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THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC OPTIMISM
AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN MIDDLE
SCHOOLS IN MISSISSIPPI

by
LaQuanta Murray Nelson

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2012
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC OPTIMISM AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN MISSISSIPPI

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ABSTRACT

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC OPTIMISM AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN MISSISSIPPI

by LaQuanta Murray Nelson

May 2012

As we constantly seek to increase educational attainment and increase student achievement in the United States, it is critical that we not only look at the effect of research based instructional practices or socioeconomic status on academic achievement, but also at any other factors that may potentially have a positive impact. The current state of education in Mississippi is still behind that of its counterparts, which suggests that providing schools with extra funds and an aligned curriculum alone will not raise student achievement.

According to Beard, Hoy, and Hoy (2009) academic optimism is a factor that influences academic achievement, even after socioeconomic status has been controlled. Academic Optimism is the collection of collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust in parents and students (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2006). The purpose of this study was to examine correlations between administrator’s and teacher’s Academic Optimism and academic achievement. This study also examined the difference in administrator’s and teacher’s congruence of academic optimism.

A total of four, centrally located Mississippi school districts participated in this Study. All schools were Title 1 eligible, which means they had a high percentage of
students living close to the poverty line. Participants, which included teachers and administrators, completed the School Academic Optimism Survey. The survey consisted of 30 statements as well as demographic data. The results from the survey were analyzed to give descriptive statistics, correlations, and differences between groups. Student achievement data was obtained from the Mississippi Department of Education Accountability Reporting System.

Findings from this research showed that there was a significant positive relationship between teacher’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement. There was not a significant relationship between administrator’s academic optimism and academic achievement. The study found that there was a significant difference in the academic optimism of teachers at the elementary level versus teachers at the middle school level, with elementary school teachers having a higher mean. The study also found that administrators had higher levels of academic optimism than teachers. The findings from this study add to current literature on academic optimism and underscore the need for further research within the new construct.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Mary C. Murray. She has always believed in me and all of my dreams. She has been my greatest supporter and motivator. My mother instilled in me the importance of a great education, perseverance, and prayer. For these things, I am forever grateful.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members; my chair, Dr. David Lee, Dr. J.T. Johnson, Dr. Rose McNeese, and Dr. Ronald Styron. It was with their continued guidance that this goal has been accomplished. A special thank you goes to Dr. Lee for always being there to assist, encourage, and guide me throughout my entire matriculation at USM. I would also like to thank Dr. Johnson for all of his advice. I would like to thank everyone who has assisted me in this wonderful experience.

I would like to thank God, my creator, my sustainer, without whom this would have been impossible. I would also like to thank my husband, Doug, for all of his support and devotion throughout this experience. His desire to see me accomplish this goal was motivating. To my mother, Mary, and my family, my gratitude is ever present for your unconditional love and encouragement. I could not ask for a better support system. You have instilled in me the importance of a great education and for that I am grateful.

Without all of the passionate and caring educators that I have had the privilege to learn from, this could not be possible. You, too, have inspired me to make a difference in this world and that there is no greater gift than knowledge.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The true goals of education are to prepare individuals to lead more productive lives and contribute to the greater good in an ever changing society. For decades, education has been acknowledged as being the driving force behind successful organizations, communities, and nations (Hewitt, 2008). In April of 1983, A Nation at Risk was written to ascertain the goals of education in the United States saying:

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 8)

As the world has changed and become a more globalized community, education has become an even more critical aspect of a thriving nation. As noted in A Nation at Risk (1983), in order for the United States to remain a world leader, our schools must be able to increase academic achievement and produce students who can compete globally. This concept is the basis for legislation in recent years whose purpose was to create higher levels of success within the educational systems (Hewitt, 2008).

At the middle school level, according to Snow & Shattuck (2004), literacy skills must become increasingly sophisticated in order to meet more challenging expectations. Individuals who lack those strong skills for finding, understanding, and evaluating
written information cannot easily arm themselves with the information needed to advance the causes they value. Simply put, literacy has been called the cornerstone of freedom (Snow & Shattuck, 2004). There are far too many students in the United States today who leave secondary schools without the advanced literacy they will need to succeed in higher education or to flourish in a knowledge-based economy. That is the bad news, according to this study. The good news is that creative researchers are pursuing ways to change the status quo. Policy makers and scholars are devoting increasing attention to adolescents’ literacy needs and to distinctive challenges posed by those needs (Ippolito, Steele, & Samson, 2008).

Over the past few decades, there have been many changes in the world of education due to the emphasis on accountability, higher levels of educational attainment, and overall increased academic achievement. In an effort to further perpetuate the need for improvements in education, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 forced educators to acknowledge both the victories and defeats in our educational systems. This federal law was created to ensure equality in education and to close the many achievement gaps through stronger accountability, more local freedom, proven methods, and choice for parents (No Child Left Behind of 2001, 20 U.S.C. 6319). One major goal of NCLB is to have all students proficient by the year 2014. Through this legislation, schools must meet adequate yearly progress and show growth in academic achievement of all subgroups of students. This has been a challenge for many states across the nation.

Adolescent Literacy

In the United States, preparing all students to read and write fluently has long been a central responsibility of public schools (Ravich, 2000). The emphasis that No
Child Left Behind (NCLB) places on students’ reading performance has only increased the importance of literacy instruction.

Early adolescence and entry into middle school reflect change on multiple levels. The middle school years coincide with key changes in adolescent development. These include biological and cognitive growth, social development, and home relationships (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Recent findings (Bowers, Kirby, & Deacon, 2010) indicate that morphological knowledge has the potential to affect literacy skills through word recognition, comprehension, and motivation. Insofar as literacy involves interpreting, evaluating, and making use of the information in texts, advancing students’ literacy skills lies close to the heart of education (Chall, 2000). Literacy is seen as both timely and essential, according to Chall, who tells us that around the age of four to six, students will hopefully make the critical transition between “learning to read and reading to learn” (Chall, p. 99). It is this transition that makes adolescent literacy instruction both distinctive and challenging.

Specifically in the state of Mississippi, academic achievement in comparison to other states has been an area of weakness. In the 2007 Smartest State Ranking, Mississippi ranked 48 out of 50, which has been the trend for many years (Morgan Quitno, 2007). This statistic has been blamed on socioeconomic status, race, school climate, and leadership. This is not only a phenomenon in this state, but in many others as well. There has been an extensive amount of research on factors that influence academic achievement (Bamburg & Andrews, 1990; Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Neuman & Selano, 2001).
As one of the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the state of Mississippi tests students in grades 3-8 in the areas of language arts and mathematics. The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) annually gives the Mississippi Curriculum Test, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, which is based on the objectives found in the Mississippi Curriculum Frameworks. These tests are given on the same day, with many regulations, in order to control for many outside factors. Although students can score minimal, basic, proficient, or advanced in each subject area, the definition of each is dependent upon grade level. In general, however, the proficiency levels are defined as:

1) Advanced- Students at the Advanced Level consistently perform in a manner clearly beyond that required to be successful at the next grade level.

2) Proficient- Students at the Proficient Level demonstrate solid academic performance and mastery of the content area knowledge and skills required for success at the next grade level. Students who perform at this level are well prepared to begin work on even more challenging material that is required at the next grade.

3) Basic- Students at the Basic Level demonstrate partial mastery of the content area knowledge skills required for success at the next grade. Remediation may be necessary for these students.

4) Minimal- Students at the Minimal Level are below Basic and do not demonstrate mastery of content area knowledge skills required for success at the next grade level. These students require additional instruction and remediation in the basic skills that are necessary for success at the grade tested. (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010b, p.6)
The students’ proficiency score (achievement model) along with their yearly growth data (adequate yearly progress) are then used to calculate the quality distribution index (QDI) and assign their accountability label. These labels range from high performing to failing and also help identify those schools needing to go into improvement. Schools and school districts may fall into one of two labels with the same QDI. This is dependent on whether or not adequate yearly progress (AYP) is met. The labels are better understood by observing the following table (see Table 1) from the MDE State Accountability Performance Classification Model (2010).

Table 1

Performance Classifications

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Cut Points on QDI</th>
<th>Inadequate Yearly Progress</th>
<th>Adequate Yearly Progress</th>
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<tr>
<td>200-300</td>
<td>High-Performing</td>
<td>Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>166-199</td>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>High-Performing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>133-165</td>
<td>Academic Watch</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-99</td>
<td>Failing</td>
<td>Low-Performing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is critical to note that AYP must be met in many subgroups as noted by NCLB. These subgroups include students with limited English Proficiency, economically disadvantaged, students from major ethnic/racial backgrounds, and special education students. Many schools within the state are having difficulties in meeting AYP in one or more of these categories.
Statement of the Problem

Even with 69% of schools within Mississippi receiving Title I funds, 55% of the state still were labeled as at or below Academic Watch (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010a). These Title I schools receive extra funds from the federal government to assist those students who come from low-income families. These funds are used to help equal the playing field for students from lower socioeconomic statuses. The fact that schools, even with these funds, are still performing at much lower levels than their counterparts suggest that there are more factors other than socioeconomic status that account for low academic performance.

When considering academic achievement, it is imperative to determine the factors that are both related to and influence student performance. As educational leaders are being held more responsible for academic growth, there is a necessity to adequately identify those factors and them in order to increase acquisition of knowledge within the educational systems. There has been a great amount of research on low performing schools and yet there are still so many schools that are not meeting the academic needs of students (Bryk, 2010; Burney & Beilke, 2008; Nettles & Herrington, 2007). The recurring phenomenon suggests that other factors need to be explored.

According to Beard, Hoy, and Woolfolk-Hoy (2009) academic optimism is a factor that influences academic achievement, even after socioeconomic status has been controlled. Academic Optimism is the collection of collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust in parents and students (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2006). Hoy et. al defined academic optimism as:
The shared belief among faculty that academic achievement is important, that the faculty has the capacity to help students achieve, and that the students and parents can be trusted to cooperate with them in the effort- in brief, a school-wide confidence that students will succeed academically. (2006, p. 204)

The purpose of this study was to examine correlations between administrators’ and teachers’ Academic Optimism and academic achievement. This study also examined the difference in administrator’s and teacher’s congruence of academic optimism.

Research Questions

1) Is there a relationship between teacher’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?

2) Is there a relationship between administrator’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?

3) Is there a difference in academic optimism of teachers at elementary schools versus middle schools?

4) Is there a difference in the academic optimism of administrators in elementary schools versus middle schools?

5) Is there a difference between the teachers’ academic optimism and that of their administrators?

Definition of Terms

*Academic Achievement*- level of academic attainment as measured by a school’s Quality of Distribution Index score, which is based on scores obtained from Mississippi schools’ Curriculum Test, 2nd Edition.
**Academic Emphasis**- A focus on environments conducive to learning, high expectations of students, and celebration of academic excellence.

**Academic Optimism**- the combination of collective efficacy, trust in parents and students, and academic emphasis.

**Accountability**- the act of holding specific individuals (students, teachers, administrators, parents) responsible for the acquisition of high academic standards.

**Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)**- the formula used to determine whether or not each student is progressing accordingly. It is basically observing whether or not students have progressed a year within a school term. This formula is found both in the No Child Left Behind legislation and the Mississippi Accountability System.

**Administrator**- school leader assigned with the task of implementing, planning, monitoring and directing the goals of the school and district. Specifically in this study, administrator refers to a principal or assistant principal.

