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EDUCATOR VOICE AND INFLUENCE IN MISSISSIPPI EDUCATION POLICY

by
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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Approved by

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ABSTRACT

Sarah James Sproles: Educator Voice and Influence in Mississippi Education Policy
(Under the direction of Dr. Melissa Bass)

This thesis attempts to discover if there are barriers educators and government actors feel are in place that prevent educator advocacy and influence in the state of Mississippi, and consequently what importance their voices hold in the policymaking and implementation processes. The research questions that are addressed in this thesis include: a) Is there an absence of educators affecting policies and if so, why? b) What are the perceptions of educators' advocacy and engagement in laws passed regarding education? c) What, if any, barriers prevent educators' voices from influencing laws? Qualitative data from educators and those in the government sector is gathered through interviews and analyzed to uncover common themes regarding educator voice and advocacy. The research found several shared beliefs between interviewees, which offers solutions, discourse, and recommendations for addressing this perceived issue in Mississippi.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Growing up in rural Mississippi and attending a subpar public school, my passion for changes in education started at an early age. I was raised by two educators and felt a calling to become a teacher when I was in elementary school. Because of this calling, I am currently seeking a dual degree at the University of Mississippi in both Secondary English Education and Public Policy Leadership. Hearing for years educators in my own home and in my classrooms complain about the systems controlling our education, witnessing an absence of educators in the Mississippi Legislature, and seeing a lack of communication from those in positions of power to the educators in classrooms are a few of the factors that have brought me to this research.

The purpose of this research is to discover if there are barriers educators and government actors, whether policymakers or other state employees, feel are in place that prevents educator advocacy and influence in the state of Mississippi, and consequently, what importance their voices hold in the policymaking and implementation processes. Since education is the foundation of society and our state is currently plagued with a lack of quality education, the time has come for educators' voices and experiences to be encouraged and valued when working through education policy reform in Mississippi. We should care about identifying any barriers preventing educator influence so our state can better support dialogue and teacher advocacy efforts. By conducting a series of interviews, the voices of the professionals who experience our classrooms firsthand and

work under the state's policies can potentially lead to substantial policy reform for Mississippi.

This research addresses a broad, nationwide problem that may be preventing legitimate policy solutions from being presented. These findings could result in a broader acknowledgment of the advocates and policy agents we have in our very own classrooms.

Research Questions

My overall questions:

- I. Is there an absence of educators affecting policies and if so, why?
- II. What are the perceptions of educators' advocacy and engagement in laws passed regarding education?
- III. What, if any, barriers prevent educators' voices from influencing laws?

These questions lead to a few hypotheses regarding the potential answers. The first hypothesis is that both educators and those working in the government sector will agree that there is an absence of educators affecting Mississippi policy reform. Two hypotheses stemming from this one address why there is an absence. Maybe their absence is rooted in educators' feelings of the Legislature imposing the silencing. This hypothesis is a potential answer for why educators are not providing input to the Mississippi Legislature and it is rooted in some of the readings I explore, presented in the literature review portion of this thesis. They may feel their voice is illegitimate or not welcomed in these policy conversations. Another hypothesis regarding the questions of "why" is that educators may not feel they have the tools or knowledge to be their own advocates for

policy reform. When asking what can be done to remedy this issue, I hypothesize that individuals address the current barriers in place, such as the PERS account barrier mentioned earlier, and potentially further education on the call for educators to voice their perceptions.

The second research question leads to another hypothesis, which is that legislators do not hear from educators, or hear valid and reasonable solutions rather than just complaints, enough to immediately turn to them for advice when faced with a policy concern. I also think there may be a gap in communication due to an absence of avenues for educators to give their input beyond the walls of their schools. Ideally, I would hypothesize a discovery of respect for educators but a lack of initiative when it comes to hearing their input on policy decisions. When it comes to teachers, I hypothesize that they will feel like their voices are not valued so they do not put forth the effort to advocate for any change.

