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### Tennessee Rural Middle School Teachers' Perceptions Of Academic Goal Setting For Students

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**TENNESSEE RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
IMPLEMENTING ACADEMIC GOAL SETTING FOR STUDENTS**  
Dissertation Title (Must be typed)

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**Amy A. Woolum**  
Candidate's Name

and have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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**TENNESSEE RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS  
OF IMPLEMENTING ACADEMIC GOAL SETTING FOR STUDENTS**

**Dissertation**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education  
in the Carter and Moyers School of Education  
at Lincoln Memorial University**

**by**

**Amy A. Woolum**

**February 2023**

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## Dedication

It takes a village to help a doctoral candidate succeed! This journey has been, by far, the most academically challenging process I have ever encountered. I questioned many times what in the HELL did I get myself into? There was no way I could have made it through this long, grueling process without the support and encouragement of my family, friends, and professors.

Alexis, thanks for always encouraging me, studying with me, letting me crash at your apartment once a month, and being a fellow college student with your mommy. Mom, thanks for every meal you made because I was always busy writing, researching, or editing and for grand dog sitting every month when I attended class. Adam, thanks for every edit, feedback lecture, encouraging talk, constantly reminding me to add a “damn subject” to my math brain sentences, and calling out all my sketchy midnight sentence grammar. I’d like to thank my cohort #TheFabFive for their consistent unicorn cheerleading skills. Thanks to my friends for making sure my IRB application was picked up from the hospital, scanned, and emailed on time. Finally, thank you to my doggo Ava, for attending every Zoom session and sitting next to me through writing every page of my masterpiece. Much love and appreciation to all who have helped me along my dissertation journey!

## **Acknowledgments**

I have received much support and encouragement throughout this long, challenging dissertation process. Thank you, first and foremost, to my chair Dr. Gaines who has academically and mentally pushed me every step of the way. Thank you for being patient with my random freakout texts and emails and always being optimistic about my progress. Thank you for all the laughs throughout this stressful journey. Dr. Gaines, I hope you laugh as much as I do every time you hear or want to say, "It Depends," and then either eat a cookie or take a shot.

Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Brown and Dr. Pendergraft, for your feedback and support. Thank you for volunteering your time and efforts toward my success. And most of all, a huge thanks to all of you guys for making me believe that math peeps can write works of art, too. I hope my journey can show people they can accomplish their goals and dreams with the help of a great support team.

## Abstract

Since the 1960s, business leaders and educators used the idea of *goal setting theory* as a guide to success. Teachers who implemented goal setting strategies contributed to student success and achievement. During my study, I found little existing literature focused on academic goal setting implementation for students in Tennessee rural middle schools containing grades six through eight. The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. I sent an online Google Forms questionnaire to 117 certified and licensed teachers in varying Tennessee rural middle schools. After 21 teachers completed the questionnaire, I found participants did not have the same experiences with academic goal setting implementation for students in their middle schools or districts. All 21 participants answered all the questions; however, I only used 20 participant responses for data analysis. I analyzed the data using open, axial, and selective coding to generate themes. The results included varying benefits in implementing student academic goal setting at the middle school level, including increased student motivation and accountability. Professional Learning Communities and various strategies were also perceived as benefits by teachers. On the contrary, additional results yielded perceived barriers to academic goal setting implementation for students, which included a lack of teacher training and experience, time, and student buy in. Rural Middle School teachers needed opportunities to collaborate, hear success stories, and learn strategies behind academic goal setting implementation for students.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Successful personalized learning required goal setting for academic achievement (Caucci, 2021; Day & Tosey, 2011; DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; MacLeod, 2012; Poe et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2016; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Edwin Locke and Gary Latham partnered to develop the goal setting theory in the 1960s and continued to improve the framework and concepts of goal setting with increased research (Cui, n.d.; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Locke and Latham (2019) defined goal setting theory as the outcome of setting goals for future performance.

Researchers explained five goal setting principles (i.e., clarity, challenge, commitment, task complexity, and feedback) increased the chance of achieved success (Cui, n.d.; Locke & Latham, 2006; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Teachers and students should set specific, challenging, and attainable goals to increase motivation, alertness, and academic achievement (O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Robison et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2015). Middle school teachers agreed goal setting was a valuable skill, but they did not feel they had the proper training to implement goal setting with their students (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Researchers suggested the greatest single contributing factor of student achievement related to goal setting was implementing them (Hattie, 2018; Jensen, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Teachers and middle school students who set specific high-quality goals were associated with higher motivation, improved performance, increased levels of self-efficacy, and boosted student involvement (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Researchers explained how the benefits and values of setting goals led to improved mental health and avoided stagnant attitudes (Annarella, 2001; Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Rader, 2005; Riopel, 2019). Since the 1980s, researchers revealed the need to continue investigating the effects of goal setting in academics due to a lack of research at that time (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Students needed support from their teachers to develop goal setting skills due to various goal setting opinions (Farnsworth Finn, 2020; Slovis, 2021). Middle school teachers agreed goal setting was a valuable skill, but the teachers did not feel they had proper training to implement goal setting with their students (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Researchers posited literature details remained vague about how to incorporate goal setting strategies for learning and different age groups (Burns et al., 2019; Deemer, 2004; Scarborough et al., 2010).

The greatest single contributing factor of student achievement related to goal setting was to implement them (Hattie, 2018; Jensen, 2019). Teachers' and students' goal setting strategies developed from urgency because of low academic performance (O'Neill, 2004), and student proficiency levels increased after S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-related) goal implementation (O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Wollny et al., 2019). Wollny et al. (2019) stated the difficulty of setting, writing, and implementing goals for student goal

setting caused frustration; however, students who implemented the S.M.A.R.T. goal framework led to academic achievement (Elias, 2014; O’Neill, 2000, 2004; Wollny et al., 2019). “Many educators will be the first to tell you that setting specific, strategic, measurable goals was new to their practice and took them out of their comfort zone” (O’Neill, 2000, p. 50).

Nordengren (2019) stated without training, goal setting implementation could be complicated. The process of goal setting implementation occurred with time, practice, and reflection changes (Nordengren, 2019; O’Neill, 2000, 2004; Wollny et al., 2019). Students expressed they did not learn goal setting strategies at school, which indicated the need to provide teachers with instructional materials to teach students how to implement important self-empowerment goal setting skills (Garrels, 2017). Regardless of experience, academic teachers required support and encouragement to effectively create academic and developmental goals (Ross et al., 2016). I found a lack of research showing there was no process to grow the knowledge of practicing teachers in a way that affected instructional practices to increase student academic goal setting with their students.

At the time of this study, middle school teachers lacked educational practice including skills and tools to involve students in goal setting and planning processes (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Middle school students who set goals increased their intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy; conversely, when goal setting was not used effectively, students experienced repeated achievement failure and seemed less motivated (Mikami, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Researchers stated in contrast to rewards or vague *you*

*can do it* goals, students needed specific, difficult, and attainable goals, which led to better task performance outcomes (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Robison et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2015).

Researchers noted the organization of middle schools included grades six, seven, and eight, to promote an exploration in curriculum, instruction organization, block scheduling, individualized learning, and teacher guidance (Alexander, 1966, 1969; Weilbacher, 2019). Researchers described rural areas as open country settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents with population densities of less than 500 people per square mile (Cromartie, 2019; Ratcliffe, 2016). Students' goals established in middle school led to informed education decisions and preparedness (Olofson & Knight, 2018; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). Middle school concepts were a process, and research should be continued (Dickinson & Butler, 2001; George, 2009a, 2009b; McEwin, 1992; Olofson & Knight, 2018; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). Researchers reasoned the best schools recognized adolescents needed middle schools (Alexander, 1966, 1969; Armstrong & Elkind, 2006).

Researchers stressed rural teachers needed knowledge and effective training in the goal setting process to create student progress and academic success (Dotson, 2016; Hallenbeck & Fleming, 2011). Teachers who provided quality facilitation led to better goal setting, improved self-pride, and increased academic results for rural students (Dotson, 2016; Hallenbeck & Fleming, 2011). Over 7 million students were enrolled in rural schools, and these students needed attention to improve achievement (Showalter et al., 2019). "People cannot attain goals if they do not know how to do so" (Locke & Latham, 2019, p. 98). Adults

and children required knowledge, skill, and training for successfully setting, implementing, and achieving their goals (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2019). Researchers found a lack of goal setting implementation training for teachers and students (Dotson, 2016; Hallenbeck & Fleming, 2011). The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students.

### **Research Questions**

Effective research questions guided the study, provided structure and core knowledge, and yielded productive results (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Research questions dictated qualitative research approaches and created a starting point from which the researcher knew the possible varieties of data that could be collected and analyzed (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Research questions answered the inquiries of who, what, when, where, and how of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Quality research questions influenced methodology, sample size, data collection, and data analysis (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), research questions narrowed the purpose statement and were researchable (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). The following research questions guided this study.

#### ***Research Question 1***

How do Tennessee rural middle school teachers perceive implementing academic goal setting for students?



## ***Research Question 2***

In what ways, if any, could Tennessee rural middle school teachers implement academic goal setting for students?

### **Theoretical Framework**

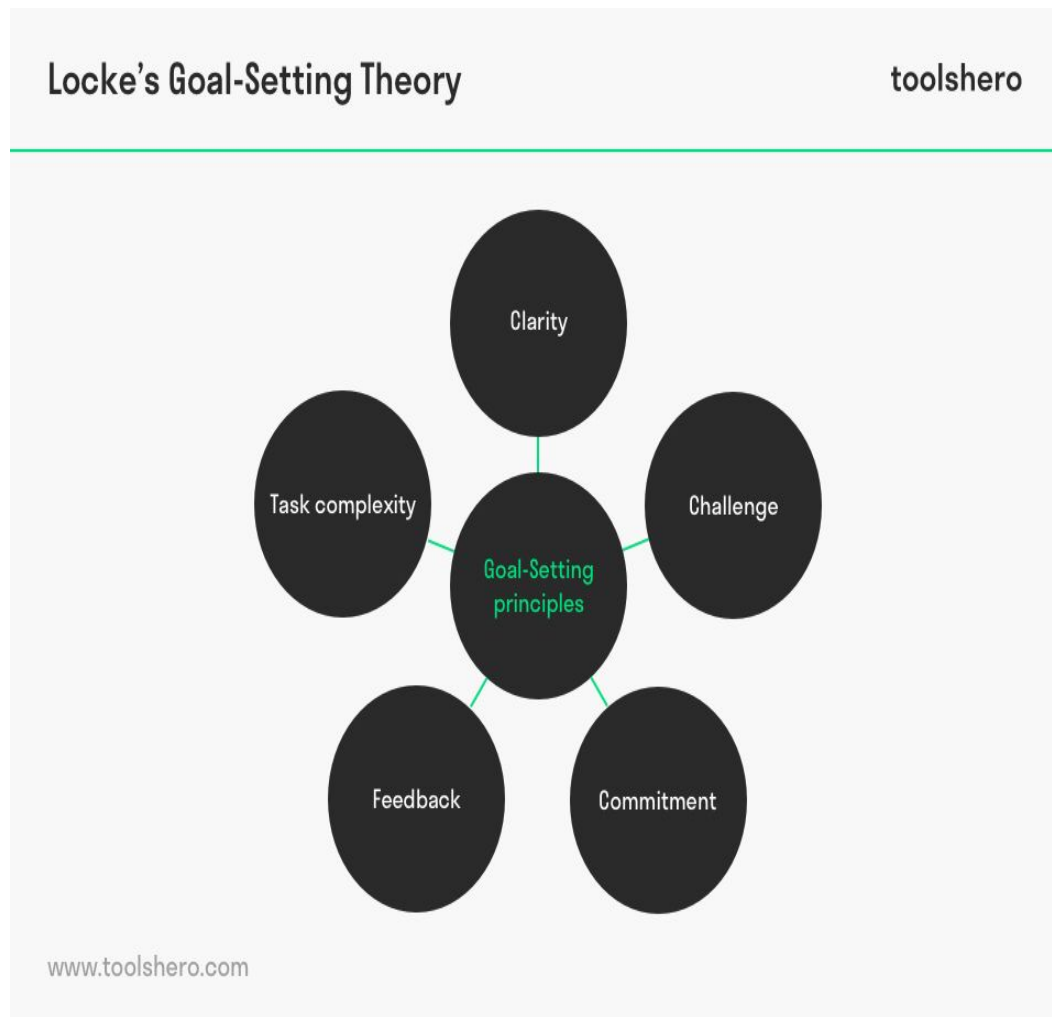
Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined a theoretical framework as a research study frame, including concepts supporting the researcher's position when conducting and interpreting the study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined a theoretical framework as a lens to shape what researchers investigated and the questions asked to drive the study. Researchers explained different terms (e.g., design, theoretical lenses, theoretical frameworks) in a qualitative study, described theories, and provided extensive research study explanations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students.

Locke and Latham partnered to develop the goal setting theory in the 1960s and continued to improve the framework and concepts of goal setting with increased research (Cui, n.d.; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Locke and Latham (2019) defined goal setting theory as the results of setting goals for an upcoming performance. "A goal is the object or aim of an action, for example, to attain a specific standard of proficiency, usually within a specified time limit" (Locke & Latham, 2002, p. 705). Locke and Latham (1990, 2002, 2006, 2019) found individuals who set specific and difficult goals performed better than those who set general or easily achievable goals. Locke and Latham created effective and motivating goal

theories based on five key principles: clarity, challenge, acceptance, feedback, and complexity (Toolshero, 2022; World of Work Project, 2021) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Locke's Goal Setting Theory Framework*



*Source:* Toolshero (2022).

Garrels (2017) shared “another important trait of goals is their source of origin” (p. 496). Goals may be self-set, set in cooperation with others, or assigned by others. Setting specific and difficult goals helped individuals’ motivation and

performance towards the completion of a task (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019).

Researchers stated goal setting theory originated with organizational psychology roots in contrast to goal orientation's educational psychology origins (Cui, n.d.; Locke & Latham, 2006; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Since the 1960s, education professionals used goal setting theory strategies in different domains, such as teaching or research, as an instructional procedure to improve students' writing performance for those who have difficulty with academic writing (Cui, n.d.; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Researchers posited goal setting theory originated for the industrial culture with goals and feedback to motivate business and labored employees (Locke & Latham, 2006; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Researchers mentioned goal setting theory started in the business world for the labored employees in factories to meet product quotas which then transitioned into the education world to meet academic goals through task performance for students (Cui, n.d.; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022).

