

MIDDLE LEVEL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ADOLESCENT  
LITERACY CRISIS:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to examine Missouri middle school principals' perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis and to ascertain how middle level principals are addressing adolescent literacy needs in their schools. The phenomenological qualitative research approach was selected due to the underpinning of the social constructivism and pragmatism paradigms of the research questions. Besides the goal of making sense of the shared phenomenon, the pragmatist sought to understand what works or what middle level principals were doing to address adolescent literacy needs.

Data sources for this phenomenological qualitative research included an open-ended online survey administered to a random sample of middle level principal in the state and personal interviews. The research findings are based on the data collected from 50 research participants, 42 online survey respondents and eight interviewees. Although there was not agreement regarding literacy being in a state of crisis, the study found consensus that literacy is a priority for middle level principals. Additionally, principals reported factors of family chaos, technology challenges, and expanded demands of literacy created additional challenges for adolescent literacy. According to the data, principals are addressing literacy needs through shared responsibility, varied delivery methods, and instructional leadership.

Despite the unique developmental characteristics of the early adolescent, the research data is inconclusive if distinctive delivery methods for middle level students are occurring in regards to literacy. Middle level principals report utilizing and analyzing assessment data to determine specific learning needs of students. A recommended best



practice in addressing adolescent literacy is for schools to develop and utilize a literacy leadership team; however, only eight research participants report utilizing a literacy leadership team in their school. This research found principals perceive themselves as being ultimately responsible for student literacy, although the responsibility for addressing and meeting students' needs is shared.

As middle level administrators strive to meet the multiple demands of their jobs, the literature and the findings of this research support the critical role of instructional leadership. In order to provide for the literacy needs of the adolescent students, principals are establishing a vision of literacy, mission for literacy, and a climate for learning. Additionally, as an instructional leader, the principal supports teachers and students by providing the needed resources and professional development for literacy.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

#### *Background*

United States policy makers and citizens are becoming increasingly aware that a large proportion of middle and high school students do not have the literacy skills needed to succeed in school or in life after graduation (Joftus, 2002; Phillips, 2005). Respected indicators such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) confirm a huge gap between students' literacy skills and the proficiency they need for college or workforce training (Alvermann, 2001; Joftus, 2002). For years there has been an emphasis on ensuring that young children in kindergarten through third grade, the primary grades, learn to become fluent readers who effectively comprehend written material (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; McCombs, Kirby, Barney, Darilek, Magee, 2005). Enormous amounts of time, energy, and resources have been dedicated to reading achievement of primary children (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

According to a report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York entitled *Achieving State and National Literacy Goals, a Long Uphill Road*, these efforts have resulted in an improvement of the reading achievement for the nations' children in the primary grades (McCombs et al., 2005). Unfortunately, despite excellent reading levels in third grade, many of these students will fail in later academic tasks when the teaching of reading is neglected in the middle and secondary grades (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Carr, Saifer, & Novick, 2002). A regrettable reality is many children are not moving beyond the basic decoding skills of the primary grade level reading instruction to the advanced fluency and comprehension skills necessary for the

expansion of the literacy skills essential to be successful in middle or high school as well as the post-secondary job market, which requires higher literacy skills than ever (Carr et al., 2002; McCombs et al., 2005).

Entering the post-industrial world, robust literacy skills are necessary for children growing into adulthood to be successful (Murphy, 2004). Unfortunately, young people's literacy skills are not keeping pace with societal demands of living in an information age (Alvermann, 2001). Although historically direct literacy instruction has been supported only through the third grade, literacy can no longer be considered a skill only associated with elementary schools. Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik (1999) explained:

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed. (p. 99)

Adolescent students are in critical need of intensive instruction to learn how to more successfully interact with and construct meaning from the texts they use daily (Phillips, 2005).

Literacy instruction at the middle and secondary level is something new for many educators who traditionally focus their expertise in content area standards

(National Institute for Literacy, 2007). In fact, most middle and high school teachers have limited, if any, training in literacy or reading instruction (McEwan, 2001). The passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has raised middle and high schools' concerns regarding student performance and the ability to exercise the literacy skills necessary to perform well on the high-stakes test. Literacy should be a priority for schools because it underlies mastery of all other academic subjects.

The required change in middle and secondary schools, McEwan (2001) described as a paradigm shift from “only some students are capable of learning” to “all students are expected to learn and educators will be held accountable” (p. 22). To facilitate this paradigm shift, strong leadership from both administrators and teachers is essential (McEwan, 2001; Phillips, 2005). Blokker, Simpson, and Whittier (2002) emphasized the importance of middle level principals making literacy a school wide issue stating, “Principals need to create and maintain a school wide reading culture because students are transitional readers who vary in their ability to read and understand what they read” (p. 37). This study examined middle school principals' perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis as well as what actions principals are taking to address adolescent literacy needs.

#### *Conceptual and Theoretical Underpinnings for the Study*

Strong leadership is an essential building block for a successful literacy program (Phillips, 2005). Highly successful school principals are committed to improving classroom instruction, professional learning, student assessment and achievement, and collegial classroom observations that support and improve reflective teaching practices; thus, successful school principals are instructional leaders (Ash, 2004). Unfortunately, the

increasing pressures of accountability, administrative complexity, fiscal constraints, instructional confusion, and social chaos are dissuading candidates from pursuing leadership positions in education during a time when strong leadership is more imperative than ever. Schools that are especially effective in teaching children to read are characterized by vigorous instructional leadership (Hoachlander, Alt, & Beltranena, 2001; Murphy, 2004).

According to effective schools research of Lezotte (2001), in effective schools, the principal acts as an instructional leader and effectively and persistently communicates the mission of the school to staff, parents, and students. In addition, the principal understands and applies the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the management of the instructional program. Clearly, the role of the principal as the articulator of the mission of the school is crucial to the overall effectiveness of the school. Lezotte said "There may be schools out there that have strong instructional leaders, but are not yet effective; however, we have never yet found an effective school that did not have a strong instructional leader" (Lezotte, 2001, p. 5).

For the sake of this study, principals were examined as instructional leaders of literacy. The 2005 *NASSP Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals* stipulates in order to have a successful literacy program, the role played by the principal is key to determining success or failure. Furthermore, as an instructional leader of literacy, the principal must be highly visible throughout the school, regularly visiting classrooms to ensure that an emphasis on literacy is truly occurring, as well as, participating in departmental and grade-level meetings (Phillips, 2005).

Ash (2004) reported most research and theory suggests instructional leaders have the greatest impact on instructional change when they demonstrate a commitment to learning about and implementing the instructional change themselves. Biancarosa and Snow (2004) stated:

It is critical that a principal assumes the role of an instructional leader who demonstrates commitment and participates in the school community. This leadership role includes a principal building his or her own personal knowledge of how young people learn and struggle with reading and writing and how they differ in their needs. (p. 30)

Leadership for literacy is like leadership for anything else: establish a clear vision, set ambitious goals, assemble the necessary resources, energize the people, nurture people's successes and assist them to overcome their failures (Ash, 2004). Ideally, leaders should be passionate about learning and have a clear vision for how schools can promote high levels of achievement for all students (Hoachlander et al., 2001).

#### *Statement of the Problem*

NASSP executive director, Gerold N. Tirozzi, stated in the preface of *Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals* (Phillips, 2005):

Today, our nation is in danger. The danger I am describing here is pervasive and will attack the very core of our democracy. It comes from a lack of the most basic foundation of knowledge: the ability to read, write, and speak in a way that promotes further learning and advances ideas among diverse people. Without education, the wealthiest nations on earth can fall into poverty because

– just like any organization – a nation’s greatest asset is its people. As important as food and shelter are to human survival, education is to human development. Education makes it possible to think, dream, act, and build further knowledge. And there can be no education without literacy. (p. v)

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, literacy is synonymous with success. Historically, middle and secondary schools have focused curriculum and instruction on content areas such as history, mathematics, science, and literature, building on the fundamentals of reading, writing, and arithmetic taught in elementary school. Students in the middle grades are not meeting the standards of performance expected of them, according to national and international assessments of educational progress (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Many students come to middle school lacking the reading proficiency needed to succeed (Donnelly, 2003).

The democratic aims of having a broader spectrum of students attain higher levels of academic achievement than at any previous time in U.S. history drives a good deal of current education reform. The prominence of the national and state standards movement is evidence of this emphasis. Meeting the challenge of higher standards is difficult in all the academic domains. In reading, national tests reveal that although the majority of U.S. students can read at a "basic" level, they cannot read and comprehend the types of higher-level texts essential to an individual's success in an information-based economy (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Such tests reveal what most middle and secondary teachers already know: students' limited reading proficiency keeps them from accomplishing the challenging work necessary to meet high academics (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). Great numbers of students do not fully understand what they read. The

1998 Nation's Report card on Reading, shows 26% of U.S. eighth graders were reading below basic level (Ballator & Jerry, 1999). This means they could not necessarily demonstrate an understanding of the literal meaning of a text, draw out its main idea, make inferences, and relate their reading to personal experience. In some inner-city schools, researchers report 80% or more of the students can fail to meet grade-level reading standards (NCES, 2003).

The evolving nature of school environments has placed new demands on educational leaders. Where knowledge of school management, finance, legal issues, and state mandates was once the primary focus for the preparation of school leaders, education reform has created an urgent need for a strong emphasis on development of instructional leadership skills to promote good teaching and high-level learning (Bockmann & Dickinson, 2001; Burch, 2007; Phillips, 2007). The stakes for school leaders are high in the climate of system-wide accountability where American public schools are charged with the tasks of improving student achievement and closing performance gaps among the subgroups of an increasingly diverse student population (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Phillips, 2007). Phillips (2005) declared, "Success begins with the principal. The staff will look to their building leader to determine his or her support for a literacy program. A lack of commitment by either words or actions will kill the program before it begins" (p. 13).

To tackle low literacy of adolescent students and close the achievement gap in the United States, principals must take on the challenge of becoming the literacy leaders in their schools (Phillips, 2005). Without a principal's "clear commitment and enthusiasm, a curricular and instructional reform [like adolescent literacy] has no more chance of



succeeding than any other school wide reform” (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004, p. 21).

Biancarosa and Snow (2004) stressed how important it was for the principal to be an instructional leader and to stay informed about the latest research regarding adolescent literacy, how young people learn, and how their literacy skills and needs differ.

Meltzer and Okashige (2001) referred to literacy as a “key to student success” (p. 16). They further contend school leaders often have insufficient support to develop and implement adolescent literacy programs, even at a time when such programs are critical to the success of more challenging academic expectations. Reeves (2008) stated, “If school leaders really believe that literacy is a priority, then they have a personal responsibility to understand literacy instruction, define it for their colleagues, and observe it daily” (p. 91). Unfortunately, the literature related to adolescent literacy and what the principal should know about its implementation is sparse. Since the success of any instructional program literally hangs upon the principal’s understanding and support of the components of that program (Zipperer, Worley, Sisson, & Said, 2002), it is critical to understand the reality of middle level principals and what they are doing to address the adolescent literacy needs of students in their school.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The text-rich world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires adolescents to be able to read and apply what they read to be a successful part of the world (Alvermann, 2001; Phillips, 2005). Unfortunately, as Alvermann (2001) warned, “Young people’s literacy skills are not keeping pace with societal demands of living in an information age that changes rapidly and shows no sign of slowing” (p. 3). Moore et al. (1999) cautioned, “Despite the prevalence of literacy in adolescents’ lives, educational policies, school curricula, and the

public currently are neglecting it” (p. 3). Unfortunately, much of what is known about adolescent literacy development does not always make its way from the researcher to the classroom teacher or building principal (Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger, & Torgesen, 2008).

The literacy education of adolescents is critical as National Endowment for the Arts (2007) reported:

The story the data tell is simple, consistent, and alarming. Although there has been measurable progress in recent years in reading ability at the elementary school level, all progress appears to halt as children enter their teenage years. There is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans. Most alarming, both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates. These negative trends have more than literary importance. The declines have demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications. It is a serious national problem. If, at the current pace, America continues to lose the habit of regular reading, the nation will suffer substantial economic, social, and civic setbacks. (pp. 5-6)

Due to the critical nature of reading and literacy skills, continued literacy instruction is necessary at the middle level and beyond (Moore et al., 1999).

As Hallinger (2003) discovered, “the skillful leadership of school principals was a key contributing factor when it came to explaining successful change, school improvement, or school effectiveness” (p. 331). NASSP’s publication *Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals* (Phillips, 2005) support principals must be instructional leaders and play an imperative role in the realization of

school wide literacy. Reeves (2009) wrote, “Although superintendents routinely expect principals to be ‘instructional leaders,’ that label does not mean very much if the leaders and teachers hold vague and inconsistent views on the most essential elements of effective instruction in literacy” (p. 116). The principal can make a major difference in the literacy achievement of students by leading and supporting teachers’ efforts in trying to improve the literacy achievement of their students (Shanahan, 2004).

Researchers such as Donnelly (2003) noted effective middle level literacy programs evolve over time. The outcome depends on how well principals articulate and demonstrate their support for teachers' efforts to improve literacy. The purpose of this research is to determine what principals’ perceptions of adolescent literacy are and if the perception is that of early-adolescent literacy being in a state of crisis. If literacy is to improve at the middle level and beyond, it is important to examine the perceptions and activities of the instructional leaders at the building level, the school principal.

The purpose of this study is to add to the available knowledge and understanding in regards to middle level principals’ perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis, as well as what middle level principals are doing in relation to the literacy needs of the adolescent student in their schools.

### *Research Questions*

The primary research questions are as follows:

1. What are middle level principals’ perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis?
2. What are middle level principals doing to address the literacy needs of the early adolescent students in their schools?

### *Research Design*

In order to answer these questions, the researcher conducted a qualitative investigation. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 1998). The researcher used an open-ended questionnaire distributed electronically to middle level principals state wide, one-on-one interviews of middle level principals in southwest Missouri, as well as analysis of middle level building improvement plans to develop a an understanding of the phenomenon of being a middle level principal during a proclaimed literacy crisis. Additionally, data were utilized to determine the role of the principal in schools as it related to the adolescent literacy needs of middle level students.

Within the study the researcher designed several features to ensure ethical research. First, the researcher gained entry through the appropriate gatekeepers, received IRB approval from both the University of Missouri-Columbia and from the principal participants. The researcher also maintained confidentiality throughout; all names and places were changed to protect anonymity.

### *Research Assumptions and Limitations*

Heppner and Heppner (2004) asserted all research is bound by limitations. This research study inherently experienced limitations as well. First, this study was limited to the state of Missouri. Interview and document analysis data collection was further limited to the southwest geographical location of Missouri due to time and financial constraints of the researcher. Another limitation to this study was the number of surveys completed and returned was out of the control of the researcher. Fink (2006)

cautions, “Some people are reluctant to complete on-line surveys or even connect to survey sites for fear that their privacy will be compromised” (p. 42). The researcher assumed a lengthy survey would decrease the response rate of busy middle level school principals. Therefore, the researcher did not ask many questions, thus limiting the length of the survey, which also limited the amount of data collected. Further research studies would need to be done to increase the generalizing of the findings. However, Merriam (1998) wrote qualitative research is not intended to generalize findings but to interpret the events.

### *Definition of Key Terms*

To facilitate the reader's understanding of this study, the following terms were defined:

*Adolescence.* Adolescence is the second phase of human life which is characterized by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social change, transitional period from childhood to young adult. Adolescence is considered the ages of 10 – 21 years of age (American Medical Association, 2001; Carr et al., 2002).

*Early Adolescent.* An early adolescent is the ages of 10 to 15 years old (National Middle School Association, 2003).

*Instructional Leader.* The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2007) defined an instructional leader as one who “focuses on strengthening teaching and learning, bridging the achievement gap among students, fostering professional development among teachers, and employing data-driven decision making and accountability” (p. 2). The instructional leader makes instructional quality the top priority

of the school and thus effectively improves the teaching and learning process in the school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

*Literacy.* Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and think effectively (Meltzer & Okashige, 2001). Literacy is a requirement for academic achievement in middle school, high school, and beyond (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

*Middle level.* Middle level refers to a school building, which primary designation is for the education of early adolescent students in grades five, six, seven, and/or eight (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustin, & Constant, 2004). For the purpose of this study, the term middle level may encompass schools classified as junior high schools, intermediate schools, upper elementary schools, as well as, middle schools. The term middle school is used synonymously with middle level in this research and was selected as a generic encompassing term because the vast majority of early adolescents in the nation attend middle schools during early adolescence (Dickinson, Jenkins, & McEwin, 2003).

*Middle level principal.* The middle level principal, for this study, is the building level leader or building school administrator whose primary student population is that of early adolescents, middle level. The middle level principal includes foremost service of fifth, sixth, seventh or eighth grade students.