When asking what barriers are in place, I hypothesize that individuals can address a few current barriers. I also predict that educators I interview will not be able to identify any barriers, which is based on interacting with politically disengaged teachers for the majority of my life. With the absence of teacher unions in Mississippi, I hypothesize that both educators and those in the government sector will acknowledge that as a current barrier and that educators would like that opportunity to be a part of a teacher union.

At the start of this thesis, I am unaware as to why there is an absence of voice and I am earnestly seeking to start this conversation and get some answers to hopefully improve the status of educators' voices in policy as I personally enter the workforce as an

educator. The next chapter will provide some background on Mississippi education and review literature that addresses topics surrounding educator voice, advocacy, and influence on education policy.

Chapter Two: Background and Literature Review

To provide context for my research, this chapter will walk through some background information regarding Mississippi education and the teacher workforce we have. Also, a literature review of relevant academic discourse will be explored to discover what research has been conducted on the topic of teacher voice and influence on education policy.

Background

When talking about education in the state of Mississippi, the public shares some common conceptions and misconceptions. To understand the climate of teacher voice and influence in schools and policy decisions in Mississippi it is important to understand some of the background information on Mississippi's teaching profession and the current state it is in.

Mississippi's current public school teacher workforce is made up of 31,924 people (NCES, 2019). These K-12 teachers' average annual salary is \$43,107, which is the lowest average salary in the nation and \$17,000 below the national average of \$60,483 (NCES, 2018).

According to a study by the National Center for Education Statistics, of the public school teachers during the 2011-2012 school year, (3,377,900 teachers total), 84 percent remained at the same school, 8 percent moved to a different school, and 8 percent left the profession entirely (Goldring, Taie, Riddles, & Westat, 2014). Out of those who left the

profession, “51 percent reported that the manageability of their workload was better in their current position than in teaching” and “53 percent of public school leavers reported that their general work conditions were better in their current position than in teaching” (Goldring, Taie, Riddles, National Center for Education Statistics (ED) & Westat, 2014).

Looking at beginning teachers, between 2007-2012 “10 percent did not teach in 2008–09, 12 percent did not teach in 2009–10, 15 percent did not teach in 2010–11, and 17 percent did not teach in 2011–12” (Gray, Taie, National Center for Education Statistics (ED), & Westat, 2015). Based on this nationwide research throughout all states, including Mississippi teachers, a significant percentage are choosing to leave the profession. Many are dissatisfied with their current profession.

In 2014, 47 out of the 151 school districts in Mississippi experienced a critical teacher shortage (Anthony, Franz, & Brenner, 2017). Mississippi defines a teacher shortage as a district “with sixty or more teaching positions that have ten percent of their teaching staff not properly licensed for the subject they are teaching. For districts with fewer than sixty teachers that percentage is fifteen. Also included are districts where at least thirty percent of the teaching staff has enough experience to retire” (Kiefer & Mader, 2013). Mississippi is cursed with a critical need for qualified teachers.

Collective bargaining, specifically teachers having the opportunity to join teacher unions, is one factor that deserves attention. As a whole in 2018, “governments employed approximately 3.2 million public school teachers, of whom about 65% were union members” (Han, 2019). With that being said, Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, South Carolina, Texas, and Mississippi are the only states that have a statute or court

ruling that prohibits collective bargaining (Lovenheim & Willén, 2016). Mississippi's ban on collective bargaining means teacher unions, a common avenue for teachers to engage and voice their opinions about particular political decisions, are not an available option for Mississippi teachers.

Another potential hindrance for educator engagement in the policymaking process is the risk of their personal retirement accounts, which is known as the Public Employees' Retirement System of Mississippi (PERS). Within the current 2020 legislative session, Representative Billy Andrews had to resign from his position in the Legislature due to certain rulings from House Speaker Phillip Gunn (Wilson & Burns, 2020). Andrews', who previously served as a judge in Lamar County, PERS benefits were going to be revoked if he chose to continue to serve in the Legislature, despite his belief while running for the position that he could "serve for less than full legislative pay and still receive his PERS benefits".