**Administrative Team**- refers to the principals, assistant principals, counselors, and academic coach/leaders of a school building.

**Accountability Label**- label assigned by the Mississippi Department of Education this is determined by a school or district’s Quality of Distribution Index Score and adequate yearly progress.

**Collective efficacy**- the belief of one individual that the entire school faculty has the ability to positively affect academic achievement.

**Elementary School**- a public educational institution in which kindergarten, first, second, third, fourth, and fifth grades are located.
Faculty Trust- the extent to which the faculty trust that both students and parents will contribute to the goals of high academic excellence.

MDE- acronym for Mississippi Department of Education

Middle School- a public educational institution in which grades six, seven, and eight are located.

Mississippi Curriculum Test- 2nd Edition (MCT2)- statewide assessment given to students in grades 3-8 in the areas of language arts and mathematics. This test is based on state standards.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001- legislation under George W. Bush that was created in an effort to increase student achievement, close achievement gaps between specific groups, and increase accountability.

Teacher- an individual employed by the school district with the primary responsibility of facilitating learning in the classroom, assessing learning, and providing academic enrichment.

Delimitations

In an effort to control for certain factors, there were certain delimitations to this research. The delimitations are as follows:

1. All participants will be from school districts located centrally in the state of Mississippi.

2. Only elementary and middle schools will be included in the study.

3. Academic achievement will be measured by the school’s QDI score.
Assumptions

The results and validity of this research are based on the below assumptions listed below:

1. All participants will be honest in their responses on the survey.
2. Only educators (teachers, administrators, counselors, other) who worked in that particular school during the 2010-2011 school year will complete the surveys.

Justifications

As we constantly seek to increase educational attainment and increase student achievement in the United States, it is critical that we not only look at the effect of research-based instructional practices or socioeconomic status on academic achievement, but also at any other factors that may potentially have a positive impact. The current state of education in Mississippi is still behind that of its counterparts, which suggests that providing schools with extra funds and an aligned curriculum alone will not raise student achievement.

Although the construct of academic optimism is relatively new, emerging research suggests that it is one of few factors that has a positive relationship with student achievement, despite socioeconomic status (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006b). Focusing on the elements of academic optimism of both teachers and administrators of a school for this study can possibly provide insight for educational leaders in the state of Mississippi seeking other means of improving academic achievement.

In this particular study, the researcher explored the relationship between administrator’s and teacher’s academic optimism and academic achievement. The researcher also explored the differences between the academic optimism of
administrators and their teachers. In exploring these relationships, the researcher seeks to contribute to the limited amount of research that exists on academic optimism. The findings from this study may also offer some insight into the power of a school team being on one accord with their beliefs.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

Although throughout time the specific goals of education have changed, based on community needs of the period, the ultimate goals of education have always been to increase one’s knowledge, prepare individuals to lead more productive lives, and to encourage contributions to the greater good in an ever changing society. Education has long been regarded as the cornerstone to successful countries, nations, businesses, and organizations. There are no substitutes for a high quality education, as its effects can span for generations.

As the world has become a more global community, the importance of acquiring a strong education has become even more imperative. The American Institutes for Research (2007) published a study in which they explained, “If you think of states and nations as in a race to prepare the future generations of workers, scholars, and citizens to be competent and competitive in a technologically complex world, then the states are in the middle of the pack. The bad news is that even our best performing states are running far behind that of high performing countries” (p. 1). Specifically, if the United States is to remain a leader among nations in the world, it must better prepare individuals to compete on a global level. This goal can only be realized through acquisition of a strong education.

Adolescent Literacy

In the past decade, there have been increasing concerns raised about the adolescent literacy crisis. The term, adolescent literacy, refers to the set of skills and abilities that students need in grades four through twelve in order to successfully read,
write, and think about the text materials they encounter (Moje, Overby, Tysaver & Morris, 2008). Becoming literate is a developmental and lifelong process, which in the 21st century also includes becoming proficient with the use of electronic and multimedia texts as well as conventional written material. The middle grades are a crucial time when America’s adolescents need to be knowledgeable in reading, writing, and thinking not only to succeed in at the middle school level, but also to succeed in high school and later in life (Biancarosa & Berman, 2004). Educators, in order to be effective in increasing literacy, must determine what practices and strategies will help to ensure that every middle school student moves beyond the basic literacy skills. Specifically, if students are to move beyond basic skills of the previous grades to the more challenging and more rewarding literacy of the middle and secondary years, they must first master those critical literacy skills in the elementary years (Snow & Shattuck, 2004).

A central challenge of adolescent literacy instruction lies in recognizing that effective literacy skills vary among different disciplines. Therefore, these literacy skills need to be adjusted while helping students develop the range of skills necessary to facilitate success in many contexts (Ippolito et al., 2008). A second distinctive challenge of adolescent literacy instruction lies in attending to adolescents’ developmental needs as they mature from children into young adults. Ippolito, et al. (2008) suggest that, in order to engage adolescents, literacy instruction must capture students’ minds and speak to the questions that they have about the world as they contemplate their place within it. This would allow them to interact with intellectually challenging content as it sharpens their ability to derive meaning from texts. Pedagogy and content that relates too closely to what works with middle school children are not likely to hold the attention of curious
adults, nor will they prepare those young adults for the rigors of a postsecondary education, where disciplinary knowledge and critical, independent thinking are prized (Sawyer, 2006; Ippolito, et al., 2008).

**Background Knowledge**

Commonly, researchers and theorists refer to what a person already knows as background knowledge. Numerous studies have confirmed the relationship between background knowledge and achievement (Marzano, 2004). Academic background knowledge affects more than just the learning that takes place within the physical realms of a classroom (Marzano, 2004; Hirsch, 2006). Studies have also shown its relation to occupation and status in life. Enhancing students’ background knowledge is a worthy goal of public education from a number of perspectives, especially in elementary and middle schools.

Given the relationship between academic background knowledge and academic achievement (Marzano, 2004), one can conclude that it should be considered when interventions are being employed to positively influence student achievement. If not addressed by schools, academic background knowledge can create great advantages for some students and great disadvantages for others. The scope of the disparity becomes evident when we consider how background knowledge is acquired (Marzano, 2004).

Marzano (2004) held that innate ability to process and store information dictates whether our experiences are stored as background knowledge or not. To illustrate this conjecture, the author suggested that we consider two students visiting a museum and see exactly the same exhibits. One student has an enhanced capacity to store information, while the other has a diminished capacity to process and store information. The student
with enhanced capacity will store most of the information from museum experience as new knowledge, committed to permanent memory, while the student with low capacity will not (Marzano, 2004). Differences in these factors create differences in their background knowledge, and therefore, in their academic achievement. This concept is one that has created substantial achievement gaps within different student populations and minority groups.

**Socioeconomic Status & the Achievement Gap**

There has been extensive research that has concluded that students who live in poverty often enter the formal education setting with less background knowledge than their peers. Croizet and Dutrevis (2004) noted that these children are at a greater risk for academic failure. The authors suggest that this phenomena also decreases their potential to contribute to society. Zill (1993) explained poverty as being cyclical in nature. He notes:

> Low achievement, grade repetition and classroom conduct problems are often precursors of school dropout, adolescent parenthood, joblessness and delinquency. The finding that poor children exhibit these problems at rates double those shown by non-poor children means the “cycle of disadvantage” is still with us. Unless effective interventions are found and applied, many of these young people will go on to become adult non-workers and impoverished or dependent parents, possibly producing another generation of high-risk children. (p. 39)

In the United States, ethnic minority populations are growing at a rapid pace and
in the near future will possibly be the numerical majority (Hernandez, 2004). Kolhlhaas, Lin, and Chu (2010) noted that in 2010, student enrollment within the United States public school system was nearly 50 million, with 43% of those students being from ethnic minority populations. Immigration has increased such that schools serving the developmental, health, and mental health needs of diverse families are forced to struggle with new added dimensions to the learning environment. Some of these include multiculturalism and language diversity, which are found in both urban and rural areas.

It is commonplace today to identify certain children in this modern, complex society as ‘at-risk’ of failing because of certain risk factors in which they have no control. Poverty, low educational attainment, violence, substance abuse, and illness are among the negative forces that often exist within these minority populations. Policymakers worry not only that such children stand little chance of reaching their potential as adults, but also that they are likely to become dysfunctional, and thus be limited in their ability of self-support or rewarding relationships with others. Many children are identified as at-risk because of both biological and environmental factors and early opportunities for enhancing language comprehension, once wasted, may have been permanently lost (Rak & Patterson, 1996).

Students who live in poverty often differ from those of their counterparts in the many experiences that affect literacy development (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000). Research has shown that students who are from families stricken with poverty are likely to struggle with reading (Hemphill & Tivnan, 2008). These particular patterns of low reading abilities are mostly first evident within early elementary school years and appear to become even greater barriers as students progress to later grades. These patterns may
be due to parent-child interactions that do or do not take place within low-income families, such as focused conversations, book reading habits, and the use of expressive language (Britton, Brooks-Gunn & Griffin, 2006).

According to Barr and Parrett (2007), schools mainly operate with middle class norms in mind, which for students living in poverty, can be a true challenge. They explain that often students who live in poverty and those from the middle class differ in values, attitudes, and perspectives on survival. Socioeconomic status is one of the widely used contextual variables in educational research. Increasingly, researchers examine educational processes, including academic achievement, in relation to socioeconomic background (Bournstein & Bradley, 2003).

A Nation at Risk

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education created a report that gave a synopsis of the current state of education within the United States. This report both startled the nation and forced educational leaders to more closely observe their overall effectiveness. A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform began with a letter from the chairman of the committee, David P. Garnder, stating:

Our purpose has been to help define the problems afflicting American education and to provide solutions, not search for scapegoats. We addressed the main issues as we saw them, but have not attempted to treat the subordinate matters in any detail. We were forthright in our discussions and have been candid in our report regarding both the strengths and weaknesses of American education. The Commission deeply believes that the problems we have discerned in American education can be both understood and corrected if the people of our country
together with those who have public responsibility in the matter, care enough and
are courageous enough to do what is required. (p. 2)

The report begins by discussing the world as a global village and the nature of the risk of
falling behind other nations. Education was noted as the sole determinant of the potential
of success in a nation. The Commission was tasked with several main goals that
included:

1) Assessing the quality of teaching and learning in our Nation’s public and
   private schools, colleges, and universities;
2) Comparing American schools and colleges with those of other advanced
   nations;
3) Studying the relationship between college admissions requirements and
   student achievement in high schools;
4) Identifying educational programs which result in notable student success in
   college;
5) Assessing the degree to which major social and educational changes in the last
   quarter century have affected student achievement; and
6) Defining problems which must be faced and overcome if we are successfully
   pursue the course of excellence in education (p. 39)

Specific indicators of risk and a focus on statistics of education within the United States
were explored and presented in detail. These statistics ranged from low high school
drop-out rates to low comprehension scores in math and reading. Although there have
been many disputes to determine the true purpose of a Nation at Risk, nearly three
decades later, researchers still agree with its facts and historical implications (Hewitt,
There is still a need for increased student achievement and subsequent reforms and legislation has been created for that purpose. Some of the recent legislation and reforms have tried to account for, and counteract, the effects and relationship of socioeconomic status to academic achievement. This concept is the basis for this research.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide relevant literature on the many variables that encompass academic optimism of teachers and administrators and their relationship to student achievement in the state of Mississippi. First, it will explore the No Child Left Behind Act and its influence on the educational system, both nationally and in the state of Mississippi. Secondly, there will be an exploration of effective leadership and academic achievement. Next, a deeper look at the influence of the teacher is included. An overview of the literature on the constructs of academic optimism is then presented. Lastly, a review of current literature relevant to the middle school concept and achievement is presented.