*Principal.* Principal is defined by Merriam-Webster (2010) on-line dictionary as “a person who has controlling authority or is in a leading position, the chief executive officer of an educational institution.” According to the U. S. Department of Education (2004), “it is the principal who sets the tone, creates an environment that guides and supports learning for all those in the school community, and ultimately has the greatest

impact on student performance” (p. 45). The principal’s job description has expanded to a point that today’s school leader is expected to perform in the role of “chief learning officer,” with ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of the enterprise (Bottoms & O’Neill, 2001).

### *Conclusion/Organization of the Study*

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter One provides a brief overview of the research study including background, theoretical underpinnings, purpose of the study, and research questions. Chapter One also outlines the research design, assumptions and limitations, defines key terms, and the organization of the study. Chapter Two provides a review of literature related to the studies topic. Chapter Two covers the early adolescent, evolution of school for early adolescents, academic performance, and achievement in the United States. Additionally, Chapter Two explores why literacy matters, defines adolescent literacy, as well as examines the role of the principal in regards to adolescent literacy. Chapter Three outlines the approach and the procedures used to conduct the qualitative research. Chapter Four narrates the findings to the questions posed in this research. Chapter Five provides conclusions and offers a discussion as well as implications of the research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Introduction*

A growing body of literature on adolescent literacy indicates an increasing concern about the literacy achievement, or lack thereof, of America's youth. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation represented a unique initiative to reform the entire educational system around researched-based principles and practices (Conley & Hinchman, 2004). A major claim of this legislation was to improve reading instruction in all schools in the United States so every student would be achieving at a proficient level by 2014. NCLB placed great emphasis on student achievement, specifically, progress in reading with accountability for schools and school administrators (Conley & Hinchman, 2004). Taylor and Collins (2003) acknowledged, "The political scrutiny and criticism regarding the lack of an acceptable level of literacy among diverse student populations has made educators well aware of the need to improve literacy learning" (p. 2).

The political scrutiny and requirements continue beyond NCLB as the Obama administration has introduced an additional education reform initiative, Race to the Top. Race to the Top, a competitive grant program, was designed to encourage and reward States which created the conditions for education innovation and reform that advanced policies and programs that significantly improve teaching and learning in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). President Obama stated, "We're going to raise the bar for all our students and take bigger steps towards closing the achievement gap that denies so many students, especially black and Latino students, a fair shot at their dreams" (Lee, 2010).



Taylor and Collins (2003) asserted, “In the past, we assumed that students learned to read in elementary school; if they did not, we found alternatives for them in middle school and high school— alternatives that rarely led to academic success or to graduation” (p. 2). Difficulties with school literacy, reading specifically, have been linked to indifference towards school, acting out of struggling students due to frustration in the classroom, and to these students eventually dropping out of school all together (Alvermann, 2001; Carr et al., 2002; Kamil, 2003). The principal can make a major difference in the literacy achievement of middle and secondary students by leading and supporting teachers’ efforts to improve the literacy achievement of their students (Shanahan, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and actions of middle level principals in regards to early adolescent literacy. Subsequently, this literature review provided background necessary to understand the issues related to the phenomenon of being a middle level principal during the adolescent literacy crisis. This chapter included a review of current literature related to: (a) a description of early adolescents, (b) the evolution of schooling for early adolescents, (c) academic performance and achievement in the United States, (d) defining adolescent literacy, (e) the importance of literacy, and (f) the role of the principals in adolescent literacy.

#### *Description of Early Adolescents*

A common description of adolescence is the transitional period between late childhood and the beginning of adulthood although the specific chronological ages of adolescence vary by disciplines and programs (Choudhury, Blakemore, & Charman, 2006). The American Medical Association (AMA) divides the adolescent years into three

stages: early adolescence as 11 to 14 years old, mid-adolescence as 15 to 17 years old, and late adolescences as 18 to 21 years old (American Medical Association, 2001). The National Middle School Association consider early adolescents as 10 to 15 year olds (National Middle School Association, 2003), while the U.S. Department of Education (2008) describes early adolescence as “the fascinating, confusing, and wonderful years of ages 10 through 14” (p. 3).

Adolescence is the second phase of human life characterized by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social change (American Medical Association, 2001; Carr et al., 2002). The physical growth and biological change of young adolescences are typically referred to as puberty. Puberty is a period of the physiological changes caused by hormones which occurs at different ages and at different rates for each individual (American Medical Association, 2001; Manning & Bucher, 2001). Despite the differences in the age of onset and the rate of the puberty cycle, there are certain milestones associated with the physical changes of early adolescents and even a sequence to those changes (American Medical Association, 2001; Brighton, 2007; Brown & Knowles, 2007; National Middle School Association, 2003). The wide range of the rate of physical developmental characteristics can readily be seen; some 12-year-olds look like 16-year-olds while others resemble 8-year-olds (Manning & Bucher, 2001). Manning and Bucher (2001) explain, “Every young adolescent is growing up, but each is taking a different road and going at a different speed on his or her journey from childhood to adulthood” (p. 26).

The physical changes of early adolescence also bring on emotional and social changes. Adolescents are moving from “child's play” to “the adult world” and their

emotional and social abilities do not always keep up with their changing bodies. The most dramatic social changes since infancy happen during early adolescence (Weinberger, Elvevag, & Giedd, 2005). Studies confirm the cognitive processes that underlie the ability to control impulses, plan, make decisions, and inhibit inappropriate behavior are evolving and are not fully mature in early adolescence (Weinberger et al., 2005). Cognitive development is also diverse, with some young adolescents performing formal and higher level thinking, while others continue to think in concrete terms (Manning & Bucher, 2001). Weinberger et al. (2005) reported a large and compelling body of scientific research on the neurological development of the adolescent brain discovering:

Remarkable changes occur in the brain during the second decade of life. Contrary to long-held ideas that the brain was mostly grown-up—"fully cooked"—by the end of childhood, it is now clear that adolescence is a time of profound brain growth and change. In fact, the brain of an early adolescent in comparison to that of a late adolescent differs measurably in anatomy, biochemistry, and physiology.  
(p. 1)

Unfortunately, learning is often not a high priority in the adolescents' lists of concerns (Carr et al., 2002; Moje, 2002). The adolescent brain is still a work in progress (Weinberger et al., 2005).

The key to understanding the transitional period of early adolescence is that change is a constant and that diversity is the hallmark characteristic of young adolescents (Manning & Bucher, 2001). Changes occur in individual early adolescent students on a daily basis (Manning & Bucher, 2001), Carr et al. (2002) explained:

Educators can choose to work with these changes and build them into our instructional planning or we can ignore them and become frustrated by them. The latter option leads to disengagement from learning, school, and teachers. The former route can lead to marvelous growth for our students and ourselves. (p. 4)

As the early adolescent strives for the independence and autonomy that comes with maturation, adults need to know young adolescents have limited cognitive abilities to simultaneously process information, hold it in working memory, and use it to guide plans and behavior; thus, the young adolescent still needs the watchful eye and active involvement of caring adults (Brighton, 2007; Weinberger et al., 2005).

Of primary importance for educators is to understand that no matter the specific chronological age, early adolescents are different from elementary school children and high school students, and thus, educational needs are also different due to their unique developmental characteristics (Brown & Knowles, 2007; Dickinson, 2001; Manning & Bucher, 2001; National Middle School Association, 2003). Changes in all developmental areas have a significant impact on students' willingness to engage in school learning of any kind (Carr et al., 2002; Moje, 2002). The physical, emotional, and behavioral changes of this intermediary period are normal, natural, and even necessary behaviors of a youngster in transition from childhood to adulthood (Brighton, 2007). Even though the focus of this research is regarding literacy of the early adolescent, it is important for the reader to understand the developmental complexities of these unique learners.

#### *Evolution of Schooling for Early Adolescents*

For nearly a hundred years, both educators and researchers concerned with quality education have periodically called attention to the “serious mismatch” between the needs

of young adolescents and the educational organization and social environment of schools (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Around the turn of the 20th century, there was a call to start high school at seventh grade to meet the needs of an increasingly industrialized workforce and to relieve overpopulated primary schools (Colorado Children's Campaign, 2005). Educators argued that developmentally, adolescents were not ready for high school by seventh grade and recommended a split between junior and senior secondary schools, with junior highs focusing on developmental and social support and high schools concentrating on serious academics (Colorado Children's Campaign, 2005; Juvonen et al., 2004). Yet, without explicit guidelines or policies, junior high schools slipped into being mere junior versions of high school (Boyer & Bishop, 2004).

During the 1960s, reformers endorsed a new middle school "concept" intended to change the traditional junior high school to create an educational experience more appropriate for young adolescents (Juvonen et al., 2004). The goal was to make the old junior high more developmentally responsive by changing the grade configuration from grades 7–8 or 7–9 to grades 6–8 and introducing new organizational and instructional practices (Juvonen et al., 2004). According to National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) (2006), a great tug-of-war has existed for over 40 years about how best to address the needs of students in the middle with the unfortunate results of "decisions about grade configuration often are based on district budgets rather than what is best for these students who are stuck in the middle" (p. xv).

In the United States, middle schools have been called the Bermuda Triangle of education and have been blamed for increases in behavior problems, teen alienation, disengagement from school, and low achievement (Juvonen et al., 2004). Middle schools

have shifted focus several times between academic achievement and meeting the social, emotional, and psychological needs of early adolescents (Juvonen et al., 2004). Bunting (2005) insisted middle school is all about the multi faceted changes of early adolescence with nurturing interventions to provide the support needed to navigate the tidal wave of developmental change between childhood and adolescence. Jackson and Davis (2000) contended:

The main purpose of middle grades education is to promote young adolescents' intellectual development. It is to enable every student to think creatively, to identify and solve meaningful problems, to communicate and work well with others, and to develop the base of factual knowledge and skills that is the essential foundation for these "higher order" capacities. As they develop these capacities, every young adolescent should be able to meet or exceed high academic standards. (p. 11)

According to the National Middle School Association (1996), "exemplary middle schools center on the intellectual, social, emotional, moral and physical developmental needs of young adolescents" (p. 1).

Middle grade reform has been polarized. A balance between the academic and social-emotional needs of students has not yet been achieved according to Juvonen et al. (2004). Too often, middle level reforms have prioritized one at the expense of the other. For middle school students to thrive, schools must support both academic and developmental needs (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Lounsbury (2009) states, "The true middle school concept...has not been practiced and found wanting; rather it has been found difficult to implement fully, and is practiced only partially" (p. 32).

Regrettably, despite years of middle level reform movements, the day-to-day operation of middle grades education has not drastically changed in the past decades, even though the world has changed (Jackson, 2009). Erb (2009) wrote:

The time is right for us, as educators and citizens, to reinvent middle schools and public education, generally. While the ineffectiveness of public education and the middle grades, in particular, may be most obvious in our inner cities, with our language diverse students, with our special needs students, and with our low-income students, these conditions are, perhaps, just the canaries in the mines of education. While schools in a wide variety of communities have remained, many ways, resistant to change over the past 25 years, our social makeup, our communication technology, and our economic realities have changed around us, rendering schools as we have run them irrelevant and ineffective. (p. 4)

Unfortunately, “Schools continue to plod along at a pre-industrial snail’s pace, emphasizing memorization over thinking and repetitive routine over extrapolation and problem solving” when in fact “today’s young adolescents seem fiber-optically wired to accept data streams faster and from multiple sources simultaneously” (Springer, 2009, p. 23). Springer (2009) described current school for many middle level students as a “fate to be endured, part of the price of adolescence – like acne and awkwardness” (p. 22).

#### *Academic Performance and Achievement in the United States*

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the United States could take pride in having the best educated workforce in the world, unfortunately that is not true today (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). Serious concerns noted by Biancarosa and Snow (2004) included these statistics: (a) More than 8 million students in grades 4 through 12

were struggling readers, (b) every school day more than 3,000 students dropped out of school, (c) only 70% of high school students graduated on time with a regular diploma, (d) high school students in the lowest 25% of their class were 20 times more likely to drop out of school than the highest performing students, and (e) approximately 53% of high school graduates enrolled in remedial courses in post secondary education.

Nationally, almost 70% of students entering 9th grade and 60% of 12th graders can be considered as reading below grade level. The National Institute for Literacy (2007) reported approximately 8.7 million fourth through twelfth grade students struggle with the reading and writing tasks that are required of them in school which for many adolescent students, figure prominently in the eventual decision to drop out of school.

The National Commission on Adult Literacy (2008) found among the 30 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) free-market countries, the U.S. is the only nation where young adults are less educated than the previous generation, and compared to other countries the U.S. is losing ground in educational attainment. The National Adult Literacy Survey (Gordon & Gordon, 2003) indicates 80% of all jobs considered high tech now require a 12th-grade literacy level in reading, comprehension, and math. The survey unfortunately reports 48% of the U.S. adult population “fails to meet this criterion” (p. 19). This means almost half of the work force in this country is not able to or will have great difficulty in adequately performing the range of complex occupational tasks considered necessary for the U.S. to compete successfully in a global economy. Heller and Greenleaf (2007) further warned:

According to many prognosticators, economic realities alone should be sufficient to persuade policymakers of the urgent need to help many more students develop



much more advanced literacy skills than ever before. As the Education Testing service (ETS) warned in a recent report, current labor market trends, demographic projections, and student achievement data combine to suggest a not-too-distant future in which there will be tens of millions more adults who lack the education and skills they will need to thrive in the new economy, leading to unemployment and poverty on a scale that the country has not seen for generations. (p. 31)

On average, college graduates earn 70% more than their high school graduate counterparts, while high school dropouts are four times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed (Berman, Biancarosa, Green, Curran, Linn, Thomasian, et al., 2005). Jobs once available to dropouts and high school graduates are disappearing rapidly (Joftus, 2002). Many routine jobs, even white-collar jobs, have been turned over to machines or outsourced to developing countries whose labor pool produces the same work at a much lower cost (Springer, 2009). At one point in history, high school dropouts were able to seek rewarding careers in the armed forces, but the U.S. military no longer accepts high school dropouts and only 10% of army recruits, 6% of navy recruits, and less than 1% of air force recruits are accepted with a GED (Alliance for Excellent Education Fact Sheet, 2006). Students who drop out or do not go on to post secondary education have significantly lower annual and lifetime earnings than those who continue their education (Joftus, 2002). Joftus (2002) stated, “Simply put students who learn more earn more” (p. 9).

The 2007 State New Economy Index explained the change as “Workers who were skilled with their hands and could reliably work in repetitive and sometimes

physically demanding jobs were the engine of the old economy. In today's New Economy, knowledge-based jobs are driving prosperity" (Atkinson & Correa, 2007, p. 20). Most jobs today demand strong cognitive abilities and problem solving skills. Today's workers must cope with myriad evolving technologies and make on-the-spot decisions that would have bewildered previous generations (Joftus, 2002). As a result, it is all the more imperative that students attain a higher level of education. Haycock and Huang (2001) reported the failure rates on employment exams testing applicants' basic literacy and mathematics increased from 18.9% in 1996 to 35.5% in 1998. Not surprisingly, employers are hesitant to hire applicants lacking basic skills.

Policymakers and the general public have generally concluded that in order for the United States to be competitive in this era of globalization, schools must produce the human capital necessary to meet the demands of the new economy (Artiles, 2003). In today's world, a bad education is a million-dollar mistake (Joftus, 2002).

The structure of the new economy is global and its evolution has created many changes for the American workforce. The National Center of Education and the Economy (2007) explained:

Every day, more and more of the work that people do end up in a digitized form..... Because this is so, employers everywhere have access to a worldwide workforce composed of people who do not have to move to participate in work teams that are truly global. Because this is so, a swiftly rising number of American workers at every skill level are in direct competition with workers in every corner of the globe. So it matters very much that, increasingly, it is easier

and easier for employers everywhere to get workers who are better skilled at lower cost than American workers. (pp. 4-5)

Joftus (2002) stated, “Society can no longer afford to let students drop out or fall behind. In today’s global knowledge economy, every student needs to achieve high standards, graduate from high school, and go on to some form of postsecondary education” (p. 8).

Globalization has altered the political and economic landscapes around the world, and for the United States to remain competitive, a highly educated workforce is vital. Unfortunately, assessment results and international comparisons demonstrated weaknesses in the educational achievement of America’s youth.

### *Defining Adolescent Literacy*

The notions of what it means to be literate has changed over time, and how people conceive of being literate early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is different than previous times in history (Christenbury, Bomber, & Smagorinsky, 2009). From colonial America up through the revolutionary war, literacy was defined as the ability to simply sign your name; the term literacy then evolved to mean basic reading and writing (Beers, Probst, & Reif, 2007). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the evolution of the term continues. Some current definitions of literacy have grown to include not only reading and writing, but additionally the ability to speak, listen and think effectively (Meltzer & Okashige, 2001).