People who used goal setting strategies enhanced their motivation and task performance because they committed and persisted with their best actions to achieve a clear, specific, and challenging goal (Cui, n.d.; Locke & Latham, 2006; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Researchers noted people reflected when they received feedback and understood the complexity of the task to decide whether they should put forth more effort or revise their original strategies (Cui, n.d.; Locke & Latham, 2006; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Cui (n.d.) suggested future studies could integrate goal setting theory with young children to see whether the theory applied across ages.

## **Significance of the Study**

At the time of this study, I could not locate any existing studies focusing on Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students. Other literature concentrated on teachers' perceptions of goal setting strategies (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017), on students' outcomes after teachers provided goal setting strategies (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Robison et al., 2021), and on the effects of student-set goals (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Deemer, 2004; Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Mikami, 2020; Scarborough et al., 2010; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Teachers and students used goal setting to improve motivation, self-efficacy, created personalized learning environments, and improved academic achievement without the need for added incentives (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Robison et al., 2021; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Researchers found young adolescents' academic performance improved with goal setting strategies in middle school environments, consisting of grades six through eight for students ages ranging from 11–15 years old (Dickinson & Butler, 2001; Olofson & Knight, 2018; Sullivan, 2009; USAHello, 2022). Teachers supported middle school students' transition from elementary school to high school with departmentalization and age-appropriate curriculum; however, more research was required to better meet student needs (Dickinson & Butler, 2001; George, 2009a, 2009b; McEwin, 1992; Olofson & Knight, 2018; Schaefer et al., 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. Through this study, I wanted to gain better

insight and fill the gap regarding middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students in rural schools in Tennessee. Additionally, I wanted to prepare teachers for meaningful discussions with their students on academic goal setting implementation in classrooms and schools, the training needed to accomplish these discussions, and the positive outcomes of setting goals. This study provided transparency into how teachers perceived their roles and responsibilities as goal setting facilitators with their students in the classroom, which could aid schools and districts in designing professional development for teachers to gain goal setting strategies for implementation in the classroom, best practices for teachers and students to use goal setting strategies, and to improve student achievement and growth. I found few studies regarded teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students, and therefore, I wanted to conduct this study to research and understand how teachers perceived implementation and the influence of goal setting in their classroom. Ultimately, I wanted to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students.

### **Description of the Terms**

The purpose of the description of terms was to provide readers with a better understanding, clarity, and definition of the terminology utilized and aligned in this specific study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I provided the following terms to educate readers and provide clarification of any possible misconceptions in this study.

### ***Academic Goals***

Researchers stated academic goals included educational, short-term or long-term content area goals, set by either teachers or students to enhance and advance academic performance including acquired knowledge, coursework, and grades (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Garrels, 2017; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015).

### ***Goal Setting***

Researchers explained goal setting as specific, challenging, measurable, and attainable motivators to help people guide and fuel the outcomes of future performances (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019; O’Neill et al., 2006).

### ***Middle Schools***

Sullivan (2009) described a middle school as a learning environment serving adolescents between elementary and high school encompassing at least three grades six through eight.

### ***Rural Communities***

I defined rural communities as open country settlement areas with fewer than 2,500 residents with population densities of less than 500 people per square mile (Cromartie, 2019; Ratcliffe, 2016). Members of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported three subtypes of rural categories: fringe, distant, and remote (Arnold et al., 2007; Brenner, 2016; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; NCES, 2022; Provasnik et al., 2007; Showalter et al., 2019). Agents of the U.S. Census Bureau defined fringe as a rural territory less than or equal to five miles from an urban area (population 50,000 or more) and less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster (population 2,500 to 49,999) (Arnold et al., 2007;

Brenner, 2016; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; NCES, 2022; Provasnik et al., 2007).

Greenough and Nelson (2015) noted the majority (three-fifths) of rural students learned in rural fringe schools with an average school size of 583 students.

Members of NCES explained distant rural territories as more than five miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urban area (Arnold et al., 2007; Brenner, 2016; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; NCES, 2022; Provasnik et al., 2007).

Researchers defined remote rural territories as more than 25 miles from an urban center (Arnold et al., 2007; Brenner, 2016; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; NCES, 2022; Provasnik et al., 2007).

### ***Middle School Teachers***

I defined a middle school teacher as a licensed and certified individual within a school setting serving students in grades six through eight.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study was organized into five chapters. Chapter I included a brief background of goal setting theory; a statement of the problem focusing on teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students; two research questions that drove the study; the theoretical framework of goal setting theory used as a basis of this research; the significance of this study in Tennessee rural middle schools; and a description of important terms. Chapter II included a comprehensive review of the literature related to the study and the research questions. The literature review included the background and evolution of goal setting theory, students' and teachers' perceptions of goal setting strategies, various goal setting frameworks like S.M.A.R.T. and S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goals, middle school model descriptions, and rural community descriptions. Following

the literature review, in Chapter III, I discussed the qualitative interpretive research approach of the study, the purposeful random sampling methods using Google Form questionnaires to collect data, the district and principal letter for permission, teacher participation and implied consent letter, descriptions of transcribing the data, and the open, axial, and selective coding used to analyze the data.

After completing the study, in Chapter IV, I reported the findings of the study, including the questionnaire data collected and the data analysis. Finally, in Chapter V, I summarized the study findings, conclusions, implications for practical application, and recommendations for future research.

Recommendations included looking into rural teachers' perceptions of goal setting encompassing other grade levels.

This introductory chapter described an overview of the research study and its purpose. In the following chapter, Review of the Literature, I provided detailed theories, histories, evolutions, explanations, and clarifications for the topic studied. I also provided background relevant to Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students.



## Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Successful personalized learning required goal setting and provided purpose for academic achievement (Caucci, 2021; Day & Tosey, 2011; DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; MacLeod, 2012; Poe et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2016; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). The French author Antoine de Saint Exupéry stated, "A goal without a plan is just a wish" (as cited in Garrels, 2017, p. 493), and people should move beyond wishful thinking and produce actual results, which required specific and challenging goals. Locke and Latham (1990, 2002, 2006, 2019), the founding fathers of goal setting theory, defined goal setting theory as the effects of setting goals on future performance. Locke and Latham pioneered the idea of the goal setting theory in the 1960s, paving the way for business leaders and educators to use their theory to guide the business world and the educational classroom (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019; World of Work Project, 2021).

Locke and Latham (1990, 2006, 2019) posited goal setting theory matched goals to desired outcomes. Locke and Latham described goal setting as success blueprints that affect students' motivation and academic performance (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019). Teachers and students implemented and practiced goal setting strategies to reach desired outcomes from passing tests to personal growth (O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Teachers and students should set specific, challenging, yet attainable goals to increase motivation, alertness, and academic achievement (O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Robison et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2015).

Teachers and students of various ages used goal setting strategies to establish optimal achievement performance both personally and academically (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Mikami, 2020; O’Neill, 2000, 2004; Robison et al., 2021; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Teachers used the acronym S.M.A.R.T. goal, which encompassed the idea of making personal goals that were Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound (Caucci, 2021; DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Elias, 2014; Harris, 2022; Nordengren, 2019; O’Neill, 2000, 2004; Robins, 2014). Researchers noted goal setting strategies created optimal student achievement (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Caucci, 2021; DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Elias, 2014; Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Mikami, 2020; Nordengren, 2019; O’Neill, 2000, 2004; Robison et al., 2021; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015; Wollny et al., 2019).

In this qualitative, interpretive study, I examined Tennessee rural middle school teachers’ perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. I reviewed the literature in which researchers investigated goal setting strategies with elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, and higher education settings located in rural or urban areas with research conducted in the United States as well as other countries. I reviewed books, articles, websites, and studies on goal setting theory, middle schools, and rural districts. I found resources through the Lincoln Memorial University Library (LMU), on-line databases such as LMU’s Interlibrary Loan Education Resources Information Center, Journal Storage, ProQuest Education, and Google Scholar. I researched

key terms, such as goal setting theory, academic goals, middle schools, rural schools, S.M.A.R.T. and S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goals, and teachers.

As I conducted my research, I focused on teachers' perceptions on goal setting implementation in the classroom. I found it difficult to find literature focusing solely on rural middle school teachers' perceptions on implementing academic goal setting with their students in the classroom. Existing researchers focused on secondary (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Deemer, 2004; Farnsworth Finn, 2020; Jensen, 2019; Scarborough et al., 2010; Slovis, 2021) and higher education goal setting strategies (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Mikami, 2020; Robison et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2015).

I focused the literature review on the importance of goal setting in elementary, middle, high school, and higher education. I then focused on middle school models and students. I also reviewed literature about rural communities, rural schools for students, goal setting in rural schools, and teacher perceptions of goal setting implementation in rural and urban middle schools.

### **Importance of Goal Setting**

Researchers defined goals as objects or actions that attained specific timed productivity standards, like crews paid on a piece-rate basis in a specified timeframe (Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006, 2019). Locke and Latham (1990, 2002, 2006, 2019) found individuals who set specific and difficult goals performed better than those who set general or easily achievable goals. Locke and Latham created effective and motivating goal theories based on five key principles: clarity, challenge, acceptance, feedback, and complexity (Toolshero, 2022; World of Work Project, 2021). People who used goal setting strategies, individually or

with a team, improved their success rates and personal achievement (Annarella, 2001; Bergman, 2010; Ferlazzo, 2017; Fried & Slowik, 2004; Jung, 2014; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019; Riopel, 2019; Tracy, 2022). O’Neill et al. (2006) noted goal setting helped people fuel, guide, and motivate daily tasks. People who used goal setting strategies increased their focus, engagement, progress, motivation, and achievement in academics and careers (Boss, 2017; Ferlazzo, 2017; Riopel, 2019; Tracy, 2022). Researchers explained how the benefits and values of setting goals led to improved mental health and avoided stagnant attitudes (Annarella, 2001; Rader, 2005; Riopel, 2019). Teams, adults, and children produced optimal results when they set specific, challenging, and attainable goals (Annarella, 2001; Bergman, 2010; Ferlazzo, 2017; Fried & Slowik, 2004; Jensen, 2019; Jung, 2014; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019; Rader, 2005; Riopel, 2019; Tracy, 2022).

Employees and managers created productive working environments by setting goals around performance and time management (Fried & Slowik, 2004; Jung, 2014). People worked faster as deadlines approached because setting attainable, challenging, time management goals increased job performance (Fried & Slowik, 2004). Fried and Slowik (2004) examined and analyzed multiple case studies of the overlooked role of time management in setting workplace goals. Fried and Slowik (2004) argued cognitive motivation, like setting goals, helped researchers and managers to envision the future, predicted individuals’ work motivation, and incorporated business time frame deadlines for productivity.

Jung (2014) focused on U.S. federal government employee turnover and shared organizations needed its own goals for success. Jung’s (2014) mixed

methods approach used a turnover intention goal questionnaire from the 2005 Merit Principles Survey. Jung (2014) used an online survey original responses included 36,926 randomly drawn full-time U.S. federal employees with a final sample size comprising approximately one-half (18,242) of employees from 40 federal agencies. The employees' perceptions and results from the survey showed specific and challenging goals led to lower turnover (Jung, 2014). An employee's intent to leave indicated an organization's health or lack of health and goal setting efforts identified potential quitters (Jung, 2014).

Researchers suggested goal setting served as a springboard for an organizations' policies and practices, particularly in knowledge-based industries with desired long-term achievements (Fried & Slowik, 2004; Jung, 2014). Leaders who set ambiguous goals weakened employees' organizational support due to apathy and productivity due to decreased motivation (Fried & Slowik, 2004; Jung, 2014). Managers succeed by setting clear timelines with specific performance targets (Fried & Slowik, 2004; Jung, 2014).

Adults and children produced accountability by taking ownership and setting goals in the academic setting (Annarella, 2001; Bergman, 2010; Ferlazzo, 2017; Jensen, 2019; Rader, 2005). Bergman (2010) described how goals enhanced instruction explaining the expectations and directions to achieve. Students who set goals showed more respect for others and developed a sense of self-worth, improved critical thinking, accomplishment, and pride (Annarella, 2001; Bergman, 2010; Rader, 2005). Ferlazzo (2017) shared students understood the purpose of the learning process by setting a G.O.A.L. (Growth, Ownership, Awareness, and Learning).

Students who set goals produced value, relevance, and lifelong competency with their confidence and drive (Jensen, 2019). Hattie (2018) researched instructional practices on visible learning mind frames, including different types of goals. A list of factors and effect sizes related to education pedagogy, compared student achievement (Hattie, 2018; Jensen, 2019). Hattie (2018) collected, compared, and analyzed the findings of nearly 50,000 previous educational studies to create a comprehensible influence chart to explain how any score above 0.4, a school year's growth, yielded a greater positive effect on student learning. Hattie (2018) found setting performance goals compared to not setting goals displayed a significant positive impact with a 0.68 effect size. Researchers suggested the greatest single contributing factor of student achievement related to goal setting was to implement them (Hattie, 2018; Jensen, 2019).

Individual and team performances improved when properly implementing goal setting techniques (Annarella, 2001; Bergman, 2010; Ferlazzo, 2017; Fried & Slowik, 2004; Jensen, 2019; Jung, 2014; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019; Riopel, 2019; Tracy, 2022). "People cannot attain goals if they do not know how to do so" (Locke & Latham, 2019, p. 98). Adults and children required knowledge, skill, and training for successfully setting, implementing, and achieving their goals (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019). People and organizations who used various effective goal setting strategies improved their personal achievement and performance (Annarella, 2001; Bergman, 2010; Ferlazzo, 2017; Fried & Slowik, 2004; Jung, 2014; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019; Riopel, 2019; Tracy, 2022).

## **S.M.A.R.T. Goals**

People used goal setting practices to provide a sense of direction, motivation, and focus to accomplish a specific task (CFI Team, 2022; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018; O'Neill et al., 2006). In 1981, George Doran coined the acronym S.M.A.R.T. goals to assist business leaders with writing effective non-confusing objectives for employees (Doran et al., 1981; Harris, 2022). Researchers stated Doran invented S.M.A.R.T. goals to combat the challenges of developing and writing meaningful goals (Doran et al., 1981; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014). Researchers found S.M.A.R.T. goals practiced changed over time and evolved with increased interest and user deployment strategies (Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014) (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*S.M.A.R.T. Goals*



*Source:* ASVAB Career Exploration Program (2022).