No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was yet another means of bringing focus to our nation’s educational system, and specifically including the academic achievement of those students living in poverty (Fuller, Wright, Gesicki & Kang, 2007). Under this educational reform, schools immediately were held to greater levels of accountability for their student’s academic achievement and yearly progress. This legislation was signed into law by President George W. Bush and reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Act of 1965. The ESEA was the first legislation of its kind that both combined federal funding and policy in an effort to
increase academic achievement (Ellen, 2010). NCLB is based on four main pillars: stronger accountability for results, proven education methods, more choice for parents, and more local flexibility.

Under the stronger accountability pillar, schools are now held more responsible for student academic achievement. This legislation has required all states to create an accountability system in which they annually assess students. Although there is some flexibility for states, they must test in the areas of reading and math and create plans for helping all students achieve a level of proficiency by 2014 (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010a). Schools are also required to meet adequate yearly progress. Within each state’s accountability model, they are required to report the achievement of subgroups and show improvement in closing achievement gaps of those students. Some of the subgroups that must be reported are children from low socioeconomic status, English language learners, students with disabilities, as well as students from different racial backgrounds. This specific component of NCLB has been effective in that schools must now focus on all groups of students to ensure they are all achieving at high rates (Burney & Beilke, 2008). These authors note that the transparency of the data from these subgroups has led to more research as to the specific and unique needs of each subgroup.

In the past, many students from those particular subgroups had been overlooked because schools were only reporting overall academic achievement. When only overall academic achievement was being reported, the students who were high performing helped give the perception that the entire school was performing at a higher level. In the situation that schools are not showing improvement in achievement for all subgroups,
there are corrective measures that must be put in place. According to NCLB, states and school districts must also report to the public their levels student achievement each year.

Jennings and Rentner (2006) note that although the effects of NCLB vary from state to state, overall the Center on Education Policy has determined that there are some recurring effects across the nation. The authors sum these recurring effects as follows:

1) State governments and school districts have expanded roles in school operations, but often without adequate federal funds.
2) Federal government is playing a bigger role.
3) The percentage of schools on state ‘needs improvement’ lists has been steady, but not growing. These schools are required to offer students public choice or tutoring services.
4) Schools are paying much more attention to achievement gaps and the learning needs of particular groups of students.
5) Students are taking a lot more tests.
6) Schools and teachers have made considerable progress in demonstrating that teachers meet the law’s academic qualifications.
7) Low-performing schools are undergoing makeovers rather than the most radical kinds of restructuring.
8) Schools are paying much more attention to the alignment of curriculum and instruction and are analyzing test score data more closely.
9) Schools are spending more time on reading and math, sometimes at the expense of subjects not tested.

10) State and district officials report that student achievement on state tests is rising, which is a cause for optimism. (p. 111)

This multiyear analysis clearly suggests that the overall major impact of NCLB is positive. Although some of the effects were not intended and negative, schools are now focusing more on the individual student and educational attainment. Schools are being held accountable for every student, which has helped to ensure that all students, including those living in poverty, students from various ethnic groups, and those with special needs, are steadily progressing toward higher levels of proficiency. Initial results from the last decade indicate that states and school districts are up to challenge of increasing academic achievement and decreasing achievement gaps (Weiner & Hall, 2004).

NCLB has mandated that all states create an accountability system, in which schools are held responsible for the academic achievement of all students. Although there were some specific requirements, states varied in their interpretation of those requirements. In the state of Mississippi, the accountability system gives an account of the effectiveness of both the school’s and the district’s instructional program. According to the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) (2010a), the current accountability system was created in the school term of 2008-2009 and implemented in the fall of 2009.

Mississippi Department of Education

According to the Mississippi Department of Education (2010b), although NCLB is the most current legislature governing the accountability system in Mississippi, it is not the state’s first attempt in creating accountability within its public school system.
Specifically in the area of accreditation, the University of Mississippi published a study in 1896 which launched efforts to more closely identify schools that prepared students to enter higher education. There were many efforts from teacher associations and state agencies throughout the next century that addressed accreditation in high schools, elementary schools, discrimination in schools, and improved academic performance. The Education Reform Act of 1982 was initiated by Governor William Winter and was created to establish a permanent performance-based system in the state of Mississippi. As recorded by MDE (2010b):

Legislation enacted in 1994 maintained the emphasis on student achievement and mandated that the Mississippi State Board of Education strengthen and expand the performance-based accreditation system. The 1994 legislation required the system to include: rigorous minimum standards; levels above the minimum that demand High Performing performance; and strict accountability measures for districts that fail to meet minimum standards. (p. 6)

The next act that affected accountability in the state of Mississippi occurred in 1999. The Mississippi Achievement Improvement Act of 1999 created a school evaluation and improvement system, in which annual performance standards were set. In 2000, further legislation clarified the components of the Mississippi Achievement Improvement Act of 1999 to more clearly explain the annual growth model and the achievement model. The legislation of 2000 also created a program that assisted schools that were not meeting specified standards. “Individual school performance classifications were assigned in September 2003 and for the first time, all components of a school- students, teachers,
principals, superintendents, and school board members- were held accountable for student learning.” (MDE, 2010b)(p.6)

It was the year 2007 in which the current accountability model began to form. The Accountability Task Force began to establish the new system based on three goals that had been established by the Mississippi Board of Education. These three goals included reducing, by 13%, the dropout rate, reaching the average national assessment scores by 2013, and making sure that all 3rd grade students can read on grade level by 2020. According the MDE (2010b):

The Mississippi Board of Education has set a very bold goal of reaching the national average on national assessments by 2013. When the State Board passed the new accountability rating system on March 20, 2009, they took an important step toward reaching that goal and made a tremendous commitment to prepare Mississippi children to compete on a national and international level. With the new system in place, Mississippi standards will be on par with standards in other states and there will be greater transparency in school, district, and state performance than there has ever been. (p. 7)

This brings us to the current state accountability system and its many components that have been created through observations of past systems in the state as well as current national standards. While many leaders in the state have noted that it is not a perfect system, it is one that has steadily progressed in the right directions.

There are two types of student level data used in the current accountability system. The first type of student level data is that taken from statewide assessment results. The assessments currently given are the Mississippi Curriculum Test- 2nd Edition
(MCT2), Subject Area Testing Program (SATP), and the Mississippi Alternate Assessment of the Extended Curriculum Frameworks (MAAECF). The second type of student level data is taken from school completion and cohort information.

Schools are given the accountability label based on their data from the Growth Model, the Achievement Model, and high school completion combined. The Growth Model shows how much student growth has occurred from year to year. The Achievement Model reflects scores from statewide assessments. The high school completion is based on how many students either graduate or complete GED (Graduate Equivalent Degree) programs. The accountability labels range from low performing to high performing and are as follows: Failing, Low-Performing, At-Risk of Failing, Academic Watch, Successful, High Performing, Star School/District.

The Achievement Model uses the student level assessment scores. The results from the MCT2, SATP, and MAAECF are then used to calculate a school’s quality of distribution index (QDI). Depending on whether a student scores minimal, basic, proficient, or advanced, they are assigned a certain number of points. MDE (2010b) has assigned the following formula:

$$QDI = (1 \times \%\text{Basic}) + (2 \times \%\text{Proficient}) + (3 \times \%\text{Advanced})$$

It is important to note that no points are assigned to those scores of minimal proficiency. The QDI of a school or school district can range from 0 to 300.

The Growth Model in Mississippi is what is used to meet the adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirement of NCLB. Under this model, individual student data is used to determine how much they should grow academically in one school term. Currently, the accountability system in Mississippi categorizes AYP in the two ways; growth met or
growth not met. This is a very critical component as it relates to the accountability label, in that a school can be labeled in one of two categories depending on whether or not they met AYP. One example of this is a school with a QDI of 142. If that school meets AYP, they will be labeled as Successful. If they fail to meet AYP in one of the subgroups, that same school could be under Academic Watch.

When it comes to the state of education in Mississippi in comparison to others, according to the National Association of Educational Progress (2011), it has ranked between 47 and 50 for the last 10 years based on the 8th grade math scores. These rankings are based on the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment, which is a national assessment given to students in grades three and eight. Some have contributed these achievement results to the low levels of socioeconomic status and high levels of poverty found within that state, specifically to those students who are in public schools.

Socioeconomic Status & Poverty Levels

As documented in the 2009 National Report Card for Mississippi (2011), nearly 69% of students in public schools in Mississippi were eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. According to the United States Department of Agriculture and its School Lunch Program (2011), students are eligible for free and reduced lunch if they are living between 130% and 180% of the poverty level. Poverty levels are currently considered at $22,350 for a family of four. Table 2 contains the federal poverty guidelines as determined by the number of people living within a household.
Table 2

*Federal Poverty Guidelines, 2011*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persons in family</th>
<th>48 contiguous States and D. C.</th>
<th>Alaska</th>
<th>Hawaii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$10,890</td>
<td>$13,600</td>
<td>$12,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$14,710</td>
<td>$18,380</td>
<td>$16,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$18,530</td>
<td>$23,160</td>
<td>$21,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$22,350</td>
<td>$27,940</td>
<td>$25,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$26,170</td>
<td>$32,720</td>
<td>$30,100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each additional person add $3,820 $4,780 $4,390

Adapted from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty)

The fact that almost 69% of students in the state of Mississippi are eligible to receive free and reduced lunch asserts that there are a large number of families that are living on low-income or in poverty. Croizet and Dutrevis (2004) discussed the implications of socioeconomic status on achievement. They noted that inequalities in socioeconomics can restrict educational experiences before students enter the formal school setting. Children who often live in low-income areas have less access to proper materials that can positively affect their early literacy skills (Neuman & Celano, 2001). These researchers propose that because students who live in poverty are exposed to less print material and educational experiences, they arrive with less background knowledge. As noted by Edmonds (1982), while the landmark publications of the Coleman Report of
1966 suggests that schools have less to do with the academic outcomes of students than do their poverty levels, more current literature reveals otherwise. Recent research has shown that while socioeconomic factors can be predictors of academic performance, there are other factors that can positively influence academic success, even in spite of family statistics (Hoy et al., 2006b; Mertens & Flowers, 2006; Picucci Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2004).

Leadership and Academic Achievement

Research has explored and documented the effects of leadership on academic achievement, both direct and indirect. Looking at the leadership in any organization is essential to understanding its goals, successes, and failures. Leadership ultimately determines the direction in which the organization is headed. As demands have increased for higher levels of academic achievement, more attention and focus has been shifted to the critical role of leadership.

