THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS’ SENSE OF ACADEMIC OPTIMISM AND COMMITMENT TO THE PROFESSION

DISSERTATION

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the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

by

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***

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ABSTRACT

Using the theoretical frames of positive psychology and social cognitive theory, this study explored teachers’ beliefs that influence their commitment to the profession. While commitment significantly influences teacher effectiveness, little has been known about teachers’ cognitive thought processes related to commitment. Therefore, this study examined the relationship between teachers’ commitment and key beliefs. In particular, teachers’ beliefs about their ability to bring about desired student outcomes (teachers’ sense of efficacy); thoughts about quality relationships with their students and parents (trust); and high priorities for academic tasks (academic emphasis) form the underlying construct of academic optimism as a characteristic of individual teachers.

To test the relationship between teachers’ sense of academic optimism and commitment to the profession, data were collected from a random sample of third and fourth grade teachers in Ohio. Correlational and exploratory factor analyses were conducted to analyze the data and the proposed models. In addition, analyses
included an investigation into teacher factors (years of experience, certification/licensure status, and degree attained) and student factors (socioeconomic status, minority background, and identified status) related to teachers’ sense of academic optimism.

The results of the investigation supported the hypotheses that academic optimism is comprised of teachers’ sense of efficacy, and their emphasis on academics. Teacher factors are not related to teachers’ sense of academic optimism. Academic optimism is positive related to students’ socioeconomic status, but teacher experience and expertise factors are not related to teachers’ sense of academic optimism. Finally, academic optimism is related to teachers’ to the profession.

In summary, exploratory analyses demonstrated that positive teacher beliefs are related to teachers’ commitment to the profession. The results of this study offer numerous implications for theory, practice, and future research.
I extend my deepest gratitude and celebrate my heroes who helped me accomplish this goal. Thank you to:

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, research on teacher beliefs has been extensive and productive. Teacher beliefs about themselves, their students, the subject(s) they teach, and educational reform have been related to such significant outcomes as student learning, teacher adoption of innovations, and teacher motivation, to name only a few (Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006). One neglected area, however, is teachers’ commitment to their profession. While commitment is typically examined as an organizational variable, the major objectives of this study were first to examine teacher commitment at the individual level and then to identify those factors that predict it. In particular, the researcher investigated the role of teachers’ positive beliefs as they enable teacher commitment.

During a recent meeting of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris, educators from around the globe gathered to discuss ways to increase teacher effectiveness. Their introductory statement outlined the complexity of the problem:
A great deal of money has been expended in research trying to discover the characteristics and activities of a ‘good’ or ‘effective’ teacher. Teachers, though, work within schools with certain structures and curricula. The teacher plans the environment of the classroom, organizes and manages the class, determines the detailed curriculum that will be presented to the students, as well as its sequencing and pacing, the overall structure of the lesson, the homework which is to be set, the feedback mechanisms to know how each pupil is ‘getting on’ and the correctives to be taken…Some teachers plan and execute these elements more effectively than others. But, what is it; in particular, that makes an effective teacher?” (Anderson, 2004, p. 11-12).

Common to all definitions of effective teachers are teacher characteristics or traits related to the way in which teachers practice their profession. In particular, effective teachers all have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to maximize the learning of all students in their classrooms. While teachers’ knowledge and skills can be measured through testing, teacher dispositions tend to be a “fuzzy construct” and require detailed examination.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) defines dispositions as, “The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator’s own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, responsibility, and social justice” (retrieved December 15,

Of the 12 traits UNESCO identified, teachers’ commitment to the profession or “commitment to doing everything possible for each student and enabling all students to be successful” was noted as an essential disposition of good teachers (Anderson, 2004, p. 21).

Commitment to the Profession

“Good” teachers, as described by their students, establish positive interpersonal relationships, provide structure without being too rigid, and make learning fun (Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). To capture these skills, good teachers must truly commit themselves to the students, classroom, and instructional content. Questions then arise as to what is commitment, how it has been studied in the past, and why it is so important for teachers to possess.

Commitment involves the steadfast attachment of thought and actions to someone or something (Tyree, 1996); and the strength of one’s moral character to invest time and energy to a particular cause (Entzioni, 1975). Furthermore, “Commitment consists of personal and professional investments in a specific workplace and its goals, as indicated by specific behaviors that indicate extra effort as well as attitudes” (Louis, 1998, p. 3). As such, commitment is a multidimensional construct influenced by external forces such as colleague and administrative support, parental demand, education policies, workplace conditions (Johnson & Birkeland,
internal forces such as motivation (Dias, 1981), and values (Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005).

Most studies on teacher commitment examine the influence of the school environment on teachers’ professional commitment (Hargreaves, 1988; Hoy, Tarter, & Hottkamp, 1991; Rosenholtz, 1989). For many teachers, commitment to the profession becomes part of their identity as seen in Day et. al. (2005)’s research by, Teachers who reported giving their ‘whole heart’ to their work and feeling a ‘depth’ of commitment to what they do. For many of these teachers there was not mind/body or work/life dichotomy when they discussed commitment (ppps. 574-575).

Commitment to the profession of teaching resides deeply in teachers’ sense of self in their thoughts and beliefs. This particular study examined teachers’ beliefs related to their commitment to the profession.

Both quantitative and qualitative investigations examine factors predicting teachers’ commitment to the profession. As an organizational variable, commitment is commonly measured using the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ). Three dimensions of the OCQ include identification (share common goals of the organizations), involvement (engage in extra work), and loyalty (desire to stay in the organization) (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). In addition, several researchers have used the 1987-1988 and 1993-1994 Schools and Staffing Surveys database to extract data related to teachers’ commitment and retention in the profession (Ingersoll, 2001; Smith & Rowley, 2005; Weiss, 1999). From these data, Smith and
Rowley (2005) found that schools with high levels of commitment have better success achieving reform goals.

Many qualitative studies examine teachers’ sense of commitment (Certo & Fox, 2002; Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Sun 2004). Most recently, Day et. al. (2005) interviewed 20 teachers and asked:

- How do teachers themselves characterize those who are committed and those not so committed?
- What has shaped teachers’ levels of commitments and what sustains/diminishes this?
- How do teachers characterize the changes in their levels of commitment across time?

The teachers in the study saw quality teaching and commitment as intertwined. One teacher commented, “Commitment to teaching comes from caring about the children and caring about the philosophy of education, what education really means” (p. 569). Another teacher remarked, “Commitment is part of you. This is my work; my responsibility and I get a lot of enjoyment from this” (p. 569). Therefore, teachers’ commitment to their profession is a complex construct which is highly valued and deeply embedded within a teachers’ sense of self.

For the most part, quantitative studies investigating commitment tend to focus on organizational variables while qualitative studies exploring commitment tend to focus on intrinsic variables (Day et. al., 2005; Firestone, 1996). Therefore, a quantitative examination of teacher attitudes related to commitment to the profession
is needed to juxtapose the findings from the organizational and attitudinal research bases.

As a disposition, teacher commitment stimulates positive practices in the classroom and student engagement. For example, teachers’ increased level of commitment directly relates to students’ commitment (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). When teachers invest more time in creating stimulating activities and staying after school to ensure students learn the concepts, student achievement increases (Rosenholz, 1989).

Yet, the widely-publicized exodus of teachers from the profession means that many tenured teachers retiring and novice teachers leaving during their first years pervades any discussion of teachers’ commitment (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996; Weiss, 1999; White, Gordon, & See, 2006). Known as “the revolving door” in teaching, scholars and school officials search for ways to retain qualified teachers (Ingersoll, 2001). Therefore, schools search for ways to build commitment to keep competent teachers from leaving the profession. Knowledge of factors related to teachers’ commitment aids in the creation of policies and initiatives aimed at slowing the revolving door in teaching.

In particular, questions arise concerning how teachers’ attitudes and/or beliefs influence their commitment to the profession.

Teacher Beliefs

Teachers’ beliefs serve as cognitive filters to screen incoming and outgoing thoughts and actions. Otherwise known as intuitive conceptions, teachers’ beliefs “predispose individuals to think and act in particular ways without much conscious
reflection” (Torff & Sternberg, 2001, p. 3). Research and reviews of literature examining teachers’ beliefs fill handbook chapters (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Clarke & Peterson, 1986; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001; Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Richardson, 1996; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006), research journals (Alexander, Murphy, & Woods, 1996; Brophy & McCaslin, 1992; Pajares, 1992; and many others), and conference proceedings. Studies indicate teachers’ beliefs significantly influence student learning (Butler, 2000; Jordan, Lindsay, & Stanovick, 1997) and many other facets of the school environment. Furthermore, Gregoire (2003) comments that, “understanding how teachers’ beliefs relate to their practice as well as to student outcomes may be the missing link between calls for school reform and teacher implementation of that reform” (p. 149).

The three facets of teacher beliefs investigated in this study were teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ trust in their students and parents, and teachers’ sense of academic emphasis.

*Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy*

Teachers’ sense of efficacy is defined as a “judgment of his or her capability to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated” (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Teachers’ sense of efficacy is one of the only teacher characteristics consistently correlated with student achievement (Armor et al., 1976; Ashton & Webb, 1986; and Ross, 1992; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006). If
teachers believe they are able to affect student learning, teachers set higher expectations and exert greater effort (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 1998).

Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) describe, teachers’ sense of efficacy as being derived from a personal analysis of the difficulty or ease associated with a specific teaching task and from a personal assessment of one’s capacity and limits associated with the specific task. As a result, teachers make decisions regarding appropriate goals to set for the task, the amount of effort needed to accomplish the task, and persistence needed when difficulties arise.

The history of self-efficacy research dates back to 1975 when Albert Bandura introduced the concept and defined it as “beliefs in one’s capacity to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Since his initial work in self-efficacy, hundreds of scholars have examined the many facets of self-efficacy research including the influence of efficacy in human learning, performance, and motivation (Bandura, 1997; Woolfolk, 2004). Scholarship in teachers’ sense of efficacy is grounded in Bandura’s social cognitive theoretical frame.

*Teachers’ Trust in their Students and Parents*

In addition to teachers possessing a sense of efficacy, teachers must be able to form trusting relationships with students and parents. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly and they will show themselves great” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1841). Trust is an essential component needed to cultivate and maximize positive relationships. When teachers
create a safe and trusting environment, students feel comfortable to take chances and
parents begin to dialog with teachers about the best interests of their children. Only
when a trusting relationship is created will students “show themselves great” and
apply themselves to learning the content.

A trusting relationship includes feelings of benevolence, reliability,
competence, honesty and openness (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). In
general, teachers must trust that their students possess an openness to learn and the
capability to grasp concepts. Similar to teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers set
higher expectations for students they trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Teachers’ Sense of Academic Emphasis

Only one-third of the hours students spend in schools are devoted to
successful learning tasks, known as academic learning time (Woolfolk, 2007). Yet,
quality teachers make sure students are “actively engaged in worthwhile, appropriate
learning activities” (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 446) to ensure students’ time in school is
maximized.

Academic learning time for students is essential because the time students
spend successfully and actively engaged in an academic task relates positively to
student learning (Smith, 2000). Therefore, teachers must find ways to prioritize and
to engage students in appropriate, academic tasks.

Synonymous with the terms academic press, achievement press, and academic
rigor, academic emphasis refers to teachers’ beliefs about their inclinations toward
Although previously only investigated as a school variable, this study examined academic emphasis of individual teachers.

Together, teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ trust in their students and parents, and teachers’ sense of academic emphasis form the construct “academic optimism” (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006).

Teachers’ Sense of Academic Optimism

Optimists anticipate positive outcomes; they enter a situation and expect positive results. If teachers’ enter the classroom with optimistic beliefs, positive student results should ensue. Yet, little is known about teachers’ optimistic dispositions. As dispositions serve to influence behaviors, optimistic teachers create learning environments where all students are expected to achieve. They create goals for themselves and their students to make sure students learn the content. In general, optimistic teachers carry positive beliefs about themselves, their students and parents, and the required content; these beliefs are referred to in this study as teachers’ sense of academic optimism.

Teachers’ sense of academic optimism encompasses teachers’ positive beliefs about themselves, students and parents, and instruction (Hoy, et. al., 2006). Hypothetically, teachers’ sense of academic optimism should directly correspond to the creation and maintenance of an effective classroom when the teachers feel vested in the best interests of their students and community members. Academic optimism has been examined as an organizational variable, but this study sought to understand individual teacher dispositions associated with academic optimism.
Even though teachers rely on their beliefs to direct their behaviors, the environment within which a teacher works plays a significant role in their commitment to the profession.

Classroom Context

The incredible diversity of students in 21st century classrooms creates instructional settings filled with students from different cultural, ethnic, racial, language, geographic, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and religious backgrounds. In addition, students bring a variety of academic and social strengths to the classroom. Banks (2005) states, “One of the challenges to diverse democratic nation-states is to provide opportunities for different groups to maintain aspects of their community cultures while building a nation in which these groups are structurally included and to which they feel allegiance” (p. 23). Therefore, teachers must embrace the challenge of a diversified classroom and find ways to maximize the learning of all children.

In addition to the challenges associated with diverse student backgrounds, the socioeconomic status of students plays a significant role in the classroom context. A large percentage of students entering classrooms come from lower social class backgrounds due to the fact that one in six Americans under the age of 18 lives in poverty (Woolfolk, 2007). As socioeconomic status has a positive, direct relationship with student achievement, the students’ social class background must be considered when looking at variables correlated with a teachers’ effectiveness (Conger, Conger, & Elder, 1997; McLoyd, 1998).
Public Law 94-142 (1975) required states to provide “a free, appropriate public education for every child between the ages of three and 21 regardless of how, or how seriously, he may be handicapped (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 117).” Since 1975, multiple revisions of the law have modified 94-142 to change the word “handicapped to disabled” and to specify the nature of instruction for students with special needs. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is an, “annually revised program for an exceptional student, detailing present achievement level, goals, and strategies, drawn up by teachers, parents, specialists, and (when possible) the student” (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 117) used to ensure students’ needs are met.

Teachers’ beliefs are influenced by contextual variables of the immediate classroom and school context (Woolfolk Hoy et. al., 2006). Approximately 86% of teachers are white, female, middle-class, monolingual, and the product of suburban or rural schools. Therefore, most teachers do not have experiences interacting with diverse groups (Gay & Howard, 2000), nor do they feel confident in working with diverse students (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000).

Teachers consider diversity in terms of racial and ethnic differences (Hoffman, 1996). According to the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), diversity includes differences in ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical area. Therefore, in order to capture the classroom context, this study gathered data on the number of students from racial/ethnic minorities, students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), students with 504s (plans to accommodate
for disabled students), students of low socioeconomic status (students with free or reduced lunch), and students considered English Language.

Public school classrooms contain students with diverse backgrounds from many different social classes and possess a range of strengths and needs. Effective teachers capitalize on the richness of diversity and create classroom communities where all feel welcomed and challenged. When seeking to examine teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis, a clear picture of the context allows for the multiple presses on teachers beliefs to be acknowledged.

Teacher Variables

According to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, “studies show that teacher expertise is the most important factor in student achievement” (1996, p. 6). In other words, teachers are the most significant variable in children’s learning (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996, Sanders & Rivers, 1996).