George Doran defined S.M.A.R.T. goals with five distinct criteria as Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic, and Time-related standards (Doran et al., 1981; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014). Researchers found specific goals targeted the improvement of the who, what, where, when, and why to attain a goal (CFI Team, 2022; Doran et al., 1981; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014). People who set goals with specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound goals achieved their goals more than people not using the same criteria (CFI Team, 2022; Doran et al., 1981; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014). Researchers noted how assignable encompassed many synonyms, including examples like, attainable,



achievable, adjustable, ambitious, aligned, and agreed-upon (Caucchi, 2021; CFI Team, 2022; Day & Tosey, 2011; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; MacLeod, 2012; O'Neill et al., 2006; Poe et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2016). For this study, I used attainable to describe S.M.A.R.T. goals.

Students with off task behavior caused issues for teachers (Nordengren, 2019; O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Wollny et al., 2019). Researchers stated students who set positive and specific goals like S.M.A.R.T. goals tackled more challenging assignments (Elias, 2014; Nordengren, 2019; O'Neill, 2000, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2006; Wollny et al., 2019). Researchers found goal setting linked student learning and student character (Elias, 2014; Nordengren, 2019; O'Neill, 2000, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2006; Wollny et al., 2019). Students who set goals changed their actions to a purpose (O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Wollny et al., 2019). Teachers who implemented S.M.A.R.T. goal setting for their students supported student learning by checking the effectiveness of planned lessons (O'Neill, 2000, 2004). O'Neill (2004) noted collaboration of teacher and student S.M.A.R.T. goal setting led to empowerment and shared learning responsibility. Teachers' and students' goal setting strategies developed from urgency because of low academic performance (O'Neill, 2004), and student proficiency levels increased after S.M.A.R.T. goal implementation (O'Neill, 2000, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2006; Wollny et al., 2019).

Students who set goals found meaningful purpose in their learning (O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Wollny et al., 2019). Wollny et al. (2019) posited the difficulty of setting, writing, and implementing goals for student goal setting caused frustration; however, students who implemented the S.M.A.R.T. goal framework led to academic achievement (Elias, 2014; O'Neill, 2000, 2004;

O'Neill et al., 2006; Wollny et al., 2019). Wollny et al. (2019) presented students with a roadmap system to assist with writing learning S.M.A.R.T. goals which involved a three-stage process including goal structure, continuous goal setting, and dialogue-based goal setting (Wollny et al., 2019). Nordengren (2019) explained goal setting by and for students helped form the glue bounding assessments and learning activities together. Researchers suggested using S.M.A.R.T. goal strategies to achieve desired goal outcomes (Elias, 2014; Nordengren, 2019; O'Neill, 2000, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2006; Wollny et al., 2019). Teachers used S.M.A.R.T. result-based goals to provide better feedback on student academic learning (Elias, 2014; Nordengren, 2019; O'Neill, 2000, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2006).

Teacher and student set goals contained challenges such as lack of training, strategies, and implementation (Nordengren, 2019; O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Wollny et al., 2019). "Many educators will be the first to tell you that setting specific, strategic, measurable goals was new to their practice and took them out of their comfort zone" (O'Neill, 2000, p. 50). Nordengren (2019) stated without training, goal setting implementation could be complicated. The process of writing, defining, and carrying out goal setting implementation occurred with time, practice, and reflection changes (Nordengren, 2019; O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Wollny et al., 2019).

Researchers found setting S.M.A.R.T. goals prepared students for ongoing success in life because goals kept students moving forward toward college and beyond (Day & Tosey, 2011; Poe et al., 2021; Robins, 2014; Ross et al., 2016; Slovis, 2021). Researchers stated S.M.A.R.T. goals change with age, from

academic goals to life goals (Day & Tosey, 2011; Poe et al., 2021; Robins, 2014; Ross et al., 2016; Slovis, 2021). Day and Tosey (2011) studied secondary and further education students in England and Wales, creating action plans with teachers using S.M.A.R.T. goals. Researchers indicated goal setting teacher/student discussions lasting a minimum of 10 minutes increased the likelihood of students achieving their self-set learning goals (Day & Tosey, 2011).

Ross et al. (2016) investigated peer assisted S.M.A.R.T. goal teaching and training approaches at five Australian universities. Ross et al. (2016) surveyed 26 Australian teachers and estimated 65% of Australian academic institutions displayed limited teacher preparation for goal setting implementation, including goal setting knowledge and strategies. One-third of the participants' poorly crafted goals compared to the S.M.A.R.T. framework, which indicated a need for goal setting implementation training (Ross et al., 2016). Researchers explained how the S.M.A.R.T. framework enabled participants to focus on problems and gain direction even though implementation issues arose (Doran et al., 1981; Ross et al., 2016; Slovis, 2021). Regardless of experience, academic teachers required support and encouragement to effectively create and implement academic goals (Ross et al., 2016).

Teachers utilized the S.M.A.R.T. goals framework for creating meaningful professional goals to guide their instruction and assessments (Day & Tosey, 2011; Poe et al., 2021; Robins, 2014; Ross et al., 2016; Slovis, 2021). Robins (2014) surveyed full-time first-year graduate students working toward education and technology professions enrolled in the University of Hawaii's Educational Technology Master's program. Robins's (2014) research aimed to provide

participants with step-by-step instructions on writing long and short-term goals using the S.M.A.R.T. goals framework. Robins (2014) showed how teachers needed scaffolding strategies, like how to write specific and relevant goals; however, teachers still required training to improve their S.M.A.R.T. goals and implementation.

Poe et al. (2021) surveyed students and professors at large public universities in the Midwest and the southeastern U.S., and a private university in the mid-Atlantic region. Poe et al. (2021) used an end-of-semester survey which provided reflection questions about S.M.A.R.T. goal assignments. Participants reflected how the semester's goal setting activities increased their value in learning (Poe et al., 2021). Researchers suggested a need for further research on goal setting practices in the classroom due to a lack of knowledge in this field (Day & Tosey, 2011; Poe et al., 2021; Robins, 2014; Ross et al., 2016; Slovis, 2021).

### **S.M.A.R.T.E.R. Goals**

Researchers explained how S.M.A.R.T. goals expanded into S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goals, adding an extra E and R for increased clarity (Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018). Johnston (2018) trademarked the term S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goals and added an E for energizing (to light a goal fuse) and an R for reaching (room to grow). MacLeod (2012) tweaked the acronym to include E for engaging and R for rewarding. People who set S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goals intended to improve how they approached, set, and pursued goals (Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018; MacLeod, 2012). Researchers agreed regardless of the acronym practiced, successful goals continued to include specific,

challenging, and attainable strategies (Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018; MacLeod, 2012).

MacLeod (2012) mentioned the first step to making S.M.A.R.T. goals S.M.A.R.T.E.R. included more innovative objectives like motivational rewards to bring out desired behavior. Researchers suggested S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goal setting included goal revision like reflection and correction (Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; MacLeod, 2012). Researchers noted how the careful design and implementation of well-constructed goals provided valuable tools for accomplishment (Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018; MacLeod, 2012). People who set vague goals with no sense of purpose failed due to lack of specific direction (Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018). Individuals and businesses set themselves up for success by making goals S.M.A.R.T.E.R., not harder, by providing a purpose and deadline (Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018; MacLeod, 2012). Researchers found the S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goal setting framework helped push people to further understand the value, implementation process, and organization it took to achieve their goal (CFI Team, 2022; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018).

### **S.M.A.R.T. Goal Critics**

Researchers stated goal setting strategies were the first step to success, but not all people viewed S.M.A.R.T. or S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goals as a positive force in goal setting strategies (Cauci, 2021; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014). Researchers argued the S.M.A.R.T. design did not work for long-term or personal growth goals due to a lack of flexibility and failure possibilities (Cauci, 2021; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018). Johnston (2018) posited S.M.A.R.T. goals

lacked purpose and meaning, and suggested people use S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goals to achieve desired outcomes. Johnston (2018) described issues with the many synonyms associated with assignable and said this conundrum created a frustrating sandbag approach to setting goals. Researchers also explained how not all goals fit into the five-frame box approach to goal setting (Caucci, 2021; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014).

People who set S.M.A.R.T. goals followed a strategic process of setting goals without attention to how someone would reach the goal (Caucci, 2021; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018). Researchers cautioned S.M.A.R.T. goals concentrated on the result and not the journey (Caucci, 2021; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018). Critics suggested S.M.A.R.T. or S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goals did not generate excitement or urgency (Caucci, 2021; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014). Researchers found various opinions on how to implement goal setting strategies and using a framework for setting goals continued to provide benefits for people of all ages, including higher education teachers and students and professionals (Caucci, 2021; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; Johnston, 2018).

### **Higher Education Goal Setting**

Researchers conducted goal setting studies on university students to analyze the impact of students or professors setting performance and achievement goals (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Mikami, 2020; Robison et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2015). Professors and students who set goals increased task engagement and motivation to complete assignments (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Mikami, 2020; Robison et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2015). Dishon-Berkovits (2014) and Robison

et al. (2021) studied professors providing students with assigned learning goals and examined the influence of motivation on academic achievement.

Dishon-Berkovits (2014) researched 104 female, freshman undergraduates at a private women's college in Israel, where 49 students were assigned performance goals, and 55 students were assigned learning goals. A final exam with a maximum score of 100 determined students' academic success (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014). Dishon-Berkovits (2014) reported a final exam mean of 77.84. Students with assigned teacher facilitated learning goals led to higher academic achievement and a significant effect ( $\beta = -0.26, p < 0.01$ ) (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014). Additionally, Dishon-Berkovits (2014) reported the combination of achievement and performance goals predicted academic performance.

Robison et al. (2021) researched the effects of goal setting, feedback, and incentivizing manipulations to sustain students' attention. Researchers compared difficult and easy goal setting conditions with instructions and examined the effect of pairing goals with a reward (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Robison et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2015). Robison et al. (2021) studied 111 college student participants at the University of Oregon with a target sample size of 35 participants per condition. Researchers explained the concept of goal setting theory as people creating specific, challenging, and assigned learning goals (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Robison et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2015). Robison et al. (2021) found limited evidence for academic achievement when using incentives to produce difficult and easy goals. Through goal achievement, the

learner clarified the bigger picture and real-life solutions (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Robison et al., 2021).

Mikami (2020) and Travers et al. (2015) researched student-set performance, motivation, growth, and achievement goals. Mikami (2020) observed first-year undergraduate economics students at a private university in central Japan with beginning level English skills set goals to increase their reading motivation. Travers et al. (2015) studied the continued impact of goal setting, academic growth, and academic achievement on a cohort of 92 United Kingdom (UK) final-year students enrolled in an elective advanced course with self-reflection and growth goal setting at its core. The majority ( $n = 72$ , 78%) of UK born students had English as a first language with 20% of students' goals related to academic growth and performance (Travers et al., 2015).

Students who set goals increased their intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy; conversely, when goal setting was not used effectively, students experienced repeated achievement failure and seemed less motivated to read (Mikami, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). University students were categorized into three goal setting themes based on their self-selected life or personal growth goals:

1. The students' chose academic performance related growth goals.
2. Students used reflective growth goal setting processes for improved academic achievement.
3. Students went beyond the reflective growth goal setting process to continue improving their academic achievement (Travers et al., 2015).



Travers et al. (2015) noted about 20% of students directly impacted their academic achievement both during and following the reflective program by setting growth and performance goals. Students committed to achieving their goals through the effective use of goal setting and felt a sense of achievement from goal attainment (Mikami, 2020).

Dishon-Berkovits (2014) examined the influence of goal setting on motivation and academic achievement. College professors assigned specific and difficult performance and learning goals to their university students (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014). Travers et al. (2015) stated, "In contrast to vague 'do your best' goals, researchers have shown specific and difficult, yet attainable, goals across multiple domains lead to better task performance outcomes" (p. 226). College professors assigned specific and difficult performance and learning goals to their university students (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Travers et al., 2015). Dishon-Berkovits (2014) noted that students performed better with specific, difficult, and attainable goals. Robison et al. (2021) corroborated this notion as students in their study did not experience an increase in performance when setting vague goals or with offered incentives. Students provided with assigned learning goals led to higher academic achievement, engagement, and motivation (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Mikami, 2020; Robison et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2015). Researchers suggested looking at goal setting strategies for K-12 students (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014) due to limited research on goal setting applications (Travers et al., 2015).

## **High School Goal Setting**

Researchers studied how setting academic goals with students in high school settings influenced student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Deemer, 2004; Farnsworth Finn, 2020; Jensen, 2019; Scarborough et al., 2010; Slovis, 2021). Burns et al. (2019, 2021) examined goal setting strategies to address the decline of adolescent engagement among Australian high school students. Teachers provided feedback in mathematics and guidance for feedforward improvement, feedback focused on future goals and progress, with 362 Australian high school students in grades nine through eleven from two independent high schools located in urban centers of New South Wales (Burns et al., 2021). Researchers found high school students needed specific, challenging, and attainable goals to maintain focus in their academic and personal settings and prevent off-task behaviors leading to apathy (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Deemer, 2004; Farnsworth Finn, 2020; Scarborough et al., 2010; Slovis, 2021).

Burns et al. (2019) focused on students' engagement, academic outcomes, and academic growth related to personal best (PB) goal setting strategies. Three hundred sixty-eight Australian high school students in grades seven through twelve, from systemic Catholic and independent schools in New South Wales, showed PB goal setting was associated with student engagement and academic growth (Burns et al., 2019). Students answered survey questions pertaining to engagement and motivation via a secured online weblink (Burns et al., 2019). Burns et al. (2019, 2021) noted the developmental decline in engagement seemed pervasive during adolescence; however, feedback performance from teachers and

student achievement was associated with using goal setting and PB goal setting as an effective strategy. Researchers suggested students required positive feedback on setting goals, and teachers needed to celebrate students' academic accomplishments (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Deemer, 2004; Farnsworth Finn, 2020; Scarborough et al., 2010; Slovis, 2021). Burns et al. (2019, 2021) suggested effective strategies to support students' engagement throughout high school and positively impact future student participation centered around students setting PB goals. Future goal setting research should consider other age ranges including different grade level transitions outside of high school aged children (Burns et al., 2019; Scarborough et al., 2010).