Leadership in the school setting, mostly rests upon the building principal. As the roles of the school principal have evolved over the past years, so has their direct effect on student achievement (Nettles & Herrington, 2007). Principals are no longer viewed as the individuals with the most keys in a building, but more importantly as instructional leaders. The model of instructional leadership was a component of Edmond’s research on effective schools (Hallinger, 2003). Effective schools research (Blasé & Blasé, 2000) has defined the instructional leader as one who:

1) Makes suggestions
2) Gives feedback
3) Supports collaboration
4) Models effective instruction
5) Provides professional development opportunities
6) Solicits opinions
7) Gives praise for effective teaching. (p. 136)

Hallinger (2005) defines the instructional leader as one who defines the school mission, manages the instructional programs, and promotes a positive climate. Others have defined the instructional leader as one who is responsible for developing, monitoring, and assessing curriculum and instruction within the school building (Bamburg & Andrews, 1990). Horng and Loeb (2010) note that the instructional leader is not only responsible for implementation of curriculum and instruction, but also for overall organizational management. They highlight that organizational management focuses on the structures of the organization and not curriculum alone. The authors note that strong organizational managers are effective in identifying the good personnel and maintaining positive climates.

There has been an extensive amount of research in school improvement that focuses on the leadership skills that are essential to increasing student achievement (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Byrk (2010) notes five elements needed in order to support schools in improvement: a coherent instructional guidance system, professional capacity, strong parent and community ties, a student-centered learning climate, and effective leadership. Vanderhaar, Munoz, & Rodosky, (2007) note that “implementing steps to reform schools and improve student achievement requires the leadership of excellent principals and assistant principals” (p. 18).
Waters, Marzano, & McNulty (2004) talked about the 21 leadership qualities found from their MCREL studies of effective school leaders. They note these following key areas of responsibility:

1) **Culture:** fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community
2) **Order:** establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines
3) **Discipline:** protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus
4) **Resources:** provides teachers with the materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs
5) **Curriculum, instruction, and assessment:** is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices
6) **Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment:** is knowledgeable about current practices
7) **Focus:** established clear goals and keeps these goals at the forefront of the school’s attention
8) **Visibility:** has high quality contact and interactions with teachers and students
9) **Contingent rewards:** recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments
10) **Communication:** establishes strong lines of communication with teachers and students
11) **Outreach:** is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders
12) Input: involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies

13) Affirmation: recognizes and celebrates school accomplishments and acknowledges failures

14) Relationship: demonstrates empathy with teachers and staff on a personal level

15) Change agent role: is willing and prepared to actively challenge the status quo

16) Optimizer role: inspires and leads new and challenging innovations

17) Ideals and beliefs: communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling

18) Monitoring and evaluation: monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning

19) Flexibility: adapts his or her leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent

20) Situational awareness: is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems

21) Intellectual stimulation: ensures that faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices in education and makes the discussion of these practices integral to the school’s culture (p. 49)

Leaders that encompass these responsibilities are not guaranteed to be effective, but those that are effective have shown strong abilities within these areas. Effective leadership has
been defined in many ways, but these central themes found within McREL (Midcontinent Research for Education & Learning) research are often recurring. Waters et al. (2003) also note that while principals can positively influence student achievement by employment of specific leadership practices, they can also have a marginal or even negative impact by using approaches that are not effective.

Collaborative Leadership

Recent research has explored the concept of courageous, collaborative leadership (Goldring, 2005). Goldring notes that courageous leadership develops deep within the core of educational leaders and is nurtured in response to a true sense of vision. Leaders that are considered courageous and are often engaged in “providing honest input and counsel, presenting and being responsive to outside-the-norm ideas, sharing alternative viewpoints, speaking up, and not settling for the status quo” (Anfara et al., 2008). These leaders are not afraid to do what is best for students and the organization at large, even when it is not popular practice or conventional.

Collaborative leadership often focuses on the process of group decision making. These leaders use effective communication skills, value all stakeholders input, and often foster mutual trusting relationships. School administrators and teacher leaders who embody the concept of collaborative leadership seek to empower those around them and promote a shared vision. Collaborative leaders recognize the power of team and encourage the notion of shared power. These qualities work together to create rich cultures in which students excel academically, the teachers improve professionally, and the school community benefits.
Academic Optimism

As the demands for greater academic achievement have steadily increased, so has the need to further elucidate those factors that positively influence student performance. It is also critical to note that as the demands for academic achievement have increased, budget restraints have decreased the amount of funds being delegated to education. With this in mind, it is critical that researchers explore other areas in which schools can more positively influence academic success, that are both cost effective and can overbear the effects of socioeconomic status. Beard, Hoy, & Woolfolk-Hoy (2009) noted:

One of the most important contributions educational researchers can make to the field is to identify properties of schools that make a real difference in academic achievement of students. Socioeconomic status always has a strong impact upon academic achievement, but socioeconomic is not amenable to significant change by teachers or administrators. We need to identify factors that go beyond socioeconomic status to affect achievement. The search for such variables, especially those that school leaders can influence or that are under control of individual teachers themselves, has been elusive. (p. 20)

One specific concept that has emerged as a factor that can influence student achievement, despite socioeconomic status, is Academic Optimism.

Developed by Wayne Hoy (2006b), academic optimism is a relatively new concept that uses Bandura’s (1997) social cognitive and self-efficacy research as a theoretical foundation. Hoy explains academic optimism as:
an appropriate overarching construct to unite efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis because each concept contains a sense of the possible. Efficacy is the belief that the faculty can make a positive difference in student learning; teachers believe in themselves. Faculty trust in students and parents is the belief that teachers, parents, and students cooperate to improve learning, that is, the faculty believes in its students. Academic emphasis is the enacted behavior prompted by these beliefs, that is, the focus is student success. Thus, a school with high Academic Optimism is a collectivity in which the faculty believes it can make a difference, the students can learn, and academic performance can be achieved. (p. 145)

The three components of academic emphasis, faculty trust, and collective efficacy interact together and influence the overall culture and climate of the school.

Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura was a social psychologist whose social cognitive theory was created in an effort to explain how individuals learn (Malone, 2002). The major component of this theory includes self-efficacy, vicarious reinforcement, self-regulation, observational learning, and forethought activity. Burney (2008) describes this theory:

Social cognitive theory emphasizes a dynamic interactive process to explain human functioning. This theory ascribes a central role to cognitive processes in which the individual can observe others and the environment, reflect on that in combination with his or her own thoughts and behaviors, and alter his or her own self-regulatory functions accordingly. (p. 130)
Although this theory has been challenged by other social learning theorists, Bandura’s research has been most widely accepted and spread to other disciplines (Grusec, 1992; Malone, 2002). Bandura, unlike many other social theorists of the time, focused on actual human behavior research and not that taken from observation of animals. Grusec (1992) explained:

Bandura’s theory (1997) is mainly concerned with how children and adults operate cognitively on their social experiences and with how these cognitive operations then come to influence their behavior and development. Individuals are believed to abstract and integrate information that is encountered in a variety of social experiences, such as exposure to models, verbal discussions, and discipline encounters. (p. 781)

Although this theory initially was referred to as the social learning theory, as his research expanded on the concept it later was called the social cognitive theory.

Collective Efficacy

Collective efficacy is the first component of Academic Optimism that will be explored. According to Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk-Hoy (2004), collective efficacy is the belief of one teacher that the entire faculty has the ability to do what is necessary in order to increase student achievement. The basis of collective efficacy is personal of self-efficacy. According to self-efficacy theory, both children and adults develop certain beliefs about their ability to accomplish specific tasks (Grusec, 1992). These beliefs, in return, influence their behavior in present and future situations. Over time, an individual’s beliefs influence how much he or she will try to achieve and overall performance efforts in a certain task.
As it relates to collective efficacy, these same concepts apply, but with the understanding that these beliefs are related to the entire group of individuals. Goddard & Skrla (2006) note, “The stronger an organization’s collective efficacy beliefs, the more likely that its members are to put forth the sustained effort and persistence required to attain desired goal” (p. 220).

An individual’s behavior is, largely in part, based on his or her beliefs. As reported by Erdem and Demirel (2007), self-efficacy can be considered a belief that has an immense impact on one’s sense of responsibility and actions. They state:

Self-efficacy beliefs provide the foundation for human motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment because unless people believe that their actions can produce the outcomes they desire, they have little incentive to act or to persevere when they face obstacles…It is not simply a matter of how capable one is, but of how capable one believes oneself to be. (p. 576)

Research has suggested that the effects of self-efficacy can be both positive and negative. Paunonen and Hong (2010) found that self-efficacy is bidirectional in that individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy can possibly perform at better levels of proficiency than do their counterparts with lower levels of self-efficacy merely because they are approaching the task differently. This is often the case, even when both individual’s actual performance abilities are similar. They also found that individuals with lower levels of self-efficacy might not perform up to expected levels because they are not as persistent or motivated to achieve the task. Self-efficacy has also been determined to have an impact of future goal setting (Yilmaz, 2009). He noted that individuals who have
higher levels of self-efficacy perceptions are more likely to set higher goals and truly seek to attain those goals. On the other hand, individuals with lower levels of self-efficacy perception are more likely to have goals that are very easily attained.

Teacher self-efficacy can be conceptualized as the teacher’s belief in his or her abilities to create, execute, and evaluate instructional activities that will positively influence student achievement (Shaalvik & Shaalvik, 2007). According to Bandura (1997), teachers with high self-efficacy spend the maximum amount of instructional time engaging their students in academic activities that are purposeful and increase the learning process. Likewise, teachers with low self-efficacy spend instructional time on activities that do not yield academic progress, but rather focus on the discipline issues associated with students. Teachers with high self-efficacy not only believe in themselves, but they also believe in their students as well (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

Collective teacher efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), is concerned with the performance capability of a system as a whole. As asserted by Goddard (2001), “For schools, collective efficacy refers to the perceptions of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can execute the courses of actions necessary to have positive effects on students”(p. 467). Ware and Kitsantas (2007) noted that high collective teacher efficacy requires group effort, judgment, and willingness for the group to remain as a group. They contributed to this as cohesiveness. Research has shown that high collective teacher efficacy is associated with student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2000).

Leadership does matter. Collective efficacy is a construct that is not predetermined and can be improved. As teachers experience success and failures, their
levels of self-efficacy are influenced. Individuals arrive at their self-efficacy perceptions by internalizing information from four main areas. Researcher Pajares (2003) asserts:

The most influential source is the interpreted result of one’s performance, or mastery experience. Outcome predicted as successful raise self-efficacy; those interpreted as failures lower it. The second source of self-efficacy information is the vicarious experience individuals undergo when they observe other performing tasks. Part of one’s vicarious experience involves the social comparisons made with other individuals. These comparisons, along with peer modeling, can be powerful influences on developing self-perceptions of competence. Individuals also develop self-efficacy beliefs as a result of the verbal messages and social persuasions they receive from others. Positive persuasions may work to encourage and empower; negative persuasions can work to defeat and weaken self-beliefs. (p. 140)

As noted by Waters et. al, (2004), one of the 21 most important things that an effective leader can do is provide praise and affirmation. As explained by Ross and Gray (2006), principals have the profound ability to strongly influence how teachers define, recognize, and celebrate success. Through the communication of an inspiring vision, administrators can increase teachers’ collective capacity beliefs. By celebrating success of both team and individual performance, instructional leaders can further perpetuate collective efficacy.

Other ways that educational leaders can help increase teacher collective efficacy is through improving the emotional well-being of faculty members. This can be
accomplished as leaders find effective means of decreasing negative stress (Erdem & Demirel, 2007). Administrative teams can help decrease teacher stress by protecting the instructional time through scheduling. Another way that administrators can help decrease a teacher’s stress level is by establishing effective discipline plans that decrease the number of classroom disruptions and behavior problems. Ross and Gray (2006) found that transformational leadership styles have a positive effect on a school’s collective teacher efficacy.