Beers et al. (2007) explained literacy is not a tangible object; rather literacy is “a set of skills that reflect the needs of the time. As those needs shift, then our definition of literacy shifts” (p. 7). Current definitions of literacy go beyond simply being able to sound out or recognize words and understand text. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) project defines literacy as “using printed and written information to

function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Kutner, Greenberg, Jin, Boyle, Hsu, & Dunleavy, 2007, p. 2). A central feature of the NAAL definition is literacy is related to achieving an objective (Kutner et al., 2007). Meltzer and Okashige (2001) equated being literate with power, stating "being literate enables people to access power through the ability to become informed, to inform others, and to make informed decisions" (p. 1). Using written information is an important part of everyday life in the United States (Kutner et al., 2007). Kutner et al. (2007) explained the magnitude of the necessity to be literate as:

Adults in most workplaces are surrounded by written information: health and safety postings, brochures describing their benefits, instruction manuals, memos, reports, and e-mail. Parents of school-aged children often receive written notices and forms from their children's schools: field trip permission slips, flyers about parent meetings or parent-teacher conferences, descriptions of course offerings, and applications for determining eligibility for free lunches and subsidized medical care. Older adults receive mailings explaining their Social Security and Medicare benefits. The millions of adults who take medication encounter labels explaining dosages, timing for taking the medication, interactions with other medications or food, and possible side effects. Getting a driver's license, registering to vote, and renting or purchasing a place to live all require reading and understanding written information. (p. 1)

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will read and write more than at any other time in human history (Moore et al., 1999). Becoming literate is a developmental and lifelong process which in the 21<sup>st</sup> century extends beyond traditional

conventional written material to include becoming literate with electronic and multimedia texts (National Governors Association, 2005). Adolescents face a world filled with new types of information systems; new modes of communication, presentation, and publication; and wide access to technologies that support new ways of managing, analyzing, developing, and monitoring information (Meltzer, Smith, & Clark, 2001). To be prepared, increasingly sophisticated levels of literacy are required to be able to negotiate the multitude of tasks.

In the National Governors Association's Reading to Achieve report, the term adolescent literacy is specifically defined as "the set of skills and abilities that students need in grades four through 12 to read, write, and think about the text materials they encounter" (National Governors Association, 2005, p. 6). The Adolescent English Language Learners Literacy Advisory Panel (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007) developed the following definition of academic literacy:

- Includes reading, writing, and oral discourse for school
- Varies from subject to subject
- Requires knowledge of multiple genres of text, purposes for text use, and text media
- Is influenced by students' literacies in contexts outside of school
- Is influenced by students' personal, social, and cultural experiences. (p. 8)

Because literacy is fundamental to teaching and learning, ongoing support for literacy development is critical to students' success in the classroom and beyond (Meltzer et al., 2001). Taylor and Collins (2003) challenged educators that the goal should be to

“maximize students’ literacy achievement and help them to become not just better readers and writers, but also better listeners, speakers, and thinkers” (p. 2).

The term literacy has evolved with advancements in civilizations. Currently, literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and think effectively (Meltzer & Okashige, 2001). Literacy is a requirement for academic achievement in middle school, high school, and beyond (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

### *The Importance of Literacy*

Strong reading, writing, and thinking skills are essential not only for success in school but also for the workplace and participation in civic life (Berman et al., 2005). As part of the American Diploma Project, Achieve (2005) delineated the content and skills graduates need to have mastered by the time they leave high school if they expect to succeed in post-secondary education or in high-performance, high-growth jobs. These literacy skills include the ability to read and interpret a wide range of reference materials (e.g., periodicals, memoranda, and other documents that may contain technical information), to judge the credibility of sources, to evaluate arguments, to understand and convey complex information, and to communicate effectively in writing (Achieve, 2005).

Poor academic skills are consistently linked with high dropout rates, entrance into the juvenile justice system, and unemployment (Haynes, 2007). Former President George W. Bush called reading “the new civil right” stating, “You don’t have a chance to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if you can’t read” (McManus, 2004). Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad (2004) argued the purpose of public education is to sustain a nation grounded in “an experiment called democracy” further stating “all societies want

‘educated citizens’, most societies want a literate population, a democratic society demands a special kind of literacy...a more complex kind of literacy” (p. 4).

According to Murphy (2004), the United States commitment to literacy in general and the heightened attention to literacy in classrooms, schools, school districts, state houses, and in the federal government is powered by a solidifying understanding of the critical link between literacy and success. This commitment has generated a number of popular reform ideas, including the incorporation of national standards, curricula, testing, and privatized choice plans (Artiles, 2003). Mandates established when President Bush signed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) into law January 8, 2002, required a shift in the standard of determining the adequacy of the United States public education. The broad goals of NCLB are to raise the achievement levels of all students, especially underperforming groups which include students of color, those living in poverty, new English learners, and students with disabilities (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The act intends to do this by focusing schools’ attention on improving test scores for all students, providing parents with more educational choices, and requiring highly qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

NCLB represents an aggressive congressional attempt to create major reform in the American education system. Under the law, data constitute one of the most critical forms of information administrators can employ in improving student learning. Federal regulations impose a host of new administrative responsibilities on school administrators to involve the collection and analysis of data. Through regulations regarding Adequate Yearly Progress, test score data are disaggregated and publicized. In fact, NCLB establishes the goal of every student meeting state-identified standards at the proficient

level by the 2013-2014 school year. Testing practices and accountability expectations related to the implementation of No Child Left Behind represented a comprehensive change in policy and practice. These changes bring a new level of accountability to public schools with high stakes attached to the results.

In July 2005, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released an analysis of long-term trends by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Perie, Moran, & Lutkus, 2005). The findings show nine-year olds overall scored higher in reading in 2004 than in any previous assessment year. Thirteen-year-olds scored higher in reading on average in 2004 than in 1971, but there were no differences from 1999. For seventeen year-olds, they scored about the same in reading in 2004 as they did in 1971, and there was no statistically significant difference between average scores in 1999 and 2004. The report further showed some progress had been made in certain areas in reading, but that progress was not sufficiently dynamic and widespread to meet the high literacy needs of students in today's society (Perie et al., 2005). Many more students need to be achieving at an advanced level (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007).

Despite international comparisons that show U.S. students scoring among the best in the world in grade four, by grade eight the comparison has U.S. students scoring much lower, and by grade ten, these students are scoring among the lowest in the world (Snow, Martin, & Berman, 2008). Jacobs (2008) stated, "National concern about the reading proficiency of U.S. adolescents has increased in intensity over the past twenty years to the point of alarm and has been cast most recently in the language of crisis" (p. 7).

The scope of the problem of low literacy levels among many young adults in our nation is staggering. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress



(NAEP), approximately two-thirds of 8th and 12th graders read below the *Proficient* level. About 29% of 12th-grade public school students scored below the *Basic* level on the NAEP 2005 reading assessment—a figure that excludes the large number of students who drop out of high school prior to 12<sup>th</sup> grade and who characteristically have limited reading skills (Perie et al., 2005). The performance of 8th graders is just as disappointing, with students performing substantially below grade level, demonstrating only miniscule to partial mastery of the prerequisite knowledge and skills fundamental for success in their respective grades. (Haynes, 2007; National Association of State Boards of Education, 2006; Perie et al., 2005).

In the February 2009 Fact Sheet from the Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE) about Adolescent Literacy, it was noted:

Policymakers have directed considerable resources toward improving the skills of the nation's youngest schoolchildren, and higher scores for fourth graders indicate that these investments are paying off. However, similar investments have not been made to support the literacy needs of students in the later grades; thus, academic gains are not being sustained through secondary schooling when students need instruction in advanced literacy skills necessary to succeed with more complex content. As a result, while fourth-grade proficiency rates on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) increased from 1998 through 2007, the percentage of eighth graders who scored at or above proficient declined. (p. 1)

The monies associated with No Child Left Behind is mostly targeted for elementary years up to third grade (Conley & Hinchman, 2004), and unless the nation makes a consistent investment towards delivering comprehensive reading and writing

instruction through the secondary school, millions of students will continue to leave school unprepared for college, work, and the many demands of adulthood (AEE, 2009). Senator Patty Murray (DWA), the author of the U.S. Senate Bill *Pathways for Success*, stated, “America cannot maintain its position as the world’s strong economy if we continue to ignore the literacy needs of adolescents in middle school and secondary [high] school” (Moje, 2002, p. 3).

Achieve (2005) reported:

Most workers question the preparation that high schools provide. A majority of workers give high schools a grade of C, D or F for their success in preparing students for success on the job. They rate literacy and critical thinking skills as much more important than job-specific or computer skills. (p. 11).

The facts suggest the leaks in the education pipeline are at least partially due to the fact that large numbers of young people reach high school without being able to read with sufficient fluency and comprehension to do serious academic work (McCombs et al., 2005).

The National Endowment for the Arts (2007) report, *To Read or Not to Read* proposed:

All of the data suggest how powerfully reading transforms the lives of individuals—whatever their social circumstances. Regular reading not only boosts the likelihood of an individual’s academic and economic success—facts that are not especially surprising—but it also seems to awaken a person’s social and civic sense. Reading correlates with almost every measurement of positive personal and social behavior surveyed. The cold statistics confirm something that most readers

know but have mostly been reluctant to declare as fact—books change lives for the better. (p. 6)

The NEA report (2007) also contended that as adolescents read less, they read less well. They have, therefore, lower levels of academic achievement. The authors of the report argued the “shameful fact that nearly one-third of American teenagers drop out of school is deeply connected to declining literacy and reading comprehension” (NEA, 2007, p. 5). Biancarosa and Snow (2004) explained the literate adolescent reader not only incorporates decoding, fluency, vocabulary, background knowledge, and critical thinking skills; the literate adolescent reader must also develop and maintain a motivation to read and learn, the strategies to monitor and correct their own comprehension during the act of reading, and the flexibility to read for a wide variety of purposes in a wide variety of media, all while developing their identities not only as readers but as members of particular social and cultural groups.

Sadly, for those adolescents who are struggling with reading and are not receiving appropriate help, there is a pessimistic picture of what will happen to them if they are unable to master essential literacy skills. These adolescents will be “undereducated, underemployed, and underprepared to participate successfully in the 21st century” (Hock & Deshler, 2003, p. 50). The need for increased literacy skills is vital for success, and even survival, for young adults in the 21st century (Gordon & Gordon, 2003).

Taylor and Collins (2003) stated, “The political scrutiny and criticism regarding the lack of an acceptable level of literacy among diverse student populations has made educators well aware of the need to improve literacy learning” (p. 2). For students to be able to be successful in not only academic pursuits but in life as well, each student must

achieve the ability to read, write, think, and communicate. Unfortunately, statistics demonstrated a reality in which many adolescent students are not achieving acceptable literacy levels. A struggle with literacy negatively affects a student's ability to be successful in school and in life beyond.

### *The Role of the Principals*

Within the context of an increased national and local focus on improving school performance and student achievement, there is greater importance on the role of the school principal (Lashway, 2002). Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, and Meyerson (2005) explained:

The role of principal has swelled to include a staggering array of professional tasks and competencies. Principals are expected to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations and communications experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special programs administrators, as well as guardians of various legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. In addition, principals are expected to serve the often conflicting needs and interests of many stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, district office officials, unions, and state and federal agencies. As a result, many scholars and practitioners argue that the job requirements far exceed the reasonable capacities of any one person. (p. 3)

Despite multitudes of demands, the principal's role of instructional leader cannot be ignored as research indicates the principal's influence on student learning is second only to that of classroom instruction (Davis et al., 2005).

The emphasis placed on the leadership role of the principal has changed during the past 30 years (McEwan, 2003). Lashway (2002) warned the standards-based accountability reform movement requires principals to lead teachers to produce tangible results on ambitious academic standards. According to Juvonen et al. (2004) principals, as the organizational leaders of their schools, are “in the position to foster school climate, thereby influencing both the learning conditions of students and the working conditions of teachers” (p. 64).

Principals, as instructional leaders, must be prepared to focus time, attention, and effort on changing what students are taught, how they are taught, and what they are learning (Bottoms & O’Neill, 2001). Due to the current climate of school reform, principals are held accountable for student achievement and success. Given these expectations, the position of the principal has shifted from a role dominated by a focus on management and administration to one focused on instruction and learning (Phillips, 2007). The U.S. Department of Education’s (2004) *Innovative Pathways to School Leadership* stated,

Successful principals establish an intense focus on learning and communicate its centrality in everything they do. Their high expectations combine with a sense of urgency to focus attention on learning for all subgroups of students, including the economically disadvantaged, racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and English language learners. No excuses override their commitment to student learning. Effective school leaders understand that they are in a position to mobilize others. (p. 2)

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) also found “the leadership behavior of the principal can have a profound effect on student achievement” (p. 31). Their findings indicated a significant correlation between the principal’s leadership behavior and student achievement, which they determined to be “compelling and should stir school leaders to seek ways to improve their leadership skills” (p. 32). Many other researchers agree principal leadership has a significant impact on student achievement (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Glickman, 2002; Marzano et al., 2005; McEwan, 2003; Taylor & Collins, 2003; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

### *The Role of the Principal in Adolescent Literacy*

Various researchers (Fisher, Frey, & Williams, 2004; Jetton & Dole, 2004; Phillips, 2005) agreed that the following principal behaviors were critical for the success of a literacy program: (a) involving faculty and staff in program design, (b) committing to the program, (c) providing staff development, (d) the principal attending all staff development activities, (e) providing encouragement and feedback to teachers, and (f) providing necessary funds for program implementation.

An important task for principals as literacy leaders was to translate a critical vision to teachers and students. That vision should include: (a) all students can be effective, independent readers and writers; (b) all students can achieve their literacy potential through the leader’s actions; (c) a schoolwide literacy plan must be collegially developed and implemented; and (d) the principal is involved in school and classroom literacy activities (Taylor, 2004). Literacy should be viewed by all stakeholders, teachers, students and parents as crucial to the academic success of students (Zipperer et al., 2002). Zipperer et al. (2002) stated, “In many cases, the success or failure of the reading

program in a school hangs upon the principal's understanding of and support for the program" (p. 3).

The principal's effect on reading achievement is well documented in underprivileged schools. Moats (1999) study demonstrated that when students from the normally high-risk population (economically disadvantaged minorities) were placed in schools with effective principals and well-supported teachers, they learned to read as well as their more privileged counterparts.

Mackey, Pitcher, and Decman (2006) also did a study on the principal factor. They analyzed the principal's influence on reading programs through analyzing test data. Through their study, they identified three specific areas that enable elementary principals to positively influence reading achievement. The three areas include the following:

- (1) the principal's vision of the reading program,
- (2) the educational background the principal brings with her/him; and
- (3) how the principal defines and applies her/his role as an instructional leader within the school. (p. 52)

Instructional leaders can influence instruction in many indirect ways (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Waters et al., 2003). Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996) conducted a study to measure the effects of the principal on reading achievement in 87 U.S. schools. The results demonstrated the learning environment created by the principal does affect reading gains made by students. Based on their findings, elementary principals who were perceived as strong instructional leaders by the teachers indirectly promoted the learning environment and increased student achievement in their elementary schools. While the principal's direct influence is difficult to prove, the many indirect influences positively affect student achievement. When they analyzed personal characteristics of principals,

they noted an interesting variable with the number of prior years of teaching and the possible correlation to the effectiveness of the principal.

As noted above, strong leadership of principals in literacy has been evident in successful reading programs (Booth & Rowsell, 2002; McEwan, 2001). However, it is important to note some researchers have indicated the literacy leader or reading expert in a school does not necessarily have to be the principal (Mednick, 2003). Earlier research and analysis claimed strong instructional leadership through coordinating curricula is essential for effective reading programs in elementary schools, but the school instructional leadership does not necessarily have to be the principal. Other qualified staff members can take this leadership role (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Mednick, 2003). Cobb (2005) acknowledged alternate literacy leaders as well. Cobb reported the principal was the leader of the school who serves as the change agent. Cobb also claimed a reading specialist or skilled reading teacher could function as the literacy leader in a school.

Sanacore (1997) suggested a principal needs to delegate the instructional leadership and literacy initiative to other staff members if he or she is uncomfortable with this leadership role in learning. Whether effective leadership is accomplished by the principal or a delegated agent is unimportant. What matters is the end result. Whoever takes on the responsibility of leading and teacher training will need reading knowledge. An important aspect of the principal's role in reading leadership was to determine their level of prior reading knowledge. Regardless of personal skill, a principal who is not proficient in reading instruction has the obligation to implement a program whereby an effective literacy leader is assigned. Biancarosa and Snow (2004) pointed out a literacy focused school required the principal to "building his or her own personal knowledge of



how young people learn and struggle with reading and writing and how they differ in their needs” (p. 21). The National Institute for Literacy (2007) stated:

It is important to realize that the responsibilities for strengthening literacy skills in these [adolescent] students is the responsibility of everyone at the school ranging from the language-arts instructors, reading specialists, content-area teachers, speech and hearing specialists, school psychologists, administrators, and others.