Expert teachers commit their time and energy to maximizing learning for all students, and hence student achievement improves. Therefore, an understanding of effective teacher characteristics and ways to instill these traits in teachers inform discussions related to educational quality. Teaching expertise is often associated with years of experience, certification/licensure status, and highest degree attained (Anderson, 2004, Darling-Hammond, 2000).
Theoretical Frameworks

Multiple theoretical frameworks have been used to examine teachers’ beliefs. The two theoretical frameworks used in this study were positive psychology and social cognitive theory.

*Positive Psychology*

Positive psychology seeks to explore and explain optimal environments (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Analyzing positive emotions, traits, and institutions, positive psychologists identify situations where humans thrive and flourish. When looking at the classroom context, teacher educators use positive psychology to prepare novice educators to enter the 21st century predisposed to focus on the positive qualities of students, classrooms, schools, and communities (Pajares, 2000). In recent demands for accountability of schools, researchers tend to focus on deficits. This study examined what works to improve teachers’ commitment to the profession and hence student achievement in 21st century schools.

*Social Cognitive Theory*

The second theoretical frame used in the study was the social cognitive theory. As this theory posits, the development of skills and the regulation of behaviors occur within a complex, multifaceted, causal structure (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1997) speculates that humans exercise control over their lives through agentive actions. People act, reflect on those actions, and change their behaviors accordingly and constantly. Through this process, classroom teachers proactively
create mental plans to deal with events as they arise. For the most part, teachers are not just reactive.

In Bandura’s quest to understand human behaviors, he conceptualized the three dimensions of the social cognitive theory: behaviors, personal factors, and the environment. Together, these three form a triadic set of interactions, known as reciprocal presses (Figure 1.1). The three components of teachers’ sense of academic optimism represent different aspects of the triadic interactions: teachers’ sense of efficacy represents teachers’ personal factors, teachers’ trust in their students and parents form a trusting environment, and teachers’ sense of academic emphasis creates behaviors that press for achievement.
Therefore, this study sought to explore three dimensions of academic optimism: teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ sense of trust in their students and parents, and teachers’ sense of academic emphasis.

**Research Questions**

Because academic optimism is a novel construct, the results of this study help to provide initial understanding of the significance of multiple factors and outcomes. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. Do teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ trust in students and parents, and teachers’ sense of academic emphasis form a general construct called academic optimism?
2. Is the classroom context (socioeconomic status, 504/individualized education programs, number of students, school setting, subject taught, number of students from ethnic and racial minorities, and number of English language learners) related to academic optimism?

3. Is teacher expertise (years of teaching, type of certification/licensure held, and highest degree attained) related to academic optimism?

4. Does the construct of academic optimism influence teachers’ professional commitment?

Definition of Terms

Terms used throughout the study are defined below for the reader’s understanding.

*Academic Optimism.* Teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ trust in students and parents, and teachers’ sense of academic emphasis.

*Classroom Context.* The immediate setting in which instruction occurs, including the number of students, school location (urban, rural, or suburban), number of students from racial and ethnic minorities, number of English language learning students, number of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, and identified students.

*Identified Students.* Students qualifying for an Individualized Education Program and/or Section 504 modifications.

*Teachers’ Sense of Academic Emphasis.* “A general perspective of the importance of academics in a school held by administrators, teachers, and students
themselves” (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000, p. 684) and “the extent to which a drive for academic excellence contributes to the behavioral and environmental press of the school” (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000, p. 684).

Teacher Commitment. Attitudes and behaviors representative of teachers’ investment in their professional and personal responsibilities in a classroom (Louis, 1998).

Teacher Expertise. Years of experience, certification/licensure status, and highest degree held.

Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy. Teacher’s “judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated” (Tschanne-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000, p. 783).

Teachers’ Sense of Trust in Students and Parents. “An individual’s or group’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). In this study, trust in clients refers to the relationship established between the teachers and students, and the teacher and parents.

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on academic optimism at the teacher level and will not report information regarding the organization.

In addition, this study was limited to third and fourth grade classrooms in Ohio public schools.
This study did not attempt to examine the social context of the classroom which may serve to impact teachers’ sense of efficacy.

Participation was voluntary.

While the sampling frame consisted of the most recent information from the Ohio Department of Education’s website, errors in the names and addresses of schools were present. Once the list of schools was downloaded from the Ohio Department of Education web site, names of participants were gathered from on-line web searches and telephone calls to schools. If names were not available on-line and schools were not willing to give teachers’ names, the school was eliminated from the random sample.

Longitudinal comparisons will not be made to check the reliability of responses.

Delimitations of the Study

As a descriptive study investigating the beliefs of third and fourth grade teachers in Ohio, this exploration focused specifically on these grades. The only beliefs examined in the study were those aligned with the construct of academic optimism, as identified in the research. The intent of the study was to describe what teacher beliefs exist, not to develop hypotheses about the derivation of these beliefs.

This study does not attempt to discuss the principals’ leadership style, school community, or collegial environment of the school. Focusing attention on the classroom level allows for an understanding of a teacher’s level of academic optimism on student achievement.
When gathering data for this study, survey instruments were used. General assumptions held by the researcher were 1) beliefs can be measured, 2) participants understood the directions on the cover letter, 3) participants gleaned the same meaning for the items on the instrument, 4) participants were thoughtful and truthful on the survey instrument, and 5) the survey instrument was an appropriate measurement for the study.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study examined the contribution of several cognitive factors related to commitment. Chapter two presents the theoretical and relevant research. Chapter three describes the methodology, including the instruments used, for the study. Chapter four revisits the hypotheses by analyzing the data. Finally, chapter five summarizes the study, provides implications of the findings, and suggests future research in the field of cognitive factors related to commitment.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter presents the theoretical underpinnings of the teachers’ sense of academic optimism. First, the relevant theories, concepts, and research studies associated with the theoretical frames will be examined. Next, a review of the literature on teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ sense of trust in their students and parents, teachers’ sense of academic emphasis, and teacher commitment is presented. Later, teacher and student variables are analyzed. The chapter ends with a model depicting the theoretical relationships existing between the variables in this study.

This study is grounded in two psychological frameworks (positive psychology and social cognitive theory) and in the research on teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in students and parents, academic emphasis, and commitment. In addition, the research design takes into account important characteristics of classroom context and teacher expertise that might be related to the teacher beliefs examined in the study.
Theoretical Underpinnings of Teachers’ Sense of Academic Optimism

The key independent variable investigated in this study, teachers’ sense of academic optimism, is a new construct growing out of a diverse field of research. The three components of academic optimism are teachers’ sense of efficacy, their trust in students and parents, and their academic emphasis. All three facets focus on teachers’ strengths that contribute to the creation and maintenance of a positive, productive learning environment.

Research on the three facets of academic optimism is situated in two theoretical frames, positive psychology and social cognitive theory. The next section of this chapter considers the general theory of positive psychology and its implications for schooling. Following the discussion of positive psychology, Bandura’s social cognitive theory is examined.

Positive Psychology

Even though its roots lie 40 years in the past, positive psychology is a relatively recent addition to psychological studies. The framework evolved in the past 10 years as scholars called for a redirection of focus in psychology from treating pathologies to understanding how to enhance competence and capacity within a given context (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2002).

Positive psychology was first conceptualized by Seligman who tells the story of the day he was weeding a garden with his five-year-old daughter, Nikki. She mentioned, “Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From the time I was three to the time I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. When I turned five,
I decided not to whine anymore. That was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch” (Seligman, 2002, pp. 3-4). At this point, Seligman realized, “Raising children…is more than fixing what is wrong with them. It is about identifying their strongest qualities, what they own and are best at, and helping them find niches in which they can best live out these positive qualities” (Seligman, 2002, p. 4). Although he was already well-established as a psychologist, Seligman revised his conceptions of the field of psychology and his practices. He shifted his thinking from a focus on maladaptive behaviors to finding ways of identifying human strengths and building on them.

Although the field of psychology has always had a fascination with pathology (the study of weaknesses, diseases, and damages), this focus on personal weaknesses was reinforced following World War II when the Veterans Administration was founded and hired many psychologists to treat mental illness. At the same time, the National Institute of Mental Health was founded, in part to support research on pathologies. Successes in these endeavors led psychologist to turn away from nurturing positive qualities in individuals and increase their focus on curing individual suffering (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

During the 1960s, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rodgers, and other humanistic psychologies attempted to change the course of psychology to focus on human strengths. Humanistic psychology emphasized the importance of the individual, not collective well-being. In addition, humanists were skeptical of scientific method to
investigate human strengths. They relied upon alternative research methods to gain insight into ways to help individuals progress toward a satisfying and fulfilling life.

Many misinterpreted the goals of humanistic psychology and began to associate it with crystals, aromatherapy, and other inner healing rituals. As such, humanist psychology was regarded as a passing fad in the history of psychology. Nevertheless, these psychologists did lay the foundation for considering the positive impact of focusing on individuals’ strengths (Pajares, 2000).

In 1998, the theme of the American Psychological Association (APA) annual meeting was prevention, with presentations on, “How can psychologists prevent murderous schoolyard violence? How can psychologists prevent substance abuse?” and other such topics. Many researchers concluded that human strengths buffer against mental illness. Strengths provide the optimal prevention mechanism. Therefore, participants at the conference agreed that work of the 21st century psychologies needed to include a study of human strengths to understand how best to prevent maladies (Seligman, 2002).

Positive Psychology Defined

Grounded in scientific inquiry, positive psychology is the study of human strengths and optimal functioning. The goal of positive psychology is to understand the personal traits and dispositions that contribute to the psychological health and general well being of individuals and collectives (Myers, 2001). In particular, positive psychologists investigate individual’s subjective well-being as it relates to their well-being and satisfaction (past); flow, joy, the sensual pleasures, and
happiness (present); and optimism, hope, and faith (future) (Seligman, 2002). As Seligman writes:

Psychology is not just the study of disease, weakness, and damage; it also is the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is wrong; it is also building what is right. Psychology is not just about illness or health; it is also about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. And in this quest for what is best, positive psychology does not rely on wishful thinking, self-deception, or hand waving; instead, it tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behavior presents in all its complexity (p. 4).

The three topics of study associated with positive psychology are: “positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and institutions that enable positive experiences and positive traits” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 5). As this study focuses on the teachers’ beliefs that impact student achievement, this study examines positive individual traits associated with subjective well being.

To define subjective well-being, begin by pondering the question “What is the good life?” Subjective well-being encompasses beliefs about both life as a whole and domains within one’s life (e.g., work, marriage). For teachers, their work is to foster student achievement.

Study of Individual Strengths

Inherent in the study of positive psychology is the notion that individuals possess certain character strengths that can be cultivated and measured. Peterson and
Seligman (2004) worked for years to collect a list of human strengths. Gathering thoughts at numerous conferences, searching multiple literature bases, grouping synonyms in categories, and putting the strengths through a series of 10 criteria, Peterson and Seligman classified 24 human strengths into six virtues categories: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) took great care to consider cultural and historical definitions of strengths. Even though different cultures place different values on particular strengths and virtues, the six individual strengths identified transcend diverse backgrounds. Peterson and Seligman (2004) were able to identify and measure the six individual virtues and the 24 strengths embedded in the virtues.

Not only do positive psychologists study human strengths, they also study human attitudes and how these influence beliefs and effectiveness. A primary attitude that strongly influences outcomes is optimism. This aspect of positive psychology is especially pertinent to the present study. In particular, this study is grounded on the assumption that some teachers tend to possess optimistic beliefs, while others are more likely to approach students and classroom tasks with pessimistic attitudes.

Study of Optimism

Scholars have written about optimism since Voltaire wrote Candide in 1759. Early texts recognized that optimism is an inherent feature of all humans (Peterson & Chang, 2003). Researchers define optimism as, “mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future--one which the evaluator regards as
socially desirable, to his [or her] advantage, or for his [or her] pleasure” (Tiger, 1979 in Peterson, 2000, p. 44). Dictionary definitions generalize optimism as one’s positive expectations for the future (Carver & Scheier, 2002). Together the two definitions allow researchers to conceptualize optimism as a positive belief about the future. As Carver and Scheier (2002) describe, “Optimists are people who expect to have positive outcomes, even when things are hard” (p. 233).

Seligman conceptualizes optimism in terms of how an individual explains the causes of bad events, in other words, a person’s explanatory style (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995). Others look at optimists’ attribution styles (Peterson & Chang, 2004). When “bad” events occur, those who attribute the cause of the event to external and unstable causes tend to possess higher levels of optimism.

The current study examines the construct “academic optimism,” bringing together teachers’ beliefs about behaviors, personal factors, and environmental factor positively related to student achievement.

Positive Psychology in the School Context

Positive psychologists recognize that each individual brings a wealth of experiences and personal strengths that shape their interpretation and responses to events. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) mention,

“No longer do the dominant theories view the individual as a passive vessel responding to stimuli; rather, individuals are now seen as decision makers, with choices, preferences, and the possibility of becoming masterful, efficacious, or in malignant circumstances, helpless and hopeless” (p. 8).
As such, researchers study the nature of individuals’ preferences and beliefs when trying to understand practices. For example, recent scholarship investigates the nature of teachers’ beliefs that shape the numerous decisions and actions in a classroom (Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006)

A search of multiple databases revealed that relatively little scholarship investigates the use of positive psychology in the school setting (Psychinfo, ERIC, and EBSCO). School psychologists are the lone individuals spearheading efforts to bring positive psychology to the discussion of effective teaching and constructive student outcomes (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Suldo & Huebner, 2004). Positive school psychologists devote their practices to encouraging positive mental health among children.

In conceptualizing positive psychology within a school context, one must consider both the strengths and the beliefs teachers bring to the classroom environment. In particular, how do their beliefs impact student learning and achievement? When studying professional development programs for positive practices in schools, Truscott and Truscott (2004) emphasized the need to conceptualize, “teachers as active decision makers who can, and should, exercise choice” (p. 51). Following a two-year professional development project that used positive psychology principles to shape the program, Truscott and Truscott found that 78% of the teachers embraced the conceptions of strength-based approaches in the classroom and changed classroom practices accordingly. Such a study encourages further exploration into the beliefs of practicing teachers concerning positive practices
in the classroom. If teachers have optimistic beliefs, then we can speculate that student strengths and positive school traits will be emphasized. Therefore, studying teacher beliefs is essential when applying a positive psychological view to understand the teachers’ commitment.

Social Cognitive Theory

The second theoretical frame, social cognitive theory, explains behavior through the triadic reciprocal interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences. Each element interacts with another. Bandura (1986) labeled the theory “cognitive” to represent a person’s capacity to encode, self-regulate, and perform behaviors. The main assumptions associated with social cognitive theory are human agency and triadic reciprocal determinism.