In November 2018, former Attorney General Jim Hood instituted a nonbinding legal opinion that contradicted the PERS rule that state-level elected officials could not receive salaries and PERS pensions at the same time (Wilson & Burns, 2020). The following year the PERS board concurred that state elected officials could collect salaries and retirement pensions. However, Andrews claims "after he and other legislators were sworn into their seats in January, Gunn and other House leadership told them they would not be able to do so. As a result, Republican Rep. Ramona Blackledge of Laurel resigned from her [position] in February" (Wilson & Burns, 2020). This ongoing debate has

prevented years of public employees, including retired teachers, from serving in the Legislature and directly impacting Mississippi education policy decisions.

Looking at the notable inner workings of the teaching profession in Mississippi and potential barriers for engagement in policy decisions can lead to a better understanding of educator voice and influence. This information helps shape the current climate of education in the state and forms a solid understanding of the research in the following literature review.

Literature Review

Education is a heavily researched field that solicits immense academic discourse; however, Mississippi education, and specifically Mississippi teachers, are topics that are rarely addressed. Much of the current research in the field of education is dedicated to classroom practices, pedagogy, and systemic issues in the education system, often leaving out the profession of educators as a whole. With that being said, the specific research topic of voice and influence of educators on policy decisions is scarce. This section will explore the current body of literature that addresses the topic, or topics similar, to this thesis.

Admirall et al. looked into the factors causing teachers' job dissatisfaction, specifically asking veteran teachers their perceptions. These teachers had taught for at least 24 years and were over 51 years of age (Admiraal, Veldman, Mainhard, & van Tartwijk, 2019). Those who were dissatisfied with their roles pointed to school-based factors like "relations with colleagues, parents, and the school leadership, as well as time

pressure, disruptive student behavior, and the values emphasized at the school” (Admiraal, Veldman, Mainhard, & van Tartwijk, 2019). Teachers also pointed to factors outside of the schools such as “reforms imposed by the government, external school reviews, and negative image of the teaching profession in society” (Admiraal, Veldman, Mainhard, & van Tartwijk, 2019). These are the realities and pressures that teachers are facing. The outside negative factor of government reform is contributing to teachers’ dissatisfaction, which feeds into the central questions of this study. Why are teachers dissatisfied with these policies if they have the ability to influence them from their professional positions and as constituents of policymakers?

Teacher influence may not start at the statewide level, influencing policy decisions. Researchers in Florida interviewed six elementary educators who were chosen as educators of the year in 1996 or 1997, to see how they describe their schools’ decision making structures, culture, and micropolitics, and specifically how they use their agency to make decisions and accomplish work under reform in Florida (Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 1999). The researchers chose “teachers of the year,” to represent “ideal” teachers, and selected them from a diverse set of Florida schools.

Through hour-long phone interviews, four common themes emerged: decision making structures, educator culture, personal narratives, and power/micropolitics (Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 1999). Specifically, the authors found that principals and administrators who support educators’ agency in their classrooms are fostering educators’ sense of respect and empowerment in their profession. This study is not only similar to this thesis in methodology but it also shows that teachers have and are willing to share

their professional opinions when asked. This study specifically looked for changes to make at the schoolwide level, but it still relates to my research in identifying barriers to teacher voice, such as educator culture and power/micropolitics.

Another study, conducted by Henning, Dover, Dotson, and Agarwal-Rangnath in 2018, researches educator performance assessments (TPA) using a counter-narrative methodology. After describing TPAs they explain the methodology of constructing counter-narratives to expose, analyze and challenge “historical narratives that center and privilege the powerful by instead highlighting the stories of people and groups who are usually marginalized” (Henning, Dover, Dotson, & Agarwal- Rangnath, 2018). Each author wrote a counter-narrative based on themes from syllabi, lesson plans, personal journals, email communication, departmental documents, communication with national organizations, and statewide directives. The article concludes with implications that are particularly relevant to my research, namely the importance of resisting the silencing of teachers’ voices. The authors show how educators are mobilizing in response to this policy issue, highlighting the work of grassroots efforts, parent groups, and national educational organizations to counter “silencing” by higher authorities or powers. (Henning, Dover, Dotson, & Agarwal-Rangnath, 2018). The focus on “a silencing agent” -- an outside force imposing the silence -- is an interesting idea that could ring true for many educators.