Faculty Trust

The second component of Academic Emphasis is faculty trust. This refers to the levels of trust that the faculty has for its students and teachers that they will work together toward the educational goals of academic achievement. Trust is a term and concept that is not always easily defined. This can be due to the notion that trust is relative to one’s own personal experiences and perceptions.

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) asserted that trust is “an individual’s or group’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter part will is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (p. 189). As trust grows within individual or group relationships, the ability of achieving greater goals become more attainable. With increased pressure to produce greater student achievement, this is a concept that should be further explored. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk-Hoy (2006) affirmed:

Trusting others is a fundamental aspect of human learning because learning is typically a cooperative process, and distrust makes cooperation virtually impossible. When students, teachers, and parents have a common learning
goal, trust and cooperation are likely ingredients that improve teaching and learning. (p. 430)

As schools seek to successfully work with parents and students, trust is an element that cannot be overlooked. Communication is a critical component that can easily influence trust, both positively and negatively. In 2004, Tschannen-Moran explained that trust both binds organizational participants together and assists the organization in running smoothly.

When looking at the components of trust, it involves risk taking from all parties. In a school setting this refers to students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Researchers suggest that a culture of trust should create an environment in which individuals are encouraged to make errors, take risks, and break new grounds (Hoy, Gage, & Tarter, 2006). Effective teachers understand that promoting the freedom to take risk is imperative to a classroom that is conducive to learning. Likewise, effective administrators understand that in order to create positive cultures and climates within the schools, they too must allow and encourage risk taking. This helps to create stronger bonds, thus increasing the levels of trust.

Literature on the topic of faculty trust suggests that higher levels of trust are positively correlated with student achievement (Carless, 2009; Hoy, et. al, 2006a; Maele & Houtte, 2009). Trust has also been found to positively affect the effectiveness and functioning of schools. Byrk & Schneider (2003) discussed how the presence of trust in a school can help to increase collaboration. This collaboration allows teachers to freely share best teaching practices and models, which in turn influence student performance.
Administrators and educational leaders can influence the level of faculty trust within a school (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Researchers found that there are some specific things that leaders can do within the school setting to increase faculty trust. As reported by Sheldon, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland (2010):

These functions applied to trust, include a) developing a vision of a trustworthy school, b) serving as a role model for trustworthiness through language and action, c) facilitating teacher competence through effective coaching, d) improving school discipline among students and teachers through effective management, and e) mediating conflict and repairing a constructive and honest manner. Administrator trustworthiness, then is demonstrated by nurturing and balancing relationships among facets of trust, constituencies of schools, and functions of leadership.

(p. 160)

Other researchers have also explored the levels of an administrator’s respect from his faculty and its relationship to trust (Bryk & Schnieder, 2003). If the faculty has respect for their educational leaders, they are more likely to also trust them and thus increase the overall level of faculty trust within the school setting. Bryk & Schnieder suggest that the actions of educational leaders play a critical function in establishing trust. They report that principals can help create trusting relationships with their students, teachers, and parents by acknowledging differences, actively listening, and being consistent. Furthermore, they assert that in order to sustain trusting relationships, principals need to be congruent in what they say and what they do. Although the specific component of faculty trust within the concept of Academic Optimism is based on the feelings of the
teachers, an effective administrator can positively influence the trusting relationships within his or her school and thus impact the overall climate and culture.

As it relates to faculty trust of parents and students, leadership still has a great influence on this process. As concluded by Tschannen-Moran (2004), principals also play an important role in establishing trust within the overall school community. They can achieve this by creating opportunities for parents and teachers to interact as well as participating in open, honest communication with the public. Leaders in educational systems need to fully understand the impact of trust as it relates to not only their faculty, but equally as important, to their students and parents as well. Trust is not a concept that can be established overnight, but is one that takes time and effort to nourish.

Academic Emphasis

The third and last construct of Academic Optimism is academic emphasis. This particular concept has background from Ronald Edmonds’ effective school research (1982) in which he noted five specific school areas that were associated with high academic achievement; high expectations for students, an emphasis on basic skills, an orderly environment, strong principal leadership, and an emphasis on basic skills (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000). With this research in mind, Wayne Hoy and his colleagues also considered student motivation and defined academic emphasis as the extent to which academic excellence and achievement are emphasized in a school. In schools that are characterized as having high levels of academic emphasis, those teachers and administrators establish high, yet achievable, goals, possess a strong belief in the abilities of their students, establish and maintain an environment that is serious and
orderly, and everyone (students, teachers, and administrators) both respects and aspire academic success (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000).

The effects of academic emphasis is both cyclical in both student and teacher performance. As explained by Goddard et al. (2000):

Academic emphasis, which helps shape the normative environment of a school, will have a strong influence over teacher behavior and consequently, student achievement. Such emphasis creates a school climate in which both teachers and students are more likely to persist in their academic efforts. Students are motivated by the respect they get from other students and teachers when they succeed, and teachers accept responsibility for student achievement and do not let temporary setbacks unduly frustrate them. Thus, a strong climate of academic emphasis not only enhances individual student and teacher performance, but also influences the pattern of shared beliefs held by organizational members.

(p. 689)

As it relates to Bandura’s social cognitive theory, the more one experiences success, it builds their confidence that they can continue being successful (Bandura, 1997). Specifically relating to academic emphasis of a school, as the school experiences success, whether determined by state accountability measures or other methods, they are more likely to continue increasing academic emphasis.

Studies have shown that academic emphasis does directly and positively influence student achievement (Beard et al., 2009; Goddard et al., 2000; Hoy et al., 2006c). These studies were effective in showing that academic emphasis has a positive effect on student
performance, even when observing students from low-income or poverty-stricken families. The culture of the schools in these studies was of academic excellence, which had been fostered by their push in academic emphasis. Academic emphasis dictates that teachers and students consistently engage in effective practices and strategies that foster teaching and learning.

This construct of Academic Optimism, much like the others, can also be influenced by leadership. Even more so than the other two constructs, academic emphasis can both be positively or negatively affected by school administrators. Instructional leadership fully encompasses whether or not academic emphasis is strongly enforced or merely encouraged within a school building. Researchers have shown that leaders can improve academic emphasis by basing all decisions on the concept of how it will impact academic excellence and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2008). As accountability measures continue to increase and student leaders are held to higher standards for academic achievement, administrators should focus on increasing their academic emphasis as it has been shown effective in boosting student performance and overall culture.

Middle School and Achievement

Specifically, research has shown that students entering the middle school grades have unique needs (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Middle schools have traditionally been plagued with declines in student achievement, which is thought to be connected with the specific developmental concerns that are associated with adolescent development (Trimble, 2002). Alspaugh (1998) discussed the idea that middle schools have also traditionally struggled with motivating their students to be concerned enough to
learn and then demonstrate their learning on assessments. The middle school concept is one that is founded upon developmentally and academically appropriate practices and strategies for students during the transition between elementary and high school (Picucci et al., 2004; Anfara & Lipka, 2003).

The National Middle School Association has found several key characteristics of effective middle schools, in response to the unique needs of students between ages 10 and 14. Some of the key characteristics of effective middle level education include being developmentally responsive, socially equitable, and cultivating cultures of academic excellence. According to Trimble (2002), some other key characteristics of high performing middle schools are effective leadership, quality teachers, focus on achievement, and a sustained positive school climate. Cawelti (1999) also identified a focus on standards and improving results, strong leadership, teamwork, and committed teachers as characteristics of effective middle schools. They have noted that the cultures found within middle schools are very important, according to Barth (2002):

A school’s culture is a complex pattern of norms, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. It is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act. (p. 7)

Research within the construct of Academic Optimism also supports the critical component that a culture plays in a successful middle school (Hoy et al., 2006). Pritchard, Marrow, & Marshall (2005) note that the impact of a school’s culture may be due to its influence on teacher productivity, student performance, and motivation.
Middle School Cultures

As noted by Morocco, Clark-Chiarelli, Mata Aguilar, & Brigham (2002), middle schools that desire cultures of excellence should ensure teaching and learning takes place as follows;

1) Authentic tasks engage students in constructing knowledge around important concepts,

2) Cognitive strategies provide tools for engaging in domain-specific thinking and learning,

3) Socially mediated learning engages students in intellectual partnerships with one another and with adults, and

4) Constructive conversations facilitate building ideas. (p. 4)

They also note that these schools are professional learning communities in which the teachers and administrators are constantly sharing effective practices and strategies. Students have a clear vision of what it means to be a successful learner in these effective middle schools. The National Middle School Association (2010) also noted that the vision of learning is extended beyond the students to include the teacher as well. “Successful schools for young adolescents are characterized by a culture that include high expectations for every member of the learning community, with students and teachers engaged in active learning” (p. 7).

Hoy and Hannum (1997) also note the importance of culture within the middle school setting. These researchers suggest that effective middle-level educational leaders and teachers should provide student-centered environments that are mutually respectful, stimulate creativity, and promote supportive relationships. Middle school climates should
cultivate trusting relationships between students, teachers, and administrators. Effective middle schools promote cooperation, pride, and commitment (Russell, 1997). Clark and Clark (2007) explain, “Strong, energetic, and informed leadership is crucial in creating and maintain school cultures that focus on learning. If middle schools are to be places where all young adolescents will be successful learners, principals must be committed to building and sustaining healthy school cultures” (p. 59).

Interdisciplinary Teaming

Another key component of the effective school, as noted by the middle school concept, is that of interdisciplinary teaming. As explained by Wallace (2007), interdisciplinary team organizations allow groups of teachers to share the same general physical area of a school building, the same groups of children, the responsibilities of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and the same schedule. Research of effective middle schools supports that placing students into teams helps give students the needed attention, helps build stronger identity and sense of belonging and helps teachers to better understand students’ knowledge and abilities (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Flowers et al. (1999) note several positive outcomes of teaming; improved work climate, increased parental contact, increased job satisfaction, and increased student achievement. George & Alexander (2003) distinguish the following characteristic of highly effective teams:

1) Student centered focus.

2) Strong commitment to academic achievement.

3) Collaborative policies and accountability systems.

4) Strong sense of team community.
5) A proactive approach.

6) Teachers who work professionally and collaboratively.

Some schools have not only shown high levels of student achievement, but also higher levels of student self-esteem. Mertens & Flowers (2006) observed that when looking at middle schools with high percentages of students living at or below poverty level, interdisciplinary teams helped to improve student achievement.

Researchers of the middle school concept have also found that high performing schools have common planning time for teachers. This common planning time gives teachers the environment and structure to collaborate and share effective instructional strategies, thus growing together professionally. According to Gallagher-Polite (2001), common planning time affords teachers the opportunities to problem solve together, which helps increases the school’s capacity to improve. Jackson and Davis (2000) note that schools in which teachers experienced common planning time together had improved levels of student achievement in the areas of mathematics and reading. Other studies have shown the as the amount of common planning increases, so does the student achievement scores (Mertens & Flowers, 2006; Sweetland & Hoy; 2000).

High Expectations

Middle schools that sustain high levels of academic achievement also have another element in common, high expectations for academic success. High expectations often are established and communicated through the building’s leadership and travel through the teacher interactions and ultimately are transferred to the students. Clark and Clark (2007) note that “a commitment to high expectations and student success guarantees that student learning will be the focus of the school and that principals and
teachers will take action on that commitment in their classrooms and in their schools” (p. 57). Middle school students are influenced by the expectations of others (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). This expectancy concept can have a positive or negative impact on the motivation of the young adolescent learner. Students that know they are expected to perform at higher levels often put forth more effort, while those that believe they cannot succeed often stop trying. This concept ties directly into Bandura’s self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997). High and Andrews (2009) found that student engagement in the middle school setting is increased when there are high expectations of academic excellence in place. The authors discussed that students who are engaged are often characterized with behaviors that support increased academic achievement.

