Once the model is established regarding what these elements should look like, the district can engage principals in a discussion around what type of professional development would meet the needs of their teachers with the end goal of improving teaching and learning. This type of problem-based professional development is consistent with the approach used in this student to enhance the self-efficacy of teachers towards their ability to teach reading. Although the principals would be engaged in developing the aspects of effective professional development, the meetings would actually model the type of effective professional development needed in their buildings.

To bring about a shift in the structure of professional development, the district may want to consider whether the system is worth replicating and whether the principals have the capacity to develop a system that meets the adult learning needs of the teachers. As observed through this research using teachers, the principals must be shown how to meaningfully engage their staff in professional development that is practice based, frequent, and responsive to the needs of the participants. If the district is able to model best practices for principals, the principals may be

more likely to go back to their buildings with a higher self-efficacy that they are able to implement the new learning.

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Teacher Identification Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Please use your mother's maiden name; the name of your favorite pet; 4 digits of your choosing

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_

Survey Questions

*Self-efficacy beliefs about guiding groups in a differentiating way*

1. If a pupil shows unmotivated behavior, I am able to find out the reason for it  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree                      Neither Agree or Disagree                      Strongly Agree
2. I always assess well what is going on when a group works in a troublesome way  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree                      Neither Agree or Disagree                      Strongly Agree
3. I am able to foster cooperation in a group when the pupils experience difficulties in this  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree                      Neither Agree or Disagree                      Strongly Agree
4. When a group is disruptive, I am able to get them back to work again quickly  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree                      Neither Agree or Disagree                      Strongly Agree
5. I can quickly set a pupil to work who is thwarting cooperation with others  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree                      Neither Agree or Disagree                      Strongly Agree
6. I am able to point out to the pupils that they are responsible for good academic achievement  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree                      Neither Agree or Disagree                      Strongly Agree

*Self-efficacy beliefs about involving pupils in tasks*

7. If pupils experience difficulties in carrying out a task involving reading skills, I can make them think about finding solutions themselves  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree                      Neither Agree or Disagree                      Strongly Agree
8. I am able to give the necessary clues to pupils they need in searching for relevant information for a task involving reading skills  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree                      Neither Agree or Disagree                      Strongly Agree

9. If a pupil experiences difficulties in doing a task, I am able to help him or her on the right course

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

10. I can find out and check whether a task involving reading skills has the appropriate level of difficulty

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

*Self-efficacy beliefs towards the use of innovative educational practices*

11. In general I can cope quite well with stress that attends the implementation of teaching reading skills in my classroom

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

12. Even when skeptical colleagues comment on it, I am able to keep focused on teaching reading skills to students in my classroom

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

*Self-efficacy beliefs towards the school*

13. I am able to keep up with the demands of teaching reading skills to my urban middle school students

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

14. I feel comfortable working with my colleagues if I experience difficulty teaching reading skills in my classroom

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

15. I'm likely to ask for help if I feel overwhelmed teaching reading skills to my students

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

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**Maslach Burnout Inventory Emotional Exhaustion**

16. I feel emotionally drained because of my work

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
 Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

17. I feel used up at the end of the workday

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
 Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

18. I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day at the job

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
 Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

19. Working with people all day is really a strain for me

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
 Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

20. I feel burned out by my work

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
 Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

21. I feel frustrated by my job

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
 Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

22. I feel I'm working too hard at my job

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
 Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree

23. I feel like I'm at the end of my tether

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
 Strongly Disagree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Strongly Agree





**Depersonalization**

31. I feel I treat some students as if they were impersonal ‘objects’

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly Disagree			Neither Agree or Disagree					Strongly Agree	

32. I’ve become more callous toward people since I took this job

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly Disagree			Neither Agree or Disagree					Strongly Agree	

33. I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly Disagree			Neither Agree or Disagree					Strongly Agree	

34. I don’t really care what happens to some students

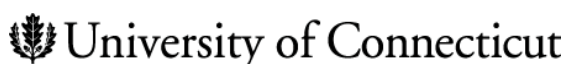
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly Disagree			Neither Agree or Disagree					Strongly Agree	

35. I feel students blame me for some of their problems

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strongly Disagree			Neither Agree or Disagree					Strongly Agree	

Coker, A., & Omoluabi, P. (2009). Validation Of Maslach Burnout Inventory. *Ife Psychological*

## Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study



**Principal Investigator:** Alison Burdick Ryan

**Study Title:** Self-Efficacy in Middle School Teachers Responsible for Teaching Struggling Readers

### Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study to better understand how your perceptions of self-efficacy regarding your ability to teach reading to middle schools students may change after engaging in professional development specially formulated for adult learners and focused on teaching the fundamental elements of reading instruction.

### Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to gain a beginning understanding of whether and to what degree the addition of adult learning concepts into current professional development models can increase Language Arts teachers belief that they have the ability to teach middle school students to read. These feelings of efficacy have a strong relationship with practice – with teachers who feel more efficacious tending to produce higher levels of student achievement (Cross & Hong, 2012).

Middle school teachers are more likely than elementary teachers to doubt their personal teaching efficacy (Marachi, Gheen & Midgley, 2002). Teacher education programs and licensure focus on either elementary or high school programming, leaving middle school teachers untrained to meet the specific needs of their students (Slavin, Cheung, Groff & Lake, 2008). Fewer than one in four middle school teachers have received specialized training to teach at the middle school level before they begin their careers (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2002). As such, it is likely that few middle school teachers conceptualize their instructional role as literacy educators and those that do may lack the necessary skills to actualize this understanding. In response, I propose that additional and high quality professional development is needed to help ensure that middle school teachers have the necessary knowledge and skills to address our current literacy crisis.

The process of gaining an understanding as to how teachers feel about their ability to instruct students after experiencing a specialized professional development intervention has multiple benefits. First, such findings could help administrators to look critically at the professional development currently being provided to teachers in the district and whether it is encouraging teacher efficacy. Second, if teachers report a high degree of improvement in self-efficacy in response to the intervention then the administration may consider further replication. Alternatively, if teachers do not report any change in their self-efficacy then administration can use the results to reinvestigate what aspects of professional development need to be changed or enhanced to achieve this result. Therefore, regardless of the outcome, the information gained from this study of how teachers rate their self-efficacy after receiving a specialized professional development program will help the overall learning environment of this school to better meet the needs of students.

### What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete two surveys associated with the planned professional development already slated for this year. You will take the paper & pencil surveys during your normal professional development time.

### What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

There are no serious risks associated with this study. Though the investigator is the principal and leader of the professional development intervention, none of the data collected here will be used, informally or formally as part of your evaluation. Additionally, to minimize the risk of subject discomfort all subjects will be given randomly generated id numbers. Moreover, teachers will never be asked to include their real name on the surveys. A neutral third party will collect the consent forms and the investigator will not know who has consented to participate in the study and who has not. It is important to note that all of the professional development components of the study are part of teachers typical responsibilities. As such, the only area where risks are truly applicable are in relation to the survey.

In terms of the external risk of a breach in confidentiality, any original materials that do include identifiers will be housed exclusively with the researchers and will be password protected. The name of the program and the location will also be obscured in any formal publications or presentations of the results. All data from the survey will be stored in a secure location by a neutral third party. Finally, questions are carefully constructed to focus on issues relating specifically to your perceptions on teaching reading to middle school students and will not stray into other, perhaps more sensitive topics.

### What are the benefits of the study?

Participants will benefit from experiencing high quality of professional development and the opportunity to reflect thoughtfully on its impact.

Additionally, I hope that this work will aide principals who wish to improve teacher quality/knowledge of reading in order to provide high quality literacy instruction to middle school students. Doing so could help school leaders develop better structures for professional development of teachers as it relates to teaching reading.

### Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

You will not receive payment for participation, nor are there costs to participate.

### How will my personal information be protected?

At no point will your name be connected with anything you tell the researcher. Information collected from your surveys will be protected by a word-number combination that you create and will be known only to you.

If we use this research for publication, your comments during your interview will remain completely confidential (i.e. a pseudonym will be used). We will use this research to create academic and practitioner articles. Additionally, we hope to present findings at conferences for education researchers, practitioners and policymakers.

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

You should also know that the UConn Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office of Research Compliance may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, but these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on your responses or involvement. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

### Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. All of the professional development components of the study are a part of your typical responsibilities. Not participating in the study will not exclude you from receiving professional development. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. You may also choose not to answer any or all of the questions posed to you today.

### Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact either of the principal investigator Alison Burdick or her doctoral advisor (Dr. Jennie Weiner (860) 486-4491). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.”]

### **Documentation of Consent:**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_

Print Name:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person

\_\_\_\_\_

Print Name:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date:

Obtaining Consent