(p. 1)

The primary factor in facilitating positive literacy changes in schools was a literacy leader who created an environment that supported innovation and collaboration to distribute the leadership by enabling all to feel like participating professionals (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Researchers continue to provide suggestions for principals to improve a school’s literacy program. McEwan (2001) made the following recommendations to principals:

1. Focus on changing what you can change.
2. Teach the students who can’t read how to read.
3. Teach every student how to read to learn.
4. Motivate all students to read more books, to read increasingly challenging books, and to be accountable for what they read.
5. Create a reading culture in your school. (p. 141)

Other researchers identified additional skills and characteristics principals display in schools with successful reading programs. Crawford and Torgesen (2006) studied ten Florida Reading First elementary schools that had successful outcomes in reading. They identified seven common traits among the schools. The first trait they identified was

strong leadership. They claimed the strong leader had extensive knowledge of “children, reading programs, data, schedules, and teachers’ needs” (p. 3). In addition, they reported that the strong leader understood data which helped the leader organize schedules and meet the needs of the staff. Knapp, Copland, Swinnerton, and Monpas-Huber (2006) also reported on the importance of leaders using data to make data-informed decisions. They stressed that much of the responsibility can fall on the principal and can vary depending on the school, resources, and the principal’s interests and skills. Knapp et al. (2006) explained:

Given that the responsibility of interpreting and using assessment data to guide school improvement in such high-stakes environments tended to fall primarily on the principal, data use in these schools depended on the interests and skills of the individual cast in this role” (p. 26).

Wixson and Yochum (2004) also expressed the importance of reading data being used by a supportive principal and teachers to promote positive change in reading performance. They said, “The high-reform-effort schools typically had a supportive principal and one strong and respected teacher leader who made sure that teachers looked at the data linking students’ reading growth to classroom reading practices” (p. 237).

Bottoms and O’Neill (2001) used titles and phrases to redefine the modern principal or instructional leader as the “chief learning officer” who bears “ultimate responsibility for success or failure of the enterprise” (p. 4). The importance of the school principal in implementing any school reform has been researched and documented a multitude of times; however, there remains serious concern that principal training for something as critical as adolescent literacy has virtually gone unnoticed. Most principals

simply do not know where to begin or how to start the implementation of an adolescent literacy initiative (Shanahan, 2004).

In 2005, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) published *Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals* (Phillips, 2005). In the preface of this work, Executive Director Tirozzi wrote, “We have developed this guide, which will give them [principals] tools to create and sustain a culture of literacy for all in their school” (Phillips, 2005, p. v). Phillips’ (2005) research developed the following nine action steps for the literacy leader.

*Determine the school’s capacity for literacy improvement:* This step is placed first because it is the initial step before anything else can be done. It is a process of reviewing test data and having discussions with faculty regarding the literacy needs of their students and their own literacy instruction needs.

*Develop a literacy leadership team:* This particular step is also strongly encouraged by other researchers (Shanahan, 2004; Strickland & Alvermann, 2004; Taylor & Collins, 2003). Principals need feedback from teachers regarding literacy needs as mentioned above. The literacy leadership team is one of the best ways available to receive such feedback. The team needs to be representative of all the curricular departments in the school. These teachers should be “highly motivated...highly skilled and deeply committed to improving the literacy opportunities for every student” (Phillips, 2005, p. 8).

*Create a collaborative environment that fosters sharing and learning:* The principal must provide teachers an opportunity to dialogue with each other about their successes, questions, and frustrations. The principal also needs to be in classrooms

frequently to help teachers improve their literacy instruction and share with them the latest literacy research.

*Develop a school wide organizational model that supports extended time for literacy instruction:* Phillips (2005) recommended an extended period of time of about 90 to 100 minutes for literacy instruction. Restructuring of the school's schedule may need to occur in order for this extra block of time to take place. Phillips also noted the importance of the principal arranging for ongoing staff development activities based on teacher needs.

*Analyze assessment data to determine specific learning needs of students:* Standardized test results are certainly one form of assessment data that faculty and the principal need to use to determine literacy instruction needs. Other forms of assessment should also be used. These can include class grades, teacher anecdotal records, and formal and informal assessments of student progress (Burch, 2007).

*Develop a school wide plan to address the professional development needs of teachers:* As mentioned earlier in the staff development section of this review, teacher centered, research-based best practices and ongoing staff development are critical to the success of adolescent literacy implementation (Hawley & Valli, 1999). The principal's job is to know what research is available (or know how to find it) to meet teachers' training needs and then to arrange for the staff development to take place.

*Create a realistic budget for literacy needs:* Effective approaches to adolescent literacy need to be able to support the purchase of necessary materials such as books for teachers' professional libraries, classroom sets of novels, test materials. Staff development activities present budget needs as well. The principal needs to prioritize the

literacy needs of the school and what costs are essential to the immediate implementation of the program, as well as what might be needed in the years to come (Phillips, 2005).

*Develop a broad understanding of literacy strategies that work in the content area classes:* The literature is clear about the importance of the principal staying informed of the most recent research in curriculum and instruction and sharing that knowledge with the faculty (Glickman, 2002; Marzano et al., 2005; McEwan, 2001).

*Principals need to demonstrate their commitment to the literacy program.* This is a reemphasis of the importance of the principal participating in staff development with teachers, of designing budgets to fit the needs of an adolescent literacy framework, and of actively demonstrating his or her firm commitment to literacy (McEwan, 2001; Phillips, 2005).

The Alliance for Excellent Education (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007) developed four general principles in encouraging content-area teachers, middle and secondary, to integrate literacy instruction more fully into their everyday practice. These four principles also provide a road map for administrators.

1. The roles and responsibilities of content-area teachers must be clear and consistent.
2. Every academic discipline should define its own essential literacy skills.
3. All secondary school teachers should receive initial and ongoing professional development in the literacy of their own content areas.
4. Content-area teachers need positive incentives and appropriate tools to provide reading and writing instruction. (pp. 25–29)

Research has identified specific characteristics of successful reading programs. Many findings identified the reading knowledgeable principal as the first and most important factor in a successful program. Several studies concluded principals could influence reading achievement directly or indirectly. On-going support for best practice is necessary if deep change in school-wide literacy data is to be achieved (Fullan, 2003)

Research has identified some effective strategies for leadership and instruction in adolescent literacy, and Ivey and Fisher (2005) identified five ineffective strategies for developing adolescent literacies that should be avoided. These include (a) not letting students read by giving them activities to complete other than reading, (b) making students read what they do not know or care about, (c) making students read difficult books, (d) interrogating students at the basic comprehension level about what they have been reading, and (e) buying computer programs about reading and letting them do all the work. Unfortunately, simple strategies to address the adolescent literacy needs are also found to be ineffective; therefore, Ivey and Fisher cautioned principals to avoid these ineffective strategies.

Principals have a vital role to play in regards to literacy of students in their school. Determining the school's capacity for literacy improvement and development of a building literacy leadership team are first steps to address poor literacy mores in a middle or secondary school. Additionally, establishment of a collaborative environment, development of an organizational model that supports extended time for literacy instruction, determination of learning needs of students through analysis of data, and construction of a school wide plan to address professional development needs of the teachers are strategies to assist a principal in effecting teacher practice and thus student

literacy learning. The principal's actions, words, allocation of time and resources are viewed by students, parents, and teachers as either support or nonsupport of high literacy expectations.

### *Summary*

Early adolescent students are different from elementary school children and high school students and their educational needs are also different due to their unique developmental characteristics. For early adolescent students to thrive, middle schools must support both academic and developmental needs (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Regrettably, middle schools have shifted focus several times between academic achievement and meeting the social, emotional, and psychological needs of early adolescents (Juvonen et al., 2004) and have not yet achieved the balance between the two.

Disturbingly, it is estimated 26% of high school students nationally “cannot read material that many of us would deem essential for daily living, such as road signs, newspapers, and bus schedules” (Hock & Deshler, 2003, p. 50). Other research findings indicate “close to 50% of all incoming ninth graders in this country’s comprehensive, public high schools cannot comprehend the texts that their teachers expect them to read” (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004, p. 3). Many adolescents are struggling with their ability or inability to read. The concern for lack of adolescent literacy skills has continued to grow. The notions of what it means to be literate has changed over time, and how people conceive of being literate early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is different than previous times in history (Christenbury et al., 2009). Because literacy is fundamental to teaching and

learning, ongoing support for literacy development is critical to students' success in the classroom and beyond (Meltzer et al., 2001).

Principals, as instructional leaders, must be prepared to focus time, attention, and effort on changing what students are taught, how they are taught, and what they are learning (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001). Literacy should be viewed by all stakeholders, teachers, students, and parents, as crucial to the academic success of students (Zipperer et al., 2002). The primary factor in facilitating positive literacy changes in schools was a literacy leader who created an environment that supported innovation and collaboration to distribute the leadership by enabling all to feel like participating professionals (Spillane et al., 2001). Principals are currently held more accountable for student achievement and success due to the current environment of school reform.

The principal working with early adolescent middle level school students who globally appear to be unsuccessful in the literacy demands of school during a period of high-levels of accountability for the building level administrators was the focus for this research. Chapter Two included a review of current literature related to this phenomenological qualitative study. Subsequently, this literature review provided background necessary to understand the issues related to the phenomenon of being a middle level principal during the adolescent literacy crisis. This chapter included a review of current literature: (a) who is the early adolescent, (b) evolution of schooling for early adolescents, (c) academic performance and achievement in the United States, (d) why literacy matters, (e) a definition of adolescent literacy, and (f) the role of principals in adolescent literacy. Chapter Three will include a complete description of the research design, including the research participants and sample as well as the data gathering



methods and instruments. Chapter Three also includes an explanation of the data analysis process and research bracketing. Chapter Four will include a review of findings based on the data collected. Finally, Chapter Five will contain a discussion, conclusions and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER THREE  
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

*Introduction*

The increased awareness and concern regarding adolescent literacy provided the foundation for this study. Building leadership has been identified as a significant factor in increasing student achievement (Beaudin, Thompson, & Jacobson, 2002) and thus literacy. The purpose of this research study was to examine Missouri middle school principals' perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis and to ascertain how middle level principals are addressing adolescent literacy needs in their schools.

The following questions guided this study:

1. What are middle level principals' perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis?
2. What are middle level principals doing to address the literacy needs of the early adolescent students in their school?

The phenomenological qualitative research approach was selected due to the underpinning of the social constructivism and pragmatism paradigms of the research questions. The researcher seeks to understand or make sense of the meanings others have about the world as related to the shared phenomenal experience (Creswell, 2007) of being a middle level principal during a time of a proclaimed adolescent literacy crisis in the United States. Besides the goal of making sense of the shared phenomenon, the pragmatist seeks to understand "what works" or what middle level principals are doing to address adolescent literacy needs.

This chapter will further explain the rationale for the qualitative research methodology as well as explication of the research design. Participants and sample selection for the study as well as data collection methods and instrumentation are detailed in this chapter as well.

### *Research Design*

The goal of qualitative research is to investigate a problem or issue that exists in the real world with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described the essence of qualitative research as, “You [The researcher] are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know, you are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts” (p. 7).

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 1998). McEwan and McEwan (2003) described a qualitative researcher as an educational detective looking for clues. Qualitative research is an umbrella term and includes multiple approaches through which researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them (Bogdan, & Biklen, 2007). This research study utilized the phenomenological qualitative research approach.

Giorgi (2006) explained that modern phenomenological method was founded by Husserl who outlined the following philosophical methods:

- (1) adopt the phenomenological attitude [of the discipline being studied], (2) encounter an instance of the phenomenon that one is interested in studying and

then use the process of free imaginative variation in order to determine the essence of the phenomenon, and (3) one then carefully describes the essence that they discovered. (p. 354)

The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, while remaining true to the facts. In phenomenological studies, the focus would be on the essence of an experience (Merriam, 1998). Creswell (2007) stated:

A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologist's focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essences. (pp. 57-58)

Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as "real world setting [where] the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2001, p. 39). Qualitative researchers seek instead illumination, understanding, and extrapolation to similar situations (Golafshani, 2003).

#### *Research Participants and Sample*

For a phenomenology study, Heppner and Heppner (2004) stipulate participants must meet the criteria of, "(a) they experienced the phenomenon under study, and (b) they can articulate their lived experiences" (p. 173). For these reasons, purposeful (purposive) sampling was employed since it is necessary that all participants have

experience of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). As Merriam (1998) stated, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). To begin purposive sampling selection, the researcher created a list of the attributes essential to the study and then found individuals matching the criteria (Merriam, 1998). The primary criterion for participants of this research study was middle level principals in the state of Missouri who work exclusively with early adolescent students in grades fifth, sixth, seventh, and/or eighth grade.

According to data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) school building data (2009), of the 2,334 school buildings in the state of Missouri, 364 of these buildings met the researcher’s criteria of serving early adolescent students in grades five, six, seven, and/or eight. Schools that served any additional grade levels were not included as the researcher sought perceptions of principals working exclusively with early adolescent students in the researcher’s defined middle school grades five, six, seven, and/or eight. The principals of these 364 buildings all share the common phenomena of serving as administrators during a proclaimed adolescent literacy crisis in the United States. Random selection was utilized to select sample size of approximately 33% percent of Missouri middle level principals for the open-ended survey. To reduce sampling error (Fink, 2006), as well as to acquire the largest possible amount of information, an online open-ended survey questionnaire was developed and electronically sent to 120 randomly selected middle level school principals in Missouri.

Additional purposive sampling methodology utilized to select research participants to be interviewed included convenience and maximum variation sampling (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 2006). A nine county area of Missouri, which included 39 school districts, was selected as a convenient sample location as the researcher was able to drive to any of these Missouri schools within 90 minutes in order to conduct interviews. From these 39 school districts, 22 of the school districts had grade level configurations that included separate principals to serve the middle level early adolescent students. These 22 school districts encompass 30 buildings and building level principals who serve grade levels five, six, seven, and/or eight.

Seidman (2006) stated, “Maximum variation sampling provides the most effective basic strategy for selecting participants for interview studies” (p. 52). Maximum variation sampling methodology involved seeking those who represent the widest possible range of characteristics in the larger population under study (Merriam, 1998). Variables considered included: principal’s gender, principal’s years of administrative experience, district student population, building enrollment, and school setting were utilized to identify 10 middle level principals to be interviewed.

The researcher utilized the principle of sufficiency and saturation of information to determine enough data had been collected from which the phenomenon could be described (Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) suggested, “The method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants” (p. 55).

### *Data Gathering Methods and Instrumentation*

Data refer to the “rough materials researchers collect from the world they are studying; data are the particulars that form the basis of analysis” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 117). Three methods were utilized to gather data for this study. Data were collected via an open-ended questionnaire (The Early Adolescent Literacy Principal Perception Survey), interviews, and document analysis. Through the use of data triangulation, bias was minimized and validity enhanced. Creswell (2007) stated the process of triangulation “involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (p. 208). The use of triangulation also allowed the researcher to capture a more complete, holistic, and contextual depiction and revealed the varied dimensions of the phenomena, with each source contributing an additional piece to the puzzle (Golafshani, 2003).

Ethical guidelines were followed to protect the human subjects of the research involved in this study. Participants involved in the research were protected from harm, as well as, confidentiality and security of research data were maintained (Creswell, 2007). The researcher utilized full Internal Review Board certification along with utilizing participant informed consent form (Appendix A & B). Informed consent was utilized for both survey participants as well as interview participants. Informed consent provides potential participants sufficient written information to decide whether or not they were willing to participate (Fink, 2006; Seidman, 2006).

#### *Early Adolescent Literacy Principal Perception Survey*

Fink (2006) defined the use of surveys in research as the following “Surveys are information collections methods used to describe, compare, or explain individual and

societal knowledge, feelings, values, preferences, and behavior. A survey can be a self-administered questionnaire that someone fills out alone or with assistance” (p. 1). Due to the phenomenological nature of the research study, there was not an existing survey instrument available to use to glean the desired information and data. Thus, the researcher developed the Early Adolescent Literacy Principal Perception Survey (see Appendix C).

This survey was an open ended questionnaire distributed electronically to middle level principals ( $N=120$ ) in Missouri. Fink (2006) asserted, “Open-ended questions can offer insight why people believe the things they do” (p. 14) and “the data they provide are descriptions of feelings and perceptions, values, habits, and personal background or demographic characteristics” (p. 4). A written statement was included in the survey informing the principals that by completing the survey, they were implying their consent. All participant surveys were completed through the internet using the survey builder web based tool of Google Docs. Consideration of the potential participants’ computer literacy skills and access was considered when selection of this data collection method was chosen (Fink, 2006). The Early Adolescent Literacy Principal Perception Survey consisted of six open-ended questions followed by four demographic questions.