Human Agency

Humans strive to control their life circumstances. In so doing, people act in accordance with their intended goals. Agency refers to “acts done intentionally” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3) to control a situation. The major premise of human agency asserts the notion that “the human mind is generative, creative, and proactive, not just reactive” (Bandura, 1997, p. 5). Therefore, the mind is not a passive receptacle of information. Instead, if individuals believe they have the power to produce desired results, then they will attempt to make it happen. In other words, personal agency is mediated by one’s sense of efficacy.
Triadic Reciprocal Determinism

Bandura (1997) proposed that human agency has three interdependent dimensions, referred to as a triadic reciprocal causation. He explains, “In this transactional view of self and society, internal personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events; behavior; and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants that influence one another bi-directionally” (p. 6). Figure 2.1 illustrates the reciprocal nature of the three factors and the degree of influences varies depending on the situation and activity.
Personal factors, behaviors, and environmental factors exert varying degrees of press on one another. For example, to use a teaching-related situation, preservice teachers tend to have high levels of sense of efficacy (personal factor) before entering the classroom environment. During the first year, the novice teachers’ sense of efficacy declines significantly as they experience the realities of the classroom (environment) and struggle to manage students (behavior).

The concepts of Positive Psychology and Social Cognitive Theory appear to be congruent. Efficacy, from Social Cognitive Theory, might be considered a combination of several human strengths. Optimism, from Positive Psychology could be considered a personal factor. Thus, these theories provide the framework of the present study. The next sections consider the streams of research that relate to the concept that is central to the present study, academic optimism.

Theoretical Background of Teacher Belief Research

Teacher beliefs are a powerful force in classrooms and have been studied extensively over the past 30 years (Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006). During and prior to the 1960s, most research in educational psychology focused on the behaviorist traditions, analyzing observed classroom actions (Calderhead, 1996). In the early 1970s, researchers began to look beyond focusing exclusively on teachers and student observable actions and to question, “How teachers understand their work and the thought processes, judgments, and decisions that their work involves” (Calderhead, 1996, p. 709). As researchers investigated the impact of teachers’
thought processes on student achievement, cognitive approaches to educational psychology appeared. In particular, researchers found that teachers’ beliefs have significant effects on student achievement (Weinstein, 2002, Weinstein, Gregory, & Stambler, 2004).

*Conceptualizing Teacher Beliefs*

Cognitive researchers seek to describe the impact of non-observable teacher behaviors on student learning (Tom, 1997). Cognitive theories are viable and valued for their contribution to understanding classroom practices, especially the tacit elements in the classroom. Specifically, many cognitive psychologists recognize that teachers’ thinking patterns influence the planning, organizing, and executing of most interactions between students and teachers.

Several seminal research pieces in the 1960s and 1970s supported the need for research on teacher thinking. Lortie’s (2002) *Schoolteacher* detailed the characteristics of the teaching profession. Of interest to the study of teacher beliefs, Lortie described the plethora of “choices teachers make in the course of a working day” (p. viii) and how such decisions impact the efforts of students and teachers. His descriptions lured many researchers to further analyze teacher decision-making practices.

Lortie and his contemporaries encouraged others to investigate the “mental lives of teachers” (Walberg, 1984). Research in the field of teacher beliefs has been plentiful over the past 30 years; focusing attention on the “attitudes, perceptions, reflections, cognitions, personal theories, concerns, images, metaphors, Gestalts,
practical knowledge, and craft knowledge with many of these terms used interchangeably” (Pajares, 1992; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006).

Quite a few handbook chapters detail rich descriptions of teacher beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes (Calderhead, 1996; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001; Borko & Putnam, 1997; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein 2006). The researchers all acknowledge the significant impact of teacher beliefs on classroom practices. In particular, Borko & Putnam, 1997 describe the significance of teachers’ beliefs in the school process:

Many of the beliefs about teaching, learning, learners, and subject matter may serve as personal impediments to change pervade the culture of schools. Such views are widely held by other teachers, school administrators, students, and parents. They underlie many existing school practices and policies, such as grading of students, evaluation of teachers and commitments to standardized testing (p. 90).

Teachers hold on to their beliefs; and these beliefs impact all aspects of the schooling process.

While acknowledging that beliefs make a difference, educational psychologists struggle to reach an agreement upon the definition of beliefs. Many educational psychologists accept Richardson’s (1996) conception of beliefs as, “psychologically held understandings, premises or propositions about the world that are felt to be true” (p. 103). Richardson proposed that beliefs originate from; a) personal experiences, b) experiences with one’s schooling, and c) experiences with
found knowledge. This definition sparked questions concerning the difference between “found knowledge” and beliefs.

Assumptions about Teacher Beliefs. In his seminal piece on teachers’ beliefs, Pajares (1992) described teachers’ beliefs as “messy constructs.” While messy, Pajares synthesizes the assumptions. He detailed 16 generalizations about teachers’ beliefs. Four of his statements help to understand teacher beliefs for the purpose of this present research:

1) beliefs are formed early in life, tend to self-perpetuate, preserve against contradictions stemming from reason, time, school, or experiences,
2) beliefs are filters to interpret new information,
3) the more beliefs are incorporated into one’s schema, the more difficult it is to change, and
4) beliefs [rarely] changed during adulthood (pp. 324-325).

Accepting Pajares’ generalizations, researchers concluded that teachers’ beliefs must be understood because of the ability of beliefs to significantly control the learning environment. The three beliefs examined in this study are teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in students and parents, and academic press.

Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy

One belief shown to impact student learning is teachers’ sense of efficacy. Teachers’ efficacy beliefs have been related to student achievement (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Muijs & Reynolds, 2001; and Ross, 1992), student motivation (Midgley, Feldhaufer, & Eccles, 1989), and students’ own sense of efficacy (Anderson, Greene,
Loewen, 1988). Over the past 25 years, research on teachers’ sense of efficacy has been filled with controversy and competing definitions and measures. Early conceptualizations of teacher efficacy were grounded in Rotter’s (1966) theory of internal and external locus of control, but the predominant current grounding is in Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy.

**Bandura’s conception of efficacy.** Bandura (1997) stated, “People’s level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than what is objectively true” (p. 2). If individuals believe they can produce desired results, they are motivated or possess incentive to act. Therefore, self-efficacy refers to, “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). According to the theory of self-efficacy, if people believe they are capable of performing certain tasks, they attempt and perform the tasks with greater success. Such a belief empowers the individual, giving a sense of power or agency.

According to Bandura (1997), sense of efficacy is a regulatory mechanism that influences cognitive processes, motivational processes, affective processes, and selection processes. Therefore, teachers’ sense of efficacy is a crucial factor when crafting a learning environment to maximize the learning of all students. In fact, Wheatley (2002) argues, “Some scholars have even concluded that reforms that do not address teacher efficacy are doomed” (p. 5).

**Teacher’s sense of efficacy.** Consistent with Bandura’s conception of efficacy, researchers in the field defined teacher efficacy as a teachers’ “belief in their ability to
have a positive effect on student learning” (Ashton & Webb, 1986, p. 142).

Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy and Hoy (1998) further defined teacher efficacy as, “the teacher’s belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required and successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context” (p. 233). Teachers with high teacher efficacy tend to believe in themselves and work to help all students learn, even the most difficult students (Woolfolk Hoy & Spero, 2005).

Research in the field of teacher efficacy fills journals, conferences, and discourse surrounding the provision of high quality learning environments for all students. As researchers continued to investigate teachers’ sense of efficacy they searched to find ways to effectively measure the construct.

Measurement of Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy

Over the past 30 years, researchers created multiple ways to measure teachers’ sense of efficacy. The original studies were conducted by the Rand researchers who asked participants two questions:

1) When it comes right down to it, a teacher really can’t do much because most of a student’s motivation and performance depends on his or her home environment

2) If I try really hard, I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated student.

The first question assessed teaching efficacy or teachers’ outcome expectations. The second question examined a teachers’ personal teaching efficacy and forced teachers
to make judgments about their ability to influence student learning. This line of questioning was grounded in Rotter’s (1966) locus of control studies because the questions examined teachers’ sense of responsibility for the learning of all students.

Next, Ashton and Webb (1986) used cognitive theory to examine the relationship between efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations. They believed teacher efficacy was comprised of the same two factors as the Rand researchers: teacher efficacy was grounded in outcome expectations and personal efficacy was rooted in efficacy expectations (Denzine, Cooney, & McKenzie, 2005).

Gibson and Dembo (1984) worked to develop the Teacher Efficacy Scale (TES), a 30-item instrument looking at two components of teacher efficacy: personal teaching efficacy (PE) and general teaching efficacy (TE). They found that PE accounted for 18.2% of the variance in teacher efficacy, while TE accounted for 10.6% of the total variance.

In 1990, Woolfolk and Hoy extended the teacher efficacy research to look at prospective teachers’ beliefs. Using 16 of the items from Gibson and Dembo’s TES, Woolfolk and Hoy found that the two factors (PE and TE) accounted for 27% of the variance in the data. Because the two factors were not correlated, the factors were considered independent. Using the three-factor model of teacher efficacy, 32.8% of the variance was accounted.

At the same time, Emmer and Hickman (1991) argued that teacher efficacy consisted of personal beliefs about classroom management, external influences, and personal teaching efficacy. The debate over the two or three-factor model continues
to this day. Denzine, Cooney, and McKenzie (2005) just tested Woolfolk and Hoy’s (1990) TES instrument. Running a confirmatory factor analysis, Denzine et al. were not able to load the data into the two or the three factor modeling, leading them to reject the previously established model.

Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, and Hoy (1998) decided to rethink the questions used to assess teachers’ sense of efficacy. During a graduate student seminar, the researchers and the students worked together to craft questions to gather information about teachers’ sense of efficacy. The scale is now widely used to measure teacher efficacy, the Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES). Analyzing data from initial pilot studies of the instrument, the TSES yielded three factors: efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional practices, and efficacy in classroom management. This study will use the TSES and test the three factor model presented by Tschannen Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, and Hoy.

Teachers’ beliefs about their ability to work in a specific context shape their approach to student engagement, instruction, and management. Yet, teachers’ beliefs about students impact their sense of efficacy, as well.

*Determinants of Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy*

According to Bandura (1997), the four sources of efficacy are: verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, physiological experiences, and mastery experiences. Of the four sources, mastery experiences tend to be the most influential (Milner & Hoy, 2003). To represent the means through which the sources of efficacy impact teacher efficacy and hence performance are outlined in Figure 2.2.
The Cyclical Nature of Teacher Efficacy

Figure 2.2 The Cyclical Nature of Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998)

Figure 2.2 depicts the cyclical nature of teachers’ sense of efficacy. The four sources of efficacy (verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, physiological arousal, and mastery experiences) influence the way a teacher processes information. Teachers use the sources of efficacy when analyzing the teaching and task and the personal competence to complete the task. These analyses and assessments determine
a teachers’ sense of efficacy. As such, teachers’ level of efficacy serves to direct their goals, effort, and persistence when engaging in the task.

*Teacher Efficacy Conclusions*

Hoy and Woolfolk (1993) found that experiences that provide teachers with success in daily tasks increases teacher’s sense of efficacy. In particular, preservice teachers’ sense of efficacy grows as a result of field experiences with students in schools (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990). When teachers have a sense of efficacy, they remain motivated despite setbacks and obstacles.

Whereas teachers’ sense of efficacy consists of a self belief about ability to be successful in the classroom, teachers’ trust in their students focuses on teachers’ relationships with their students.

*Teachers’ Sense of Trust*

Trust is an essential component in effective relationships. When professional climates promote trusting relationships, participants are more likely to invest more time and effort to work towards organizational goals, instead of focusing personal needs (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). In the school context, teachers must establish trusting relationships among parents, students, and community members.

*Conceptual Foundations of Trust*

As Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) describe, defining trust tends to be difficult. While numerous definitions of trust have been proposed in the past 50 years, the common feature of all definitions is one of vulnerability. In 1960, Morton Deutsh studied trust in relation to the increasing global tensions surrounding the Cold War.
Consistent with other social scientists in the 1950’s and 1960’s, he used behavioral terms to examine trust. Following Deutsh, researchers emphasized the interpersonal nature of trust, focusing on relationships consisting of trust (Rotter, 1967; Baier, 1985).

Tschannen-Moran (1997) states, “Trust is a general confidence and overall optimism in occurring events; it is believing in others in the absence of compelling reasons to disbelieve” (p. 342). Baier (1986) defined trust as the reliance on others’ competence and their willingness to look after rather than harm what is entrusted to their care (in Goddard et. al, 2001, p. 4). Therefore, individuals accept a certain degree of vulnerability when trusting relationships are established. In so doing, individuals optimistically open themselves and anticipate a positive relationship will ensue.

The school environment relies on creating trusting relationships between all members of the community for maximum growth of all students. Several researchers have examined the positive influence of trust on the school context (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). In particular, faculty trust in colleagues and the principal has been linked to school effectiveness (Hoy, Tarter, & Wiskowskie, 1992; Tarter, Sabo, & Hoy, 1995), as well as positive school climate (Hoy et al., 1996; Tarter et al., 1989).

Furthermore, Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy (2001) collected survey data on 2,536 fourth grade students. Accounting for student demographic information, prior achievement, and school socioeconomic status, the researchers
concluded that trust in students and parents positively predicted student achievement on reading and math achievement tests. In addition, the researchers investigated the degree to which trust depends on the social context. They concluded, “Teacher trust is systematically associated with student socioeconomic status—the larger the proportion of poor students in the school, the lower teachers’ perceptions of trust” (p. 13).

When examining trust within the classroom context, recent trends toward empowering student voice in the classroom calls for teachers to establish trusting classroom climates. Cook-Sather (2002) writes, “Although it is rarely articulated as such, the most basic premise upon which different approaches to educational policy and practice rest is trust—whether or not adults trust young people to be good (or not), to have and use relevant knowledge (or not), and to be responsible (or not)” (p. 4). In other words, traditional notions that encourage teachers to “not smile until Christmas time” are being revised. Teachers see the importance of teacher-student relationships that support notions of trusting that students enter the classroom with the skill and will to succeed.

Facets of Trust

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) performed a factor analysis to explore the concept of trust. They found six facets of trust: vulnerability, benevolence, reliability, competence, honest, and openness.

Willingness to risk vulnerability. When creating trusting relations, people must be willing to share information with others. In other words, when people enter a
trusting relationship, they must be willing to risk that the other person will have their best interests at heart. For example, friends trust each other with secrets, wishes, etc.

*Benevolence.* The most widely accepted definition for benevolence includes notions of relationships where one feels safe and protected. More specifically, Baier (1986) defines benevolence as the “accepted vulnerability to another’s possible but not expected ill will” (p. 236). Everyone needs to feel protected and cared for, hence the reliance on benevolence in trusting relationships. In particular, teachers are legally and philosophically depended upon to create spaces where students feel safe.

*Reliability.* Trustworthy people are thought to be dependable and predictable. Yet, reliability in itself does not create a trusting relationship. People don't enter positive, trusting relationships with those who are predictably malicious.

*Competence.* Teachers are trusted to have knowledge and skills to impart to students. As such, students trust that their teachers impart accurate and relevant information.

*Honesty.* Trusting relationships are built upon honest, open communication. If one distorts the truth, they can not be counted on to facilitate the creation of a positive relationship.

*Openness.* To enter a trusting relationship, people must be open to engage with other individuals. They must be willing to share information about themselves, confident that the other individuals will be giving of themselves, as well.

In summary, teachers who trust their students tend to approach instructional and management practices from a positive perspective. Although these relationships
improve student learning, they are not the only factor that is required for students to learn. Teachers must allocate class time to prioritize academic learning time. The teachers must emphasize the importance of academic tasks, developing high expectations for all students. This research refers to such dispositions and actions as academic emphasis. The following section outlines research on this relatively new construct.