The middle school concept and some of its components are related to the constructs within Academic Optimism. Most importantly, creating and sustaining a culture that is conducive to learning is a key element of both. Literature related to middle schools and achievement suggests that while the adolescent learner has diverse needs, with the proper support and resources these students can have high levels of academic achievement.

**Summary**

As NCLB requirements have forced states to create accountability systems in which academic achievement of all students is transparent and proficiency is expected, leaders have searched for more effective means to influence student performance. Academic Optimism, through its constructs of collective efficacy, faculty trust, and academic emphasis, has been shown to have a positive relationship with academic achievement, especially in the areas of math and reading. Each specific construct has
shown direct relationships with student achievement. Especially in the state of Mississippi where over 68% of students in public education are eligible for free or reduced lunch, this concept should be of great interest since effects are evident regardless of socioeconomic levels.

Academic optimism seeks to create a climate and culture in which student achievement is both expected and celebrated, faculties trust each other, parents, and students to help in the attainment of academic goals, and academic excellence is the standard in which everyone operates. Specifically, in middle level education, students have unique needs that warrant specific practices and environments. Educational leaders have no control over student’s background, as it relates to their home life, and often have little control over obtaining funds and proper resources for those students. Even with these facts in mind, however, administrators can still positively influence students’ achievement through the use of academic emphasis. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the Academic Optimism of teachers and administrators and academic achievement of students in Mississippi.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

As we increase accountability and look for higher academic achievement in Mississippi, it is critical that factors outside of socioeconomics are considered. According to Hoy et al. (2006), Academic Optimism is the combination of academic emphasis, faculty trust, and collective efficacy interactions. These three constructs together can positively affect student achievement, even despite socioeconomic status. The purpose of this study was to examine correlations between administrators’ and teachers’ Academic Optimism and academic achievement in Mississippi. This study also examined the difference in administrators’ and teachers’ congruence of academic optimism.

Research Design

A non-experimental quantitative research design was utilized in this study. The following questions were used to guide this study:

1) Is there a relationship between teacher’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?

2) Is there a relationship between administrator’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?

3) Is there a difference in academic optimism of teachers at elementary schools versus middle schools?

4) Is there a difference in academic optimism of administrators at elementary schools versus middle schools?

5) Is there a difference between the teachers’ academic optimism and that of their administrators?
The independent variable was academic optimism. This one independent variable has three components; collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust in parents and students. The dependent variable was academic achievement as measured by the Quality of Distribution Index (QDI) score, which reflects scores of the Mississippi Curriculum Test- 2\textsuperscript{nd} for the 2010-2011 school term.

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited from four central Mississippi school districts, which are Title I eligible. Only teachers and administrators from elementary and middle schools that were employed during the 2010-2011 school term were included in this study. Participants were informed that data from their participation would be used for research purposes only and their identifying information would remain confidential.

Instrumentation

The instrument that was utilized to measure the Academic Optimism of teachers and administrators is the School Academic Optimism Survey (SAOS), which was created by Dr. Wayne Hoy (Appendix C). The three constructs of Academic Optimism are collective efficacy, faculty trust, and academic emphasis. Each component has a subscale that is then used to calculate the overall Academic Optimism score. Each subscale will be used in its entirety.

The subscale that measures the collective efficacy was created in 2000 by Hoy and his colleagues. This component of the SAOS contains 12 items (1-12 on the instrument) and rated on a six-point Likert scale. The response choices include 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=agree, and 6=strongly agree. Tschannen and Woolfolk-Hoy (2001) determined that reliability of the
measure was alpha=.73. In order to obtain the collective efficacy score, three steps must be followed. First, on items numbered 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, and 12 of the instrument, the scores must be reversed (that is 1=6, 2=5, etc.). Second, average items 1-12 which will yield the individual collective efficacy score. Lastly, to get the overall collective efficacy score of a school, find the average of items 1-12 of all individuals within that particular group.

The subscale that measures faculty trust in students and parents contains 10 items rated on the six-point Likert scale (alpha=.90). The response choices are the same as the collective efficacy items of the SAOS. These subscale items are found in items 13-22 on the instrument. To find the subscale score, first reverse item number 22. The individual subscale and collective subscale can then be calculated by finding the average.

The subscale that measures the academic emphasis contains eight items and rated on a four-point Likert scale. The responses include 1=rarely, 2=sometimes, 3=often, and 4=very often. The reliability was reported as alpha= .92 (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2000). Those eight items were taken from the Organizational Health Inventory. To calculate the academic emphasis subscale score, total all the items as they are and proceed to find the individual and then collective subscale average.

The students’ academic achievement data was obtained from the Mississippi Department of Education Reporting System for the 2010-2011 school term. This report, as a component of NCLB, provides details on MCT2 scores, accountability label, and QDI. MCT2 scores reflect student achievement for grades three through eight in the areas of language arts, reading, and mathematics.
Procedures

After permission was granted from the University Institutional Review Board (Appendix A), the researcher then contacted the superintendents of the targeted school districts to seek permission to conduct research within their elementary and middle schools. The superintendent was provided with a written request (Appendix B), a copy of the Institutional Review Board’s approval letter, a copy of the SAOS (Appendix C), and an explanation of the current study.

Principals from the elementary and middle schools within those districts were then contacted with the same information as well as a copy of the letter from the superintendent granting permission to conduct research within the school district. The researcher worked with each individual school to determine the best method for participation. Some schools requested to complete surveys during faculty meetings, while others requested time for teachers and administrators to complete the surveys individually. Teachers and administrators were given the survey (Appendix C) along with the letter of consent (Appendix B). There was an item that asked teachers to note whether or not they were employees for the 2010-2011 school term along with other demographic information (Appendix E). If the employee indicated that he or she was not employed with the school district at that time, their survey was not used in the analysis.

Data Analysis

Data derived from this research was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Data from instruments were aggregated at the teacher level, administrative level, and overall school level. Statistical analyses were completed to determine descriptive data of each school. Correlational analyses were used to determine
the relationship between academic optimism and academic achievement. Independent $t$-tests were utilized to determine whether or not differences exist between groups of teachers, administrative teams, and school levels.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the correlations between administrator’s and teacher’s Academic Optimism and academic achievement. The School Academic Optimism Survey was sent out to 30 schools, 15 middle schools and 15 elementary schools. All schools were located in the central Mississippi region. Each school received 20 surveys, which represented a total of 600 (N=600) surveys. Three hundred twenty-four surveys were returned, representing 20 schools and 54% of the total number (N=600) that were sent to the schools. This chapter sets forth the results of the study.

The following research questions were used in the study:

1) Is there a relationship between teacher’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?

2) Is there a relationship between administrator’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?

3) Is there a difference in academic optimism of teachers at elementary schools versus middle schools?

4) Is there a difference in the academic optimism of administrators in elementary schools versus middle schools?

5) Is there a difference between the teachers’ academic optimism and that of their administrators?

Descriptive Statistics

The number of teachers who responded to the survey was 239 (73.8%). Approximately 17 counselors (5.2%), 18(5.6%) academic coaches/leaders, 14 (4.3 %)
assistant principals, 7 (2.2%) principals, and 29 (9.0%) others responded to the survey. Of the respondents that identified themselves as others, they noted being teacher assistants, library assistants, and secretaries. Over half of the respondents were from elementary schools (55.9%), while 44.1% of respondents were identified as middle school educators. The findings also revealed that 44% of the respondents had been in their capacity for less than five years. Table 3 displays the different categories of respondents, grade levels, and years of experience.

Teacher Demographics

According to the survey data, 270 (83.3%) respondents were female and 54 (16.7%) were male. As it related to age categories, 102 (31.5%) respondents were between the ages of 21-30, 99 (30.6) were between the ages of 31-40, 62 (19.1) were between the ages of 41-50, and 59 (18.2) identified as being older than 50. In the category of ethnicity, 110 (34%) respondents were Caucasian, 203 (62.7%) respondents were African American, 4 (1.2%) respondents were Hispanic, 2 (0.6%) respondents were Asian, and 4 (1.2%) identified as other. Table 4 contains information on gender, age, and ethnicity of respondents.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capacity, Grade Level, and Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Table 3 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Coach/Leader</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grade Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-5 (Elementary)</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8 (Middle)</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

*Gender, Age, and Ethnicity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older than 50</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Instrument

The School Academic Optimism Survey (SAOS) was the instrument used to determine the Academic Optimism. Academic Optimism is a construct that encompasses academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents. The School Academic Optimism Survey uses a Likert-type scale to obtain scores on each of the three areas.
Table 5

*Collective Efficacy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. Teachers in this school are able to get through to the most difficult students.</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. Teachers here are confident they will be able to motivate their students.</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. If a child doesn’t want to learn teachers here give up.</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. Teachers here don’t have the skills needed to produce meaningful results.</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5. Teachers in this school believe that every child can learn.</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6. These students come to school ready to learn</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7. Home life provide so many advantages that students are bound to learn.</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8. Students here just aren’t motivated to learn.</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Teachers in this school do not have the skills to deal with students disciplinary problems.</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10. The opportunities in this community help ensure that these students will learn.</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11. Learning is more difficult at this school because students are worried about their safety.</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12. Drug and alcohol abuse in the community make learning difficult for students here.</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale 1= Strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= somewhat disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=agree, 6= strongly agree
The first construct of collective efficacy has 12 questions on the survey. The response choices included 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=agree, and 6=strongly agree. Table 5 displays descriptive statistics for collective efficacy. The second construct measured faculty trust in parents and students. These subscale items are found in items 13-22 on the instrument and are also based on a six-point Likert scale. Table 6 displays the faculty trust means and standard deviations.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q13. Teachers in this school trust their students.</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14. Teachers in this school trust the parents.</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. Students in this school care about each other.</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Parents in this school are reliable in their commitments.</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. Students in this school can be counted upon to do their work.</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q18. Teachers can count on parental support.</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q19. Teachers here believe that students are competent learners.</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20. Teachers think that most of the parents do a good job.</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 (continued).

| Q21. Teachers can believe what parents tell them. | 3.66 | 1.01 |
| Q22. Students here are secretive. | 3.00 | 1.16 |

Scale 1= Strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=agree, 6=strongly agree

The subscale that measures the academic emphasis contains eight items, which are found in items 23-30 on the SAOS, and rated on a four point Likert scale. The responses include 1=rarely, 2=sometimes, 3=often, and 4=very often. Table 7 displays the descriptive statistics for academic emphasis.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Emphasis</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q23. The school sets high standards for performance.</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q24. Students respect others who get good grades.</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q25. Students seek extra work so they can get good grades.</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q26. Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the school.</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q27. Students try hard to improve on previous work.</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q28. The learning environment is orderly and serious.</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q29. The students in this school can achieve the goals that have been set for them.</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q30. Teachers in this school believe that their students have the ability to achieve academically.</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale 1=Rarely, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very often

The dependent variable was the Quality of Distribution Index Score (QDI), as assigned according to student academic performance of students on the Mississippi Curriculum Test (2nd Edition). According to data obtained from the Mississippi Department of Education through its Annual Accountability Reporting System, Table 8 shows the mean and standard deviation of QDI scores.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality of Distribution Index Score</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QDI Score</td>
<td>97.00</td>
<td>180.00</td>
<td>142.82</td>
<td>23.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 1: Is there a relationship between teacher’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?
In order to answer the first two research questions, correlation tests were run. These test showed that there was a significant relationship between teacher’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement (r = .545, p < .001). As shown in Table 9, the results in each of the subscales of collective efficacy (r = .488, p < .001), faculty trust (r = .458, p < .001), and academic emphasis (r = .488, p < .001) were also significant.