Nearly 50 years ago, in his classic book *Teacher Power, Teacher Unity and Teacher Professionalism*, Rotigel argued that “If teaching is to become a profession, it is evident that the power to control the educational process must be vested in the teachers

themselves” (1972). This stance was not new but still has yet to be widely accepted. Rotigel also argues that “Teachers have been reluctant to use their power to exert control over the educational process because of the connotations of the words ‘power’ and ‘control’ themselves. We seem to attribute evil intent to those with power, and we look with suspicion upon anyone who would seek to control public education” (Rotigel, 1972). This claim provides a question for my research: is one potential barrier to teacher engagement in policy the negative perceptions of such power by teachers themselves?

One specific interest of this thesis is teacher unions and their effect on education policy, or at least provide a platform for educators to engage with advocacy efforts. One study conducted by Hartney and Flavin in 2011 assessed whether or not “state-advantaged interest groups leverage political influence in the policy-making process” by analyzing the “relationship between teacher union political activism and five salient state education reform policies” (Hartney & Flavin, 2011). The authors develop a method to measure teacher union influence and find that states with more active teacher unions are less likely to adopt education reform policies that teacher unions typically oppose. Thus they find that organized interests can significantly influence public policy outcomes. Mississippi, with its prohibition on collective bargaining, works against this dynamic, potentially suppressing educators’ ability to influence policy, most certainly through union activism.

Hartney and Flavin’s study highlights previous studies of teacher unions and their political influence and then explains their framework for analyzing the link between teacher union political efforts and state education policies. Their criteria are “(1) the

favorability of state collective bargaining laws and policies for public school teachers, (2) the number of National Education Association members per 1,000 state residents, (3) overall public-sector union density, (4) campaign contributions from teacher unions to candidates for state office” (Hartney & Flavin, 2011). On the campaign contribution measure, Mississippi ranks second to last nationally.

This research assessed the influence of each state’s teacher unions based on the state’s current climate of education reform policies regarding the “expansion of school choice and reforming teacher pay and evaluation policies by judging teachers on the basis of student achievement” (Hartney & Flavin, 2011). The research concludes that teacher unions are influential in state education reform and are effective in warding off changes they oppose. These findings are beneficial in my research in Mississippi because teacher unions are nonexistent and could potentially serve a good purpose when making policy decisions.

Teachers: The Missing Voice in Education, by Cohn and Kottkamp, uncovers the diminished voices of educators in policy reform (1993). The purpose of this research is to “contribute both to the scholarly literature on teaching and teachers to the fields of educational policy and classroom practice” (Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993). The research focuses on the classroom level and the perspectives of educators derived from their daily work with students, parents, fellow educators, and administration.

Cohn and Kottkamp used mixed methods for their study, conducting interviews with a small number of teachers and surveying a much larger group in one school district. The authors acknowledge that the educators point out a lot of problems during the

interviews but they did not offer up ideas on how to rethink them, so the study moves into an analytical section that is dedicated to interpreting these opinions to rethink the current education system in America. They came to a series of interesting conclusions, including support for alternative educator assessment systems, and a more “content-in-context” approach to teaching. They also identify three domains of assumptions schools need to re-examine: expectations of schools and educators, learning, and control (Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993). To address the need for reexamination, the authors propose the creation of inquiry-based schools. The authors reach different conclusions than they had anticipated because they end up providing solutions themselves, based on what they learned from the surveys and interviews

A 2017 issue of the Peabody Journal for Education published multiple articles related to this research and two, in particular, are especially significant. The first contains educator commentary from seven Northern educators regarding voice in education policy reform (Good, Fox Barocas, Chávez-Moreno, Feldman, & Canela, 2017). This article is a general collection of testimonies regarding experience and perspective, presumably written by the educators themselves (because the authors did not provide details regarding the collection method), and all point to the need for educators to be invited to assist in the creation, rather than just implementation, of policies. One educator highlighted a few national organizations -- the “Twitter collective EduColor, the teacher-generated policy-recommendation organization the VIVA Project, and the cross-labor networking and organizing of the AFL-CIO Next Up Initiative” -- that focus

on providing tools and platforms for teacher voice in policymaking (Good, Fox Barocas, Chávez-Moreno, Feldman, & Canela, 2017).