Teachers’ Sense of Academic Emphasis

For decades, researchers examined the degree to which teachers’ ability to emphasize academic tasks over social and affective tasks positively impacts student learning (Berliner, 1971; Purkey & Smith, 1983; & Fisher & Berliner, 1985). Situated in school effectiveness literature, teachers’ ability to maximize students’ academic growth has been studied extensively (Uline, Miller, & Tschannen-Moran, 1998). Such ability requires teachers’ setting high expectations for their students; often the underlying ethos or climate of the school and classroom contains an environmental press for the program of studies to be rigorous. In addition, students strive to maximize their ability. The interaction among students, teachers, and school members creates an “academic press” or, “the extent to which the school is driven by a quest for academic excellence. High but achievable goals are set for students, the learning environment is orderly and serious, teachers’ believe in their students’ abilities to achieve, and students work hard and respect those who do well academically” (Hoy & Hannum, 1997, p. 294).
Synonymous with the terms academic press, achievement press, and academic rigor, academic emphasis is the degree to which individuals possess a drive for academic success (Alig-Mielcarek, 2003). Teachers with high levels of academic emphasis establish and maintain a learning environment where teachers’ prioritize maximizing academic learning time. Since Smith (2000) concluded academic learning time is directly related to increases in student achievement (Smith, 2000); academic emphasis is indirectly related to growth in student achievement scores.

In the past 10 years, researchers examined academic emphasis as a characteristic of school climate or environments (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). The theoretical and empirical analyses of the origins of climate where high levels of academic emphasis exist can be traced back to Halpin and Croft’s (1962) Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire. By mapping climate profiles for 71 elementary schools, Halpin and Croft analyzed school and teacher characteristics facilitating the creation of an open or closed school climate. As such, academic emphasis was viewed as an organizational level variable or the degree to which an organization seriously commits itself to students’ academic growth. Since 1962, researchers continue to delve into the influence of academic emphasis on school environments (Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Lee & Smith, 1999; Shouse, 1996), but no studies have examined academic press as an individual teacher belief—the approach taken in the current study.
Teachers’ Sense of Academic Optimism

Using Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal structure, Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006) created a framework for understanding teachers' sense of academic optimism as an organizational variable. The three parts of academic optimism are: teachers' sense of efficacy, teachers' trust in students and parents, and teachers' academic emphasis; these self-referent beliefs are directly related to student achievement. Together, teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ trust in their students and parents, and teachers’ academic emphasis form a latent construct referred to as teachers’ sense of academic optimism. The three parts of academic optimism are self-referent beliefs which are directly related to student achievement.

The term academic optimism was chosen to represent the many positive decisions schools make to overcome negative consequences of low socioeconomic status (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006). As Hoy, et al. comment, “a school with high academic optimism is a collectivity in which the faculty believes that it can make a difference, that students can learn, and academic performance can be achieved.”

Initial work on academic optimism conceived of the term as an organizational variable (Alig-Mielcarek & Hoy, 2005; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006). This study is the first to test academic optimism as an individual teacher’s trait. The three components of academic optimism represent the reciprocal presses inherent in social cognitive theory. Academic emphasis entails explicit teacher behaviors in the classroom to maximize student learning. Teachers’ sense of trust creates an affective
climate or environment where all students find encouragement to learn and grow.

Finally, teachers' sense of efficacy stems from personal beliefs about their ability to accomplish tasks. Bi-directional interactions occur amongst the three facts and the strength of influence depends on the individuals and context (as seen in Figure 2.3) (Bandura, 1986).

Figure 2.3 Bandura's (1997) Triadic Reciprocal Causation Aligned with Academic Optimism

A fundamental assertion tested in this study is that if teachers have a sense of efficacy, trust their students and parents, and emphasize the importance of academic tasks, their commitment to the profession should be strong and positive.
Teachers’ Sense of Commitment

In a profession known for low compensation and little autonomy, few refute that teaching is hard work. As Nieto (2005) reports,

“The average teacher spends 50 hours a week on teaching duties, more than those in many other professions, and they get an average of 32 minutes for lunch. They spend nearly $500 a year of their own money for classroom supplies and their salaries are less lucrative than those of other professionals requiring the same credentials. They teach too many kids, and they have too little time to do so. They sometimes face unresponsive bureaucracies, listless students, and seemingly disinterested parents. Why do they do it?” (pp. 3-4).

Why do teachers commit their time and energy to a profession with little extrinsic rewards and so many external pressures especially considering that committed teachers are more valuable to schools and students? To answer this question, commitment scholarship is examined.

Two forms of teacher commitment comprise previous research studies: organizational commitment and personal commitment. Organizational commitment refers to behaviors and beliefs related to the well-being of a community (Mowday et al., 1979). On the other hand, personal commitment refers to beliefs and actions regarding the school organization, teaching profession, and students (Elliot & Crosswell, 2002). This study focuses on individual teachers’ beliefs and the relationship to teachers’ individual sense of commitment.
Personal Antecedents of Teachers’ Sense of Commitment:

Research in teachers’ sense of commitment is extensive and comprehensive. Tsui & Cheng (1999) found teachers’ personal sense of commitment predicted job performance and the quality of education. Furthermore, a committed teacher is recognized as the most essential component to school success (Fink, 1992). Therefore, studies to understand dimensions of teachers’ personal sense of commitment are needed and vital to comprehend effective teaching practices.

Demographic variables tend to be strong predictors of teachers’ personal sense of commitment. In particular, white teachers tend to be less committed; women tend to be more committed (Park, 2005). Furthermore, private school teachers are more committed than public school teachers (Park, 2005). Teachers in urban and low SES neighborhoods tend to leave schools before suburban and rural teachers from higher SES schools (Firestone, 1996). Larger school districts have less committed teachers (Reyes, 1990). Such information is essential to understand the “revolving door” in education where only a small percentage of teachers remain in the profession after five years. Yet, teacher commitment is directly related to an increase in student achievement, less absenteeism, and the development of positive attitudes toward school (Rosenholtz, 1989; Elliot & Crosswell, 2001). So, research into ways to retain teachers in the profession and increase their degree of commitment is essential and should be beneficial to student learning.

When conducting semi-structured interviews with Australian researchers, Joffres and Haughey (2001) examined teachers’ beliefs about the antecedents,
processes, and outcomes of teachers’ sense of commitment. The teachers in the study envisioned commitment to the profession in terms of professional behavior, “someone who is striving to improve on their practice” (http://www.aare.edu.au/02pap/cro02522.htm) and in terms of the investment of time outside of school contact hours. The teachers believe that teaching is more than a job and commitment to the profession was seen as a way to invest in future generations.

Keeping in mind that teachers are nested within particular ecosystems, teachers’ sense of commitment is influenced by external influences in addition to their beliefs (see Figure 2.4) (Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006). While teachers’ beliefs influence the immediate context, so too does the context exert a press on teachers’ identity. Therefore, careful consideration of relationship between the classroom context and teachers’ commitment to the profession is necessary.
As Figure 2.4 illustrates, multiple layers of influence exist in the classroom and school community. At the center of the ecosystem, the teacher has a personal sense of identity, efficacy, and other self-referent beliefs. The immediate classroom context consists of students and instructional contents which exerts pressure on teachers’ sense of self. Outside the classroom, state and national mandates (accountability, reform movements, standards, etc.) and cultural norms and values press on the
classroom and teacher. Figure 2.4 shows the incredible complexity of the task of teaching.

Classroom Context

The instructional environment significantly influences teachers’ commitment (Joffres & Haughey, 2001). Since the Coleman Report (1966) declared that “only a small part of [student achievement] is the result of school factors, in contrast to family background differences between communities” (Coleman, Campell, Hobson, et al., 1966, p. 297), researchers strive to find classroom context variables related to student achievement.

Students’ Socioeconomic Status.

Sociologists use the term socioeconomic status (SES) to refer to a person’s level of wealth, power, and prestige. Children born into poverty tend to be more frail and sick more often. They exhibit more neurological problems and other conditions leading to a shorter life expectancy, poor physical health, homelessness, and multiple other disabling conditions (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2006). Many relationships exist between socioeconomic status and student achievement; students from poor backgrounds do not perform as well on student achievement measures (Woolfolk, 2004). Therefore, careful consideration of the influence of socioeconomic status on student achievement must be included in any attempt to study teachers’ professional commitment.
Identified Students

Listening to a conversation among teachers, acronyms in the form of an “alphabet soup” tend to fill the dialogue. Outsiders to the education profession may need reference sheets to help interpret the many letters and numbers teachers use to describe their students’ needs. Two commonly used acronyms are IEPs (individualized educational programs/plans) and 504s. This paper refers to students qualifying for IEPs and 504s as simply “identified students.”

In 1975, the Education for ALL Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) made a free and appropriate education available to all students. While Public Law 94-142 has been revised many times in the last 30 years, the goal of providing all students with equal access to high quality education remains the same. Today, we refer to the law as Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA). One of the provisions of IDEA is a written statement for each eligible student to include students’ present performance, goals, services, and an annual evaluation. This statement is referred to as an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The American with Disabilities Act passed Section 504 requires school officials and teachers create, “A written plan that provides for reasonable accommodations or modifications in assessment and instruction as a means to ‘create a fair and level playing field’ for students who qualify as disabled” (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2006, p. 48). In addition, all children must have access to all school activities. Through Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, schools must
provide access to equal education opportunities for all students while no extra funds support schools’ efforts to accommodate the students.

Estimates of the prevalence of students with disabilities in the primary and secondary classrooms range from 2.7% to 30% (Hardman et al, 2006). While the law mandates classrooms open their doors to provide high quality education for all students, teachers do not believe they have the knowledge, skills, or dispositions to enact the mandates (Kurz, Paul, Harriot-White, & Skon, 2006). Therefore, it is possible that the challenge of teaching students with disabilities would affect teachers’ beliefs and their commitment. This study seeks to examine the relationship between the number of students with IEPs and 504s and teachers’ positive beliefs.

**Class Size**

Many scholars, parents, and policy makers argue over the effect of class size on student learning. Hanushek (2001) examined 277 studies looking at the relationship between class size and student achievement. He found only 14% of the studies found a relationship between small class size and student learning. Recently, Borland, Howsen, and Trawick (2005) tried to improve measures used in past class size studies to reflect multiple variables not included in previous research (including student ability, taking out approximates of student/teacher ratios, and many others). They could not find any relationship between class size and student achievement and declared, “Policy-makers who seek to cause improvement in student academic achievement via changes in class size should be aware that this study suggests it is
not necessarily achievement-increasing to either increase or decrease class size” (p. 80).

While Hanushek (2001) and Borland et al. (2005) sought to correlate class size and student learning, this study examines the influence of class size on teachers’ sense of commitment. Perhaps teachers who have smaller class size feel greater commitment towards a smaller group of students thereby indirectly influence the creation of positive learning environments.

**Number of Students From Ethnic and Racial Minorities**

In 2000-2001 school year, the U.S. Department of Education reported the percentage of students by race/ethnicity. They found:

- 61.2% White, non-Hispanic
- 17.2% Black, non-Hispanic
- 16.3% Hispanic
- 4.1% Asian/Pacific Islander
- 1.2% American Indian/Alaska Native

In all, 38.8% of the students represented minority populations (Nieto, 2004). Yet, the majority of teachers are white, thus the possibility exists for misunderstandings and cultural clashes in the classroom when teachers and their students do not share a common cultural heritage. The present study seeks to find whether the ethnic make-up of classes influences teachers’ sense of commitment.
When examining racial and cultural differences of students, linguistic diversity of students must be considered, as well. As Trueba comments, whatever knowledge we acquire, it is always acquired through language and culture, two interlocked systems considered essential for human interaction and survival. Culture and language are so intricately intertwined that even trained scholars find it impossible to decide where language ends and culture begins, or which one of the two impacts the other the most (Trueba, 1993, p. 26-27).

Nieto (2004) reports that 18% of the U.S. population speaks a language other than English at home; Spanish is spoken by half of these families. When analyzing the racial differences of students, so too must this research include the linguistic diversity of students. Therefore, this research seeks to examine the relationship between teachers’ commitment and the number of English Language Learners in their classrooms.

Sanders and Rivers (1996) refute the findings from the Coleman report regarding the overwhelming influence of contextual variables on student achievement. In their Value-Added Assessment project, Sanders and Rivers (1996) found that quality teaching strongly predicted growth in student achievement scores. With this information, policy makers and school administration search to identify teachers’ traits associated with teaching expertise and positive student achievement.
Debates over the definition of quality teaching fill research journals and conference proceedings. When comparing and contrasting definitions of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), common themes emerge. Goldhaber and Anthony (2003) shared understanding of quality teaching as beliefs that teachers should:

- understand the process through which children learn and develop and be committed to furthering students’ learning
- have deep knowledge of the subject they teach and be able to convey this knowledge to students in ways that engages student inquiry
- manage and monitor students’ learning and reflect on teaching practices, making any needed adjustments to keep all students engaged in the learning process
- forge relationships with members of the broader educational community in order to foster students’ learning (p. 5)

Yet, past referents of quality teaching prioritized teachers’ intellectual ability (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). As quantitative measures of teachers’ ability in the classroom were questioned, researchers switched terminology to teaching expertise to reflect the multidimensional natural of quality teaching. This change expanded the focus of research examining good teachers.
How can we prepare teachers to work in the diverse classroom context while enacting a learning environment where challenging and current academic content fills the school day? Looking at the basic tenets for all professions, consistently, three conditions exist to be declared a profession:

1) possession of a body of knowledge and skill that is to be mastered by all who call themselves members of the profession (knowledge)
2) assuming responsibility for defining, transmitting, and enforcing standards of practice (skills)
3) committing to making decisions in the best interest of clients on the basis of this hared knowledge and standards of practice (Darling-Hammond, 2001, p. 759) (dispositions)

In other words, The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) policy states that teachers must have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to create positive learning environments.

Similar to the Hippocratic Oath in medicine, when teachers enter the classroom, they make a commitment to use their knowledge, skills, and dispositions to create positive and productive learning environments for all who enter their classroom. In reality, only some teachers are able to effectively reach all students. Policy makers, school officials, and practitioners search for ways to ensure twenty-first century teachers possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions embrace the challenges in all classrooms and with all students (Darling-Hammond, 2001).
Debate ensues over how to measure teachers’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions to reflect the multidimensional nature of the profession.

Most recently, three factors used examine teacher effectiveness are: years of teaching experience, certification/licensure type, and highest degree attained (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Armour-Thomas, Clay, Domanico, Bruno, and Allen (1989) found that differences in teacher expertise (educational degrees, certification/licensure status, and experience) accounted for approximately 90% of the variation in student achievement scores when students’ characteristics are held constant. These variables address the knowledge and the skills teachers must have to be successful in twenty-first century classrooms. Since 1989, many researchers contest Armour-Thomas et al.’s findings and further analyses of the effect of years of teaching experience, certification/licensure type, and highest degree attained are necessary.