Deemer (2004) and Scarborough et al. (2010) added goal setting for high school students needed to be purposeful and realistic. Scarborough et al. (2010) argued effective goal setting for adolescents ranging from 11 to 19 years old developed from a critical sociocognitive process. Adolescents used goal setting to enhance brain development and cognitive and social growth (Scarborough et al., 2010). Examples from educational psychology, such as goal setting activities, guided teachers' ideas on creating successful high school classroom environments (Deemer, 2004; Scarborough et al., 2010) because adolescents who used goal setting demonstrated enhance brain development, cognitive, and social growth (Scarborough et al., 2010). Researchers suggested high school teachers design tasks to promote classroom goal setting (Deemer, 2004; Farnsworth Finn, 2020; Scarborough et al., 2010; Slovis, 2021). Teachers who promoted goal setting prepared their students for academic success and endeavors beyond the

classroom, such as college, trade school, or the workplace (Deemer, 2004; Farnsworth Finn, 2020; Jensen, 2019; Scarborough et al., 2010; Slovis, 2021).

High school students needed support from their teachers to develop goal setting skills due to various goal setting opinions (Farnsworth Finn, 2020; Slovis, 2021). Jensen (2019) suggested teachers link behaviors and outcomes with goals to help prepare for college and beyond. Researchers cautioned teachers needed to understand the differences between setting and achieving goals due to failure possibilities (Farnsworth Finn, 2020; Slovis, 2021). Student goal setting nurtured personal success, such as graduation and job placement, but information about promoting and implementing goals in high school education was needed (Deemer, 2004; Scarborough et al., 2010). Researchers posited literature details remained vague about how to incorporate goal setting strategies for learning and different age groups (Burns et al., 2019; Deemer, 2004; Scarborough et al., 2010).

### **Elementary and Middle School Goal Setting**

Researchers tracked the importance of setting academic and personal goals with students in elementary and middle schools to analyze students' overall motivation, performance, levels of self-efficacy, and involvement (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Students in third and fourth grade in a Title I, elementary, rural, public school in north Georgia focused on setting goals for motivation and self-efficacy in multiplication fact fluency (Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Sides and Cuevas (2020) reported the experimental group recorded multiplication five-minute fact probe scores every Monday and Wednesday during the study and students tracked their progress towards their fluency goal. Sides and Cuevas (2020) reported test scores for the comparison group

( $M = 86.30$ ,  $SD = 30.89$ ) were substantially lower than test scores compared to the experimental group ( $M = 114.65$ ,  $SD = 43.17$ ) where students used goal setting. Further results indicated a statistically significant difference in the area of multiplication fact fluency and accuracy in mathematics as a result of using goal setting in the academic setting,  $F(1, 67) = 45.17$ ,  $p < .001$  (Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Sides and Cuevas (2020) found students setting academic goals yielded higher multiplication fact fluency test scores than students who did not set goals.

Elementary and middle school teachers and students assigned goals in academic settings to set the mood for the classroom environments and improve motivation, self-efficacy, and problem-solving when working on multiplication (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Elementary and middle school students involved in setting goals benefited students of all ages' academic success and increased academic achievement (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Elementary students who used goal setting strategies, like listing personal academic achievement goals, co-designed with their teacher, gave input, and took ownership of their learning (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Researchers stated appropriate student goal setting resulted in a compelling sense of achievement, enhanced intrinsic motivation, increased self-efficacy, and new goals created (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015).

Researchers explained how setting specific high-quality personal goals associated with improved motivation, performance, levels of self-efficacy, and student involvement in elementary and middle school students promoted

academic growth (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Ginns et al. (2018) surveyed students setting personal goals ( $n = 35$ ) versus a no-goal condition ( $n = 33$ ) during mathematics fluency building with middle school students ranging from 10–12 years old in a Sydney, Australia government primary school. Sides and Cuevas (2020) surveyed 70 third and fourth grade students ranging from 8–10 years old, located at a Title I, elementary, rural, public school in north Georgia. Sides and Cuevas (2020) found a correlation between personal goal setting and students' motivation and self-efficacy toward multiplication fact fluency. Researchers measured students' motivation and self-efficacy toward mathematics with the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire and the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Sides and Cuevas (2020) reported only the experimental group received personal folders to log scores and goals. Garrels (2017) investigated self-reporting goals with 83 elementary and lower secondary school students ages ranging from 9–17 years of age from 11 schools in Eastern Norway. Sixty-five percent ( $n = 54$ ) of students received their education in mainstream settings, and 35% ( $n = 29$ ) of students had mild intellectual disabilities and received their education in special education classrooms separated from mainstream educational settings (Garrels, 2017).

Students who set their own PB goals for mathematic fluency solved more problems accurately than students who just received information about their performance (Ginns et al., 2018). Sides and Cuevas (2020) reported results showing no effect on student goal setting on motivation in mathematics or on the effect of student goal setting on self-efficacy in mathematics. Conversely, students who set academic goals yielded a statistically significant

[ $F(1, 67) = 45.17, p < .001$ ] difference in multiplication fact fluency and mathematical accuracy (Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Garrels (2017) found two-thirds of students reported feeling encouraged to set goals for themselves at school around academic and career goals (25%), followed by sports-related goals (23%), non-sports related goals (10%), and social goals (7%). Elementary and middle school teachers and students who used goal setting strategies enhanced student motivation, performance, and academic growth (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015); however, 60% of students expressed they did not learn goal setting strategies at school, which indicated a need to provide teachers with instructional materials to teach students how to implement important self-empowerment goal setting skills (Garrels, 2017).

Teachers in elementary and middle school educational needed more skills and tools to involve students in goal setting and planning processes (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). DeMink-Carthew et al. (2017) and Ginns et al. (2018) suggested goal setting was a critical aspect of motivation and personalized learning and was an important instructional area for researchers to investigate. Researchers investigated student set goals for elementary and middle school students (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020), while DeMink-Carthew et al. (2017) surveyed teachers setting goals and their methods and strategies to goal setting for elementary and middle school students. DeMink-Carthew et al. (2017) interviewed 11 public middle grades teachers (grades 4–8) from eight different schools in Vermont who used diverse methods and strategies to implement goal setting. DeMink-Carthew et al. (2017) reported

teachers used specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (S.M.A.R.T.) goals to empower students' personalized learning. Researchers postulated goal setting was important in instructional and personalized learning environments, especially when students helped co-design their goals impact on personalized learning (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Ginns et al., 2018).

I researched elementary and middle schools to investigate the influence of goal setting by teachers and students to improve engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. I wanted to focus on goal setting in rural elementary and middle schools to see what methods and strategies teachers used to implement goal setting in the classroom. Although I found studies surveying the correlation between goal setting and students' overall improvement, I continued to find a lack of research supporting what teachers needed to develop the methods and strategies to support goal setting in the school setting, especially in middle schools. Middle school teachers agreed goal setting was a valuable skill, but they did not feel they had proper training to implement goal setting with their students (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020).

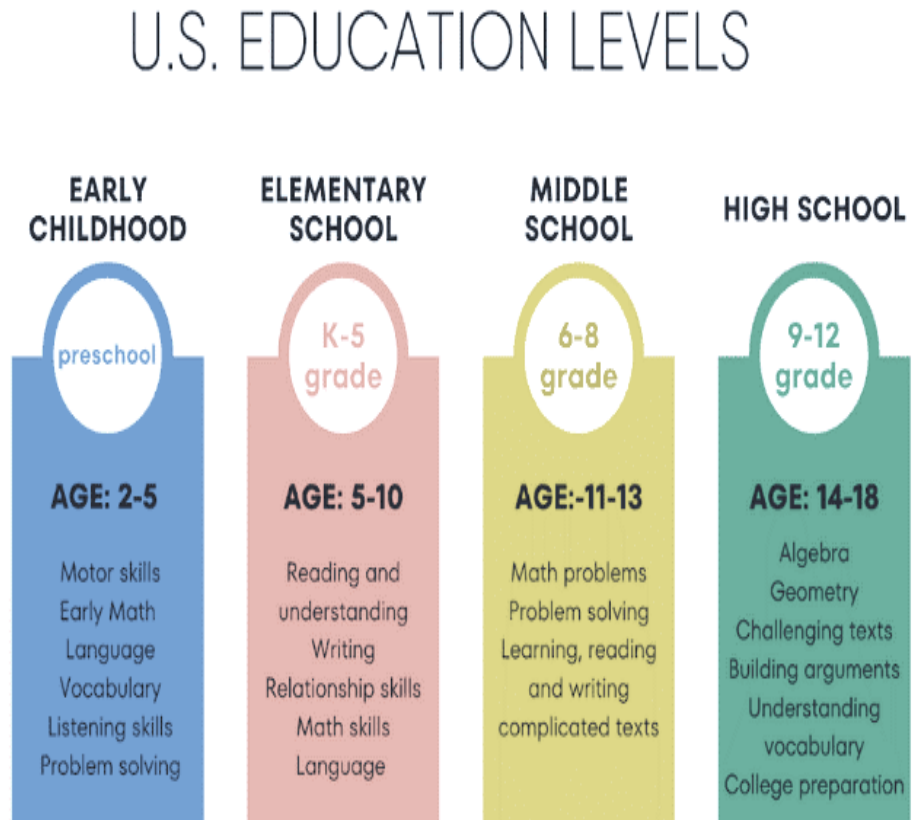
### **Middle School Environments**

Researchers defined the middle school environment as a place providing developmentally responsive education with various grade configurations of at least three grades, including grades six and seven, to students ranging in ages from 11–15 years old between elementary and high school (Dickinson & Butler, 2001; Olofson & Knight, 2018; Sullivan, 2009; USAHello, 2022) (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3**

*U.S. Educational Levels*



*Source:* USAHello (2022).

Researchers stated middle school models provided validity and unique developmental needs of young adolescents in transition (Dickinson & Butler, 2001; Olofson & Knight, 2018; Sullivan, 2009). Young adolescents performed better academically in middle school educational environments because these environments met their needs while they transitioned from elementary school to high school (Dickinson & Butler, 2001; George, 2009a, 2009b; McEwin, 1992; Olofson & Knight, 2018; Schaefer et al., 2016).

### ***Middle School Students***

Researchers agreed the biological event of puberty, for boys around the age of 10 years old and girls around the age of 11 years old, impacted teens' cognitive, social, and emotional circumstances (Armstrong & Elkind, 2006; George, 2009a; Ruppert, 2020). According to Ruppert (2020), middle schools included a variety of ages ranging from 10–15 years old, grades encompassing intermediate schools, K-8 schools, middle schools, junior highs, and ninth grade academics. Leaders of the Association for Middle Level Education provided guiding principles, goals, and characteristics of middle schools serving ages ranging from 10–15 years old (Ruppert, 2020; USAHello, 2022). George (2009a, 2009b) suggested designated junior high and high school configurations transition starting with fifth and sixth grade. Until the 1960s, U.S. elementary schools consisted mainly of K-8 models (Olofson & Knight, 2018; Tamer, 2012; USAHello, 2022). School districts transitioned away from this model, and middle school models started with grade 5 or 6 (Tamer, 2012; Weilbacher, 2019).

### ***Middle School Model***

In 1950, William M. Alexander, a pioneer of the middle school model, believed young adolescents, those in grades six through eight, deserved a separate place to learn and thrive (Alexander, 1969; Armstrong & Elkind, 2006; McEwin, 1992). Researchers explained how the phrase *middle school* emerged in the early 1960s as an alternative to junior high schools (Alexander, 1966, 1969; McEwin, 1992; Weilbacher, 2019). Tamer (2012) noted middle schools bridged learning needs of children between the ages ranging from 11–13 years old. Armstrong and Elkind (2006) suggested middle schools should include adolescents between the ages ranging from 11–15 years old.

Alexander (1966) remarked middle school reorganizations included grades six through eight, which was also a long-standing practice in some districts. “Grade 6 is simply moved from elementary to junior high and grade 9 is returned to the high school” (Alexander, 1966, p. 30). Young adolescents attended middle schools ranging from grades six through eight to develop their intellectual, social, and emotional lives (Alexander, 1966, 1969; Armstrong & Elkind, 2006; McEwin, 1992; USAHello, 2022). School district leaders shifted their middle school models from grades ranging from seven through nine to an arrangement of grades six through eight, promoting exploration in curriculum, instructional organization, block scheduling, individualized learning, and teacher guidance (Alexander, 1966, 1969; Weilbacher, 2019). Olofson and Knight (2018) argued middle school models also included grades four through eight. Weilbacher (2019) described middle school and junior high schools as synonyms where students between grades five through nine went to prepare for high school. Regardless of

the grade ranges, teachers created a nurturing bridge in middle schools between elementary to high school (Tamer, 2012).

Wimberly and Noeth (2005) found college readiness should begin in middle school with students in grades eight by conducting student surveys and focus group discussions centered on college readiness. Wimberly and Noeth (2005) noted various educational planning and goal setting activities, including ACT's EXPLORE and PLAN programs, were initiated in all schools' studies. Wimberly and Noeth (2005) stated school programs needed college preparatory curricula as early as middle school levels for students' success. Students reported teachers assisted with classes, activities, and goal setting (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). Wimberly and Noeth (2005) suggested schools design postsecondary planning as early as sixth grade to assist with students' educational goals. Student goals established in middle school led to informed education decisions and preparedness (Olofson & Knight, 2018; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005).

Middle school levels across the nation thrived, and the continued importance of this model remained (George, 2009a, 2009b). Thousands of high-quality middle school models succeeded and redesigned instruction practices (George, 2009a, 2009b; McEwin, 1992). Middle school models were a process, and research should be continued (Dickinson & Butler, 2001; George, 2009a, 2009b; McEwin, 1992; Olofson & Knight, 2018; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). The middle school movement represented a milestone in human development history and recognized that young adolescents were not older elementary students nor younger high school students (Alexander, 1969; Armstrong & Elkind, 2006; McEwin, 1992; Weilbacher, 2019).

## **Rural Communities**

Leaders of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the federal agency with primary responsibility for rural America, explained rural areas as places with rolling hills, farmland, and small towns (Brann-Barrett, 2014; Cromartie, 2008, 2019; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Johnson, 2017; Ratcliffe, 2016; Thier et al., 2021; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Agents of the U.S. Census Bureau defined rural areas as any population, housing, or territory not in an urban area based on population density (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Cromartie (2019) and Ratcliffe (2016) described rural areas as open country settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents with population densities of less than 500 people per square mile. “At the time of the 2010 Decennial Census, almost sixty million people, about nineteen percent of the population, lived in rural areas of the United States” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 1).