### *Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews ( $N=8-10$ ) were conducted consisting of open-ended questions. The semi-structured interview format was utilized because this format allowed the researcher “to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). A semi-structured interview protocol form (see Appendix D) provided a foundation of questions for the interview while allowing for additional questions by the interviewer and wider latitude of



potential responses from participants (Kruger & Casey, 2000; Merriam, 1998). No interviews were conducted without signed consent.

Each interview was audio-taped and later transcribed by the researcher. Member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and confirm for each participant that their stories were portrayed as intended (Fink, 2006). Participants were instructed to contact the researcher to make necessary corrections. Changes were made to comply with the requirements outlined in the letter of informed consent. Field notes were taken by the researcher during the interview process to record information not reflected in the audio tapes.

#### *Document Analysis*

In addition to interviews, principals were also asked to provide the researcher a copy of the school improvement plan ( $N=8-10$ ). The school improvement plan documents were used to substantiate or counter information from the interview, in order to add to the complete picture of the phenomenon studied. Merriam (1998) concluded that documents were “a ready-made source of data easily accessible to the imaginative and resourceful investigator” (p. 112). Analyzing school improvement plan documents (see Appendix E) allowed the researcher to further investigate principal communication and buttress findings from these documents with findings from principal interviews. According to Merriam (1998), document analysis is important and offers insightful information about the topic since the documents were not produced solely for the purpose of this study.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

In qualitative research, the process of data collection and analysis is an interactive process “that allows the investigator to produce believable and trustworthy findings” (Merriam, 1998, p. 151). Qualitative research produces a large quantity of data, which Kruger and Casey (2000) warn can be overwhelming for novice qualitative researcher. Kruger and Casey suggested “throughout the analysis process, the researcher should remember the purpose of the study” (p. 127). The purpose of this research was to determine the perceptions of middle level principal during a proclaimed adolescent literacy crisis as well as to determine what middle level principals were doing to address adolescent literacy needs of students in their school. Repeatedly during the data collection and analysis process the researcher referred back to the research questions for direction.

### *Theme Development*

Data analysis for qualitative research consisted of “analyzing the data for significant phrases, developing meanings and clustering them into themes, and presenting an exhaustive description of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 160). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) maintained the best way to analyze qualitative data was to simultaneously analyze data during collection. Thus, after each interview, the researcher searched for common ideas or themes, which eventually became coding categories. During and following interviews, data were searched for patterns to add the description and understanding of the phenomenon being researched. However, the credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness of the phenomenological data required a design that followed guidelines “ideally suited to understand the phenomenon under investigation”

(Heppner & Heppner, 2004, p. 168). Consistent with Heppner and Heppner (2004) suggested methods, this facilitated the “naming of categories, determining the number of categories, and figuring out systems for placing data into categories” (p. 197).

### *Triangulation*

In order to triangulate the data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, as well as, document analysis. The interviews were used in conjunction with survey data and document analysis in order to gain a greater understanding of the phenomena being studied. In order to maintain consistency, the researcher was the only interviewer in this study. Each of the participants was audio-recorded then transcribed verbatim. The individuals were allowed to check their transcript for accuracy. The individual review of the transcripts, field observations, logs, notes, and patterns of responses emerged by coding categories that allowed the researcher to look for consistency and triangulation (Creswell, 2007).

### *Data Saturation*

Merriam (1998) suggests looking for data saturation of categories and exhaustion of sources to help determine when the researcher has enough data to answer the research questions or if any additional data collection is necessary. Data saturation is “the point of data collection where the information you get becomes redundant” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 69).

### *Researcher Bracketing*

Phenomenology is a school of thought that emphasizes a focus on people's subjective experiences and interpretations of the world. That is, the phenomenologist wants to understand how the world appears to others. To accomplish a fresh perspective,

phenomenological study requires the researcher to bracket their experiences as much as possible by “describing their own experiences with the phenomenon and bracketing out their views before proceeding with the experiences of others” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

The bracketing approach was utilized to help ensure objectivity in the process of analyzing the data. This is a process whereby the researcher identifies her own personal experiences and biases that might have an impact on interpretation of research data.

The researcher for this study holds a Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education English, Speech and Theatre undergraduate degree with an additional middle school endorsement which expands the researcher’s Missouri teaching certification to include grades 5 – 12. The researcher’s professional experiences include five years of teaching experience in a seventh grade language arts classroom followed by ten years as an assistant principal and two years as principal in a fifth – seventh grade building. The researcher holds Master’s and Specialist’s degrees in Educational Administration with Missouri principal certificates K-8, 5-9, 9-12. All of the researcher’s professional experience are in the same large, rural Missouri school district.

The researcher’s perspective is that of a middle level principal whose school is in the third year of school improvement due to student achievement scores not meeting annual yearly progress (AYP) targets. Thus, the researcher had preconceived ideas regarding the state of adolescent literacy in Missouri. Additionally, since the researcher has only worked for one school district, experience is limited to one district’s approach and investments in literacy instruction.

### *Summary*

This study was proposed to add to the available knowledge and understanding in regards to middle level principals' perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis, as well as, what middle level principals are doing in relation to the literacy needs of the adolescent student in their schools. Data sources for this phenomenological qualitative research included open-ended survey administered to all middle level principals electronically in the state, interviews and document analysis. Chapter Three of this study included detailed description of the research design, participants, and sample. Additionally, details regarding the data collection instrumentation and data analysis procedures were outlined. Chapter Four will include a review of findings based on the data collected. Finally, Chapter Five will contain a discussion, conclusions, and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of Missouri's middle level principals regarding the state of early adolescent literacy crisis as well as to ascertain how early adolescent literacy needs have been addressed in Missouri middle level schools. The research design and methodology utilized to answer the research questions were presented previously in Chapter Three. This chapter presents the findings of the data collected from the Early-Adolescent Principals Perception Survey, interviews, and school improvement document analysis. The study was a phenomenological qualitative design utilizing random and convenience sampling methods.

The increased awareness and concern regarding adolescent literacy provided the foundation for this study. Building leadership has been identified as a significant factor in increasing student achievement (Beaudin, Thompson, & Jacobson, 2002) and thus literacy. Collection and analysis of data were guided by the following research questions:

1. What are middle level principals' perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis?
2. What are middle level principals doing to address the literacy needs of the early adolescent students in their schools?

Chapter Four is organized into three additional sections. The first is Data Sources which describes data collection instruments and the participants. The second, Data Analysis, discusses emergent themes found in the data collected from the online surveys and interviews followed by a summary of chapter four.

### *Data Sources*

Collection of data used in this research project occurred from across Missouri via an online survey, as well as interviews conducted in a geographically convenient location to the researcher. The methods and tools to collect data included an online survey, documents, and interviews. The online survey and interview protocol were overviewed followed by demographic descriptors of the research participants.

#### *Online Survey*

The Early Adolescent Principal Perception (see Appendix C) online survey consisted of six open-ended questions followed by six demographic type questions. The survey was developed to gain insight from middle level administrator practitioners regarding adolescent literacy and the principal's role.

#### *Interviews*

Additional source of data was face to face interviews with middle level principals. A semi-structured interview protocol form (see Appendix D) which asked similar questions as the Early Adolescent Principal Perception online Survey provided a foundation of questions for the interview while allowing for additional questions by the interviewer and wider latitude of potential responses from participants (Kruger & Casey, 2000; Merriam, 1998). Prior to beginning each interview, all study participants were informed of their rights as a human subject in research, provided time to review and ask questions regarding the informed consent form (appendix B). For each interview, the researcher retained a paper copy of the informed consent form and recorded verbal consent for the interview process to be recorded (appendix B). Informed consent forms and verbal consent were received from all eight interviewees. During the interview

process, the researcher sought deeper meaning, understanding, and clarification through conversation that cannot always be found in set written survey responses.

### *Documents*

The final data sources were intended to be the School Improvement Plans which all schools are required to have for Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP). Only three of the principals interviewed were able to provide a copy of their School Improvement Plan. All eight principals indicated their school does have a school improvement plan; however, as I8H stated, “Of course we have the C-SIP, we have to have one. I just don’t know how it will help you with your research.” The researcher then explained she would be looking for references to literacy. Following explanation, two principals indicated they would send a copy to the researcher (which did not happen), and three stated their school improvement plan did not have any reference to literacy. I6F stated, “The School Improvement Plan is like a lot of things we have to do anymore; its more paperwork we have to do rather than doing the work we should be doing, working with teachers and kids.” The school improvement plan was not a source of data for the researcher.

### *Demographics*

The participants used in this study consisted of middle level principals, principals working exclusively with grade levels of fifth, sixth, seventh, and/or eighth grade from across the state of Missouri. A total of 50 principals participated in this research, 42 via online survey and eight via face to face interviews. To maintain confidentiality of the research participants, each participant has been assigned a code. Online Survey



respondents were coded with an OS followed by a number, while interview participants were coded with I followed by a number and letter.

#### *Demographics of Online Survey Participant*

The survey was completed by 42 middle level principals out of 120 sampled, giving the study a return rate of 35%. Of the participants, 21 (50%) were males and 21 (50%) of the respondents were female. Based on the respondents reported years of principal experience, the mean average was 8.2 years with the mode of 6 years.

In an attempt to represent all types of school district settings, the researcher sought urban, suburban, and rural school district principal participation for this study from across the state of Missouri. More than half of the respondents ( $N=22$ ; 52%) classified their school setting as rural although both suburban ( $N=16$ ; 38%) and urban ( $N=4$ ; 10%) schools were represented.

The researcher sought principals who work exclusively with grade levels of 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and/or 8<sup>th</sup>. The largest survey participant group ( $N=18$ ; 43%) reported working in a 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade building setting. Table 1 provides details regarding the building grade level configuration of the survey participants.

Table 1

*Online Survey Participant's Building Types Identified by Grade.*

Grades	Frequency	Percent
5th - 8th	8	19%
5th - 6th	6	14%
6th - 8th	18	43%
7th - 8th	8	19%
Other:	2	5%

*Note. N=42.*

To better understand the respondent's perspective, the survey inquired as to the typical building enrollment. The majority of middle level principals ( $N=28$ ; 66%) work with student enrollment of 251 – 750 students. Table 2 details the student enrollment of survey participants.

Table 2

*Online Survey Building Size Identified by Typical Student Enrollment.*

Enrollment	Frequency	Percent
1 - 250 students	5	12%
251 - 500 students	14	33%
501 - 750 students	14	33%
751 - 1000 students	7	17%
1001 + students	2	5%

*Note. N=42.*

*Demographics of Interview Participants*

Interviews were conducted to triangulate and add depth and understanding to the online survey. Principals in southwest Missouri were selected for maximum variation of participants. Gender, years of experience, building grade configuration, school setting, and student enrollment were variable considered when selecting interview candidates. Table 3 outlines eight interview participants in regards to each of the demographic variables.

Table 3

*Interview Participant Demographic Variables*

Interviewee	Gender	Years	Grade Configuration	School Setting	Student Enrollment
I1A	Male	3	7 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup>	Rural	1 - 250
I2B	Female	5	5 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup>	Rural	1 - 250
I3C	Female	11	5 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup>	Rural	1 - 250
I4D	Female	16	5 <sup>th</sup> – 6 <sup>th</sup>	Rural	251 - 500
I5E	Male	7	6 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup>	Suburban	501 - 750
I6F	Male	6	5 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup>	Rural	251 - 500
I7G	Female	12	6 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup>	Suburban	501 - 750
I8H	Male	7	5 <sup>th</sup> – 6 <sup>th</sup>	Suburban	501 - 750

*Data Results*

Qualitative research produces a large quantity of data which Kruger and Casey (2000) warned can be overwhelming for the novice qualitative researcher. Kruger and Casey suggested “throughout the analysis process, the researcher should remember the purpose of the study” (p. 127). The purpose of this research was to determine the perceptions of middle level principals during a proclaimed adolescent literacy crisis as well as to determine what middle level principals were doing to address adolescent literacy needs of students in their school. Data analysis for this research consisted of

“analyzing the data for significant phrases, developing meanings and clustering them into themes, and presenting an exhaustive description of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 160). The data were axial coded for emergent themes (Merriam, 1998). Once the researcher identified emergent themes, the coded data were divided into subgroups within the themes for further examination and reflection (Merriam).

### *Is There a Literacy Crisis?*

The first research question asked, “What are middle level principals’ perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis?” To discern principals’ perceptions, qualitative data were gathered from open-ended questions of an online survey and interviews. Specifically, principals were asked, “According to multiple studies, adolescent literacy is in a state of ‘crisis’. Do you agree? Why or why not?” Of the 50 individual responses, the 42 surveys and eight interviews, reaction to the question regarding crisis resulted in 22 respondents who indicated adolescent literacy is not in a state of crisis, 19 respondents indicated they perceived literacy is indeed in a state of crisis, and 9 responses were mixed neither a yes or no. Figure 1 summarizes these data results.

*No literacy crisis.* Respondents indicating adolescent literacy is not in a state of crisis called attention to the era of accountability and “schools are doing as good of job as ever in all educational programs. Students are achieving at the highest levels in standard tests and continue to progress” (OS11). Another respondent, OS29 wrote, “I feel middle school students have the same loathing to read today as we did 30 years ago” which was echoed by several principals during interviews (I7G, I5E) discussing

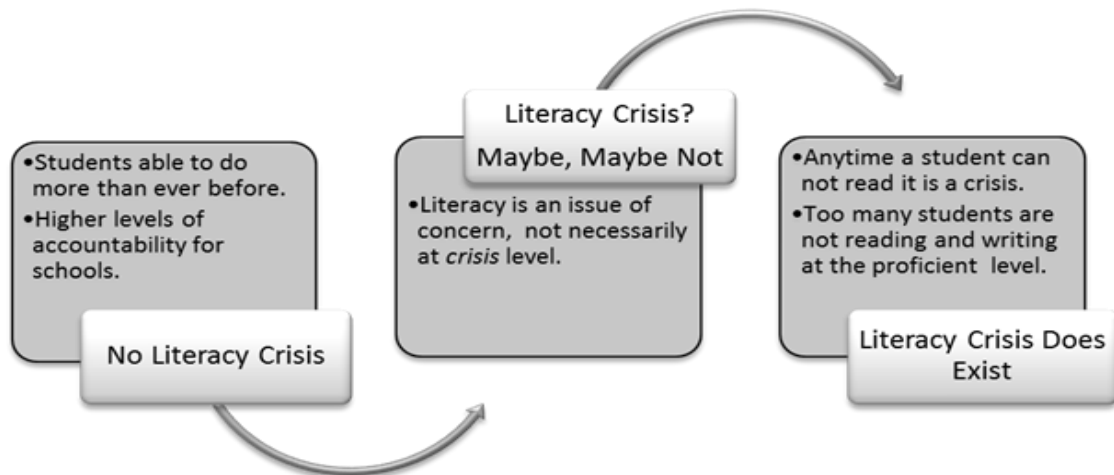


Figure 1. Principals' perception of the literacy crisis.

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the challenges of motivating the early adolescent to read independently, although they did not believe crisis was appropriate to describe this on-going challenge. “With technology, many students read more than ever before; it’s just not what we in schools have traditionally accepted as reading,” explained I7G. Some administrators expressed concern the statement of crisis associated with public education was more about politics than reality. OS30 answered,

I sense students are exceeding at levels that have not been reached before. They can do things we never would have dreamed possible just 25 years ago.

Unfortunately, success is not good copy for journals, newspapers, etc.

OS16 indicates a crisis exists but not with adolescent literacy rather, “many homes/family are in a state of ‘crisis’ - not literacy!”.

*Literacy crisis does exist.* Of the respondents, 19 endorsed adolescent literacy as in a state crisis. OS34 stated, “Any time a student cannot read, it is a crisis.” Other

answers that affirmed a crisis exists cited students not reading or writing at grade level and students graduating from high school without the literacy skills necessary to effectively communicate via speaking, reading, or writing to obtain gainful employment. Interview 17G stated,

I would like to say no [there is not a literacy crisis] but for too long those of us in education have gone with what we think we see rather than data. The data indicates that students are not reading and writing at proficient levels. To me, this indicates a problem.

OS34 response continued, “To be effective in the world today, everyone must be able to read. Do I think that there are more students that are illiterate? No, I do not. I believe that we are more aware of the problem.” OS16 resonated, “Yes, a crisis exists because success in this 21<sup>st</sup> century demands higher levels of reading and communicating skills than ever before.”