*Years of Teaching Experience*

Common sense would lead one to believe that years or teaching experience is positively correlated with student growth. Yet, Hanushek (1986) reviewed 109 studies on the effects of teacher experience and found only one half showed that teacher experience significantly affects student learning. When Rosenholtz (1989) examined teacher experience she found that less-experienced teachers (with one to three years of experience) are not as effective. Yet, after five years of teaching,
student achievement tends to level off. A curvilinear relationship exists between years of teaching experience and teacher expertise (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Certification/Licensure Type

According to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), all teachers must be “Highly Qualified.” To meet these requirements, teachers must be licensed in the content area and for a particular age group where they teach. Teachers certifications/licenses are issued by states who require prospective teachers to complete specific college level courses, engage in experiences in schools, and pass one or more standardized test in there are where they wish to teach.

Under NCLB, teachers with elementary school certification should not be teaching high school math. Such licensure specifications are necessary because, “Effective teaching behaviors vary for different subject areas and grade levels, for students at different developmental stages and with different cognitive and psychological characteristics, and for different learning outcomes” (Darling-Hammond, 2001, p. 761). To have the knowledge and skills to teach at the appropriate grade level, teachers’ certification/licensure needs to correspond.

Fuller (1999) examined those school districts with greater percentages of licensed teachers. She found that districts with a higher percentage of licensed teachers had students who were significantly more likely to pass Texas achievement tests. Yet, Walsh (2001) examined 150 studies on teacher certification and could not conclusively state that certificated teachers are more successful than uncertificated
teachers. As with teacher experience, further exploration of the variable is needed to understand the influence of licensure on student growth.

*Highest Degree Attained*

With many states requiring teachers attain Masters’ Degrees in Education, a general understanding existed that attaining graduate degrees is positively and directly related to student growth. But researchers find mixed results when trying to clarify this hypothesis. Park (2005) found an inverse relationship between level of education and commitment to the profession. Yet, Ferguson and Ladd (1996) found a significant and positive influence of teachers with Master’s Degrees on student achievement gains on mathematics and reading achievement tests. Goldhaber & Brewer (1997) found that the subject of the degree was more strongly correlated to student achievement than the level of degree. In other words, teachers with advanced degrees in mathematics and science tended to have students with increased learning on mathematics and science achievement tests. Nevertheless, the results correlating teachers’ highest degree attained with student achievement vary and need further analyses. This study further explores the relationship between degree attained and teachers’ commitment to the profession, hence student achievement.

Teachers are the most important factor influencing student outcomes (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2003). It is essential to understand teachers’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions positively related to student growth. To begin the process, this study examines a new construct, teachers’ sense of academic optimism, and seeks to
answer the question, “Do committed teachers possess positive beliefs about themselves, their students, and the content they are charged to teach?”

Hypotheses

1. Teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ trust in students and parents, and teachers’ sense of academic press form a general construct called academic optimism.

2. The classroom context (SES, 504/IEP, size, and ELL) is related to academic optimism.

3. Teacher expertise (years of teaching, certification/licensure, and highest degree attained) is related to academic optimism.

4. Teachers’ sense of academic optimism positively and directly predicts teachers’ level of professional commitment.

The underlying model that brings together the multiple hypotheses appears in Figure 2.5.
Figure 2.5. Model for the Study
Summary

In conclusion, this research addresses three main questions:

1. Do teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ trust in students and parents, and teachers’ sense of academic emphasis form a general construct called academic optimism?
2. Is the classroom context (socioeconomic status, 504/individualized education plans, number of students, school setting, subject taught, number of students from ethnic and racial minorities, and number of English language learners) related to academic optimism?
3. Is teacher expertise (years of teaching, type of certification/licensure held, and highest degree attained) related to academic optimism?
4. Does the construct of academic optimism influence teachers’ professional commitment?

This study sought to explore academic optimism, a latent construct comprised of: teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ sense of trust in their students and parents, and teachers’ sense of academic emphasis. Next, the relationship between academic optimism and teachers’ commitment was examined. Finally, teacher and student factors thought to predict teachers’ academic optimism were explored.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an explanation of the methodology used to answer the research questions. The sample population, data collection procedures, and research instrumentation, including the pilot study, are outlined. Finally, the chapter includes an explanation of the statistical methods used to analyze the data.

Population and Sample

The target population for the study was full-time, third and fourth grade teachers in the State of Ohio. Current licensure protocols in the state of Ohio categorize early childhood education licensure as pre-kindergarten through third grade and middle school licensure as fourth grade through ninth grade. Prior to the implementation of the most recent licensure protocols, teachers in these grades were issued K-8, or 1-8 certification. Therefore, the study includes teachers with early childhood and middle childhood licensure and elementary certification.
The names and addresses of the schools with third and/or fourth grades were acquired from the Ohio Department of Education’s database located online (http://ilrc.ode.state.oh.us/Downloads.asp). Using the sample size model, the sampling frame of 350 schools from the 2045 schools in Ohio with a third grade and/or a fourth grade was determined using Microsoft Excel’s random number generator. This sample included approximately 17.1 % of the schools with third and/or fourth grade classrooms in the state.

As teachers’ names were not available from the state’s website, the researcher completed a web search on each school and selected one third grade teacher and/or one fourth grade teacher from the 210 schools with information available online. For the schools without web sites, the researcher called each school and requested teachers’ names. Out of the schools called, 10 (7.1%) were willing to share teachers’ names over the telephone. In total, the accessible population was comprised of 351 teachers from 220 schools. Survey instruments were sent to the individual teachers through the United States Postal Service. A response rate of 60% was expected.

School characteristics such as location, number of students, and levels of socioeconomic status were collected for each teacher in the study. This information was all available at the Ohio Department of Education’s website (http://www.ode.state.oh.us/).

The unit of analysis for this investigation was at the teacher level. In addition to collecting data on teachers’ beliefs, this study examined teacher characteristics that
may impact teacher commitment and student achievement beyond beliefs. These characteristics included number of years teaching, type of certification/licensure, and highest degree attained.

The researcher was able to protect the anonymity of the participants and was not aware of the names of the teachers from whom the data were collected. When teachers completed the survey instrument, they returned two items: the questionnaire in one envelope and a postcard with an identification number.

**Student Factors**

By using random selection of schools throughout the state of Ohio, the student population identified was considered diverse. Teachers were asked to self-report the type of school: urban, suburban, or rural. Percentages of students on free or reduced lunch were used as measures of socioeconomic status. As seen in Table 3.1, the student demographic characteristics were consistent with those generally seen in third and fourth grade classrooms in Ohio (http://www.ode.state.oh.us/accountability/condition_of_edu/ConditionofEducation_1.pdf).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Factor</th>
<th>Percent Statewide</th>
<th>Percent in Data Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students from low socioeconomic status</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students from minority backgrounds</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students labeled as disabled</td>
<td>13.50</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1. Comparison of Student Factors between Data sample and State Population

**Teacher Factors**

Table 3.2 summarizes the characteristics of the teachers in this sample in terms of years of experience, and highest degree attained. The data sample has a larger percentage of teachers with advanced degrees. In addition, the sample participants have more experience than the average reported in the state of Ohio (http://www.ode.state.oh.us/accountability/condition_of_edu/ConditionofEducation_1.pdf). Seventy percent of teachers had licensures other than those listed on the survey instrument. This disproportionate percentage in the “other” category probably occurred because the state of Ohio has undergone multiple changes in certification/licensure requirements, including changing the grade levels encompassed.
within elementary certification/licensure. Teachers in the sample with more than 10 years of experiences likely received a 1-8 certificate, a category not included in this survey instrument but a likely the certification of many of the respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Factor</th>
<th>Statewide</th>
<th>Data Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage with an advanced degree</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>69.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average of total years of experience</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2. Comparison of Teacher Factors between State Population and Data Sample
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Percent of the Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years of teaching experience</td>
<td>0 years</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-4 years</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5-8 years</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9-12 years</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13-16 years</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17-20 years</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21-24 years</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 + years</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest earned degree</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor’s plus</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some Master’s work</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>62.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some Doctoral work</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification/licensure type</td>
<td>Pre K-3 Licensure</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-6 Certification</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4-9 Licensure</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects taught</td>
<td>Language Arts</td>
<td>87.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>88.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>74.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>49.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3 Teacher Factors
Although not assessed directly in this study, it is likely that the teachers in the study were from middle and upper socioeconomic backgrounds because this is the case for elementary teachers in general (Gay & Howard, 2000). In the 2003-2004 school year, only 6.8% of Ohio teachers reported they were a minority. Results of the study revealed that 4.75% of students are of minority background. Therefore, the teachers in some of the schools in this study probably did share similar demographic characteristics with their students. A mismatch between teachers and students has shown to lower teacher expectations of student performance (Saft & Pianta, 2001). Therefore, similarities between teachers’ and students’ backgrounds might also be a factor influencing teacher beliefs, but similarities were not addressed in the current study.

Sample Error

Since the researcher cannot generalize the results of this study beyond third and fourth grade teachers in the state of Ohio, external validity was not considered a threat to surveying of respondents.

Frame error. To decrease the discrepancy between the intended population and the actual participant population, a list of third and fourth grade classrooms in Ohio for the 2004-2005 school year was downloaded from the Ohio Department of Education’s website.
Sampling error. To increase the chance that the participants were a representative and probabilistic sample, a random selection of schools was chosen to participant in the study.

Selection error. To decrease the likelihood that some participants have a greater chance in being selected, a random selection of schools with third and/or fourth grade classrooms was identified.

Nonresponse error. The five step process used to improve response rate (decrease nonresponse error threat) is outlined in Table 3.4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participating teachers received questionnaire, pencil, and a postcard. The postcard and questionnaire were to be mailed back to researcher.</th>
<th>Mailed Tuesday, October 18, 2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Participating teachers received reminder postcard.</td>
<td>Mailed Friday, October 28, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Participating teachers received packet.</td>
<td>Mailed Friday, November 11, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Participating teachers received reminder postcard.</td>
<td>Mailed Friday, December 9, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Nonresponding teachers received packet.</td>
<td>Mailed Saturday, February 11, 2006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4 Five Step Process to Improving Response Rate
Using these procedures, 207 survey instruments (61%) were returned during October through December. During the final packet mailing to the remaining nonrespondents, 18 surveys were returned. In all, 225 survey responses were received (64.1%). Usable questionnaires were defined as having 66% or more responses completed. Twenty-one (21) of the respondents were deleted from the database, because they failed to answer at least 66% of the questions or had left the teaching profession.

Data Collection

Before completing the questionnaire, participants had access to a statement describing the purpose of the study which requested honest answers to the questions. In addition, the directions on the questionnaire included a statement informing the participants that they did not need to answer any question with which they were uncomfortable. A sharpen pencil was included as an incentive. The participants did not have to include their name on the instrument, but they were asked to send a postcard when returning the instrument to let the researcher know that they had completed the instrument and their name could be removed from the participant list. Completed survey instruments were returned in researcher-provided stamped, addressed envelopes.

From the pilot tests interview, the projected or estimated time to complete the survey was approximately 20 minutes.
School year

The school year begins the end of August and concludes the middle of June. All of the data were gathered during the months of October, November, and December, 2005 and February, 2006.

Variables

As noted in Chapter One, four major variables were included in this investigation. Three of the variables comprise the construct of teachers’ sense of academic optimism (teachers’ sense of efficacy, teachers’ trust in students and parents, and teachers’ academic emphasis) and represent the predictor variables. The fourth variable, teachers’ professional commitment, represents the outcome variable. The extensive literature base allowed for the creation of a path model predicting relationships among the variables. The operational definitions for the variables are described in the next section.

Operational Definitions and Research Instruments

Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy

To measure teachers’ sense of efficacy, the short form of the Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) was used. A factor analysis was conducted on the data to verify these three factors for the current sample (Table 3.5). Items on the instrument are represented in Table 3.5.
Survey Items:

1. How much can you do to control disruptive behavior in the classroom?
2. How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in school work?
3. How much can you do to get students to believe they can do well in school work?
4. How much can you do to help your students value learning?
5. To what extent can you craft good questions for your students?
6. How much can you do to get children to follow classroom rules?
7. How much can you do to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy?
8. How well can you establish a classroom management system with each group of students?
9. How much can you use a variety of assessment strategies?
10. To what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example when students are confused?
11. How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school?
12. How well can you implement alternative strategies in your classroom?

The items on the TSES instrument are scored using a 9-point scale from nothing (1) to a great deal (9). Survey items fall into three subscales: efficacy for management, efficacy for instruction, and efficacy for engagement.

In previous research, the Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities for the 12-item form of the TSES ranged from 0.81 to 0.86 (Retrieved December 3, 2005 from http://www.coe.ohio-state.edu/ahoy/researchinstruments.htm#Sense). Reliability for the current study was 0.91.

*Teachers’ Sense of Trust in Students and Parents*

To measure teachers’ trust in students and parents, one subtest from the Omnibus T-Scale (OTS) (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, in press), the trust in clients subtest, was used. In particular, this subtest focuses on teachers’ trust in both students and parents. For the purpose of this study, items were reworded to allow looking at individual teachers’ beliefs (“I trust...” rather than “The teachers in this school trust...”). Items on the instrument are noted in Table 36.
Survey Items

1. I trust my students.
2. I trust the parents’ of my students.
3. My students’ parents are reliable in their commitments.
4. I believe my students are competent learners.
5. I think that most of my students’ parents do a good job raising their children.
6. I believe what my students tell me.

Table 3.6: 6 Item Teachers’ Trust in Students and Parents Scale (in press).

The items on the trust instrument are scored using a 6-point scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (6). The teachers’ responses to the items are averaged to give each teacher a mean score for the construct. In previous research, the reliability for the Omnibus Trust Scale ranged from 0.90 to 0.98 (retrieved February 15, 2006 from http://www.coe.ohio-state.edu/whoy/instruments_6.htm#Omnibus). The reliability of the trust in clients’ subtest of the Omnibus Trust Scale on the current study was 0.82.

Teachers’ Sense of Academic Emphasis

To measure academic emphasis, one subtest from the Organizational Climate Index (OCI) created by Goddard, Sweetland, and Hoy (2000) specifically focuses on “achievement press” (otherwise known as academic press). This measure is used to describe the organizational climate of schools. In particular, the academic press
subtest is meant to describe parents’, teachers’, and the principals’ press for high, but achievable academic standards and goals. For the purpose of this study, items were reworded to facilitate looking at the classroom climate from an individual teacher’s perspective. Items on the instrument are listed in Table 3.7.

**Survey Items**

1. My students respect their classmates who get good grades.
2. My students seek extra work so they can get good grades.
3. Students in my classroom can achieve the goals that I set for them.
4. My students’ parents exert pressure to maintain high academic standards.
5. My students’ parents press for classroom improvement.
6. My students are cooperative during classroom instruction.

Table 3.7: 6 Item Classroom Academic Press Scale. Source: Adapted from Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy (2000).

The items on the OCI are scored on a 6-point scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (6). The teachers’ responses to the items are averaged to give each teacher an average score for the construct.