Members of the NCES reported three subtypes of rural categories: fringe, distant, and remote (Arnold et al., 2007; Brenner, 2016; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; NCES, 2022; Provasnik et al., 2007; Showalter et al., 2019). Agents of the U.S. Census Bureau defined fringe as a rural territory less than or equal to five miles from an urban area (population 50,000 or more) and less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster (population 2,500 to 49,999) (Arnold et al., 2007; Brenner, 2016; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; NCES, 2022; Provasnik et al., 2007). Greenough and Nelson (2015) noted the majority (three-fifths) of rural students learned in rural fringe schools with an average school size of 583 students. Members of NCES explained distant rural territories as more than five miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urban area (Arnold et al., 2007; Brenner,

2016; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; NCES, 2022; Provasnik et al., 2007).

Greenough and Nelson (2015) noted the rural distant territory's average school size contained 307 students. Researchers defined remote rural territories as more than 25 miles from an urban center (Arnold et al., 2007; Brenner, 2016; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; NCES, 2022; Provasnik et al., 2007).

### **Rural Schools for Students**

Many rural students attended school districts smaller than urban districts (Barksdale, 2018; Barley & Brigham, 2008; Boser, 2013; Drescher et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Researchers stated rural education goals focused on achievement outcomes for students (Arnold et al., 2007; Barley & Brigham, 2008; Brenner, 2016; Drescher et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Low-income students performed better academically in rural areas compared to urban areas with higher graduation rates than urban high schools (Barksdale, 2018; Showalter et al., 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021); however, rural students did not attend college at the same rate as their urban counterparts (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021).

Researchers noted challenges for rural students included smaller budgets, limited supplies, teacher shortages (including turnover), and bus transportation costs (Arnold et al., 2007; Barksdale, 2018; Barley & Brigham, 2008; Drescher et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Funding shortages in rural areas continued to limit teacher recruitment, retainment, and training (Arnold et al., 2007; Barksdale, 2018; Barley & Brigham, 2008; Brenner, 2016; Drescher et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Federal programs like the Rural Education Achievement Program/Fund (REAP)

created opportunities for rural districts to assist schools with needed finances (Arnold et al., 2007; Barksdale, 2018; Brenner, 2016; Showalter et al., 2019). Researchers suggested REAP assisted teachers with needed training and supplies (Arnold et al., 2007; Barksdale, 2018; Brenner, 2016; Showalter et al., 2019).

Rural schools provided smaller unique learning environments, and students' education required the same attention as in urban areas (Arnold et al., 2007; Showalter et al., 2019). Researchers explained despite challenges, teachers in rural areas provided a sense of community for their students (Barksdale, 2018; Barley & Brigham, 2008; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Successful rural education required teachers, policymakers, parents, and students to work together (Barksdale, 2018; Barley & Brigham, 2008; Drescher et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Researchers noted how the small-town feel of rural areas encouraged racial integration and equality (Barksdale, 2018; Boser, 2013; Drescher et al., 2022; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Rural students led numbers in college preparatory or dual enrollment (23%) classes, with rural students being more likely nationally (14.4%) to take college courses (Showalter et al., 2019). Researchers mentioned policymakers were unfamiliar with the unique challenges of teaching and learning in rural settings with smaller budgets, limited supplies, and teacher shortages (including turnover) (Brenner, 2016; Drescher et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019). State leaders continued to face challenges in providing a high-quality education for rural students (Drescher et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019). Researchers recommended rural education should be a priority (Drescher et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019) because over 7 million students were enrolled in rural

schools and these students needed attention to improve achievement (Showalter et al., 2019).

### **Rural Schools and Goal Setting**

Students' and teachers' goal setting activities in rural districts provided success (Dotson, 2016; Hallenbeck & Fleming, 2011). Goal setting in rural districts positively impacted learning and yielded increased district benchmark scores, assessments, academic goals, and improved student performance (Dotson, 2016; Hallenbeck & Fleming, 2011). Hallenbeck and Fleming (2011) described goal setting intervention as a behavior-changing tool used in rural, southeastern schools in the United States. Researchers stressed rural teachers needed knowledge and effective training in the goal setting process to create success (Dotson, 2016; Hallenbeck & Fleming, 2011).

Quality teacher facilitation led to better goal setting, pride, and results for rural students (Dotson, 2016; Hallenbeck & Fleming, 2011). Dotson (2016) expressed rural district leaders must support specific goal setting action plans outlining steps to maximize academic achievement for teachers and students. A focus of future research should include why rural middle school teachers implemented goal setting with students, how they learned to implement goal setting, and challenges teachers faced when implementing goal setting.

### **Summary of Review of Literature**

Teachers and students used goal setting to improve motivation, self-efficacy, personalized learning environments, academic achievement without the need for added incentives (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Robison et al., 2021; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Smithson (2012) proclaimed “a



dream is just a dream; a goal is a dream with a definite plan” (p. 57). Since 1977, pioneers Locke and Lathan established goal setting as a motivation technique to guide success for business and education (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Mikami, 2020; Robison et al., 2021; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015).

Educators and students of various ages practiced and implemented goal setting strategies deemed effective when applied with specific, challenging, yet attainable criteria to guide the learning process (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Mikami, 2020; O’Neill, 2000, 2004; Robison et al., 2021; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Researchers found young adolescents performed better academically in middle school educational environments because these environments met their needs while they transitioned from elementary school to high school (Dickinson & Butler, 2001; George, 2009a, 2009b; McEwin, 1992; Olofson & Knight, 2018; Schaefer et al., 2016). I focused my literature review on rural middle school teachers’ perceptions on implementing student academic goals because research lacked in this area. I researched goal setting theory, the model of middle schools, and the definition of rural school districts.

Teachers should align goal setting approaches with personalized learning environments to empower students as co-designers of their learning (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017). Goal setting strategies were worthy of research because of increased student motivation, alertness, and achievement (Robison et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2015). Teachers needed a better understanding of academic goal setting practices and implementation to support the benefits of

student academic achievement in middle schools. Gaps in goal setting literature included how goal setting approaches evolved, how goal setting can be used to inform policy and professional development, relationships between internal and external goal setting, the effectiveness of students vs. teachers setting growth goals, and challenges teachers face in implementing goal setting with students (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Mikami, 2020; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). The research was also scant regarding teachers' perceptions of goal setting implementation with their students. DeMink-Carthew et al. (2017) stated personalized learning aligned with student empowerment is essential; however, "there is a significant lack of empirical research about personalized learning in the middle grades" (p. 3).

The research conducted could update policies and enhance professional development, while promoting more teachers to implement goal setting in the classroom. Researchers recommended rural education should be a priority (Drescher et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019) because over 7 million students were enrolled in rural schools and these students needed attention to improve achievement (Showalter et al., 2019). Research continued to show positive outcomes of goal setting in helping students to be motivated and improved their academic achievement (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Mikami, 2020; Robison et al., 2021; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015); however, a gap in the literature existed regarding the lack of implementation of goal setting for teachers and students. Additionally, the research was lacking as to why some schools chose to implement goal setting and others did not. Successful schools

included middle school learning environments for adolescents (Alexander, 1969; Armstrong & Elkind, 2006).

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. Through an exhaustive review of existing literature, I noted a gap concerning the lack of implementation training of goal setting for teachers and students in general, but more specifically, in rural middle school settings. Additionally, a gap existed regarding rural middle school teachers' perceptions of goal setting implementation with their students. I filled that gap by sending questionnaires to teachers in Tennessee rural middle school settings. In the following Methodology Chapter III, I discussed the qualitative interpretive study approach, utilized my guided research questions, included participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

Students demonstrated successful personalized learning when teachers required goal setting for academic achievement (Caucci, 2021; Day & Tosey, 2011; DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; MacLeod, 2012; Poe et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2016; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Teachers and students implemented and practiced goal setting strategies to reach desired outcomes from passing tests to personal growth (O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Researchers explained five goal setting principles (i.e., clarity, challenge, commitment, task complexity, and feedback) increased the chance of achieved success (Cui, n.d.; Locke & Latham, 2006; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Researchers found young adolescents performed better academically in middle school educational environments when those environments met their needs while they transitioned from elementary school to high school (Dickinson & Butler, 2001; George, 2009a, 2009b; McEwin, 1992; Olofson & Knight, 2018; Schaefer et al., 2016). The literature I reviewed in Chapter II, however, revealed a gap in research around the lack of implementation training of goal setting for teachers and students in rural middle school settings.

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. In Chapter III, I described my specific research methods, explained the research designs, defined my role as the researcher, and included the criteria for the study's participants. I narrated the data collection procedures which included instrumentation, permission, pilot testing, data

analysis, trustworthiness, limitations, delimitations, and the study's assumptions regarding the methods utilized.

### **Research Design**

Researchers described qualitative research design as a changing process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). People who studied qualitative research design focused on discovery, insight, and perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described qualitative researchers as those interested in how people experience their surroundings. Researchers further identified qualitative designs as favored research methods in education, counseling, and health sciences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The concept of qualitative research focused on the purposeful selection of participants, provided the researcher with data, and helped the researcher understand the problem statement and research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I used a qualitative interpretive methodology to conduct a study of investigating Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained how researchers conducted a qualitative interpretive study when they were interested in people's perceptions and experiences. Researchers categorized a qualitative interpretive study as the most common and basic type of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interpretive researchers understood multiple situations existed, and interpretations of those situations varied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

While examining the literature, I found the research lacked data showing the perceptions of Tennessee rural middle school teachers for implementation training on academic goal setting for students. In Fall 2022, I conducted this study to better understand the relationship among these factors. As part of the qualitative interpretive study design, I used questionnaires to collect information from Tennessee rural middle school teachers who knew of or were directly involved with students' academic goal setting implementation.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher acted as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the sole researcher involved in this study, my role included being the only individual who collected data through online questionnaires; completed a pilot study; analyzed the collected data to create codes and themes; verified trustworthiness; described limitations and delimitations; and reported accurate participation study data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) cautioned multiple issues with the qualitative research approach such as researcher bias, background, personal values, and socioeconomic status.

I had first-hand experience as a licensed, certified general education teacher in a Tennessee rural elementary school serving grades Pre-K through sixth for the past 14 years, which included three years teaching students sixth grade. I worked with my students to set weekly and monthly academic goals with unit tests, benchmark assessments, and state assessments. These teaching experiences enabled me to interpret the literature and design the study to investigate

Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), researcher bias was the biggest threat to research because human behavior was problematic and never static. To mitigate possible bias, I collected pilot study feedback and questionnaires until the point of saturation to answer my two research questions. I found saturation occurred when continued data collection produced no new information and the same ideas were repeated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested qualitative researchers collect public or private documents (e.g., newspapers, reports, letters, e-mails) to enhance saturation. To avoid additional bias, I did not collect data from my school or my school district.

### **Participants in the Study**

Participant selection consisted of a nonprobable or *purposeful* method for qualitative researchers to understand the problem and answer the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) posited participants must be individuals with perspectives used to provide the interviewer with answers to the research questions. The criteria for participation in this study was being a teacher (i.e., licensed and certified teacher serving middle school students in grades six through eight) in a Tennessee rural school district. I chose licensed, certified general education middle school teachers within rural middle school settings containing grades six, seven, or eight as my participant sample.

Researchers described essential participant selection criteria and how to choose the sites studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I selected middle school teachers with purposeful sampling. These middle school teachers fulfilled the requirement of Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) recommendation for sampling and source selection to obtain the maximum amount of information. I collected data from purposefully sampling only middle school teachers serving students in grades six through eight in a Tennessee rural middle school district.

Researchers discussed differentiated qualitative research types of purposeful sampling strategies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Researchers described a typical sample as purposeful, reflecting the average person of interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Random purposeful sampling was the strategy I utilized in my qualitative, interpretive study.

My population consisted of seven rural school districts, which included 10 middle schools located within the three regions of Tennessee (West, Middle, and East). This population (117 potential participants) included Tennessee rural middle school teachers who taught students in grades six through eight. The principals from the schools I selected provided me with contact information (email addresses) for 117 initial participants. I expected 15 participants who met the established criteria to complete the questionnaire to participate in the study. I emailed the Google Forms questionnaire link to 117 potential participants. After I collected data, 21 (18%) of the recommended participants, who represented Tennessee's rural middle school teachers, grades six through eight, participated in



the study. I used the responses from 20 (17%) out of 21 participants for data analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Research questions answered the inquiries of who, what, when, where, and how of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Researchers communicated quality research questions influenced methodology, sample size, data collection, and data analysis (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). To conduct this study, I utilized a qualitative, interpretive design methodology with a questionnaire.

In qualitative research, questionnaires were categorized as interviews sent out with a web-based or email platform (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested using questionnaires to reduce limitations such as school locations, schedules, or building entry restrictions. I emailed questionnaires to my participants because this allowed me to conduct my research efficiently and reach a larger participant sample. This benefited the participants because they could complete the questionnaire asynchronously, not take away from instruction, and complete the information on their own time and terms.

### ***Instrumentation***

Researchers cautioned responses to web-based questionnaires and mentioned potential bias regarding computer and Internet availability, competency, demographic groups, and security concerns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The web-based questionnaire helped reduce bias due to the lack of my presence, tone, and other nonverbal cues during the

interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of my qualitative, interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. To gain appropriate data, I asked open-ended questions regarding Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used Google Forms as a web-based questionnaire platform which allowed the participants to choose the time and setting to complete questions regarding perceptions, opinions, and experience while I simultaneously collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I collected data until I reached the point of saturation (20 responses or 17%), which occurred when continued data collection produced no new information and the same ideas were repeated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Researchers categorized questionnaires as interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and considered questionnaires highly structured due to the researcher's complete control over the types and amounts of questioning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described questionnaires as asynchronous interviews because the questionnaires were text-based written interviews completed at different times. Creswell and Creswell (2018) posited questionnaires were another way to interview study participants without being face-to-face using a telephone conversation or online avenue such as Google Forms. I used questionnaires as my data collection method because, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the internet allowed qualitative researchers to reach larger groups of potential participants with minimal geographical constraints. I used the data collected through questionnaires and created themes of the

perceptions of Tennessee rural middle school teachers' about implementing academic goal setting for students.