*Literacy crisis? Maybe, maybe not.* Although the majority of respondents had a definite opinion regarding whether or not adolescent literacy is in a state of crisis, 9 respondents had mixed, non-committal responses. OS37 specifically stated, “I don't have a definite opinion about this. I believe that in my school district we are doing everything to make students more successful in the area of literacy.” OS40 wrote, “Not entirely, although too many young folks in our country (in this rapid paced 21st century) do not have sufficient command over basic literacy skills/requirements.” The respondents who did not take a stand seemed to know there may be an issue on a global scale but seemed to indicate their specific school was doing what it could to address adolescent literacy. One respondent (OS33) went as far to say, “In urban areas,

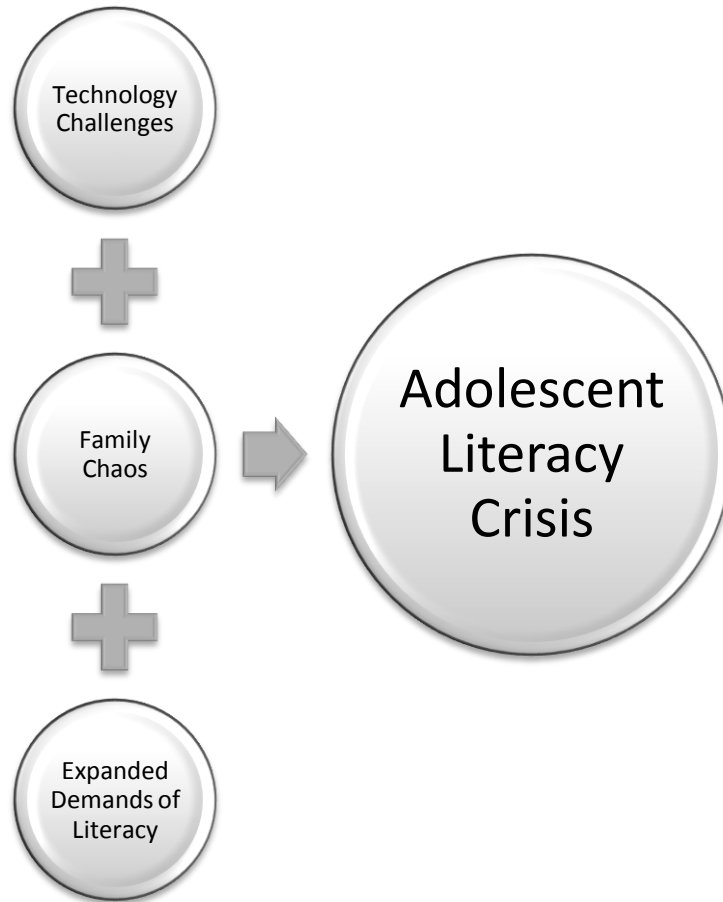
I do believe that it is close to a crisis because the rates are very low, but in my school we do not have a crisis.” Through the interview process, interview 4D responded, “My initial response is no because the word crisis evokes a strong emotional response for me, but at the same time I wouldn’t say that it is not in crisis indicating that everything is ok in the world of literacy.”

### *Challenges to Literacy*

Through the examination of the data in regards to research question one, beyond the answer of no, yes, maybe to the question of crisis, qualitative themes emerged from the data. As principals were explaining and justifying their perceptions, three themes continued to emerge. Specifically, the impact of family chaos, technology challenges, and expanding demands of literacy were mentioned as factors affecting adolescent literacy as depicted in Figure 2.

*Family chaos.* The change in family structures and multiple demands on time has had a negative impact on literacy. OS21 wrote, “Too many single parents, too tired to spend time with their children. A general lack of parental support [for school]. Too many other things to do.” OS17 specifically cites the fast pace world for adults as contributing to the adolescent literacy demise writing, “parents aren't reading as much in the home due to hectic work and family schedules. Kids need to see their parents reading newspapers, magazines, and books on a regular basis.” Interviewee I3C stated, “Kids from stable homes still do well in school. There just isn’t as many stable homes as there use to be.” The family theme also intensifies a lack of school readiness not only at the middle level but at the elementary level as well which results in adolescent





*Figure 2.* Factors perceived by Missouri middle level principals to contribute to an adolescent literacy crisis.

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literacy deficits. OS9 wrote, “I think our families and home lives are in crisis, and therefore, students don’t get the many pre-reading skills they need; therefore, the schools are being forced to be reactive rather than proactive.” OS20 reiterates the impact for middle level educators as, “More and more students come to school unable to read and write on grade level. Lack of family support exacerbates the issues.” Of course OS15 may have summed up the principal and parent response best stating, “Who has time to read anymore, so many of us are busy with running daily to so many activities with our children.”

*Technology challenges.* The impact of technology on adolescent literacy repeatedly emerged throughout the data. The development and function of technology have created a different world for today's learners. OS17 wrote, "The video gaming and texting have taken the place of reading for indoor recreation." Participant OS33 wrote, "I believe e-mail, texting, and early chat rooms, etc., have caused younger folks to communicate in non-traditional ways. Slang, abbreviations, and other short cuts have replaced formal communication structures in both mind and practice." The result is that traditional approach to reading, literature, and literacy is not relevant to today's students. OS40 explained, "There needs to be a blending, of structure, skill-based instruction and technology. Schools, due to tight money supplies, often lack in the technological arena and operate outside the realm and experience of young learners' lives outside of school." OS29 wrote, "We have provided them [students] with incredibly boring and dry textbooks, reading material, and safe novels so that everyone feels good, but we are not connecting them to powerful literature or their lives. If we make our reading programs relevant and interesting, students will read." OS33 explained, "Schools need to merge traditional practices with current technological tools and applications. Funding challenges have caused schools to move much more slowly and out-of-synch with the technological market." Participant OS21 summed up the merger which needs to occur between adolescent literacy and technology stating,

Most of the models of teaching literacy do not reach the needs of 21st century adolescents. Until schools realize that we must continue to evolve to truly understand how the modern mind works, it will continue to be in "crisis." Too often the measures used in these students are also antiquated. Literacy of the

mid-20th century, or even the end of the 20th century, is not appropriate today.

Books are only one of many sources of text for students.

The impact of technology on adolescent literacy was a theme that not only provided information as to the adolescent student but also to the expectations of what it is to be literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Expanded demands of literacy.* Although every participant included the ability to read in the definition of literacy, most defined and described literacy as encompassing many additional skills and abilities. “Literacy is not only being able to read and gain knowledge but also use that information for some purpose,” explained interviewee I2B. OS14 defined literacy as “ability to read, comprehend, interpret, analyze, and apply written language.” OS19 added to the definition of literacy to include “locate, evaluate, use, and communicate using a wide range of resources including text, visual, audio, and video sources.” OS33 wrote, “In the current era, I would define literacy in terms of a more broad view, relative to communication; one beyond reading, writing, and speaking to communicating effectively and comfortably within the realm of technology.” Literacy expands beyond the school door to “enable a person to be fluent, functioning and contributing member in the community in which the person lives and work” (OS42).

Data indicated the family chaos, technology challenges, and expanded demands of literacy are issues which Missouri middle level principal report may be leading to difficulty for adolescent literacy as depicted in Figure 2.

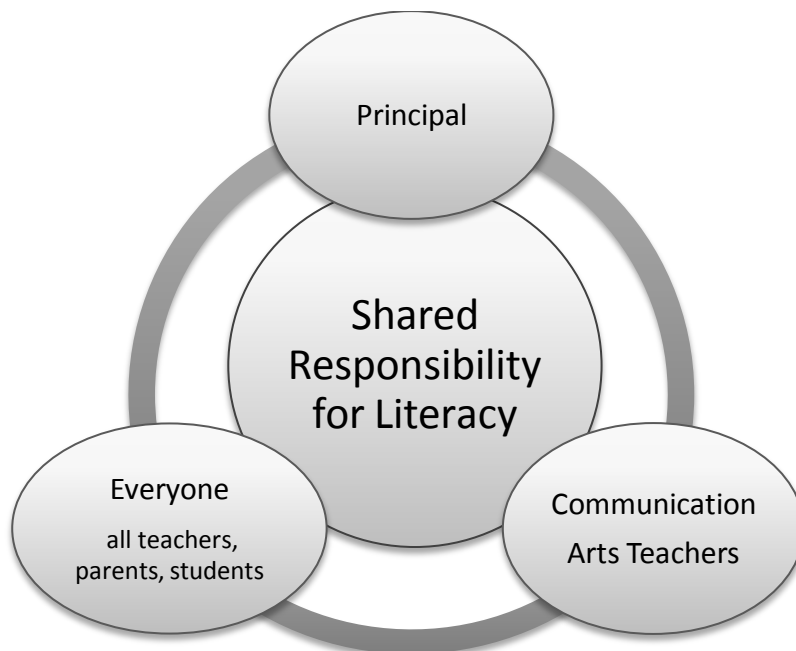
*What Is Being Done (Research Question 2)*

Research question two was more pragmatic seeking to discover “What are middle level principals doing to address the literacy needs of the early adolescent students in their school?” Survey and interview data were coded and themes and sub themes did emerge. Overarching themes of Shared Responsibility, Delivery Methods, and Instructional Leadership became apparent throughout the survey responses and during the interviews.

*Shared Responsibility*

A theme of shared responsibility repeatedly became apparent through the data analysis process. Principals and communication arts teachers are primarily responsible; however, everyone (all teachers, parents, and students) play a role in literacy progress.

Figure 3 portrays visually the theme of responsibility for literacy.



*Figure 3.* Shared responsibility for literacy.

*Everyone.* The data indicated principals perceive literacy being the responsibility of everyone with the principal themselves having the ultimate responsibility. Many responses regarding who is responsible for literacy were simple and generic and included “every teacher” (OS5) or “everyone” (OS41, OS38, OS34, OS27, OS11, OS6, OS1). Some respondents provided more detail writing, “All teachers-all content areas, librarians, administrators, instructional coaches, everyone” (OS2), and I7G stated, “it would be easier to say who isn’t responsible for literacy. Literacy is the core to everything.” A few principals added that literacy is not only the responsibility of school personnel but literacy is also the responsibility of students and parents.

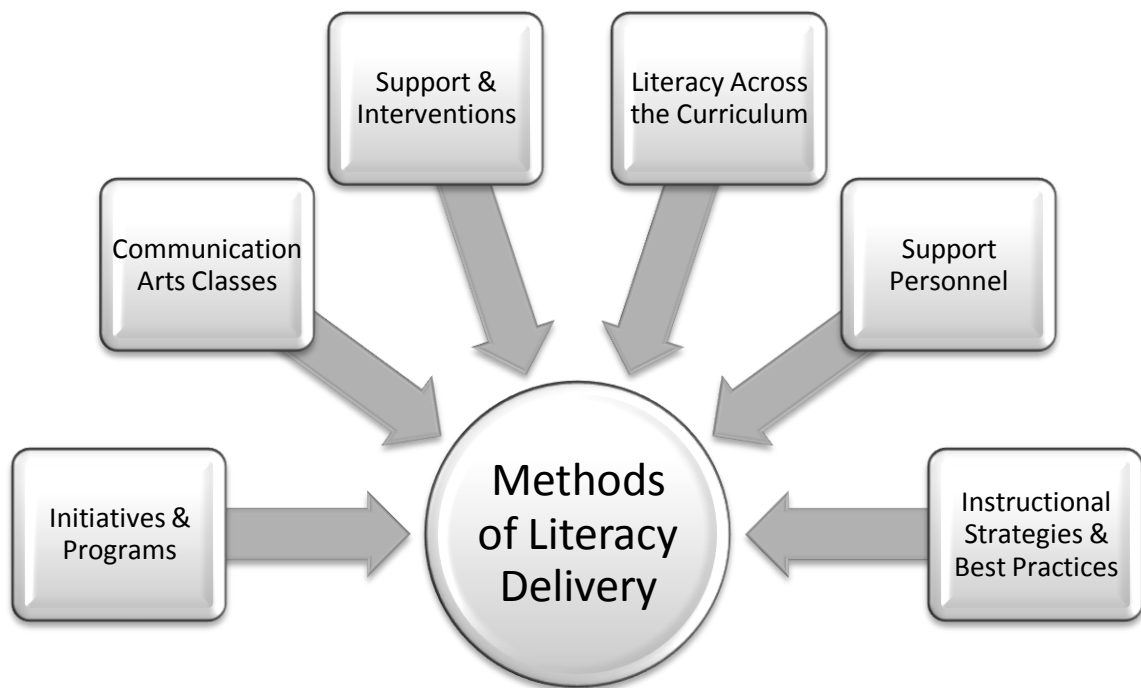
*Communication arts teachers.* Although “everyone” may be the correct or expected answer, several principals provide realistic insight stating “The communication arts teachers play the biggest role, but all teachers are considered responsible for literacy,” (OS13) and “Hopefully all, but the majority of the burden falls on our communication arts teachers” (OS18). OS19 clarified, “Our entire interdisciplinary team works to integrate literacy skills into their lesson planning; however, our communication arts instructors and literacy lab instructors are directly responsible.”

*Principal.* Throughout the survey responses and the interview data, principals repeatedly used the phrase, “I am responsible.” OS8 explained, “The principal should be the learning leader and champion the importance of literacy instruction.” OS28 described the responsibility as, “The principal must demonstrate a commitment to literacy development. He/she is responsible for facilitating a plan which incorporates a proactive approach.” Or more simply stated by OS19, “As principal, it is ultimately my responsibility to insure that we focus on literacy.” A strong sense of the

conscientiousness of the principals was evident. Principals seemed to understand the significance of their position in the school. OS36 shared the loftiness of the principals role by stating, “I am the instructional leader... it is my responsibility to spear head *all* our efforts.”

### *Methods of Literacy Delivery*

A second theme that evolved from the data in regards to research question two is the methods that schools are utilizing to deliver literacy instruction for the early adolescent student. Figure 4 represents different modes and methods that emerged from the collected data. The most frequently discussed methods were initiatives and programs as well as communication arts course offerings.



*Figure 4.* Methods of literacy delivery in Missouri middle level schools.

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*Initiatives and programs.* Principals were asked, “How are the literacy needs of the early adolescent students in your school being addressed?” Responses varied from initiatives and programs to courses and classes. Specific initiatives mentioned included: The Missouri Reading Initiative, Arkansas Literacy Model, 4-Square Writing Model, Balanced Literacy Model, Readers/Writers Workshop Model, and Professional Learning Communities. Specific programs of Read 180, Systems 44, Wilsons Reading, and Accelerated Reader were reportedly being used.

*Communication arts classes.* Many of the answers did specify the role of the communication arts department. Specifically, to address the literacy needs, additional communication arts classes, such as separate reading and language arts classes are being provided to students. OS6 responded, “We double dose students by treating both reading and writing as core subjects.” OS8 wrote, “In addition to language arts class, reading classes for all 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> are taught by a reading teacher. We offer reading classes for at-risk 8th graders.”

*Struggling reader supports and interventions.* Some schools are offering separate or additional supports for struggling readers. Several principals mentioned specifically monitoring student progress and providing interventions. OS12 wrote, “Students are identified early if they are struggling readers. Interventions are put in place within the communication arts classroom to help these readers.” OS17 wrote, “We have an intervention period built into the school day to address students’ specific needs. We have several teachers who are well trained in literacy to assist many of these students.” OS22 explained the intervention process her school utilizes:

Tag those students not performing well on state and district assessments in reading and communication arts, then work with the team and other staff to develop a plan of intervention. I meet with teams once a week and will review student progress with them at the end of an assessment date.

OS27 reported in addition to a required reading class for students who are reading below grade level, “We use several data pieces and have created intervention programs during the school day to help increase reading levels and comprehension.”

*Literacy across the curriculum.* Beyond the communication arts classes and intervention approaches, principals also report that literacy is supported across the curriculum in all areas. OS4 stated, “We are embracing reading in the content area and written response heavily in social studies, science, and modern language classrooms.” OS33 described, “Reading and writing practices have spread to content areas beyond CA [Communication Arts] and Reading classes. Additional time/energy has been directed toward literacy in courses that would have formally been described as 'exploratory' offerings.” I2B stated, “The demands on the communication arts teachers are too great. I expect all teachers to be reinforcing reading and writing in their classes.”

*Support personnel.* Some principals report additional support personnel whose responsibilities are to assist with literacy. OS3 reported, “We have an instructional coach in communication arts who provides PD, modeling, and observation to our teachers.” While OS6 reported, “The use of a literacy coach in the implementation of the Arkansas Literacy model is currently being used. She assists the teachers on using these strategies. The literacy coach also works with other departments to ensure that the same approach is



being used throughout the building.” Some principals specifically mention the important role of the librarian in helping to establish “a culture of literacy at our school” (OS8).

*Instructional strategies and practices.* Finally, in regards to delivery systems, a few principals report the literacy needs of the adolescent is being addressed through the instructional strategies and practices teachers implement in their classes. OS9 stated a plethora of instructional strategies she expects to be utilized in all classes in the building which “creates an environment of high expectations and literacy.” Several principals specifically mention expecting or requiring independent reading. Principal OS8 shared, “We do a school wide read-aloud as well as require each team to choose two literacy strategies per month that they will use with their students.” In regards to instructional strategies, I6F stated, “I believe that if every teacher used best instructional practices and strategies all the time, our students would be performing better on everything, including reading.” I8F stated, “The best thing for my struggling students is to put them with exceptional teachers, those teachers who are masters of the art and science of teaching.”