In research by Hoy, Smith, and Sweetland (2001) the reliability of the academic press subtest of the OCI was 0.92. For this current student, the reliability the OCI was 0.60. In previous research, factor analysis of the instrument supported the validity of the construct as items loaded strongly on the predicted dimensions.
Teachers’ Commitment to the Profession

To measure teachers’ commitment to the profession, the Organizational Citizenship Behavior Scale (OCB) (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2001; DiPaolo, Tarter, & Hoy, 2005) was modified to access teacher-level beliefs. Table 3.8 depicts the items on the instrument reflecting teachers’ willingness to “go the extra mile” to ensure students succeed. The 7-item Likert-type scale has a consistently high reliability (0.86 to 0.93,) and the construct validity was supported in three separate factor analyses (DiPaolo, Tarter, & Hoy, 2005). The reliability for the current study was 0.69.

Survey Items

1. I serve on committees in this school.
2. I begin class promptly and use class time effectively.
3. I make suggestions to school leaders to improve the overall quality of our school.
4. I help students during my own time.
5. I arrive to work and meetings on time.
6. I make it easy for parents to contact me at school or home.
7. I invite parents to volunteer in or visit my classroom almost any time.

Table 3.8: 7 Item Teacher Commitment Scale. Source: Adapted from DiPaolo, Tarter, & Hoy (2005).
**Demographic Data**

Several demographic questions were included on the instrument for the current study to collect a profile about the participants (years of teaching experience, certification/licensure type, and highest degree attained,) and their teaching context.

These background variables with categorical answers and level of measurement are presented in Table 3.9.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Level of Measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years of teaching experience</td>
<td>Reported in years</td>
<td>Ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest earned degree</td>
<td>(1) Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Ordinal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Bachelor’s Plus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Some Master’s Work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4) Master’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5) Some Doctoral Work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6) Doctorate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School setting</td>
<td>(1) Rural</td>
<td>Nominal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Suburban</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Urban</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification/Licensure type</td>
<td>(1) Pre K-3 Licensure</td>
<td>Nominal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) 1-6 Certification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) 4-9 Licensure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4) Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>Reported as a number</td>
<td>Ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students with Individualized Education Program</td>
<td>Reported as a number</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students with 504 accommodations</td>
<td>Reported as a number</td>
<td>Ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students with free or reduced lunch</td>
<td>Reported as a number</td>
<td>Ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students considered English language learners</td>
<td>Reported as a number</td>
<td>Ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects taught</td>
<td>(1) Language arts</td>
<td>Nominal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Mathematics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4) Social sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5) Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students from ethnic or racial minorities</td>
<td>Reported as a number</td>
<td>Ratio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.9 Demographic Information
Pilot Study and Instrument Development

Before the questionnaires were mailed to the sample population, a pilot test was completed to analyze the factor structure and reliability of three instruments (Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale, Omnibus Trust Scale modified for individual teachers, and the Organizational Climate Index). In particular, the study measured the reliability of the three measures of academic optimism (teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in students and parents, and academic emphasis).

Sample

Sixty-eight questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of third grade teachers in the State of Ohio. The population was randomly selected from a similar target population as used in the study and the results allowed careful consideration of the three instruments. Thirty-one completed instruments were returned. Thus the response rate was 47%. None of the participants in the pilot study were included in the current study.

Data Collection

Because they are traditionally used as organizational level measures, the items assessing trust in students and parents and academic emphasis at the individual level were examined using principal component factor analysis to ensure that a single construct at the individual level was captured. Structure of the scale was tested. In addition, the results of the TSES were factor analyzed to confirm the expected existence of the three subscales (efficacy for instruction, efficacy for management, and efficacy for engagement) generally found in other work. Based on the results of these analyses, the number of items on the measures of trust and emphasis were
reduced by eliminating those factors with the lowest factor loadings. Results of the
factor analyses are shown in Table 3.10; the loading of the retained items are shown
in bold. In Table 3.10, F1 represents factor loadings for efficacy in management, F2
corresponds with factor loadings for efficacy for engagement, and F3 stands for factor
loadings for efficacy for instruction. Bold numbers represent the highest factor
loadings of the three factors. In every case, the highest loading was associated with
the appropriate factor as expected, based on previous research.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure of Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy</th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>F3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How much can you control disruptive behavior in the classroom?</td>
<td><strong>0.668</strong></td>
<td>0.291</td>
<td>0.178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How much can you do to motivate students?</td>
<td>0.304</td>
<td><strong>0.539</strong></td>
<td>0.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How much can you do to get students to believe they can do well in school work?</td>
<td>0.249</td>
<td><strong>0.927</strong></td>
<td>-0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How much can you do to help your students value learning?</td>
<td>0.300</td>
<td><strong>0.623</strong></td>
<td>0.290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. To what extent can you craft good questions for your students?</td>
<td>-0.134</td>
<td><strong>0.284</strong></td>
<td>0.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How much can you do to get children to follow classroom rules?</td>
<td><strong>0.822</strong></td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How much can you do to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy?</td>
<td><strong>0.905</strong></td>
<td>0.144</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How well can you establish a classroom management system with each group of students?</td>
<td><strong>0.497</strong></td>
<td>0.287</td>
<td>0.479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. How much can you use a variety of assessment strategies?</td>
<td>-0.062</td>
<td>0.094</td>
<td><strong>0.672</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. To what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example when students are confused?</td>
<td>0.265</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td><strong>0.750</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school? 0.556 0.249 0.374

12. How well can you implement alternative strategies in the classroom? 0.333 0.463 0.591

---

**Measure of academic emphasis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I set high standards for my students.</td>
<td>0.351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My students try hard to improve on previous work.</td>
<td>0.641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My students respect their classmates who get good grades.</td>
<td>0.781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My students seek extra work so they can get good grades.</td>
<td>0.755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My students’ parents exert pressure to maintain high academic standards.</td>
<td>0.723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged in my classroom.</td>
<td>0.223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Students in my classroom can achieve the goals I set for them.</td>
<td>0.694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. My students’ parents press for class improvement.</td>
<td>0.760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. My students neglect to complete homework.</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. My students are cooperative during classroom interaction.</td>
<td>0.701</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measure of teacher trust in students and parents

1. I trust my students. \(0.802\)

2. I trust the parents of my students. \(0.796\)

3. The students in the classroom care about each other. \(0.510\)

4. I count on my students to do their work. \(0.518\)

5. My students’ parents are reliable in their commitments. \(0.726\)

6. I count on my students’ parents to support my decisions. \(0.649\)

7. I believe my students are competent learners. \(0.767\)

8. I think that most of my students’ parents do a good job raising their children. \(0.812\)

9. I believe what my students tell me. \(0.563\)

10. I believe what my students’ parents tell me. \(0.707\)

11. My students here are secretive. \(0.349\)

12. I have to carefully supervise my students. \(0.356\)

13. My students seek extra work so they can get good grades. \(0.639\)

Table 3.10 Factor Loading for the Pilot Study

Note: Bolded loadings indicate items selected for full study

To garner more information about the problematic items, the researcher continued the pilot work by interviewing three third grade teachers. These teachers evaluated and commented on the strengths and weaknesses of the instruments. Their suggestions and thoughts allowed the researcher to refine the demographic questions
and wording in several of the items on the instrument. For example, the teachers suggested the item “My students neglect to complete their homework” be changed to “My students rarely complete their homework.”

Statistical Methodology

The survey instruments used in the study were machine scored sheets. The researcher sent the instruments to The Ohio State University’s Office of Testing. The instruments were processed immediately, and the researcher received a SPSS file to begin analyzing the data. Preliminary descriptive statistics were performed on the data. The significance level adopted for this study was $p \leq 0.05$. The unit of analysis is the individual teachers’ classroom level; therefore all data were aggregated to the teacher level. In particular, simple descriptive analysis (means and standard deviations) were determined and a simple correlation coefficients matrix was constructed to analyze initial relationships among the collected data.

To examine the data, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences: SPSS Version 14 for Windows was used.

Summary

This chapter described the methodology utilized in this study. The sample, data collection procedures, and operational definitions for the variables were outlined. Finally, the statistical applications used in the data analysis section of the study were explained.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter provides the results from the analysis of data including response rate, the representativeness of the data sample, reliability of the instruments, descriptive statistics, and correlations among variables. Further, four research hypotheses presented in chapter 1 are addressed. Finally, several exploratory analyses are described.

Sample of Third and Fourth Grade Ohio Teachers

Descriptive data for this study were collected from a sample of full time, third and fourth grade teachers within the state of Ohio. Random sampling techniques were used to select 350 schools with third and fourth grades. Web investigation and phone calls to the schools located 220 schools with names available for teachers. The total number of identified teachers to receive the survey was 351.

The teachers in this study self-identified their schools as urban (26.6%), suburban (36.2%), or rural (37.2%). The percentages represent a relatively equal distribution of sample participants across school location. In addition, teachers reported an average of 21.7 students in their classroom (SD =3.72).
Return Rate and Comparison of Response Time Groups

The data collection occurred at two time points: October-December, 2005 and February, 2006. During the first time period, surveys were mailed to the 351 third and fourth grade teachers identified using the procedures described in Chapter 3. Reminder postcards were sent one week after the initial mailing. Two-hundred seven (207) teachers responded to the first mailing. During the second time period, another survey packet was sent to the participants who had not responded to the mailing during October-December in order to determine if non-responders differed from those replying to the initial data collection. Eighteen (18) surveys were returned. In all, 225 survey responses (64.1%) were received.

Usable questionnaires were defined as having 66% or more responses completed. Twenty-one (21) out of the initial respondents were deleted from the database, either because they failed to answer at least 33% of the questions or because they had left the classroom; thus there were 204 usable responses.

The responses from time period one (October-December) were compared with February responses using a t-test for independent groups to determine whether the non-responders differed from the initial group. No significant differences were found between the two groups on the independent variables of the study (teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in students and parents, and academic emphasis), the dependent variable of professional commitment, teacher variables (years of experience, certification/licensure status, and degree attained), or classroom characteristics (percent of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, identified students, and
minority group membership). Thus, the two samples were merged into one data set of 205 teachers, making the useable return rate 58.4%.

Representativeness of the Return Sample

In Table 4.1, classroom characteristics of the teachers’ in the data sample are compared to all classrooms in Ohio based on enrollment data for the 2004-2005 school year (http://www.ode.state.oh.us).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Factor</th>
<th>Percent Statewide</th>
<th>Percent in Data Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students from low socioeconomic status</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students from minority backgrounds</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students labeled as disabled</td>
<td>13.50</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1. Comparison of State of Ohio and Data Sample Student Factors

My data sample had a slightly greater representation of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (state: 31%; sample 39%). Percentages in the data sample were similar to those from the state for students from minority backgrounds (state: 22.7%; sample 22%) and students labeled as disabled, needing an IEP or 504 (state: 13.5%; sample: 15%).
Data Analysis

First, the descriptive statistics for the variables of the study are summarized including the categorical variables describing teacher factors. Then correlations between the major variables of the study are presented along with the alpha reliabilities of the measures for each variable.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 4.2 depicts the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation for the major, teacher, and classroom context variables examined in the study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Emphasis</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Efficacy</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>7.55</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>17.46</td>
<td>10.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classroom Context</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Size</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21.74</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>5.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority Students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students identified</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2. Descriptive Characteristics of Major, Teacher, and Classroom Context Variables Examined in the Study.

All variables showed substantial ranges with low minimum scores and high maximum scores. The standard deviations for the major variables were less than one.

Table 4.3 describes teachers’ highest earned degree, certification/licensure type, and subjects taught. The largest percentage of teachers in the data sample
(62.6%) had Master’s Degrees. Seventy (70) percent of teachers had licensures other than those listed on the survey instrument. This disproportionate percentage in the “other” category probably occurred because the state of Ohio has undergone multiple changes in certification/licensure requirements, including changing the grade levels encompassed within elementary certification/licensure. Teachers in the sample with more than 10 years of experiences likely received a 1-8 certificate; a category not included in this survey instrument but a likely the certification of many of the respondents. Furthermore, most teachers taught multiple subjects: 87.2% taught language arts, 80.5% taught mathematics, 88.7% taught social studies, and 49.7% taught other subjects. Thus, the data sample represented a wide range of teacher experience and classroom contexts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Percent of the Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest earned degree</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor’s plus</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some Master’s work</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>62.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some Doctoral work</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification/Licensure type</td>
<td>Pre K-3 Licensure</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-6 Certification</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4-9 Licensure</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects taught</td>
<td>Language Arts</td>
<td>87.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>88.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>74.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>49.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 Education, Certification/Licensure, and Subjects Taught by Teachers in the Data Sample

*Correlations Between Variables*

Table 4.4 depicts the Pearson bivariate correlational statistics for each of the research variables. The reliability for each of the instruments used in the study is on the diagonal in Table 4.4 in italics. Because the reliabilities for academic emphasis and commitment fell below 0.70, each scale was examined using a principal component analysis to determine if deleting some of the items would improve the reliability of the scales. The results of these analyses indicated that the reliabilities could not be improved. Thus, the original items were retained for all instruments in all subsequent analyses.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teacher Efficacy</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Academic Emphasis</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Free/Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>Minority Groups</th>
<th>Identified Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Efficacy</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.458**</td>
<td>0.386**</td>
<td>0.357**</td>
<td>-0.103</td>
<td>-0.189**</td>
<td>-0.090</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.581**</td>
<td>0.281**</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>-0.471**</td>
<td>-0.192**</td>
<td>-0.131</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Emphasis</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.223**</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>-0.435**</td>
<td>-0.218**</td>
<td>-0.165*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.120</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.561**</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority Groups</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified Students</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Correlations is significant at p<.05 (2-tailed) **Correlation is significant at p<.01 (2-tailed).

Table 4.4. Correlations between the Major Variables and Reliabilities of the Instruments (on the diagonal)
Significant correlations were found between many of the variables. There were
significant relationships between teachers’ sense of efficacy and trust \((r = .46, p<.01)\),
teachers’ sense of efficacy and academic emphasis \((r = .39, p<.01)\), teachers’ sense of
efficacy and commitment \((r = .36, p<.01)\), teachers’ sense of efficacy and the number of
students qualifying for free or reduced lunch \((r = -.19, p<.01)\), teachers’ sense of
academic emphasis and commitment \((r = .27, p<.01)\), teachers’ sense of academic
emphasis and the number of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch \((r = .44,
p<.01)\), teachers’ sense of academic emphasis and the number of minority students \((r =
.22, p<.01)\), teachers’ sense of academic emphasis and the number of identified students
\((r = .17, p<.05)\), and the number of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch and the
number of minority students \((r = .56, p<.01)\). Most correlations were moderate to low.
The highest correlations were among the three variables hypothesized to comprise the
construct of academic optimism.

*Factor Analysis of the TSES*

Previous research has identified three related factors of the Teachers’ Sense of
Efficacy Scale (TSES): Efficacy for Management, Efficacy for Engagement, and
Efficacy for Instruction (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Before addressing
hypothesis 1, the TSES results were examined using a principal axis factor analysis
with an oblique rotation (Table 4.5). The three efficacy factors, which were identified
in previous research (Brouwers, & Tomic, 2003; Denzine, Cooney, & McKenzie, 2005;
Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 2001) were found to be relatively consistent
and stable for this sample, as shown in Table 4.5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much can you get children to follow classroom rules?</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much can you do to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy?</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much can you control disruptive behavior in the classroom?</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well can you establish a classroom management system with each group of students?</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much can you do to help your students value learning?</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in school work?</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much can you do to get students to believe they can do well in school work?</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well can you implement alternative strategies in the classroom?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much can you use a variety of assessment strategies?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example when students are confused?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent can you craft good questions for your students?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5: Factor Loadings for Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale
Loadings on the engagement and instruction factors were not quite as high as usually found, but the alpha reliabilities for the scales were reasonable: efficacy for instruction =.79; efficacy for management =.86; efficacy for student engagement =.77.