### ***Pilot Testing***

Pilot studies allowed the researcher to gain insight into mistakes, practiced collection methods, and mitigated bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested piloted questionnaire participants should not be part of the study; I piloted the questionnaire, using Google Forms, in one school, which included three general education middle school teachers who were not participants in the study. My pilot study included a 100% response rate from teachers with an average of 15 minutes spent on the questionnaire. Through the pilot, I updated my original nine questions with adjustments reflecting the removal of three of the demographic information questions resulting in six final questions. I also determined a time frame for participants to complete the questionnaire for my study. I then finalized the questionnaire (see Appendix A) in preparation to email it to my teacher participants via purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### ***Participation Request, Implied Consent, & Administration of Questionnaire***

Before data collection, I requested district permission for the middle school participants (see Appendix B). After receiving district permission, I then requested principal permission for the middle school teacher participants (see Appendix C). The principals who granted approval provided a list via email to me of middle school teacher participants with their contact information. Next, I gained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee at LMU. Once IRB approval was granted, I emailed the teachers from the schools where I

had received principal approval a letter explaining the study with an implied consent statement ensuring all participants knew their rights, responsibilities, and my role as the researcher, and a direct link to the Google Forms questionnaire (see Appendix D).

I began the random questionnaire by reaching out to seven different Tennessee rural middle school districts including 10 schools serving students in grades six through eight. Next, I emailed the teacher participation and implied consent letter with the Google Forms link to 117 general education teachers in grades six through eight. Teachers completed the questionnaire via email using Google Forms, a web-based platform, to directly answer my two research questions investigating Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. After participants clicked the consent agreement, Google Forms directed them to six open-ended questions. I focused the six questions on the research topic of Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. I used the questionnaire to have teachers describe their teaching experiences and explain their perceptions for implementing academic goal setting for students within the last five years. Twenty-one (18%) of teachers submitted questionnaire responses describing their teaching experiences and explaining their perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students; however, I only used 20 (17%) participant responses for data analysis.

### **Methods of Analysis**

After I received questionnaire responses, I organized them in an excel spreadsheet, and categorized them by teacher responses. I analyzed and coded the

responses until the point of saturation, where the data no longer produced new information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used Google Forms to sort the participant responses which allowed me to add color-coded statements and themes to participants' responses. The color-coded statements and frequency of each idea assisted me in developing coding processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants answered six open-ended questions describing experiences, benefits, barriers, school-level support, training, resources, strategies, and experiences implementing academic goal setting with students. The Google Forms program I used automatically transcribed the participants' responses. I then color-coded and grouped the participants' responses in an excel spreadsheet using general open codes with common phrases, (i.e., assessment testing, student buy in, listed goal setting programs used, goal setting benefits, and barriers). Next, I narrowed my open codes into axial codes and developed phrases like motivated students' equal accountability, listed central office and administrative support options, and noted participants' lack of training responses. Finally, I used my axial codes to create selective codes from the participants' responses regarding teachers' perceptions of academic goal setting implementation for students. These themes answered my two research questions.

The data analysis process was complex and included multiple ways to code data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) mentioned the objective of data analysis was to answer the two research questions. Researchers communicated quality research questions influenced methodology, sample size, data collection, and data analysis and

helped make sense of the research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). In qualitative research, data collection occurred simultaneously in and off the field with data analysis, and the researcher was the sole tool for data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As I received participant responses to the questionnaire, I categorized them by question, took notes, then looked for similarities in responses to my two research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) declared reading participant responses helped the researcher recognize common statements and ideas from participants. I read through each participant's response to develop general thoughts and ideas of what the participants said, which helped me recognize common ideas among the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

After reading participant responses, I began the coding process and produced generalizations of what the participants said. Creswell and Creswell (2018) listed a qualitative coding process including six steps:

1. Researchers should prepare and organize the data for analysis.
2. Researchers needed to read all the data (e.g., questionnaire transcripts, documents).
3. Researchers should begin open coding using one document and assign codes to essential words or phrases of text.
4. A list of codes needed to be made provided from the first document while grouping similar codes.
5. Axial codes need to be applied to the remaining documents and highlight specific words, phrases, and quotes that support each code.

6. Researchers reduced the list of codes to five-seven themes supported with detailed descriptions from the data.

I investigated the data through coding while simultaneously organizing and analyzing the collected data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The coding process began with the raw data (i.e., participant responses to the questionnaire), consisting of responses from grades six through eight general education teachers who taught middle school students in rural schools in Tennessee. I used an online questionnaire via Google Forms and was not required to transcribe any participant responses because they directly typed their responses throughout the questionnaire process; therefore, strengthened trustworthiness.

Simultaneous collection and analysis allowed me to develop specific codes from open to axial to selective coding, captured the study's participants' perceptions, and answered my research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I received questionnaire responses from the participants and looked for similarities in the responses to generate open codes. I assigned open each of the responses by the teachers to construct axial codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I analyzed the data until I discovered emerging patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I grouped similarities from my open codes generated during the initial process to create axial codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As themes developed, I identified specific words, phrases, quotes, and data showing how participants experienced situations, and I expressed the qualitative information through rich descriptive language (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). From these axial codes, I used the patterns to develop selective core themes (Creswell & Creswell,

2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data collection and analysis continued until I met the point of saturation with 20 participant responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The selective coding, I discovered from this process answered my two research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After I collected and analyzed the questionnaire data to the point of saturation, which established answers to my research questions, I concluded the data analysis. This data was only accessible by me and was stored on a flash drive in a secure location in my home office in a locked black filing cabinet. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms for the schools and each participant. I maintained confidentiality with my participants during each step of the process. After three years, I destroyed the data by burning the flash drive. After my data analysis, I prepared to write my findings.

### **Trustworthiness**

The researcher must conduct ethical research to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers agreed in qualitative research, triangulation was the best strategy to support trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I included triangulation within my study by soliciting responses and collecting data from participants with varying years of experience and various locations within rural middle schools in Tennessee (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As I established themes through the coding process, triangulation was achieved in this study, further mitigating the threat to trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I maintained trustworthiness by using the same data



collection method and questionnaire with each participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Researcher bias was the biggest threat to the trustworthiness of a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated to mitigate the threat to trustworthiness, a researcher needed to collect data to the point of saturation and self-evaluate through the data collection and analysis processes. As the sole researcher, I maintained complete involvement throughout the data collection and analysis processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, I honestly disclosed the data collection and data analysis methods utilized in my study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

To further mitigate the threats to trustworthiness, I conducted a pilot questionnaire to seek clarity in the participant responses before officially sending it out to all participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For pilot testing, I selected two middle school general education teachers who taught students in grades six through eight (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I did not use the pilot study participants in my final study. After performing the questionnaire's pilot testing process, I reflected on and confirmed the steps and procedures related to the questionnaire interview process. During the administration of the pilot questionnaire, I revised the interview protocol to confirm participants interpreted and followed the process similarly. I increased trustworthiness by reflecting on the participants' responses, ensuring conjunction between the questions' language, content, and the existing research used in developing the questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After the completion of my pilot study, I used Google Forms to administer questionnaires to the study participants with consistent language and question order (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By utilizing consistent language and question order, I decreased elements influenced by traditional, face-to-face interview responses, like working variation, tone of the researcher's voice, and question order (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I did not conduct face-to-face interviews, and participants typed their own responses, which strengthened trustworthiness because a researcher did not transcribe an interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After participants submitted their responses on Google Forms, they could not reenter the questionnaire or change any responses. To check for accuracy, I selected Google Forms' option to email each participant a copy of their individually typed responses. After distributing the first questionnaire to participants, I made no changes to the questionnaire. All teacher participants were asked the same six questions in the Google Forms questionnaire (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used Google Forms to create a questionnaire which would not show names or link participants and their questionnaire, which increased trustworthiness through confidentiality.

I addressed security issues regarding Google Forms, a secure, web-based platform used to administer my study's questionnaire and collect participant responses. I distributed the questionnaire to qualifying participants via email containing a secure link generated by Google Forms. Access to Google Forms and my data collection was password-protected, and I was the only one with access to the password. I utilized Google Forms to produce reliable, repetitive, and

consistent findings through my data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I triangulated the data I collected by receiving questionnaires reflecting the perceptions of participants from Tennessee rural middle school teachers about implementing academic goal setting for students. I utilized the internet-based program Google Forms for the questionnaire data collection, which allowed me to reach participants from multiple locations. I was never in the same place with the middle school teachers at the time they participated in answering the questionnaires. I conducted a pilot study to confirm my questionnaire. Pilot studies allowed the researcher to gain insight into mistakes, practiced collection methods, and mitigated bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I provided participants with questions that assisted in answering my two research questions: *How do Tennessee rural middle school teachers perceive implementing academic goal setting for students? In what ways, if any, could Tennessee rural middle school teachers implement academic goal setting for students?*

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Roberts and Hyatt (2019) defined *limitations* as research study restrictions over which the researcher had no control, possibly affecting the overall results or negatively impacting the researcher's interpretation of the findings. Researchers reported limitations openly and honestly to ensure those who read their research understood any existing limitations (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Researchers explained limitations included population, extend population across Tennessee to increase sample size numbers, regional differences, response rates, and

methodology constraints (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

There are 95 districts in Tennessee, and my research only covered seven. A limitation of my study was the distance from the participants' schools to where I lived. To mitigate the lack of in-person access and distance, I used questionnaires through the online platform Google Forms instead of conducting one-on-one interviews. Another limitation of my study was the willingness of general education teachers to answer personal questions via an on-line questionnaire platform like Google Forms, as some participants did not feel comfortable answering the questions in detail. Even though the questionnaire was anonymous, teachers may not have felt comfortable answering the questions honestly out of fear of retaliation from their administration. I attempted to mitigate this by explaining in the teacher participation and implied consent letter that all participant responses were kept confidential, and no one in their school system would know who participated. An additional limitation of my study was having no control over the participants answering my questionnaire more than once. The questionnaire allowed me to reach more participants, which mitigated threats to trustworthiness and bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Roberts and Hyatt (2019) defined *delimitations* as the process the researcher utilized to clarify and justify the narrowed scope of the study. Researchers mentioned typical delimitations included time and location of the study, the study's sample, selected problem aspects, and criteria (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). My study included a delimitation to my study was using

questionnaires as the sole data collection instrument. While using questionnaires, issues such as participants could not ask clarifying direct questions if they encountered a confusing question or misinterpreted the question, potentially skewing the data I received. Additional delimitations of my study included giving participants only two weeks to complete the questionnaire, the type of open-ended questions used, the number of district and principal approval responses with participant contact information, and how I chose the participants.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

Roberts and Hyatt (2019) stated *assumptions* of a research study were what I took for granted relative to my study. The first assumption I made when I conducted my study was all teachers who responded to my questionnaire answered all the questions openly and honestly. Another assumption I made was all teachers who participated by answering the questionnaire had some personal knowledge about middle school students' curriculum. Since I have worked as a certified general education classroom teacher with students in multiple grades, I assumed most teachers serving students in grades six through eight fully understood the roles and responsibilities of classroom teachers. I assumed teachers had minimal to no training on student goal setting implementation strategies in the classroom since I had no type of training. Furthermore, I assumed my participants were representatives of certified teachers in Tennessee rural middle schools who taught students in grades six through eight. With little direction and assistance, I also assumed that teachers checked their emails daily, had access to their email accounts, including outside of school times, had Internet access, and could follow the survey questionnaire link on Google Forms.

## **Summary of Methodology**

Given the existing research gap, the purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. In this study, I used a qualitative interpretive design to answer my guiding research questions: *How do Tennessee rural middle school teachers perceive implementing academic goal setting for students? In what ways, if any, could Tennessee rural middle school teachers implement academic goal setting for students?* I described the qualitative interpretive research design and the deployment of my study's questionnaire guided by my research problem, research questions, and literature on goal setting theory. The purpose of my questionnaire was to gather data to directly answer the study's research questions. Furthermore, I explained my data collection process using purposeful random sampling, a Google Forms questionnaire, and a data analysis process. I addressed how I ensured trustworthiness and discussed the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions relative to my study. In Chapter IV, I reported details about data analysis and researcher findings.

## **Chapter IV: Analyses and Results**

Researchers found successful personalized learning for adults and children required goal setting for academic achievement (Caucci, 2021; Day & Tosey, 2011; DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; Harris, 2022; Haughey, 2014; MacLeod, 2012; Poe et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2016; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Teachers and students implemented and practiced goal setting strategies to reach desired outcomes from passing tests to personal growth (O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015). Edwin Locke and Gary Latham partnered to develop the goal setting theory in the 1960s and continued to improve the framework and concepts of goal setting with increased research (Cui, n.d.; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006, 2019; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Locke and Latham (2019) defined goal setting theory as the outcome of setting goals for future performance.

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. At the time of this study, limited research focused on Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students. My goal was to conduct this study to gain better insight and fill the gap in the literature regarding middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students in rural schools in Tennessee.

To address literature gaps, I used Google Forms, a web-based survey platform, to collect data. I relied on six open-ended questionnaire responses from general education teachers serving students in grades six through eight in

Tennessee rural middle schools to create a purposeful sample of participants ( $N = 117$ ). I sent the Google Forms questionnaire link, and an implied consent letter to all participants for this study. Within two weeks of collecting data, I received responses for 21 (18% of potential participants) of the 117 questionnaires providing data for this study and reached the point of saturation. I used 20 (17%) participant responses for data analysis. Participant 8 directly stated, "I do not have time or energy to complete this survey," for every question. I disregarded all of Participant 8 comments throughout the coding and data analysis process. After two weeks of sending the initial email with the Google Forms link to potential participants, I received no new information from the questionnaire responses and closed the questionnaire.

### **Data Analysis**

For this qualitative interpretive study, I designed two research questions to gather the information that provided insight into Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. Participants answered six open-ended questionnaire questions. I used purposeful sampling and emailed the Google Forms questionnaire link to 117 potential participants. Out of the 117 potential participants, 21 (18%) participants met the established criteria and completed the questionnaire, which provided data for this research study; however, I only used 20 (17%) participant responses for data analysis. I began data analysis by reading through the questionnaire responses to familiarize myself with the information. I read through the responses three times before returning to the first participant, then I color-coded repeated words and phrases, and applied open coding to the text. I identified open codes from the



participant responses and grouped similar or redundant codes into axial codes. From the axial codes, I identified two themes for Research Question 1 and two themes for Research Question 2.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of the research questions in this study focused on Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. The questions asked in the questionnaire were deliberate in addressing the main research questions that guided my study.