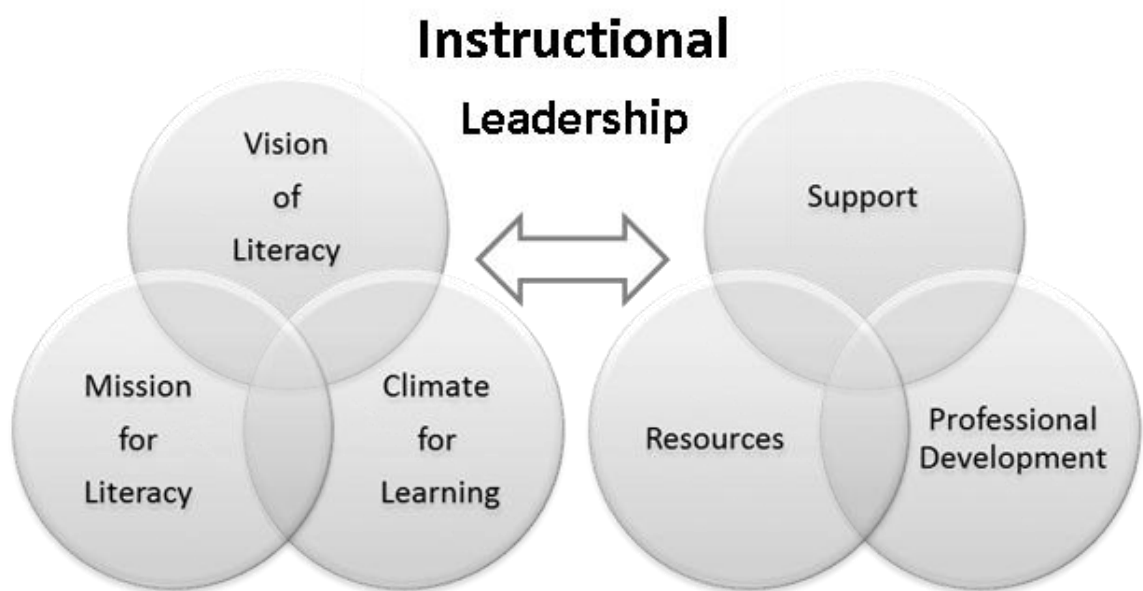
#### *Instructional Leadership*

A final emergent theme was instructional leadership. When principals were asked what their role is, if any, in regards to literacy at their school, an overarching theme of instructional leadership emerged. A few principals specifically summed up their role as instructional leader. Interviewee I4D expounded stating, “I’m the instructional leader with more influence than I often like to admit.” When questioned what she meant, I4D stated,

In my first job as principal, I thought the course was set by...I don’t know by someone someplace else, like DESE. But now that I’ve been here in this district

and job for 13 years, hindsight is really 20/20. I see the results of what has happened when I've dreamed and brought in different initiatives and focuses. When I think something is important and provide my teachers the focus, support, and training things happen. When I expect it to be important, it is.

Figure 5 demonstrates the subthemes that emerged from the data regarding instructional leadership. As pictured, two subthemes emerged. Interlocking themes of vision, mission, and climate as well as the intertwining theme of support, resources, and professional development are the major components of instructional leadership described by research participants.



*Figure 5.* Components of instructional leadership role for literacy.

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*Vision, mission, climate.* As principals discussed their role in regards to literacy at their school, principals explained their job as establishing and maintaining a vision and mission that is focused on literacy as well as creating and preserving a climate for learning. OS29 stated, “My job is to ensure it [literacy] is part of our vision that students

will leave our building proficient readers.” OS14 wrote, “I communicate to students, staff and parents that we value literacy.” OS15 simply put it as “If I do not see it as important, neither will my staff.” In addition to communicating a vision, mission, or focus of literacy being a priority, OS9 described the principals’ role is to also “set a safe and secure climate for learning to occur.” OS30 expounded the principals’ role as “to establish a climate of learning within the school so that all students leave with the skills necessary to be successful.” OS19 added, “My role as principal is to communicate our mission and to allocate our resources in such a way that time and support are provided to staff as they work to meet our building literacy goals.” OS27 summed up the importance literacy in her school by stating, “Literacy is our first priority because if students cannot read how can they succeed in any subject.”

*Support, resources, professional development.* Principals perceive their role as being one to provide support and resources for teachers. Throughout the data, the word “support” appeared repeatedly. Some principals described the principal’s role succinctly stating, “Support the classroom teachers” (OS17) and “I believe that it is my job to provide the support for literacy” (OS26). OS38 described the role of the principal as, “An instructional leader for teachers and staff so that they have the resources, professional development, and support (which includes many factors/aspects) necessary to positively impact reading comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, etc. To assist and support any way possible.” I1A stated his role is to “ensure adequate resources and personnel.” OS23’s response provided the importance of the job stating, “As principal, I support the teaching and learning of all students in literacy skills not only for academic success but for life skills and success as well.” OS8 expounded upon the principal’s job as, “The learning

leader in the area of literacy. The principal should highlight literacy instruction best practices and the use of data to meet individual student's needs and support teachers in their quest to provide high-quality literacy instruction in all classrooms.”

A key point to support and resources is to provide and participate in professional development. OS 24 stated, “My job is to ensure that there is adequate pd [professional development] and resources.” OS2 defined his responsibility as principal as, “To provide support, professional development, and to learn along with the teachers is the best way to teach literacy for our students.” OS40 wrote, “My role is to align instructional processes and provide support through professional development, including soliciting the support and help of curricular experts in and outside of the district.” I7G stated, “Providing professional development for staff to be able to utilize best-practices has probably been one of the most effective things I’ve done to improve my school.”

### *Summary*

Chapter Four provided a brief review of the study in terms of the purpose and research questions, followed by a description of the data sources which included the data collection tools as well as demographics of the research participants. The data results were shared for each research question by means of the emergent themes and subthemes.

Although there is not agreement regarding literacy being in a state of crisis, the study found consensus that literacy is a priority for middle level principals. Additionally, principals report factors of family chaos, technology challenges, and expanded demands of literacy are creating additional challenges for adolescent literacy. Principals are addressing literacy needs through shared responsibility, varied delivery methods, and instructional leadership.

Chapter Five provides a summary of findings and a discussion links the findings to portions of the literature review. Additionally, chapter Five includes discussions of possible limitation as well as implications for practice. The final section of the chapter discusses implications for future study.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

#### *Introduction*

The text-rich world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires adolescents to be able to read and apply what they read to be a successful part of the world (Alvermann, 2001; Phillips, 2005). Principals must be instructional leaders and play a vital role in the realization of school wide literacy (Phillips, 2005). The principal can make a major difference in the literacy achievement of students by leading and supporting teachers' efforts in trying to improve the literacy achievement of their students (Shanahan, 2004). Moore et al. (1999) cautioned, "Despite the prevalence of literacy in adolescents' lives, educational policies, school curricula, and the public currently are neglecting it" (p. 3).

The purpose of this research was to determine the perceptions of Missouri middle level principals' perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis. Additionally, this research sought to determine what middle level principals are doing to address the literacy needs of the adolescent student in their schools. If literacy is to improve at the middle level, it is important to examine the perceptions and activities of the instructional leaders at the building level.

Data collected from the online survey, Early Adolescent Principals' Perception Survey, and personal interviews were analyzed to identify themes that would reveal middle level principals' perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis and to gain knowledge and understanding as to what principals are doing to address the literacy needs of the early adolescent students in their schools. The phenomenological qualitative methodology was utilized by the researcher because the purpose of this research was to

better understand the reality or phenomenon of building level administrative practitioners during a reported national adolescent literacy crisis.

An online open-ended question survey and personal interviews were selected as appropriate means of “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Data analysis was conducted by “extracting the significant statements, formulating meanings, and clustering themes of the original data” (Heppner & Heppner, 2004, p. 176) in order to identify emergent themes and subthemes. Furthermore, applying qualitative methods produced “a rich and holistic account” (Merriam, 1998, p. 41) of the principals’ perspectives.

Chapter five is divided into five sections. The first section, summary of findings, presents a review of the study’s qualitative approach including emergent themes and subthemes from the data. The second section, discussion, links the findings to portions of the literature review. The next sections include discussions of possible limitation as well as implications for practice. The final section of this chapter discusses implications for future study.

#### *Summary of Findings*

Question one was, “what are middle level principals’ perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis?” The data indicated a mixed perspective. Although a slight majority of principals had no opinion or agreed there is an adolescent literacy crisis, several principals argued adolescent literacy is not in a state of crisis. From the data regarding research question one, emergent themes rose from all perspectives about factors affecting literacy. Factors of family chaos, technology challenges, and

expanded demands of literacy were used to explain the principals' perspectives of literacy.

Data regarding research question two, "what are middle level principals doing to address the literacy needs of the early adolescent students in their school?" provide a great deal of variety. Overarching themes of shared responsibility, varied delivery methods, and instructional leadership emerged. Middle level principals perceive that literacy is the responsibility of everyone with communication arts teachers carrying the majority of the daily burden and principals having the ultimate responsibility to ensure students are becoming literate in their school. Seeking specifics to what is being done at middle level school for literacy, principals shared varied delivery methods being utilized in their school as well as describing their instructional leadership roles and responsibilities. Delivery methods of initiatives and programs, communication arts classes, supports and interventions, literacy across the curriculum, support personnel, as well as instructional methods and best practices, as seen in Figure 4, were all sub themes unwrapped in the data analysis process. The instructional leadership role encompassed a variety of tasks, see Figure 5. Principals in multiple places and ways shared the tasks and responsibilities of being an instructional leader. Two main subthemes emerged from instructional leadership. The role of the principal to establish a vision of literacy, a mission for literacy, and a climate for learning was a subtheme that intertwined upon itself repeatedly. Secondly, the role of the principal to provide support, resources, and professional development as a responsibility repeatedly emerged. Figure 6 below visually summarizes the findings of the research questions.



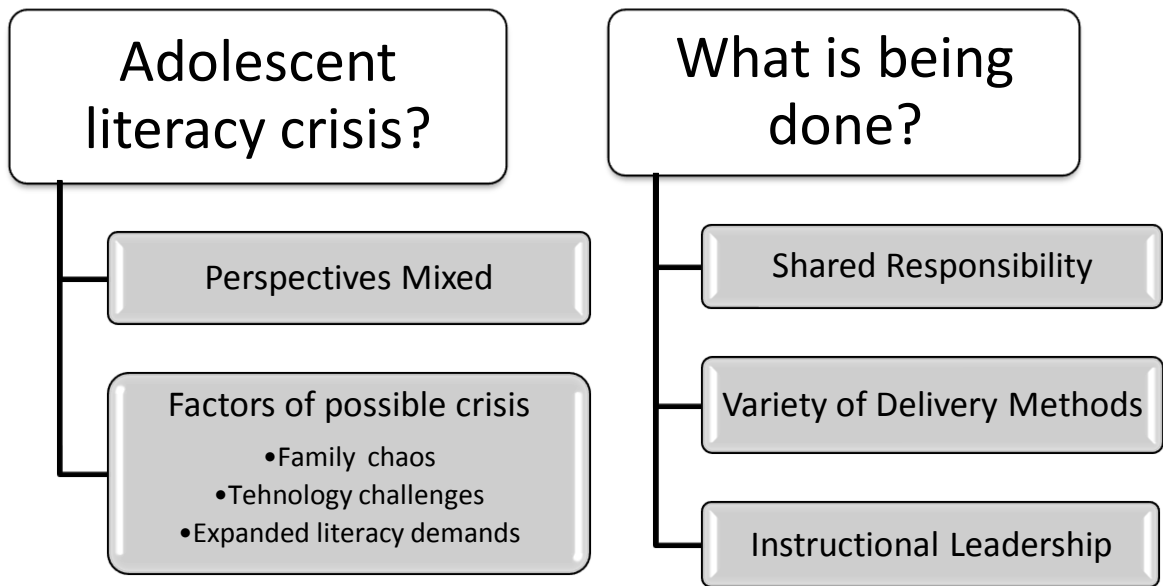


Figure 6. Findings for research questions.

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### *Limitations*

This study had several limitations that narrowed the scope of the research. Although online survey data were collected from participants across the state, collection of interview data was limited to the southwest geographical location of Missouri due to time and financial constraints of the researcher. The total number of principal participants was an additional limitation. Of the approximately 360 current middle level principals, this research collected data from 50 participants or 14% of Missouri’s middle level principals. Data were further limited because the researcher chose to limit the length of the online survey (six open-ended question and six demographic questions), so the amount of time required to complete survey would be minimized and hopefully encourage principal participation. As a result of these limitations, the amount of qualitative data was narrow.

In addition to the limitation of time, the study was conducted by one novice researcher. The researcher collected all data and performed all the analyses. An unexpected limitation was one of the predetermined data sources, school improvement plans, was found to not be an accessible or pertinent data source. Thus, this research was limited to the online survey and interview data sources. Merriam (1998) wrote qualitative research is not intended to generalize findings but to interpret the events.

### *Discussion*

This research project focused on principals who work exclusively with early adolescent students, grade levels of the fifth, sixth, seventh, and/or eighth grades, because, as stated in the review of literature, early adolescents are unique learners (Carr et al., 2002). Multiple sources explained early adolescents are different from elementary school children and high school students, and thus, educational needs are also different due to their unique developmental characteristics (Brown & Knowles, 2007; Dickinson, 2001; Manning & Bucher, 2001; National Middle School Association, 2003). The findings from this research do not indicate any distinctive concepts or approaches for the middle level student due to unique developmental characteristics. Only one participant, OS6, indicated any recognition of the uniqueness of the specified population stating, “There is far too much competition for the cognitive energy of early adolescents.” No other participant indicated any type of special understanding of the developmental aspects of the early adolescent students.

Jackson (2009) discussed even with years of middle level reform movements, the day-to-day operation of middle grades education has not drastically changed in the past decades. One aspect of middle level reform movement is the concept of an

interdisciplinary teaming in which content area teachers work together to help make curriculum connections for students. Only one respondent, OS18, mentioned the use of interdisciplinary team in addressing the literacy needs of her students. In fact, no other principal responded with any specific components of middle school concepts. The literacy delivery method of writing across the curriculum may be connected to the middle level concept of interdisciplinary teams; however, the concept of writing across the curriculum is also a concept associated with the secondary or high school level.

During the interviews, each principal stated they choose to work at the middle level because they like the age level and kids. “Middle school kids are different from high school kids, a good different. They are more open and goofy, not as set in their ways. Teachers and administrators still can easily make a big difference at this level,” stated I5E. Despite this reported opportunity, the data do not indicate anything unique or different is occurring for the middle level student in regards to literacy.

Taylor and Collins (2003) challenged educators that the goal should be to “maximize students’ literacy achievement and help them to become not just better readers and writers, but also better listeners, speakers, and thinkers” (p. 2). The findings of this research indicate the expanded demands of literacy, which include more than just reading and writing, have made being literate more difficult. Fortunately, throughout the data, principals perceive literacy is of primary importance. OS21 stated, “Literacy achievement is the key to everything. It is our #1 goal.” This discovery aligns with the literature as Biancarosa and Snow (2004) pointed out that literacy is a requirement for academic achievement in middle school, high school, and beyond.

A basis for this research project was the plethora of studies, reports, and articles which indicated an adolescent literacy crisis in the United States. Specifically Senator Patty Murray (DWA), the author of the U.S. Senate Bill *Pathways for Success*, stated, “America cannot maintain its position as the world’s strong economy if we continue to ignore the literacy needs of adolescents in middle school and secondary [high] school” (Moje, 2002, p. 3). Interestingly, Missouri middle level principals do not cohesively share the perception of a crisis in regards to the literacy levels of adolescent students. Some participants seemed to indicate the literacy crisis exists only in urban schools where it is “well known students struggle” (I8H). However, when looking at the survey respondents of the urban schools, one indicated a state of crisis, one indicated a non-committal answer, and two indicated they did not believe there was an adolescent literacy crisis. The results by urban, suburban, and rural settings were as mixed as the complete participant population. There is not a consensus regarding the state of adolescent literacy.

According to Phillips (2007), the current climate of school reform holds principals accountable for student achievement and success. Responsibility was a theme that repeatedly emerged. It was evident in the data, both survey and interview, principals feel responsible. Although the findings indicate shared responsibility for literacy, ultimately principals recognize they are accountable for the literacy of the students in their school.