**Overall Teacher Efficacy Score**

Next, to create an overall efficacy score for each respondent, the three TSES subscales of management, instruction, and engagement were submitted to a principal axis factor analysis (Table 4.6). A single factor (eigenvalue greater than one), labeled overall teachers’ sense of efficacy, emerged accounting for 65.82% of the variance. As can be seen in Table 4.6, all three subtests loaded strongly on the first factor (.77 to .87); hence, a single teachers’ sense of efficacy score was created using the factor score generated by the principal axis analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy for engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy for management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy for instruction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6. Principal Factor Analysis Loadings for the Teacher Sense of Efficacy

**Test of Research Hypotheses**

H1. *Teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in parents and students, and sense of academic emphasis form a general construct called academic optimism.*

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To test the first hypotheses, a second-order factor analysis was performed on the standardized scores on teachers’ overall sense of efficacy, trust in students and parents, and academic emphasis that yielded only one factor with an eigenvalue greater than one, which accounted for 51.8% of the variance (Table 4.7). Therefore, teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in students and parents, and academic emphasis formed a single second-order construct, which was labeled academic optimism. Hence, hypothesis 1 was supported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Emphasis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.7. Second-Order Factor Analysis of Overall Efficacy, Trust, and Academic Emphasis

As a further examination of the construct, all items on the efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis scales were submitted to a reliability analysis. Cronbach’s alpha for the 24 items was 0.90, indicating a high internal consistency of the general construct of academic optimism, supporting the notion of academic optimism as a construct.

*H2. The classroom context (socioeconomic status, identified students, and number of students from ethnic and racial minorities) is related to academic optimism.*
To address this hypothesis, first, zero-order correlations were calculated between academic optimism and each of the classroom context variables: students qualifying for free/reduced lunch, students identified with special needs, and students from minority groups (all computed as percentages based on total number of students in a classroom). As shown in Table 4.8, there is a significant negative relationship between academic optimism and percent of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch \( (r = -0.433, p<0.01) \) and percent of students from minority backgrounds \( (r = -0.208, p<0.01) \), the more students qualifying for free/reduced lunch and the greater the percentage of minority students, the lower the level of academic optimism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>( r )</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch</td>
<td>-0.433**</td>
<td>-0.450**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students from minority backgrounds</td>
<td>-0.208**</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of identified students</td>
<td>-0.106</td>
<td>-0.054</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significant at \( p<0.01 \) (2-tailed); \( R=0.44 \) and adjusted \( R^2=0.18 \)

Table 4.8. Correlational and Regression Analyses for Academic Optimism and Classroom Context Variables

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate how well the classroom context variables predicted teachers’ level of academic optimism. The linear combination of classroom context variables was significantly related to teachers’ level of academic optimism, \( F(3,191) = 15.04, p<0.01 \). The multiple correlation coefficient
was 0.44, indicating that approximately 18% of the variance in the sample can be accounted for by the linear combination of the classroom context variables.

Also in Table 4.8, the relative strength of the individual predictors is presented. The only one of the three classroom context variables (number of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch) had an independent effect on teachers’ academic optimism; the percent of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch ($\beta = -.450$, $p<.01$) was significantly related to academic optimism, controlling for all the other variables in the regression. Hypothesis 2 was supported; the context variables explained 18 percent of the variance in academic optimism.

H3. Teacher expertise (years of teaching, certification/licensure type, and highest degree attained) is related to academic optimism.

There was no relationship between academic optimism and years of experience ($r=-.01$, $p>.05$) or teachers’ highest degree attained ($r=-.02$, $p>.05$). Because certification/licensure type is a categorical variable, analysis of variance was used to examine the relationship between licensure and academic optimism. Again, no significant relationship was found between certification/licensure types and academic optimism. Therefore, teacher expertise, as measured by experience, certification/licensure and teachers’ highest degree attained, was not related to academic optimism. The hypothesis was not supported.
H4. The construct of academic optimism is related to teachers’ professional commitment.

Pearson bivariate correlation between academic optimism and teachers’ professional commitment was significant (r=.34, p<.01) and supported the fourth hypothesis. To further study the relationship between teachers’ level of academic optimism and commitment to the profession, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the individual contributions of academic optimism, the classroom context, and teacher variables (Table 4.9). The only significant predictor of commitment was academic optimism (β=.412, p<.01). Virtually all the explained variance in teacher commitment was due to academic optimism; classroom context and teacher expertise variables were unrelated to commitment in the regression.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>( r )</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic optimism</strong></td>
<td>0.344**</td>
<td>0.412**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.0099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students from minority backgrounds</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td>0.0140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of identified students</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ years of experience in the classroom</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>0.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ highest degree attained</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students in the classroom</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>0.072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of the school</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
<td>0.107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p<0.01 (2-tailed),  * p<0.05 (2-tailed); R=.403 and adjusted \( R^2 = .163 \)

Table 4.9. Correlational and Regression Analyses for Commitment and Academic Optimism, Classroom Context, and Teacher Variables
Other Findings

Two other relationships were explored. Teachers’ sense of academic optimism was positively related to the teachers’ estimates of how their students would perform on the state achievement/proficiency tests (r=.242, p<.01). Therefore, when teachers possessed a sense of academic optimism, they believed their students would score higher on the state examinations, which suggests that academic optimism may be related to student achievement (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006; McGuigan & Hoy, in press).

A significant relationship was found between the location of the school (urban, rural, or suburban) and teachers’ sense of academic optimism (r=.171, p<.05). Urban teachers tended to respond with lower levels of academic optimism than rural and suburban teachers, but the correlation is so small as to suggest practical insignificance.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the results from the statistical procedures used to examine the construct of academic optimism. Correlational, factor, and regression analyses were employed. Findings supported the existence of the general construct of individual teacher academic optimism that was related to teachers’ professional commitment. Classroom context variables predicted academic optimism but not teacher professional commitment. Teacher expertise variables were related to neither optimism nor commitment.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This chapter summarizes the findings from this study, discusses implications of those findings, and presents recommendations for future research.

Research in the field of teacher beliefs is extensive. Since 1977 when Walberg wrote about the mental lives of teachers, teachers’ cognitive processes have been examined using multiple theoretical frames. Beliefs have been correlated with learning, instruction, motivation, and student outcomes (Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006). Pajares’s (1992) conception of teacher beliefs as messy constructs encouraged many researchers to untangle the confusing web of the influence teacher beliefs have on their students, teaching, and community. In the past decade, research into teacher thinking has exploded as many scholars see the powerful influence of teacher beliefs on student learning (Weinstein, 2002). This particular study contributes to the teacher belief
knowledge base through an examination of positive teacher beliefs related to commitment to their profession.

Using the two theoretical frames of social cognitive theory and positive psychology, this study examined positive traits of teachers related to their commitment. Social cognitive theory allows the researcher to analyze the environment, behavior, and personal traits of teachers (Bandura, 1986). Positive psychology seeks to understand individual traits related to one’s ability to flourish (Seligman, 2000). Together, the two frames can be used to assess the positive behavioral, environmental, and personal strengths related to a teachers’ commitment to the profession.

Three over-arching questions guided this study:

1) Do teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in their students and parents, and academic emphasis form the general construct, teachers’ sense of academic optimism?

2) Are classroom context variables related to teachers’ academic optimism?

3) Are teacher expertise variables related to teachers’ academic optimism?

4) Is teachers’ sense of academic optimism related to their commitment to the profession?

To address these questions, appropriate measures for the set of variables (teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in students and parents, and academic emphasis) were selected. Next, a model was crafted to represent the nature of relationships among the variables in the study. The variables and model were tested using correlational, factor analytic, and regression techniques. The results from the analyses are summarized in the following section.
Summary of Research Findings

The main purpose of this study was to identify the construct of academic optimism, which was comprised of teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in students and parents, and sense of academic emphasis. The relationship between teachers’ academic optimism and their commitment to the profession was analyzed, as well. Finally, tests of significance were conducted to determine if teacher variables (number of years in the classroom, certification/licensure status, and highest degree attained) and student factors (socio-economic status, ethnicity, and disability status) influenced a teachers’ level of academic optimism.

A survey instrument was mailed to a group of 351 randomly selected third and fourth grade teachers employed in the state of Ohio. In addition to the survey, the sample population received a letter explaining the survey, a self-addressed, stamped returned envelope, a stamped postcard, and a pencil incentive. To ensure anonymity, participants were instructed to mail the postcard when returning the survey so the researcher could remove the participant’s name from the sample list. Two-hundred twenty-five responses were received for a return rate of 64.1%.

The survey instrument consisted of items from pre-existing measures including Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), the Omnibus Trust Scale (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, in press), Academic Press Scale (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2001), and the Organizational Citizenship Behavior Scale (DiPaolo, Tarter, & Hoy, 2005). A summary of results from the data collection follows below.
Findings

1. The factor structure of the teachers’ sense of efficacy was stable for the data sample of the study; efficacy for management, efficacy for instruction, and efficacy for student engagement are three related aspects of teachers’ sense of efficacy.

2. The three aspects of efficacy load on a single factor called overall teachers’ sense of efficacy. Thus, the overall teacher efficacy score is measured by the factor score of the analysis.

3. Teachers’ overall sense of efficacy, trust in their students and parents, and sense of academic emphasis formed a single, general construct called academic optimism.

4. Although classroom context variables (students’ socioeconomic status and minority backgrounds) were related to academic optimism, teacher expertise variables were not.

5. Teachers’ sense of academic optimism was positively related to teachers’ commitment to the profession. Classroom context and teacher expertise variables were not related to commitment.

In brief, the study supported three of the four proposed hypotheses.

Discussion of Research Findings

The following section analyzes the construct of academic optimism and then relates it to classroom context and teacher factors. Finally, the relationship between academic optimism and commitment is explored.
The Construct of Academic Optimism

Academic optimism has been examined as an organizational or school-wide variable (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, in press; Hoy, Woolfolk Hoy, & Tarter, 2006). This study, however, explored individual teachers’ sense of academic optimism. Comprised of teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in students and parents, and sense of academic emphasis, teachers’ sense of academic optimism is a self-referent, positive belief about the capacity to teach all students, to form trusting relationships with students and parents, and to prioritize academic tasks.

Collapsing teachers’ sense of efficacy, trust in their students and parents, and academic emphasis into one single general construct of academic optimism enables researchers to consider the multiple, positive presses on teacher thinking as one variable. Using Bandura’s Triadic Reciprocal structure (1986), researchers understand the multi-dimensional nature of individual teacher’s positive beliefs. In particular, teachers with high academic optimism believe they can make a difference, that their students can learn, and academic performance can be achieved (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, in press; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006).

Using a positive psychology framework, academic optimism as a single, general construct celebrates teachers’ strengths and virtues. In particular, optimal classroom functioning occurs when teachers believe in themselves, their students, and the importance of the content. Bringing together the three facets of academic optimism within a positive psychology frame, teachers’ positive beliefs are acknowledged as important to the well-being of the classroom. Academic optimism examines the
multidimensional, active, and influential nature of teachers’ positive beliefs in the classroom setting.

*Teachers’ sense of efficacy and academic optimism.* As scholarship in teacher sense of efficacy has exploded over the past 15 years, conference proceedings, education journal articles, and Ohio’s assessment of novice teachers include descriptions of the value of teacher efficacy. Most agree that teacher efficacy makes a difference in the well-being of a classroom (Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2005; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). A sampling of the recent scholarship examines the positive and direct relationships between teacher efficacy and their effort, persistence, aspiration, attainable goals, planning, organization, and openness to new ideas (Woolfolk Hoy & Davis, 2005). Considering the positive relationships between teacher efficacy and teacher behaviors and beliefs, the relationship between teacher efficacy and academic optimism makes conceptual sense. When teachers are optimistic, they possess positive beliefs about their abilities in the classroom, persist at challenging tasks, set high aspirations, feel open to new ideas, and possess enthusiastic dispositions: all traits of an optimistic individual (Seligman, 2006).

*Trust and academic optimism.* With visions of working with our future generations, teachers are trusted to maximize the learning of all children. When the classroom doors close, communities entrust their children with teachers. When this trust exists in schools, teachers take risks to ensure that all students learn (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).
Teachers’ inclination to trust their students and parents is important, as well. Only when teachers feel a sense of interdependence between themselves, students, and parents can learning continue past school walls to the home. As Tschannan-Moran (2004) comments, “Trust is a glue that holds things together, as well as a lubricant that reduces friction and facilitates smooth operations” (p. 38). Parents and teachers must see themselves as the “glue” or partners in student learning, working together in collaborative projects to maximize student achievement. When teachers are optimistic, they trust their abilities to learn and trust the students’ parents to support them in the classroom, also a trait of an optimistic individual (Seligman, 2006).

Academic emphasis and academic optimism. Finally, teachers’ academic emphasis aligns with academic optimism. When teachers prioritize academic tasks, they set high expectations for student achievement. Teachers with strong academic emphasis expect students to succeed on tasks in the classroom. These teachers do not think of students in terms of deficits or limitations, instead students’ strengths and places of possible assent are prioritized, again a characteristic of optimistic thinking (Seligman, 2006).

In the popular story, Tuesdays with Morrie (1992), the author, Albom, recounts conversations with a favorite professor and writes, “Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? (p. 192). Shouldn’t all teachers see their students as precious jewels in need of a good shine? In other words, teachers filled with academic emphasis see the academic potential in all their students and
work to reveal student possibilities. In general, teachers with high levels of academic emphasis see the possibilities, not the limitations, of their students and work to uncover and cultivate students’ academic strengths. Together, the three components of academic emphasis allow teachers to focus on excellence for the multiple presses on the classroom environment: teachers, students, parents, and content.

*Academic optimism and student achievement.* At the organizational level, academic optimism has been related to student achievement (Hoy et al., in press; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006). Thus, it is reasonable to speculate that individual teachers’ academic optimism might be related to student achievement, as well. Previous research has linked the components of academic optimism (efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis) to student achievement and other important learning and motivation outcomes for students and teachers (Hoy et al., in press; Hoy, et. al, 2006, McGuigan & Hoy, 2006).

Examining the individual components of academic optimism reveals possible links between academic optimism and student achievement. Efficacious trusting teachers focus on academics, set high standards, put forth effort, take time to form supportive relationships with students and parents, persist in the face of difficulties, communicate positive beliefs to students, and create a positive tone in the classroom—all factors related to student learning (Hoy et al., in press; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2005; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). Academically optimistic teachers trust themselves to maximize the learning of all students while working with parents and community
members. Arguably, a walk down a school hallway could identify which teachers have high levels of academic optimism. Academically optimistic teachers have their classroom doors open, community members participating in the class, and all students engaged in academic tasks.

*The Classroom Context and Academic Optimism*

The classroom context is a multi-layered, complex environment. While external pressures regarding curriculum, accountability, and reform movements influence the classroom, students bring their diverse backgrounds and experiences to the classroom, as well. Since the Coleman Report (1966), researchers have found that students’ backgrounds significantly influence student achievement and classroom functioning (Woolfolk, 2004). Findings from this study support prior research (Good & Brophy, 1980; Weinstein, 2002).