#### ***Research Question 1***

How do Tennessee rural middle school teachers perceive implementing academic goal setting for students?

Participants directly provided information pertaining to Research Question 1 by responding to the supporting questions in the Google Forms online questionnaire. I analyzed the collected data provided in the questionnaire by creating open and axial codes with similar grouping. I narrowed the data to 13 specific open codes, four axial codes, and two selective codes or themes related to Research Question 1 (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Tennessee Rural Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Implementing Academic*

*Goal Setting for Students*

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
Discuss goals w/test Scores	Test scores to set goals	<b>Teachers perceived academic goal setting implementation as helpful with student motivation and accountability.</b>
Compare previous & current scores	Motivated students = accountability	
Growth & achievement MAP; CFA; benchmark; iReady; CLEVER tests	Student buy in a must	
Remediate & enrich		
Motivated students	Many students do not understand the goal setting process	<b>Teachers perceived lack of student buy in, time, &amp; teacher experience as barriers for academic goal setting implementation.</b>
Student buy in/ownership		
S.M.A.R.T. goals		
Retention of content		
Better classroom management		
Students hard to motivate		
Lack of student understanding of importance		
Doesn't work		

**Teachers perceived academic goal setting implementation as helpful with student motivation and accountability.** I utilized data from my questionnaire questions one, two, and three to identify teachers' experiences with student academic goal setting implementation. I utilized the participants' responses regarding their experiences to determine two themes associated with Research Question 1. I analyzed participants' responses regarding teachers' experiences with academic goal setting implementation with their students including the benefits and barriers.

Of the 20 participants, 14 (70%) responded to questionnaire question one with statements focused on positive academic goal setting experiences with

students, which led to student motivation and accountability. Participant 5 directly stated, “Once they reach [student goals], the outcome is amazing,” and Participant 7 agreed, “My experience is that [students] like to see where they are and where they want to be.” Participant 11 also agreed, “The majority of students did find some motivation and wanted to meet those goals and be successful.” Participant 3 directly stated, “I could use setting goals as a motivator for them.”

Participants 3, 5, 7, 13, 16, and 19 shared how academic goal setting was helpful in creating student motivation. Participant 3 stated, “Setting goals can motivate students.” Participants 16 agreed, “Students have greater focus on their learning, they are more motivated, and they do better quality work.”

Participants 6, 9, 10, 14, 18, and 21 stated benefits of academic goal setting were helpful in creating student accountability. Participant 6 directly stated, “Goal setting makes the student accountable for his/her academic performance.” Participant 10 stated, “The biggest benefit is that the students are involved in the process and taking ownership for their learning.”

All participants reported their experiences when implementing academic goal setting with students. Participants used different district- or school-provided assessments or programs to develop a process to help students set academic goals. Participant 1 shared, “Our students take the [math and reading academic progress] test three times a year; we dig in and compare data to previous tests and look for both growth and achievement.” Participants 3, 6, 14, and 15 used test scores and subject benchmarks to set academic goals. Participant 19 stated, “iReady used in core subject goals and we discussed CLEVER in class.” Participants 9 and 20 implemented academic S.M.A.R.T. goals. Participant 9 directly stated, “I have my

students write S.M.A.R.T. goals there are standards based and geared toward a specific goal in the classroom.” Similarly, Participant 20 directly stated, “I ensure the following: Be specific, make sure the goals are attainable and measurable, make sure they are realistic, and ensure they are or can be met in a timely fashion.”

**Teachers perceived lack of student buy in, time, and teacher experience as barriers for academic goal setting implementation.** Twenty participants responded to questionnaire question three with statements focused on the barriers buy in, time, and teacher experience for implementing academic goal setting with students. Seventeen out of 20 (85%) participants reported barriers when implementing academic goal setting with students. Eight out of 20 (40%) participants shared how a lack of student buy in was the biggest barrier. Participant 1 directly stated, “There will always be those who do not feel as though academics are a priority.” Participant 6 stated, “Student buy in is always a factor, and goal setting can be time consuming.” Participants 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11, and 21 all reported that student buy in was important for successful goal setting implementation.

The following percentages were included in the participants’ perceptions of the 85% overall barriers of academic goal setting implementation with students. Four out of 20 (20%) participants reported lack of time as a barrier. Participant 14 directly stated, “Time constraints.” Participant 16 expanded, “Time and attendance are the enemy.” Participant 21 also stated, “Time. The challenge with most things in education is time.” Participant 2 directly stated, “I’ve tried implementing academic goal setting and it hasn’t worked with the age group that I

teach.” Similarly, Participant 4 stated, “My experience is that a small percentage will improve.”

Three out of 20 (15%) participants reported a lack of teacher experience when implementing academic goal setting with students. This percentage was included in the participants’ perceptions of the 85% overall barriers of academic goal setting implementation with students. Participants, 12, 13, and 17 reported having no teacher experience implementing academic goal setting with their students. These participants met the criteria for the study but did not include specific academic goal setting implementation experiences with students.

### ***Research Question 2***

In what ways, if any, could Tennessee rural middle school teachers implement academic goal setting for students?

Participants directly provided information pertaining to Research Question 2 while also responding to other supporting questions in the Google Forms online questionnaire. I made another list of open codes following the same data analysis method for Research Question 1. I narrowed the data to 15 open codes, seven axial codes, and two selective codes or themes related to Research Question 2 (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Tennessee Rural Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Ways to Implement*

*Academic Goal Setting for Students*

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
Various Positions: central office academic/instructional coaches school level admin principals/vice, subject teachers, & extended skills teachers Professional Development (PD): county & school level Professional Learning Community (PLC): student level meetings Tutoring programs (before & after school) Rewards/incentives Programs: iReady; RTI Masters' courses Student buy in Motivation S.M.A.R.T. Goals Time issues Modeling & encouraging Individualized lesson plans No school level support No strategies used	Various central office & school level positions in place to help teachers  No school level help provided  Available resources  No teacher training/ resources received  Various PD/ PLCs available to help  Must: student buy in  Engage students using S.M.A.R.T. goals & best strategies	<b>Teachers perceived PLCs and strategies as supports to assist teachers in using data to implement academic goal setting with students.</b>  <b>Teachers perceived a lack of training in implementing academic goal setting for students.</b>

**Teachers perceived Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and strategies as supports to assist teachers in using data to implement academic goal setting with students.** I utilized data from my questionnaire question four and six to identify school-level support and strategies to support teachers implementing academic goal setting with students, who taught Tennessee rural middle school students in grades six through eight. I utilized the participants' responses regarding their experiences to determine two themes associated with Research Question 2.

Thirteen out of 20 (65%) participants responded to questionnaire question four and six with statements listing various school-level supports, such as PLCs, resources, and positions, to provide teachers with analyzing data used in academic goal setting implementation with students. Participants shared how school-level support helped teachers use the data collected from the assessments or programs they shared from question one. Participant 1 directly stated, “Our Central Office has several people in various positions who are there to offer support digging into the data and explaining as needed.” Participants 4, 16, and 21 reported academic and instructional coaches were available for teacher support. Participants 4, 6, 11, and 15 listed school-level administration, (i.e., principals and vice principals), were available to support teachers. Participant 11 stated, “When the principal, vice-principal, teacher aids, and all other adults in the building are on board with the goal setting process, the students buy into the process as well.” Participant 7 reported, “We look at data in PLC meetings. This helps us to see where goals should be for students.”

Seven out of 20 (35%) participants responded, stating they had received no school-level support. Participant 9 reported, “I have never gotten support at the school level.” Participants 5, 12, 13, 14, 17, and 18 echoed with “None.”

Seven out of 20 (35%) participants responded to questionnaire question six with statements listing various teaching strategies to support academic goal setting implementation with students. Participants 10, 11, and 16 stated S.M.A.R.T. goal strategies provided student support. Participant 11 reported, “Using the S.M.A.R.T. goal with students helps them to stay on track with their goal. It also helps to keep them invested.” Participant 3 listed various teaching

strategies including “1. Have students pick goals that are achievable, 2. Be specific, 3. Put goals in order of importance, 4. Make time to work the goal, and 5. COME TO SCHOOL EVERYDAY!”

Participants answered question six and shared strategies the teachers implemented to support academic goal setting for their students. Participant 2 shared, “We use agenda books to help with academic goal setting.” Participant 14 reported, “Set aside specific time to set goals and make it a priority.” Participant 6, after mentioning the importance of student buy in, directly stated, “I could use some support on making students understand the significance of goal setting and why it is important.”

**Teachers perceived a lack of training in implementing academic goal setting for students.** Of the 20 participants, 11 (55%) participants responded to questionnaire question five with statements focused on the lack of training or resources teachers received on student academic goal setting implementation. Participant 3 directly stated they received, “No specific training.” Participant 14 echoed, “No formal training.” Similarly, Participant 10 directly reported, “I have received no formal training or resources on student academic goal setting.” Participants 5, 11, 12, 16, and 17 reported, “None,” with regards to receiving no training.

Three out of 20 (15%) participants shared how they received no formal training but sought other ways to implement academic goal setting with their students. Participant 9 shared they received no formal training on academic goal setting implementation, but used their own experiences with their students, “My own personal experiences and desires for my classroom.” Participant 18 shared,



“Teacher prep and personal experience” was their only exposure to academic goal setting implementation with students. Participant 21 stated, “Having to set them for our children is the training I have had and now in my Master’s level class we are entering into a discussion of academic goal setting.”

Eight out of 20 (40%) participants shared their perceptions of Professional Development (PD) and school provided teacher training. Participant 2 directly stated, “I’ve had small 2- to 4-hour professional development classes over this and did not find them helpful.” Participant 7 shared, “We receive training on this in professional development days. We look at data regularly in PLC meetings.” Participants 4, 7, and 15 reported attending PLC meetings as training. Participant 1 reported, “Central office personnel meet with our grade level departments once data is in.”

### **Summary of Results**

In Chapter IV, I outlined the qualitative interpretive research process used to analyze the online questionnaire responses to answer the two research questions that formed the foundation of this study. Throughout analyzing the data collected from 20 participants’ online questionnaires, I developed open codes, axial codes, and themes related to each research question. The data collected represented the experiences of certified, licensed state of Tennessee general education rural middle school teachers serving students in grades six through eight. I generated two themes for each research question through the detailed analysis of the 20 completed questionnaires. Research Question 1 produced two themes including teachers’ perceptions of academic goal setting implementation as helpful with student motivation and accountability and how teachers perceived

lack of student buy in, time, and teacher experience as barriers for academic goal setting implementation. Research Question 2 produced two themes including teachers' perceptions of PLCs and strategies as supports to assist teachers in using data to implement academic goal setting with students, as well as how teachers perceived a lack of training in implementing academic goal setting with students.

Seventy percent of participants for this study found implementing academic goal setting with students helped motivate students and held students accountable for their work; however, 55% of participants received no formal training for implementing academic goal setting with students in Tennessee rural middle schools. Eighty-five percent of participants shared how lack of student buy in, time, and teacher experience were barriers in implementing academic goal setting with students. Even though school-level support existed, 55% of participants' responses perceived an overall lack of training or strategies for implementing academic goal setting with students. I provided additional insights in Chapter V based on the data analysis, implications, and recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter V: Discussion of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. At the time of this study, I could not locate any existing studies focusing on Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students. Researchers concentrated on teachers' perceptions of goal setting strategies (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2017) for students' outcomes after teachers provided goal setting strategies (Dishon-Berkovits, 2014; O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Robison et al., 2021) and for the effects of student-set goals (Burns et al., 2019, 2021; Deemer, 2004; Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Mikami, 2020; Scarborough et al., 2010; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Travers et al., 2015).

I developed two research questions to focus my qualitative interpretive study on how and in what ways Tennessee rural middle school teachers perceived and could implement academic goal setting for students. I used the goal setting theory framework from previous researchers referenced in my literature review as the theoretical framework for this study. Through my theoretical framework, I examined Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. I collected data via purposeful sampling and an online questionnaire using Google Forms to generalize selective codes outlined in this chapter, Discussion of the Study.

Seventy percent of participants perceived implementing academic goal setting in the classroom as helpful with student motivation and accountability towards assessments and grades. I identified lack of student buy in, time, and

teacher experience as main factors of teacher perceived barriers. Teachers described both positive and negative experiences with academic goal setting implementation through Professional Development (PD), PLCs, reviewing test score data, creating student personal and subject-level goals, and reviewing previous student goals. I found school districts in the State of Tennessee did not use a uniform training or curriculum to assist teachers in implementing student academic goal setting despite the availability of central office and administrative supports, various available strategies, and accessible resources.

Consequently, teachers perceived more barriers concerning a lack of training in implementing academic goal setting for students at the middle school level. With the perceived barriers of lack of teacher training in implementing academic goal setting for students at the middle school level, school districts should provide more frequent and higher quality PD and PLCs (i.e., teacher modeling). Middle school teachers lacked educational practice, including goal setting implementation strategies and student assessment goal folders to involve students in goal setting and planning processes (Garrels, 2017; Ginns et al., 2018; Sides & Cuevas, 2020). Students needed continued support from their teachers to develop goal setting skills (Farnsworth Finn, 2020; Slovis, 2021). Researchers stressed rural teachers needed knowledge and effective training in the goal setting process to create success (Dotson, 2016; Hallenbeck & Fleming, 2011). On the contrary, teachers perceived the barriers concerning a lack of training in implementing academic goal setting for students in middle schools as potential future success. These barriers should provide school districts with new ideas for teachers resulting in more support, guidance, and resources, with formal training

and more meaningful academic goal setting implementation PD opportunities. I found it interesting how 65% of the participants listed various teacher support, and 55% of the participants reported a lack of teacher training for implementing academic goal setting with their students; however, 85% of the participants reported the provided support and training was either not helpful or was non-existent in academic goal setting implementation. A conundrum I found included only 20% of the participants listed time as a barrier. I was surprised to not find a higher percentage of participants listing time, or lack of time, as a barrier of academic goal setting implementation with their students. Researchers stated the process of goal setting implementation occurred with needed time and practice (Nordengren, 2019; O'Neill, 2000, 2004; Wollny et al., 2019). The participants' responses revealed how the available support and training for implementing academic goal setting has not provided a successful framework for teachers to implement academic goal setting in the classroom. School district leaders should evaluate the influence of current teacher support and training for student academic goal setting implementation in the class.