Table 9

*Correlation of Teacher’s Academic Optimism and Student Academic Achievement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>QDI Score</th>
<th>CE</th>
<th>FT</th>
<th>AE</th>
<th>AO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QDI Score</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.488**</td>
<td>.458**</td>
<td>.488**</td>
<td>.545**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective Efficacy (CE)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty Trust (FT)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.648**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.678**</td>
<td>.893**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Emphasis (AE)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>.638**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.871**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Optimism (AO)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.855**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=274, **p < .001 level (2-tailed)

Research Question 2: Is there a relationship between administrator’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?

Correlation analysis did not indicate that there was a significant relationship between administrator’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement (r = .310, p = .172). These results can be found in Table 10.
Research Question 3: Is there a difference in academic optimism of teachers at elementary schools versus middle schools?

A t test for independent samples were run in order to determine if there was a significant difference in the academic optimism of teachers at elementary schools versus teachers at middle schools. As expressed in Table 11, the total represented for elementary teachers was M=4.24, SD=.68. The total represented for middle school teachers was M=4.04, SD=.57. The results of the t test indicated that there was a significant difference in the academic optimism of elementary school teachers versus middle school teachers, t(272)=2.629, p=.009. The difference between the means was 0.203 with elementary school teachers having the higher mean.

Table 10
*Correlation of Administrator’s Academic Optimism and Student Academic Achievement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>QDI Score</th>
<th>CE</th>
<th>FT</th>
<th>AE</th>
<th>AO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QDI Score</td>
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<td>.245</td>
<td>.392</td>
<td>.310</td>
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<td>Collective Efficacy (CE)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.614**</td>
<td>.323</td>
<td>.834**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty Trust (FT)</td>
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<td>.575**</td>
<td>.894**</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Emphasis (AE)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>.701**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Optimism (AO)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=21, **p < .001 level (2-tailed)
Table 11

*Means of Elementary and Middle School Teachers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective Efficacy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Faculty Trust</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>158</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>3.89</td>
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<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Emphasis</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>3.06</td>
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<td>158</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>2.83</td>
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<td><strong>Academic Optimism</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 4: Is there a difference in the academic optimism of administrators in elementary schools versus middle schools?

A *t* test for independent samples was utilized to determine if there was a significant difference in academic optimism of administrators in elementary schools versus administrators in middle schools. As presented in Table 12, the total represented for elementary school administrators was $M=4.66$, $SD=.34$. The total represented for
middle school administrators was M=4.36, SD=.47. The results of the t test indicated that there was no significant difference in the academic optimism of elementary school administrators and that of their middle school counterparts, t(19)=1.54, p=.138.

Table 12
*Means of Elementary and Middle School Administrators*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective Efficacy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>.447</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>.646</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Faculty Trust</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>4.43</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>.597</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Emphasis</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>.368</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>.291</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td><strong>Academic Optimism</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>.342</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>.474</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 5: Is there a difference between the teachers’ academic optimism and that of their administrative teams?
Another $t$ test for independent samples was run to determine if there was a significant difference between teacher’s and administrator’s academic optimism. The teacher’s mean was as follows, $M=4.16$, $SD=.64$. The total represented by administrators was $M=4.48$, $SD=.45$. This data is represented in Table 13. The $t$ test indicated that there was a significant difference between teacher’s and administrator’s academic optimism, $t(293)=-2.26$, $p=.024$. The difference between the means of teachers and administrators was 0.29, with administrators having the higher mean.

Table 13

*Means of Teachers and Administrators*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective Efficacy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>.703</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>.575</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Faculty Trust</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>.719</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>.527</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Emphasis</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>.528</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>.350</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Optimism</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>.640</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>.445</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

This chapter presented the results of the analysis utilized in order to answer the following research questions:

1) Is there a relationship between teacher’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?

2) Is there a relationship between administrator’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?

3) Is there a difference in academic optimism of teachers at elementary schools versus middle schools?

4) Is there a difference in the academic optimism of administrators in elementary schools versus middle schools?

5) Is there a difference between the teachers’ academic optimism and that of their administrative team

Both correlation analysis and t tests were run to determine the relationship of academic optimism and the differences of such within the elementary and middle school settings. The research indicated some significant relationships between academic optimism and student achievement. Therefore, this data supports the current research that exists on the constructs of academic optimism. Chapter V provides a greater discussion of the results and recommendations of this research.
CHAPTER V
Discussion

The Mississippi Department of Education has set forth the goals of reducing the dropout rate by 13%, reaching the average national assessment scores by 2013, and making sure that all 3rd grade students can read on grade level by 2020. Although many gains have been made, much more progress is needed in order to achieve those current goals. As the state of Mississippi has steadily moved to increase the quality of education, the factors that influence academic success should continue to be explored.

Many students in the public school setting within the state are considered living at or below the poverty line. Research has been conducted in looking at the many disparities that poverty can cause as it relates to education (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Many of these students come to the formal educational setting, with little background knowledge in which the traditional school setting builds upon. And even though schools that have a high percentage of students living at or below poverty lines are given extra funds to assist these students and close the achievement gaps, they often still fall short. This suggests that simply putting more funds in a majority low socioeconomic school is not the answer. Academic optimism is a rather new construct that has shown some promising effects on academic achievement.

Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk-Hoy (2006) identified academic optimism as a factor that positively affects academic performance. The positive effects of academic optimism are seen, even while controlling for socioeconomic status. Academic optimism is the combined constructs of collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust in
students and parents. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk-Hoy (2006) defined academic optimism as:

The shared belief among faculty that academic achievement is important, that the faculty has the capacity to help students achieve, and that the students and parents can be trusted to cooperate with them in the effort- in brief, a school-wide confidence that students will succeed academically. (2006, p. 204)

There is an increasing amount of research being conducted within this new construct that all suggest the benefits of academic optimism as it relates to student achievement.

This chapter discusses the relationships found between academic optimism and student academic achievement. The chapter also discusses the differences between middle schools and elementary schools as it relates to academic optimism. It will also focus on recommendations for practice and future research in areas that positively affect student achievement.

Overview

A total of four, centrally located Mississippi school districts participated in this study. All schools were Title I eligible, which means they had a high percentage of students living close to the poverty line. Participants, which included teachers and administrators, completed the School Academic Optimism Survey. The survey consisted of 30 statements in which the respondents could select one of six options, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The subscales of collective efficacy, faculty trust in parent and students, and academic emphasis were within the 30 questions. Also, demographic data was obtained. The results from the survey were analyzed to give descriptive statistics, correlations, and differences between groups. Student achievement
data was obtained from the Mississippi Department of Education Accountability Reporting System.

Conclusions

Research question one was, ‘Is there a relationship between teacher’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?’ There was a significant positive relationship between teacher’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement. Within the subscales of collective efficacy, faculty trust, and academic emphasis, there were also positive relationships in each. The subscales of collective efficacy and academic emphasis had stronger correlations with academic achievement than did faculty trust in students and parents. These findings are consistent with current research on collective efficacy and academic emphasis. As noted by Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk-Hoy (2004), collective efficacy is the belief of one teacher that the entire faculty has the ability to do what is necessary in order to increase student achievement. Research has shown that in schools with high collective efficacy, these teachers and administrators are engaged in professional learning communities and spend maximum amount of instructional time engaging students in meaningful learning activities. Goddard et. al (2000) noted that academic emphasis is basically the extent that a school is driven by to obtain a culture of academic excellence. Research has found that in elementary, middle, and high schools, academic emphasis has a significant, positive relationship with academic achievement. These schools set high academic standards, provide the students with the necessary resources to reach those standards, and then celebrate success.

Within this specific research question, the results showed that subscale of faculty trust in parents and students had the lowest correlation. This could be due to several
different factors. Items from this subscale were statements such as, ‘Teachers can count upon parental support,’ and ‘Teachers can believe what parents tell them.’ It is the belief of the researcher that addition of some qualitative data could shed some greater insight into the results of this question.

Research question two was, ‘Is there a relationship between administrator’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement?’ Results did not indicate that there was a significant relationship between administrator’s academic optimism and student’s academic achievement. It is the belief of the researcher that this may be due to the small amount of administrators that responded to the survey. This result is not consistent with current research, but does underscore the need for larger scale studies in the specific area of leadership and academic optimism.

Research question three was, ‘Is there a difference in academic optimism of teachers at elementary schools versus teachers at middle schools?’ A t test was utilized to determine this answer. These results found that there was a significant difference in the academic optimism of elementary school teachers versus that of middle school teachers. Elementary school teachers had a higher level of academic optimism than did their middle school counterparts. Research comparing the two schools is very little, but the findings that academic optimism has a positive significant relationship with both elementary and middle schools is consistent with current research. Goddard et al. (2000) concluded that elementary schools with high levels of academic optimism positively influence academic achievement, specifically in the areas of mathematics and reading. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk-Hoy (2006) reported the positive effects of academic optimism in both middle and high schools. It is also noted that the largest difference was
within the construct of collective efficacy. This may be due to more team concepts found within the elementary school settings.

Specifically, the largest difference was within the subscale of academic emphasis. It is belief of the researcher that many elementary schools have more recognition programs in place than in middle school to honor and celebrate academic achievement. This could lead to students feeling more successful, thus working harder to sustain the higher levels of academic excellence.

Research question four was, ‘Is there a difference in academic optimism of administrators in elementary schools versus administrators of middle schools?’ Another t test was used in effort to determine whether or not a difference existed. The test revealed that there was no significant difference between the academic optimism of administrators in elementary schools versus those in middle schools. Again, it is the belief of the researcher that this may due to the small amount of data that was available as it relates specifically to the administrative position. Although there was very little research found relating specifically to administrators and academic optimism, the effects of leadership on academic achievement has been well documented and suggests that leader does matter (Hallinger, 2003; Nettles & Herrington, 2007; Waters, et al., 2004).

Research question five was, ‘Is there a difference between the teacher’s academic optimism and that of administrator’s academic optimism?’ Another t test was used to determine if there was a difference between the academic optimism of teachers versus the academic optimism of administrators. It was concluded that there was a significant difference between teachers and administrators. Administrators had higher levels of academic optimism that did their teachers. It is the belief of the researcher that it is
crucial for leaders to set the standards in their buildings. According to Hoy and Hannum (1997), it is imperative that leaders take responsibility for creating atmospheres that are academically optimistic.

Administrators are ultimately responsible for hiring teachers who are competent and effective, fostering caring and trusting relationships, and upholding the expectation of academic excellence. With this in mind, it is the belief of the researcher that because the leaders have higher levels of academic optimism than their teachers, they are creating a pathway in which their teachers should follow. Although research has shown that leadership effects achievement more indirectly than directly, it is the leader who constantly cultivates, assesses, and provides systems that promote academic optimism of the school building and community.