The findings from this study are consistent with the Coleman Report (1966); the socioeconomic statuses and minority backgrounds of students were related to teachers’ sense of academic optimism. With this information, teacher educators and school leaders must look at ways to diminish the negative effects of teacher beliefs based on students’ backgrounds. In particular, the difference between students and teachers’ backgrounds tends to lead to misunderstandings of the needs and strengths of all students (Saft & Pianta, 2001). Teachers must be encouraged to explore their beliefs about the mismatch in teacher and student backgrounds maximize the learning of all students (R. Weinstein, Gregory, & Strambler, 2004).
Interestingly enough, the number of students identified with special needs and/or as English Language Learners were not significantly related to teachers’ sense of academic optimism. This finding suggests that teachers do not alter their positive beliefs about teaching and their students as a result of having identified students in their classrooms.

Teacher Expertise and Academic Optimism

Teacher expertise was not related to teachers’ academic optimism. Therefore, teachers have the potential to use a positive framework. In particular, teachers’ years of experience of teaching was not related to their sense of academic optimism. In other words, the myth or stereotype of the tenured and “burned out” teacher possessing diminished beliefs in themselves, students, and academics was not supported in this study.

With one-third of teachers leaving the profession within the first five years, researchers strive to understand the differences among teachers with varying experience (Certo & Fox, 2002). With the finding that years of experience, degree, and licensure/certification status had no influence over teacher beliefs, school districts should not use these factors in employment decisions.

In addition, most states require teachers receive a masters’ degree within the first five to ten years of teaching (actual policies vary across states). The findings from the study inform these requirements because the teachers’ degree had no relationship to their commitment to the profession. Questions arise concerning the necessity of the mandates. As Day, Eliot, and Kington (2005), comment,
Whilst teachers may well mobilize ‘occasional identities’ in response to new challenges and changing circumstances, this research indicates that nested within these lie sets of core values-based identities which relate to strongly held purposes and principles of care and commitment to pupils’ learning and achievement, and which transcend transitory agendas of imposed change. In the management and implementation of change and reform agendas by governments, there is no evidence that these core identities are acknowledged or valued (p. 575).

Careful consideration of the mandates should include reflecting on the influence of cognitive traits or the “core identities” of the teachers on student learning. Thinking outside of the measurable teacher factors (years of experience, degrees, and licensure/certification status) to consider implicit structures related to teacher commitment and student achievement must occur in our quest to improve educational practices.

**Academic Optimism and Professional Commitment**

The International Optimists Club adopted a creed in 1912 including a promise, “To think only of the best, to work only for the best, and to expect only the best” (www.optimist.org/index.html). With this creed, optimistic teachers embark upon the teaching career ready to devote incredible amounts of time and energy and strive for the best results.

Hence, optimistic teachers are more committed to the profession and their students. This finding aligns with wisdom of practice; if teachers believe in their
teaching ability, trust their students, and emphasize academic instruction, they put more time and energy into the profession. Considering the minimal nature of the extrinsic motivators (including salary, benefits, and autonomy), great teachers enter the profession to make a positive difference in children’s lives. These teachers are motivated by watching students learn and grow and committed to creating bright futures for all their students.

As academic optimism is a resilient belief, so too is teacher commitment. Residing deep within a teachers’ identity, committed teachers have steadfast devotion to enabling students to grow, learn, and become positive and productive members of society. Firestone (1996) found, teachers’ commitment to the profession has a significant influence on student motivation, achievement and attitudes toward learning. Therefore, an indirect relationship probably exists between teachers’ sense of academic optimism and student achievement, with teacher commitment as an intervening variable. When teachers’ believe in themselves, their students, and their content, students will excel. Support for this assertion was found in this study: the teachers’ sense of optimism was related to their predictions of their students’ scores on the upcoming state achievement tests.

Practical Implications

Optimistic beliefs are known to influence one’s health, performance in sporting events, relationships with peers, and many other common life events (Seligman, 2006). When teachers’ possess a sense of optimism, positive things happen in classrooms.
Assuming that it would be valuable to foster and support teachers’ sense of optimism, what are the implications for teacher educators and school leaders?

*Academic Optimism and Teacher Education*

Teacher education programs must examine current practices to determine if their teacher candidates and recent graduates possess a sense of academic optimism. Lortie (1975) mentions that pre-service teachers bring 10,000 hours of classroom experience with them to the task of teaching. With their vast experience as students in a classroom, students have an “apprenticeship of an observation.” Pre-service teachers enter their teacher education program with a perceived sense of experience and expertise. Gaining theoretical information from coursework at the university, practical information from their field experiences and clinical practices, and having time to reflect on the differences between their pre-existing beliefs and the reality of 21st century schools, “false beliefs” tend to dissipate. In their place, teacher educators must empower prospective teachers with optimistic beliefs. Looking at the four sources of teacher efficacy, (mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, physiological experiences, and vicarious experiences) teacher educators gather ideas for how to encourage academic optimism in pre-service teachers.

As the most powerful source of efficacy, teacher educators must consider providing prospective teachers with positive, mastery experiences. Carefully selecting classrooms and mentor teachers to model positive practices, teacher educators ensure their pre-service teachers have practice working in many different classroom settings.
In addition, vicarious experiences are provided in field and clinical experiences when cooperating teachers enact positive practices for the prospective teachers to see. Teacher educators model classroom practices, hence diligent planning of teacher education coursework provides teacher candidates with ideas concerning pedagogies, assessment practices, and effective communication skills.

Teacher educators foster and model trusting relationships. As late-adolescents, many of the pre-service teachers look to develop mentor relationships with their professors. Searching for role models to dialogue about their future classroom practices, pre-service teachers appreciate professors’ willingness to develop personal connections where challenges and concerns regarding their future profession are openly discussed.

Finally, the notion of teaching as a “fall-back” profession must quickly be reversed or dissipated during per-service teachers’ beginning weeks in teacher education programs. Teacher educators must set high standards for all candidates; coursework needs to be rigorous and comprehensive to prepare novice educators for the intensity of teaching in the 21st Century. If the new teachers are ready for the complexity of the teaching tasks, retention and commitment to the profession will increase. With the skills to enact positive classroom practices, the novice teachers will enter the profession with a sense of academic optimism.

Creating a Culture of Academic Optimism in 21st Century Schools

compelled or committed to make great classrooms, to go beyond the status quo and care deeply about maximizing the experience for every child. School cultures fuel teachers’ passion for creating great classroom spaces. Hence, school leaders must find ways to craft a culture of academic optimism in 21st century schools.

The current press for quantitative, accountability measures in the form of grade level proficiency scores, percentage of student high school drop outs, and attendance rates only reveal a small piece of the story of a school (Peterson, 2006). Yet, schools have unwritten rules, traditions, and expectations which craft the culture of their school.

Research on characteristics of effective schools reveals that when high expectations and learning goals are set for all community members, collegial community environments are fostered, change is encouraged and schools are more productive (Peterson, 2006). Hence, academic optimism as an organizational and individual trait, seeks to stimulate the creation and sustenance of positive, school cultures.

Administrators must engage in practices which encourage an optimistic culture among the faculty, students, and community members. Through the creation of an enabling school culture, positive, low-stress environments exist where formal and informal structures encourage open communication, resilience to respond to unanticipated events, and the conceptualizations of mistakes as opportunities for growth. Hypothetically, when teachers feel the support of an enabling school culture, their sense of efficacy, trust in students and parents, and academic emphasis increases.
Furthermore, teachers must be encouraged to develop and maintain optimistic beliefs about their profession, classroom, and students. Many teachers look at diverse students from a deficit approach (Gutierrez, 2002). “Deficit thinking exists when educators hold negative stereotypic, and counterproductive views about culturally diverse students and lower their expectation of these, students accordingly” (Ford & Grantham, 2003, p. 1). To combat deficit thinking, prospective teachers must be taught to value all students, and the diversity they bring to the classroom. Working off a positive paradigm, teachers must see the strengths of every student (Sternberg, 1997). In so doing, teachers create a culture of high expectations for all students (Weinstein, 2002).

Positive Psychology and Academic Optimism

To reverse psychology’s tradition of pathologizing practices by identifying individual deficits or maladies, positive psychology seeks to identify and encourage human strengths and virtues. Whereas traditional psychologists refer to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, positive psychologists use the Handbook and Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Selgiman, 2004). One of the strengths identified in the Handbook is transcendence including appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, optimism, humor, and spirituality. Hence, positive psychologists look at optimism as a foundational and important for general well-being.

Optimism represents a motivational, emotional, and cognitive stance toward the future. In particular, optimists set up positive expectations that good things will be plentiful. Even when faced with a challenging task, optimists exert efforts to overcome
impediments to achieve their set goals (Peterson & Selgiman, 2004). Hence, academically optimistic teachers possess high expectations for all students and members of their community, always seeing the potential for student learning and growth.

With little prior research connecting positive psychology to the classroom context, academic optimism begins to examine teachers’ strengths and virtues related to student achievement. Some implications regarding optimism in the school context are:

- Optimism needs to be cultivated in schools. Teachers, students, and community members must set high expectations and chart successful pathways toward their intended goals. When teachers possess a sense of efficacy, they set high expectations, persist through difficult tasks, and work to achieve set goals; all traits of optimistic individuals.

- Optimism can be used by teachers and students for overcoming learned helplessness/hopelessness. In particular, teachers and students must learn skills for problem solving through impediments toward intended goals. When working with students who may have developed learned helplessness/hopelessness, academically optimistic teachers must help students see that they are capable of mastering particular tasks.

- When teachers possess optimistic beliefs, the positive quality translates into their teaching and professional commitments. Furthermore, optimism rubs off on others. Optimistic teachers help to encourage others see potential in themselves, their students, and the academic content.
• Optimism changes the way teachers talk about students. Academically optimistic teachers avoid the negativity of teachers’ lounge and other situations where students’ weaknesses become public information.

Therefore, teachers must be encouraged to develop and sustain optimistic beliefs, specially their efficacy, trust in students and parents, and emphasis placed to succeed on academic tasks.

Research Considerations

A number of limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study.

1. As a correlational, descriptive study, causal relationships are not addressed. Future research should utilize Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) procedures to look at the causal pathways established in this study, moving from exploratory factor analysis to confirmatory factor analysis.

2. Quantitative data were collected through self-report instruments. When investigating beliefs, multiple research methodologies inform the scholarship surrounding the implicit, invisible nature of beliefs. Future work to understand teachers’ academic optimism should include interviewing participants about the nature of their beliefs.

3. As this study was exploratory in nature, further work must be done to refine and improve the instrument(s). With reliabilities ranging from 0.68 to 0.90, additional investigation into the lower reliabilities could lead to a stronger scale.
4. The findings call for future studies of teachers’ sense of academic optimism to continue investigating the influence of positive beliefs on teacher behaviors.

5. A dynamic relationship exists between teachers’ beliefs and students’ socioeconomic status. Teachers’ sense of academic optimism was significantly higher in areas of middle to high socioeconomic status. In contrast, teachers reported lower levels of academic optimism when their classroom had several students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Questions arise surrounding ways to modify teacher beliefs so that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds have teachers possessing academically optimistic beliefs.

6. The participants in this study were third and fourth grade teachers. Future work must consider teachers from multiple grade levels, including teacher educators.

7. A curvilinear relationship exists in teachers’ commitment to the profession, where novice and well-tenured teachers tend to be least committed (Darling-Hammond, 2000). With no significant direct relationship existing between teachers’ sense of academic optimism and the number of years of teaching experience, future exploration should include an analysis of the curvilinear nature of teachers’ sense of academic optimism with respect to their years in the profession.
Future Scholarship

This study contributes exciting information for scholarship in teacher education and educational psychology. In particular, the results from the study clarify that positive teacher beliefs make a difference. This study should plant a seed from which many research trajectories investigating teacher and student strengths should develop and grow.

Future research questions aligned with this study are:

1. What are the antecedents to academic optimism? Is general life optimism (Seligman, 2005) a small slice of teachers’ sense of academic optimism?
2. Academic optimism is related to teacher commitment and commitment is related to student achievement. Is teachers’ sense of academic optimism related directly to student achievement?
3. Is sense of academic optimism a student characteristic as well as a teacher belief? If so, how does students’ sense of academic optimism influence their achievement, extracurricular activities, motivation, and other related topics?
4. How does teachers’ sense of academic optimism influence and translate into classroom pedagogies?
5. How might the results of this study inform policy regarding the detrimental influences of student factors on teachers’ beliefs?
6. Would a qualitative analysis of teachers with many students from low socioeconomic and minority backgrounds help to clarify why these teachers’ beliefs tend to be less optimistic?
7. Do teachers’ demographic backgrounds (age, sex, race, socioeconomic status, etc.) influence their sense of academic optimism? Does a match or mismatch between student and teacher backgrounds mediate optimistic beliefs?

8. What is the role of teacher education/teacher educators in developing future educators sense of academic optimism?

9. Do teacher educators have a sense of academic optimism? Is so, how does that translate into the creation of higher education classes and assignments?

10. Does the leadership of the principal influence the academic optimism of teachers?

11. To what extent are the organizational climate and the culture of a school related to teacher sense of academic optimism?

12. To what extent does the organizational structure of a school facilitate or depress teacher academic optimism?

13. To what extent is shared decision making related to the academic optimism of teachers?

These are only a few of the important research questions generated by this investigation, which should guide future study.

Two Models to Guide Future Research

With the results of this study that academic optimism exists and positively influences a teachers’ commitment to the profession, multiple models and research trajectories flow from this initial study. First, a model to guide research in teachers’ sense of academic optimism is presented (Figure 5.1). Next, a model to guide research
in students’ sense of academic optimism is outlined (Figure 5.2). Eventually, the two models will be combined to investigate the relationship between teachers and students’ sense of academic optimism.

Figure 5.1. Model to Guide Future Research in Teachers’ Sense of Academic Optimism
Figure 5.2. Model to Guide Future Research in Students’ Sense of Academic Optimism

Conclusion

In a conversation with the South African, Archbishop Desmund Tutu in May, 2003, I asked, “What are the qualities of a great leader?” His response aligns with demand for academically optimistic teachers. Tutu stated:

“The good leader must be someone who dreams. Someone who has a vision and who is able to inspire others to share the dream, and the vision. Also someone who can make others believe that the dream is achievable. The leader must help others to believe in themselves. The leader should be in it (whatever the cause) not for what he/she can get out it, but be there for the sake of others, be truly altruistic….To lead poor people helps to share their lot and to be able to communicate with them, to have a rapport with them, to be on the same
wavelength, and to know what makes them tick. The leader should have integrity and lead by leading, not pandering the populist positions.”

Teachers must feel enabled to become quality leaders, to make positive, lasting change in students’ lives. Teachers must possess the cognitive tools and framework for enabling prospective teachers as leaders in the context of 21st century schools.

During this time of education change and pressure towards increased standardization of teaching, the goal of this investigation was to examine individual teachers’ beliefs about their ability, students, and academic tasks. The outcome of this analysis shows that positive teacher beliefs are related to their commitment to the profession.
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