### **Implications for Practice**

As I conducted my research, I focused on teachers' perceptions of goal setting implementation in the classroom. District and school leaders should use this information to create trainings for Tennessee rural middle school general education teachers, serving students in grades six through eight, in their fundamental awareness, knowledge, and understanding of implementing academic goal setting for students. District leaders should require general education teachers to participate in structured PD (e.g., teacher think-pair-shares,

teacher modeling) to understand how to implement academic goals with students successfully. This knowledge could increase teachers' understanding of academic goal setting success and methods to best support their students in the classroom. This knowledge would build and create a motivating and productive environment for academic goal setting implementation in the classroom. District and school leaders should also provide PDs, PLCs, and alternative teacher training opportunities to address students' academic goal setting implementation in the classroom. Additionally, with the knowledge gained from this study, teachers and educational leaders could make more informed decisions to lead their schools and districts when implementing student goal setting strategies.

Furthermore, district and school leaders should provide resources for teachers to implement academic goal setting for students, including extra or designated time to create, monitor, and reflect on goals; goal setting modeling strategies; and quality teacher training. Leaders should provide collaboration with mentor teachers who have successfully implemented student academic goal setting in their classroom, to other teachers who could benefit from the modeling. School districts and universities should create a collaborative training program or PD program, including pre-service teachers, where teachers enroll based on specific micro-credential needs, such as goal setting implementation strategies for middle school students to understand and deploy best practices. Universities and school districts would benefit from one another's experiences and expertise.

School leaders should prioritize scheduling time during the school day to create, track, and implement academic goals with students. Parents and guardians, general and special education teachers, teaching assistants, tutors, special area

teachers, and administration should meet regularly as a collaborative unit to promote the success of student academic goal setting implementation. These successful meetings should also promote overall relationship-building among students and the adults in their lives both at school and at home. This collaboration could provide an opportunity to build a support network team to best support all students and their potential for future academic and life skill successes. Each team member played a unique role and provided ideas and expertise in an academic area related to the individual student. Overall, better teacher training contributed to knowledge and improved instruction, which better supported the students and their abilities to reach individual academic goals.

School leaders should support all teachers and encourage academic goal setting with all students. School leaders should provide quality training to teachers on academic goal setting implementation with students. School leaders should be aware of their teachers' comfort zone concerning academic student goal implementation and which teachers specifically consider themselves novices vs. masters at goal setting strategies and best practices. Novice teachers could be paired with veteran mentor teachers to observe successful hands-on goal setting implementation strategies with students. Implementing academic goal setting for students should be a rewarding, fun, and motivating process.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

In this section, I have provided recommendations for future research for school districts, school leaders, and teachers that will aid in the continual exploration of investigating teachers' academic goal setting implementation for students. These recommendations provided actionable steps for future researchers

based on Tennessee rural middle school general education teachers serving students in grades six through eight. While I collected information on general education teachers serving students in grades six through eight, I focused on rural middle school teachers in Tennessee. I collected data from all three Tennessee regions (i.e., West, Middle, and East), including seven districts and 10 schools.

Moreover, future researchers should expand this research by conducting a study focusing on urban districts, private schools, or different regions within the United States. Individual school districts should adapt their training, both pre-service training and supporting PD, to assist teachers in meeting the demands in implementing student academic goal setting within their classrooms. This type of study would also allow future researchers to examine whether the generalizations made in this study are valid in different demographic areas.

In addition, future researchers should use a similar research methodology but collect more demographic information from participants, such as gender, age, the highest level of education obtained, region location, district and school locations, and different schools' socioeconomic status. By collecting additional data, future researchers should compare responses across the demographic categories, which could provide valuable insight into how those demographics influenced general education teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting with students in grades six through eight. Future researchers should use their findings to identify trends based on specific demographic information such as region (e.g., specific, or different parts of a state or country), socioeconomic status (e.g., low income), and identify implications and generalizations applied to diverse populations. Other findings could identify



additional trends by looking at grade levels taught (e.g., elementary versus middle grades), subjects taught (e.g., math versus reading), and years of experience (novice versus veteran).

Future researchers should expand on the findings of this study by using a similar research methodology but utilizing alternative data collection instruments or strategies outside of a questionnaire that relies on purposeful random sampling. Researchers could also use social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, to collect data to allow the researcher to increase the number of participants and receive responses from a larger sample population. Alternatively, the researchers should ask participants to elaborate or clarify their explanations or responses by collecting data using in-person interviews, which could add clarity, depth, and relevance to participants' responses. After interviews were completed, observations could be conducted to explore how teachers are successfully implementing academic goals with their students and how they find the time to implement these goals in their classrooms.

Lastly, future researchers should expand on the findings of this study by investigating the perceptions of general education teachers about implementing academic goal setting for teachers who serve students in alternative grade levels besides six through eight. These findings would provide district and school leaders with information that could be used to support teachers who implement academic goal setting with students. In fact, these findings should be utilized to improve teacher training, available resources, mentor programs, PD, and PLC opportunities directly related to implementing student academic goal setting success strategies. Future research should focus on why rural middle school

teachers implemented goal setting, how they learned to implement goal setting, and the challenges teachers faced when implementing goal setting.

### **Conclusions of the Study**

The greatest single contributing factor of student achievement related to goal setting was implementing them (Hattie, 2018; Jensen, 2019). Teachers who provided quality facilitation led to better goal setting, improved self-pride, and increased academic results for rural students (Dotson, 2016; Hallenbeck & Fleming, 2011). The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students.

For this study, I utilized a theoretical framework that included goal setting theory and the concepts of goal setting. Locke and Latham (2019) defined *goal setting theory* as the results of setting goals for an upcoming performance. Researchers stated goal setting theory originated with organizational psychology roots in contrast to goal orientation's educational psychology origins (Cui, n.d.; Locke & Latham, 2006; Seijts et al., 2004; Toolshero, 2022). Researchers posited literature details remained vague about how to incorporate goal setting strategies for learning and different age groups (Burns et al., 2019; Deemer, 2004; Scarborough et al., 2010).

I used a qualitative interpretive methodology to conduct a study investigating Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students. Throughout analyzing the data collected from 20 participants' online questionnaires, I developed open codes, axial codes, and themes related to each research question. The purpose of my

questionnaire was to gather data to directly answer the study's two research questions. Furthermore, I explained my data collection process using purposeful random sampling, a Google Forms questionnaire, and a data analysis process. The data collected represented the experiences of certified, licensed state of Tennessee general education rural middle school teachers serving students in grades six through eight. I generated two themes for each research question through the detailed analysis of the 20 completed questionnaires. I found two themes emerged for Research Question 1 including teachers' perceptions of academic goal setting implementation as helpful with student motivation and accountability and how teachers perceived lack of student buy in, time, and teacher experience as barriers for academic goal setting implementation. I generated two themes for Research Question 2 including teachers' perceptions of PLCs and strategies as supports to assist teachers in using data to implement academic goal setting with students, as well as how teachers perceived a lack of training in implementing academic goal setting with students.

These research findings suggested teachers felt optimistic about the outcomes of academic goal setting for students but needed more support to implement them successfully. Additionally, findings suggested rural Tennessee middle school general education teachers serving students in grades six through eight need more meaningful training and supporting PD opportunities to assist teachers in meeting the demands in implementing student academic goal setting within their classrooms. These findings echoed literature included in the literature review of this study.

In conjunction with teachers, district and school leaders should use this study to stimulate and encourage training, PDs, and collaboration about best practices for implementing academic goal setting with students within middle schools. Teachers should collaborate and learn from other teachers who have successfully implemented academic goal setting with students in the classroom and have encountered positive academic goal setting experiences. Teachers need explicit strategies, best practices, resources, training, support, mentors, and frameworks to successfully incorporate academic goal setting into their classroom environment. Through this qualitative interpretive study, my findings are paramount in learning how Tennessee rural middle school teachers perceived the benefits in implementing academic goal setting for students in the classroom and the barriers preventing teachers from utilizing strategies to grow their students academically. Tennessee rural middle school teachers should have access to support, resources, and training to successfully implement academic goal setting in the classroom to support students' academic and life skill successes.

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**Appendix A**  
**Certified Teacher Questionnaire**



## **Middle School Teachers (grades 6-8) and Academic Goal Setting**

Disclaimer: When thinking about your answers to the below questions, please limit your responses to the past five years of teaching experience.

Please do not use any names when answering questions regarding your experiences with students.

1. Describe your experience, if any, with student academic goal setting implementation.
2. What benefits, if any, have you seen with student academic goal setting implementation?
3. What barriers, if any, have you seen with student academic goal setting implementation?
4. What school-level support, if any, has helped you to implement student academic goals?
5. What type of training or resources, if any, have you received on student academic goal setting implementation?
6. What strategies, if any, could you use to support your students in setting academic goals?

**Appendix B**  
**District Permission Letter**

District Name  
Street Address  
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Director of Schools,

Permission was granted to Amy Woolum through Lincoln Memorial University's (LMU) Internal Review Board to conduct research with middle school teachers as a component for the research study entitled *Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students*. The purpose of this research study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students.

The purpose of this letter is to ask permission to send a questionnaire to all general education teachers serving students in grades six through eight in your district for data collection purposes to support the research of the study. Questionnaires will be conducted by me, Amy Woolum, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at LMU.

The process will include sending the voluntary questionnaire to the teachers in your district. Teachers who volunteer to participate will do so without harm or impact on their current or future professional standing. Teacher participants will be asked to complete a six-question electronic questionnaire through Google Forms regarding their perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students to the best of their knowledge. With the data collected, this study may help to better prepare districts, principals, assistant principals, and teachers for meaningful discussions with their students on academic goal setting implementation in classrooms and schools, the training needed to accomplish these discussions, and the positive outcomes of setting goals.

The results could aid schools and districts in designing professional development for teachers to gain goal setting strategies for implementation in the classroom, best practices for teachers and students to use goal setting strategies, and to improve student achievement and growth. Students, teachers, and administrators may benefit from the data. Questionnaires will be completed in accordance with each participant's availability. Responses will be confidential without any identifying characteristics.

Thank you, in advance, for considering this research.

Sincerely,

**Researcher: Amy A. Woolum**

Edd Candidate at Lincoln Memorial University

Amy.Woolum@lmunet.edu

**Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Cherie Gaines**

Professor and Chairperson at Lincoln Memorial University

Cherie.Gaines@lmunet.edu

**Appendix C**  
**Principal Permission Letter**

Principal Name  
Generic Middle School  
Street Address  
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Principal,

Permission was granted to Amy Woolum through Lincoln Memorial University's (LMU) Internal Review Board to conduct research with middle school teachers as a component for the research study entitled *Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students*. Permission was also granted on XXX, by the XXX director of schools XXX to conduct research at your school. The purpose of this research study was to investigate Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions about implementing academic goal setting for students.

The purpose of this letter is to ask permission to send a questionnaire to all general education teachers serving students in grades six through eight in your school for data collection purposes to support the research of the study. Questionnaires will be conducted by me, Amy Woolum, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at LMU.

The process will include sending the voluntary questionnaire to the teachers in your school. Teachers who volunteer to participate will do so without harm or impact on their current or future professional standing. Teacher participants will be asked to complete a six-question electronic questionnaire through Google Forms regarding their perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students to the best of their knowledge. With the data collected, this study may help to better prepare districts, principals, assistant principals, and teachers for meaningful discussions with their students on academic goal setting implementation in classrooms and schools, the training needed to accomplish these discussions, and the positive outcomes of setting goals.

The results could aid schools and districts in designing professional development for teachers to gain goal setting strategies for implementation in the classroom, best practices for teachers and students to use goal setting strategies, and to improve student achievement and growth. Students, teachers, and administrators may benefit from the data. Questionnaires will be completed in accordance with each participant's availability. Responses will be confidential without any identifying characteristics.

Thank you, in advance, for considering this research.

Sincerely,

**Researcher: Amy A. Woolum**  
EdD Candidate at Lincoln Memorial University  
Amy.Woolum@lmunet.edu

**Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Cherie Gaines**  
Professor and Chairperson at Lincoln Memorial University  
Cherie.Gaines@lmunet.edu

**Appendix D**

**Teacher Participation and Implied Consent Letter**

Dear Educator,

Your participation is being requested for the research study entitled *Tennessee rural middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing academic goal setting for students*. This study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Lincoln Memorial University (LMU), where I am currently enrolled. Your participation will be extremely valuable to me due to your knowledge and expertise in this subject area; therefore, I am kindly requesting your participation in my research study. Participation in this study is voluntary. Please read the information below and contact me via email with any questions you may have before deciding to participate. If you consent to participate, please click the provided link in this email to begin the questionnaire.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are (a) certified and licensed by the State of Tennessee, (b) work with middle school students in grades six through eight, (c) work as a general education classroom teacher.

This study includes a six-question web-based questionnaire (via Google Forms) and will require approximately 15 minutes of your time to complete. You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty. If at any time you discontinue the questionnaire, your results will be discarded. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential, and data will be stored in secure computer files and in a secure storage location. Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with LMU.

There are no known harms or discomforts associated with this study, as it involves minimal risk and is an effort to highlight your current success as an educator and the support you provide to individuals in your school. To prepare for this study, I am asking you to consider your role as a general education teacher for grades six through eight to share your experiences and insight within the last five years regarding the implementation of academic goal setting for students in your classroom, to the best of your knowledge.

If you are unable to contact the researcher listed at the bottom of this form or faculty sponsor and have general questions, concerns, complaints, or inquiries about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee at [irb@lmunet.edu](mailto:irb@lmunet.edu).

This research has been approved by LMU's IRB. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you may contact IRB committee at [irb@lmunet.edu](mailto:irb@lmunet.edu).

By moving forward and completing the questionnaire linked in the email, you agree that you work as a certified educator in a Tennessee rural middle school district, you are over the age of 18, and you give your implied consent to participate in this study.

**<INSERT LINK HERE>**

Thank you for your consideration to participate in my study.

Sincerely,

**Researcher: Amy A. Woolum**

Edd Candidate at Lincoln Memorial University  
Amy.Woolum@lmunet.edu

**Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Cherie Gaines**  
Professor and Chairperson at Lincoln Memorial University  
Cherie.Gaines@lmunet.edu