Discussion

The overall findings of this study support the current literature that exists in the realm of academic emphasis and its relationship to academic achievement. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk-Hoy (2006c) note:

Our conception of academic optimism includes both cognitive and affective (emotional) dimensions and adds a behavior element. Collective efficacy is a group belief or expectation; it is cognitive. Faculty trust in parents and student is an affective response. Academic emphasis is the push for particular behaviors in the school workplace. (p. 143)

Working with students requires administrators and teachers to be unite all dimensions in efforts to reach and push our students to academic excellence. All schools are tasked with the responsibility of educating students. It does not come with a clause that has any
exceptions to race, sex, religion, size, or socioeconomic status. This construct of academic optimism gives all those working within the educational setting the hope that they can reach students, regardless of uncontrollable circumstances, and help them to become high academic achievers, overall productive citizens, and capable of competing globally.

The researcher believes that due to the sheer anatomy of middle school students, this construct is even more powerful within the middle school setting. According to the National Middle School Association/Association for Middle Level Education (2010), there are some essential attributes to keep in mind while educating this group of students. They note that effective middle schools should provide rich environments that are developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable. They also note 16 core characteristic to a high-performing middle school, which are as follows:

1. Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.
2. Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.
3. Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.
4. Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.
5. Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.
6. A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.
7. Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices.
8. Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.
9. Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.
10. Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

11. The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.

12. Every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.

13. Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the need of young adolescents.

14. Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.

15. The school actively involved families in the education of their children.

16. The school includes community and business partners.

These core concepts were derived from over 3 decades of research, specific to effective middle schools. The majority of these 16 core concepts tie directly into collective efficacy, academic emphasis, faculty trust in students and parents, and the overall construct of academic emphasis. According to Waters et al. (2003), collective efficacy of a faculty is directly related to high academic performance of students. They also found that academic press and relationships play a key role in student achievement. This particular research underscores the great need for further insight into effective school-level strategies and practices that promote student success within the middle school setting (National Middle School Association/Association for Middle Level Education, 2010).
Limitations

This study was limited in that it only obtained participants from four school districts that were located in Mississippi. All four schools districts were from the same geographic region and had similar demographics. The study was also limited in that only a small percentage of respondents were actually administrators. This decreased the generalizability of the results from the specific research questions that focused on administrator’s academic optimism and its relationship to academic achievement. In general, another limitation was that the study was only quantitative in nature. Expanding and including some qualitative data could add greater insight into the academic optimism of teachers and administrators.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

There has been promising research within the new construct of academic optimism. This research has shown that there is a positive relationship between academic optimism and student achievement. The findings from this study also express the individual contribution that collective efficacy, faculty trust in parents and students, and academic emphasis have on academic achievement. These results have been duplicated in elementary, middle, and high school settings. The aspect of this new construct that is so attractive is that the effects of academic optimism can be seen, despite socioeconomic status. As schools move into greater demands of accountability for student achievement, the construct of academic emphasis could aid tremendously in the task of increasing the quality of education.

Academic optimism speaks to the culture and norms of a school. Putting this construct into practice can help structure and sustain an environment in which academic
excellence is expected and celebrated by all. With this in mind, school leaders could use these results to help in achieving the current goals that the state has set forth, along with those of NCLB. Also, schools that have previously struggled with meeting Adequate Yearly Progress may find this construct to help increase student gains.

Specifically, building administrators can make sure that they are helping to increase the overall collective efficacy through affirmation, praise, and recognition of both teachers and students who are performing at high standards. Those leaders can also help to increase the trust of the faculty and community by establishing clear lines of communication and being both open and honest. Building leaders and central office administrators can help to increase the academic emphasis of schools by setting high academic expectations and celebrating successes.

School districts and leaders should provide in-depth training on academic optimism, especially in the specific construct of academic emphasis. It is the belief of the researcher that out of the three aspects of academic optimism (collective efficacy, faculty trust in parents and students, and academic emphasis), academic emphasis is the construct most easily conveyed. The three aspects work together and in cyclical manner, so improving one specific area will ultimately increase the overall academic optimism of a school.

Teachers and leaders can be taught how to create and sustain learning environments in which goals are academically challenging. And although all schools have very different needs and unique populations, having a culture of academic emphasis is one that can be attained with effective and ongoing professional development. This
specific area of academic emphasis also depends heavily on the leadership of a school building as a major aspect of it is based on how academic achievement is celebrated.

Recommendations for Future Research

School districts across the nation are all facing budget restraints, yet are still held accountable for high academic achievement. Research is needed into practices and programs that cost less and less to sustain and yield higher results, based on student achievement. It is the sincere hope of the researcher that this study will prompt further research into “low budget” practices and programs that have a positive impact on student achievement.

The findings from this study provided insight into the relationships between the academic optimism of teachers and administrators and academic achievement. The results from this study add to the growing body of knowledge on academic optimism as it relates to student success. Further research is needed in order to further clarify the relationship of academic optimism and administrative practices.

The researcher believes that there is a great amount of information that could be learned from the use of qualitative data. Qualitative data could help distinguish specific practices that are found in schools with higher levels of academic emphasis. Qualitative research would help to answer some of the questions as to what makes elementary schools have higher levels of academic optimism than middle schools. Learning practices such as school-wide recognition programs, practices for students seeking extra work, and other aspects of the learning environment could create a guideline in which others schools could replicate. Expanding the study to include student surveys could also
provide more depth to the understanding of what practices help to create cultures of academic excellence.

Finally, another recommendation is that this study be replicated in a more diverse population and geographic area. The schools in this particular study were very similar in many aspects, thus a different population may offer more data pertaining to the relationship between academic optimism and academic achievement. It is recommended that both very small and extremely large school districts be considered for comparison.

Summary

The goals of this research were to determine if there were relationships between teacher and administrator’s academic optimism and academic achievement. The study explored the differences between the academic optimism found in middle schools versus elementary schools. The findings from this study suggest that there is a relationship between the academic optimism of teachers and the student academic performance. The study also found that elementary schools higher levels of academic optimism than do middle schools. This research underscores the need for further exploration into the construct of academic optimism and other concepts that can positively influence school cultures and student achievement.
APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601.266.6820 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/irb

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

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

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

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 11102405
PROJECT TITLE: The Relationship Between Academic Optimism and Academic Achievement in Middle Schools in Mississippi
PROJECT TYPE: Dissertation
RESEARCHER(S): LaQuanta Murray Nelson
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education & Psychology
FUNDING AGENCY: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Exempt Approval
PERIOD OF PROJECT APPROVAL: 11/01/2011 to 10/31/2012

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair
APPENDIX B

Superintendents’ Permission Letter

Dear Superintendent:

I am LaQuanta M. Nelson, a doctoral student at the University of Southern Mississippi majoring in Educational Leadership. The attached survey is a part of my dissertation entitled “The Relationship between Academic Optimism and Academic Achievement in Middle Schools in Mississippi”. I am seeking permission from you to allow your district’s elementary and middle school teachers and administrators to participate in this study by completing the survey.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between administrators’ and teachers’ Academic Optimism and academic achievement. Academic Optimism is a construct that examines the combination of collective efficacy, trust in parents and students, and academic emphasis. Academic Optimism has been shown to be a factor that can positively influence academic achievement, even despite socioeconomic status.

It will only take your faculty about 10 minutes to complete the survey. The completed surveys will have full anonymity. All answers will be used for the study only and will be kept confidential. Participation is strictly voluntary and can be withdrawn from the study at any time without any penalty.

Please consider allowing your faculty to participate in this study. If you have any questions concerning the research, at any time during or after the project, please contact me by phone at (601)260-4474 or by email at lnelson@hinds.k12.ms.us. This project has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research subject should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-6820.

Again, thank you for your consideration.

Thank you,

LaQuanta M. Nelson
PhD Student
University of Southern Mississippi
APPENDIX C

SCHOOL ACADEMIC OPTIMISM SURVEY

SAOS

**Directions:** Please indicate your degree of with each of the statements about your school from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Your answers are confidential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teachers in this school are able to get through to the most difficult students.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teachers here are confident they will be able to motivate their students.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. If a child doesn’t want to learn teachers here give up.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teachers here don’t have the skills needed to produce meaningful results.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Teachers in this school believe that every child can learn.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. These students come to school ready to learn.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Home life provides so many advantages that students are bound to learn.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Students here just aren’t motivated to learn.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Teachers in this school do not have the skills to deal with student disciplinary problems.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The opportunities in this community help ensure that these students will learn.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Learning is more difficult at this school because students are worried about their safety.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Drug and alcohol abuse in the community make learning difficult for students here.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Teachers in this school trust their students.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Teachers in this school trust the parents.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Students in this school care about each other.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Parents in this school are reliable in their commitments.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Students in this school can be counted upon to do their work.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Teachers can count upon parental support.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Teachers here believe that students are competent learners.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Teachers think that most of the parents do a good job.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Teachers can believe what parents tell them.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Students here are secretive.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Directions:** Please indicate the degree to which the following statements characterize your school from Rarely Occurs to Very Often Occurs. Your answers are confidential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Very Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23. The school sets high standards for performance.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Students respect others who get good grades.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Students seek extra work so they can get good grades.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the school.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Students try hard to improve on previous work.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. The learning environment is orderly and serious.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. The students in this school can achieve the goals that have been set for them.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Teachers in this school believe that their students have the ability to achieve academically.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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APPENDIX D

SCHOOL ACADEMIC OPTIMISM SURVEY COVER LETTER

Dear Participant:

I am LaQuanta M. Nelson, a doctoral student at the University of Southern Mississippi majoring in Educational Leadership. The attached survey is a part of my dissertation entitled “The Relationship between Academic Optimism and Academic Achievement in Middle Schools in Mississippi”. And although you may be an elementary teacher, your participation is needed in order to compare the differences in elementary and middle school cultures.

I have obtained permission from your superintendent’s office to invite you to participate in this research by completing the School Academic Optimism Survey. Your participation is voluntary and your responses will remain completely anonymous. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between administrators’ and teachers’ Academic Optimism and academic achievement. Academic Optimism is a construct that examines the combination of collective efficacy, trust in parents and students, and academic emphasis.

Please take time to complete this survey, which will take between 5-10 minutes. Once you have completed it, the researcher will retrieve it from your school site. If you have any questions concerning the research, at any time during or after the project, please contact me by phone at (601)260-4474 or by email at lnelson@hinds.k12.ms.us. This project has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research subject should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-6820.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

LaQuanta M. Nelson
PhD Student
University of Southern Mississippi
### SCHOOL ACADEMIC OPTIMISM SURVEY DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

**Directions:** Please check the response that best describes your situation.

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

In what capacity do you currently serve?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Counselor</th>
<th>Academic Coach/Team Leader</th>
<th>Assistant Principal</th>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Other (Please specify)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What grade levels do you serve?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>K-2nd Grade</th>
<th>3rd-5th Grade</th>
<th>6th-8th Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How long have you served in this capacity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1-5 years</th>
<th>6-10 years</th>
<th>More than 10 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is your age group?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>21-30 years</th>
<th>31-40 years</th>
<th>41-50 years</th>
<th>Older than 50 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>____</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethnicity:

- ____ Caucasian
- ____ African-American
- ____ Hispanic
- ____ Asian
- ____ Other (Please specify) ______________________

Gender:

- ____ Male
- ____ Female

Were you employed at this same school during the 2010-2011 school term?

- ____ Yes
- ____ No
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achievement, and principal preparation programs on student achievement.