The second article is a study regarding educators as policy agents (Good, Fox Barocas, Chávez-Moreno, Feldman, & Canela, 2017). This study mainly looks at how a “teacher-university partnership can better support the conditions that facilitate greater teacher agency in thinking, talking, and acting on policy” (Good, Fox Barocas, Chávez-Moreno, Feldman, & Canela, 2017). While the university partnership is not directly relevant to my study, it does provide a relevant model the researchers, all of whom had been educators, used to gather qualitative data. They gathered from teachers in university partnerships and collaboratives across two sites to develop their case studies. The findings are sectioned into three different “categories of norms that present barriers to teacher agency in policy design,” which are the “nature of teacher’s work,” “decision-making processes in schools,” and “teachers’ tenuous status as professionals” (Good, Fox Barocas, Chávez-Moreno, Feldman, & Canela, 2017). The study has both theoretical and practical implications, including finding that educators need “time together outside of the control structures in their schools where they can build capacity and be seen as professionals with the expertise needed in policy design” (Good, Fox Barocas, Chávez-Moreno, Feldman, & Canela, 2017).

I reviewed a study in which researchers set up a conference for educators, in which they examine the distribution of talk inside a teacher workshop (Lefstein & Perth, 2014). The researchers did a “close examination of the workshop interactional dynamics” and focused on “key challenges facing teacher voices,” all while attempting to lift up and

empower those voices (Lefstein & Perth, 2014). The authors identify four factors that shape the significance of educator's voice, which are "repertoires, social position, topics and gatekeepers" and highlight the paradoxes surrounding educator representation (Lefstein & Perth, 2014). The authors argue that research in this field only tends to focus on why teachers' voices matter and how it can be heightened but little on what happens when educators try to raise their voices.

After introducing the idea of voice, they discuss the dynamics and research done through the International Teachers Workshop, where fifteen teacher delegates from a variety of countries all came to the table. The authors note that the research was not the original intention of the workshop but recorded dialogue provided the opportunity to research the workshop and what transpired following the discussion. They analyzed the workshop data by listening to the recordings and reviewing transcripts to identify emergent patterns and potential hypotheses, then coded key topics.

The researchers provide a breakdown of the topics and how they were voiced, which included ideas such as "standards for professional advancement" and "salary and cost of living" (Lefstein & Perth, 2014). They conclude by identifying factors that may be suppressing educators' voices amongst themselves, such as the use of vernacular, their status as professionals, and gatekeepers in the discussion. The methodology and topics of this research are applicable to mine, regarding educator voice outside of groups of colleagues.

The final piece of literature I reviewed relates to my study's methodology, providing systematic steps to conducting educational qualitative research. Luttrell's

Qualitative Educational Research (2010) breaks down qualitative research design into three sections: the first focuses on the “historical, epistemological, and ethical premises of qualitative research,” the second on qualitative research design models, and the final on the interworking of research relationships. These sections encompass explicit ideas and points of departure I used when designing my qualitative research.

Chapter Three: Methodology

When approaching the methodology for this research, I wanted to obtain organic and candid responses from the leading research questions. Interviews best fulfilled the purpose of this research because they open the door for experiences and opinions in an organic, one on one setting. This research topic is one that can solicit many opinions, problems, and solutions, so it lends itself to a qualitative study. My initial interest was in educators' perspectives -- the supply side of educator engagement in public policy -- but the views of policymakers -- the demand side -- is also important. These two groups, those in the classroom and those shaping laws, have a unique relationship, so I initiated a comparative qualitative study involving both groups. This research approach allows for a comparison of perspectives that hopefully sheds light on potential solutions from both groups.