The important role of the principal in establishing a culture of literacy and a climate conducive to learning were referenced by multiple researchers (Fisher et al., 2004; Jetton & Dole, 2004; Phillips, 2005). This research study also found principals perceived their role is to lead teachers, students, and parents to value literacy while providing the support, resources, and professional development to staff to make it

happen. The principal not only is a leader who establishes a vision and sets priorities, the principal is a learner and colleague working with teachers to meet the needs of the students.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) published the *Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals* (Phillips, 2005) in which specific steps were suggested to assist principals in improving adolescent literacy. This research data showed evidence of principals utilizing the step of analyzing assessment data to determine specific learning needs of students. Principals discussed the role and use of data frequently. Another one of the recommendations is to develop a literacy team. Of the 50 participant in this research, only eight reported having a literacy leadership team. It is unclear though if these teams serve the functions recommended with focus on literacy or other leadership team activities that are associated with other initiatives such as professional learning communities (PLC) or positive behavior intervention supports (PBIS).

Several principals reported the use of supports for struggling readers with intervention time built into the school day which is another recommended best practice. Built in supports and remediation is becoming an expected way for schools to operate in order to ensure students are not falling through the cracks. However, this research study really did not collect specifics about what this looks like at the middle level.

### *Implications*

As a phenomenological qualitative study seeking to make meaning of middle level principals' experiences, the findings discovered through this research have generated some implications for middle level principals in regards to adolescent literacy.

The literacy of adolescents, whether in a state of crisis or not, is of vital importance to the success of students. The expanded demands of literacy add to the importance of the middle level school in providing effective literacy programs and instruction. Although multiple delivery methods exist and are being utilized, the role of the principal to provide instructional leadership is critical to literacy development and student success.

As middle level administrators strive to meet the multiple demands of their jobs, the literature and the findings of this research support the critical role of instructional leadership. In order to provide for the literacy needs of the adolescent students, principals are establishing a vision of literacy, mission for literacy, and a climate for learning. Additionally, as an instructional leader, the principal supports teachers and students by providing the needed resources and professional development for literacy.

#### *Future Research*

There are several recommendations for future research in the area of adolescent literacy at the middle level. Due to the design of this research study, it is unclear if the results are unique to the middle level. The online survey administered to both middle and high school principals would allow research to see if there is a difference between what is being done at the middle level from the high school level and if so what those differences are.

In this research study, middle level principals did share different delivery methods their schools are utilizing to address literacy; however, these findings are a mere façade of what is happening. Future research should be conducted to determine which programs and initiatives are yielding the best student achievement results. Additionally, a quantitative examination of types and number of classes, minutes per content area, and

student achievement data would help quantify what middle level schools are doing to address literacy instruction through the communication arts and other content area classes. Another area to examine is what if any types of additional literacy support personnel middle level schools utilize and if these schools with additional support personnel are yielding better student achievement results.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) published the *Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals* (Phillips, 2005) with nine recommendations. A study which examines if Missouri middle and high schools are utilizing all nine of these recommended best practices would be informative.

#### *Summary*

Chapter Five provided a summary of findings and a discussion linked the findings to portions of the literature review. Additionally, Chapter Five included discussions of possible limitations as well as implications for practice and for future research.

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research was to determine the perceptions of Missouri middle level principals' perceptions of the adolescent literacy crisis. Additionally, this research sought to determine what middle level principals are doing to address the literacy needs of the adolescent student in their schools. Although there is not a consensus regarding literacy being in a state of crisis, the study found consensus that literacy is a priority for middle level principals. Principals are addressing literacy through shared responsibility, varied delivery methods, and instructional leadership.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Informed Consent – Online Survey

Dear Research Participant:

Thank you for considering participation in the research study "Middle Level Principals' Perceptions of the Adolescent Literacy Crisis." This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

The purpose of this study is to add to the available knowledge regarding the perceptions of middle level principals' during a time of a purported adolescent literacy crisis. This information will be useful to understand the experience of being a middle level principal. There is no known direct benefit or risk for the participant, however, the knowledge and understanding gained will be beneficial to the educational leadership profession regarding middle level literacy.

Before you make a final decision about participation, please read the following about how your input will be used and how your rights as a participant will be protected:

- Participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any point without penalty.
- You need not answer all of the questions.
- Your answers will be kept confidential. Results will be presented to others in summary form only, without names or other identifying information.
- Your participation will take approximately ten minutes. During this time you will answer open ended questions from the online survey, Early Adolescent Literacy Principal Perception Survey.
- The data collected via google docs and be stored via password protection and disposed of 7 years after the conclusion of the study.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Missouri-Columbia Campus Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights, and may be contacted at 573.882.9585. The project is being supervised by Dr. Cynthia MacGregor, Professor, CLSE, Missouri State University (417.836.6046).

Keep this letter for future reference. You can contact me at my work number, 417.451.8650, or personal number, 417.850.0452, if you have questions or concerns about your participation. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Doretta Fox

Neosho Middle School Principal

Doctoral Candidate, University of Missouri-Columbia



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If you are willing to participate and assist with this important research project, please complete the survey by selecting the statement below:

I agree to participate in this research study.

If you do not wish to participate please click the statement below:

I do not agree to participate in this research study.

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## Appendix B: Letter of Informed Consent - Interview

Dear Research Participant:

Thank you for considering participation in the research study "Middle Level Principals' Perceptions of the Adolescent Literacy Crisis." This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

The purpose of this study is to add to the available knowledge regarding the perceptions of middle level principals' during a time of a purported adolescent literacy crisis. This information will be useful to understand the experience of being a middle level principal. The risks for the participant are no greater than what can be expected in everyday life and there will be no direct benefit for the participant. However, the knowledge and understanding gained will be beneficial to the educational leadership profession regarding middle level literacy.

Before you make a final decision about participation, please read the following about how your input will be used and how your rights as a participant will be protected:

- Participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any point without penalty.
- You need not answer all of the questions.
- Your answers will be kept confidential. Results will be presented to others in summary form only, without names or other identifying information.
- Your participation will take approximately one hour. During this time you will be interviewed by the researcher. The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed by the researcher.
- The data collected will be held in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office and disposed of 7 years after the study has been completed.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Missouri-Columbia Campus Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights, and may be contacted at 573.882.9585. The project is being supervised by Dr. Cynthia MacGregor, Professor, CLSE, Missouri State University (417.836.6046).

If you are still willing to participate and assist with this important research project, please fill out the attached consent form. Keep this letter for future reference. You can contact me at my work number, 417.451.8650, or personal number, 417.850.0452, if you have questions or concerns about your participation. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Doretta Fox  
Neosho Middle School Principal  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of Missouri-Columbia

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## **Informed Consent Form - Interview**

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I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the study of "Middle Level Principals' Perceptions of the Adolescent Literacy Crisis," conducted by Your Name. I understand that:

- My answers will be used for educational research.
- My participation is voluntary.
- I may stop participation at any time without penalty.
- I need not answer all of the questions.
- My answers and identity will be kept confidential.

I have read the letter of informed consent, and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realizing that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*(optional)* For an executive summary of the study's results, provide e-mail address:

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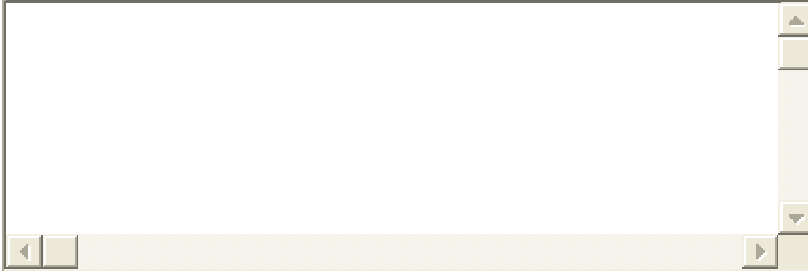
Appendix C: Survey

## Adolescent Literacy Principal Perception Survey

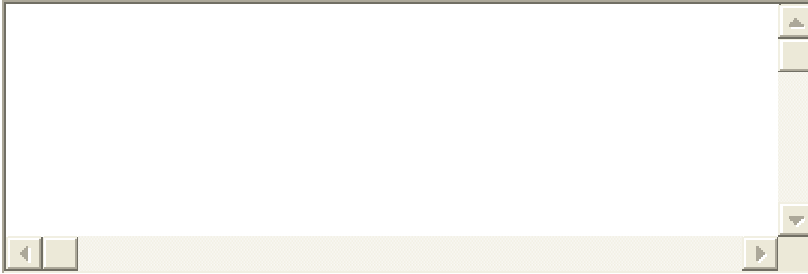
Directions: Please complete the below questions. When you have completed the questions, simply select submit. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

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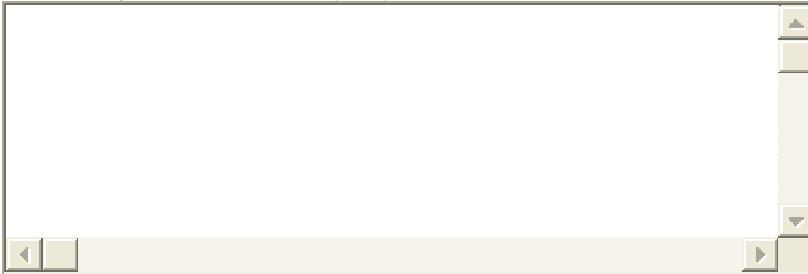
What is your personal definition of literacy? (How do you define literacy?)

A large rectangular text input box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It contains no text. On the right side, there are three small square buttons: a top one with an upward-pointing triangle, a middle one with a downward-pointing triangle, and a bottom one with a downward-pointing triangle. On the bottom left and right corners, there are small square buttons with left and right-pointing triangles respectively.

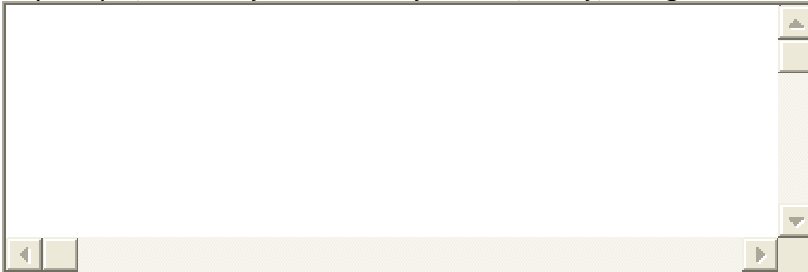
According to multiple studies, adolescent literacy is in a state of “crisis”. Do you agree? Why or why not? Please briefly give explanation for your perception/belief.

A large rectangular text input box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It contains no text. On the right side, there are three small square buttons: a top one with an upward-pointing triangle, a middle one with a downward-pointing triangle, and a bottom one with a downward-pointing triangle. On the bottom left and right corners, there are small square buttons with left and right-pointing triangles respectively.

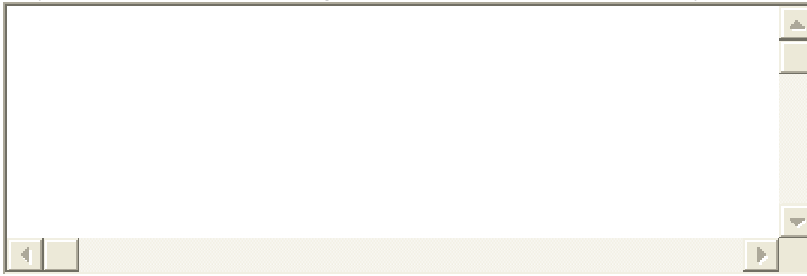
Who is responsible for literacy in your school?

A large rectangular text input box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It contains no text. On the right side, there are three small square buttons: a top one with an upward-pointing triangle, a middle one with a downward-pointing triangle, and a bottom one with a downward-pointing triangle. On the bottom left and right corners, there are small square buttons with left and right-pointing triangles respectively.

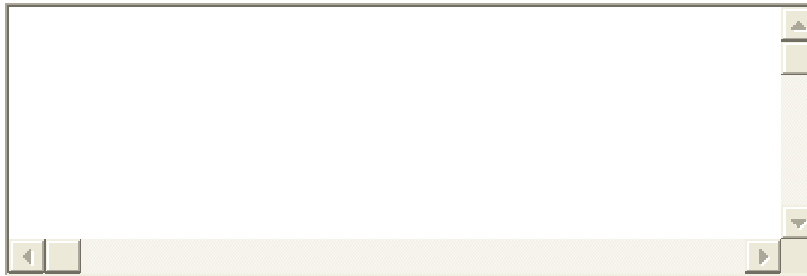
As principal, what do you believe is your role, if any, in regards to literacy at your school?

A large rectangular text input box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It contains no text. On the right side, there are three small square buttons: a top one with an upward-pointing triangle, a middle one with a downward-pointing triangle, and a bottom one with a downward-pointing triangle. On the bottom left and right corners, there are small square buttons with left and right-pointing triangles respectively.

How are the literacy needs of the early adolescent students in your school being addressed? Describe your school's approach/program for literacy instruction. Early Adolescent is defined as students 10 - 15 years old, or students in grade 5 - 8 for this research study.

A large, empty rectangular text box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It has a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom, indicating it is a scrollable text area.

Additional thoughts or perceptions regarding adolescent literacy and leadership you would like to share?

A large, empty rectangular text box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It has a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom, indicating it is a scrollable text area.

Does your school have a literacy leadership team?

- Yes
- No

What is the grade level configuration of your building?

- 5th - 8th Grades
- 5th - 6th Grades
- 6th - 8th Grades
- 7th - 8th Grades
- Other:

What is the typical student enrollment in your school building?

- 0 - 250 students
- 251 - 500 students
- 501 - 750 students
- 751 - 1000 students
- 1001 + students

Select the category that best describes your school's setting.

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural

How many years have you been a principal?

Gender?

- Female
- Male

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## Appendix D: Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your background in education.

*Probes:*

- A. How long have you been in education?
- B. Did you teach elementary, middle school, junior high, or high school?
- C. What subjects did you teach?
- D. How long have you been principal in this school? Prior administrative experience?

2. Why did you choose to work at the middle level?

*Probes:*

- A. Is this your age level preference?
- B. What do you like or dislike about this level?

3. What is your personal definition of Literacy?

*Probes:*

- A. How do you define literacy?
- B. Has your definition of literacy changed? If so, how?

4. According to multiple studies, adolescent literacy is in a state of “crisis.” Do you agree? *Probes:*

- A. Why or why not?
- B. Explain your perception/belief.

5. Who is responsible for literacy in your school?

*Probes:*

- A. Do you have a literacy coach, reading coordinator, teacher leader?

6. As principal, what do you believe is your role, if any, in regards to literacy at your school?

*Probes:*

- A. What do you see as your role in the literacy development?
- B. What kind(s) of financial resources do you allocate for literacy?
- C. How do you communicate your vision for literacy to the school and community?

7. How are the literacy needs of the early adolescent students in your school being addressed?

*Probes:*

- A. Describe your school’s approach/program for literacy instruction.
- B. How do you identify struggling readers? What screening tool do you use?
- C. What, if any, interventions do you employ for struggling students?

8. Describe your adolescent literacy program.

*Probes:*

- A. How long have you been doing this?
- B. What types of instruction do your teachers employ in their classrooms (lecture, direct instruction, small/large group discussions, etc.)?
- C. What type of classroom activities do your teachers use that might engage their students relative to their students' outside-of-school interests (e.g., student-selected books, discussions of lesson application to students' lives, etc.)?
- D. Is it a total school program or are you concerned about a particular population (e.g., ELL, special education, struggling readers, etc.)?
- E. How many pages/how much time a day would you say your students are reading for both school and homework?
- F. How do you evaluate your literacy program? When?
- G. What instructional resource(s) are most beneficial for teachers? For students?
- H. Do you incorporate literacy instruction into your staff development training?

9. Do you have a Literacy Leadership Team?

*Probes:*

- A. How long have you had the team?
- B. Who is on the team?
- C. What is the role & responsibilities of the team?
- D. If you do not have a literacy leadership team, do you have any type of leadership team? If so for what?

10. Are there any additional thoughts or perceptions regarding adolescent literacy and leadership you would like to share?

Note to researcher: Collect copy of Building Improvement Plan?



Appendix E: Document Analysis

School Improvement Plan: (school) \_\_\_\_\_

Specific Evidence of Goals for or Mention of:

**Literacy      Reading      Writing      Communication      Critical Thinking**

Evidence:

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School Improvement Plan: (school) \_\_\_\_\_

Specific Evidence of Goals for or Mention of:

**Literacy      Reading      Writing      Communication      Critical Thinking**

Evidence:

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## VITA

Doretta K. (Lovland) Fox was born May 12, 1970, in Kansas City, Missouri. The oldest child of educators, Donald and Carol Lovland, she grew up in Garden City, Missouri. After graduating high school from Sherwood Cass R8 (1988), she earned the following degrees: Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education English, Speech and Theatre from Missouri Southern State University (1993); Master in Educational Leadership from Missouri State University (1997); Specialist in Educational Leadership from William Woods University (2005); and Educational Doctorate from University of Missouri – Columbia (2010). She is married to Micheal A. Fox and they have one son, Donald James Fox. Currently, Doretta Fox is the principal of Neosho Middle School.