The political theory that will inform the underlying argument for this research is interest group theory. Educators in particular, since they are most directly impacted by the education policy decisions that the Mississippi Legislature makes, are tasked with making sure those policies are implemented in their schools. Undergoing the implementation process in these schools, one would think educators would be particularly important for policymakers to listen to when making policy decisions. Additionally, teachers cannot unionize in the state so it can be argued that they should be listened to. Educators are the interested parties, which is making them the interest group we are looking at for Mississippi education policy decisions.

When pinpointing specific educators, I wanted to explore different parts of the state of Mississippi and different roles in schools. I originally intended on reaching out to the following areas and school districts in Mississippi: Oxford or Lafayette, Clarksdale, Jackson, Brookhaven or Lincoln County, and Hattiesburg or Lamar/Forrest County. I based this decision on the congressional districting map for the state to hopefully get an interview from each district in the state, who consequently have different representation in and around the Mississippi State Capitol. These areas also provide the opportunity of talking to educators from charter and parochial schools with Clarksdale Collegiate in Clarksdale, MS and Mississippi School of the Arts in Brookhaven, MS. Another focus group is teachers who completed the Mississippi Teacher Corps and Teach For America programs, no matter the school district in Mississippi that they are teaching in. These programs send teachers to schools that are considered low income and under-resourced to teach students for a minimum of two years. I also hoped to reach both new and seasoned educators with a variety of backgrounds in these areas of the state.

When looking for interviewees for the other subgroup in this study, I planned on looking at the Senate and House Education Committee leadership and reaching the congressional members that are a part of those committees. Educational policy firms in Mississippi also provide a critical perspective and I hoped to find interviewees from organizations such as the following: Mississippi First, One Voice, and Mississippi Parents Campaign. I intended on reaching out to the Department of Education through the State Board of Education Members, one of which is a current public school teacher, to

uncover what kind of feedback they get from educators since one of their roles is to recommend policies for the Governor.

I originally hoped these different groups would result in a few interviews from each subgroup of the study. An ideal number of interviews sits at ten, which would provide enough qualitative data to analyze throughout this study.

Next, I formulated the specific research questions I hoped to ask the two different groups of individuals. Although these questions were mostly similar to one another, they were broken up by questions for educators and questions for governmental actors, including some specific questions specific to the group. The goal of the formulation was consistent questions across both groups in the study. Formulating questions about background, experience, perceptions, and opinions in and of education would hopefully yield some common trends and themes regarding the educator voice in Mississippi education policy. These questions were presented to the each interviewee prior to their interview. This method felt appropriate considering the depth of some of these questions and considering that interviewees may need time prior to the interview to consider what their answers may be.

The first questions curated were for the educators. The questions were as follows:

- I. How did you get your start in Mississippi education?
- II. To what extent do you feel like you have a voice in your current role?
- III. What is your perception of the current state of education policy in Mississippi?

- IV. Do you feel that there is an absence of educators impacting policy decisions?
- V. Are there barriers in place preventing educator voices from influencing policy decisions?
- VI. To what extent do you think educators have a say in the district and state policy decisions?
- VII. What extent do you feel like an educator should be at the table when discussing education policy reform, why?
- VIII. What would be different?
- IX. What is your perception of teacher unions?
- X. Do you feel like your opinion and voice should influence education policy change in the state of Mississippi, why?

The second list of questions was for the government group. These questions were as follows:

- I. Describe your current role and how you got to this point.
- II. What is your previous connection to teaching?
- III. What is your perception of the current state of education policy in Mississippi?
- IV. Do you feel that there is an absence of educators impacting policy decisions?
- V. Are there barriers in place preventing educator voices from influencing policy decisions?

- VI. To what extent do you feel like an educator should be at the table when discussing education policy reform, why?
- VII. What difference would it make having previously been a teacher?
- VIII. What is your perception of teacher unions?
- IX. To what extent do you feel like your opinion and voice should influence education policy change in the state of Mississippi, why?

Additional questions were added to interviews when needed and those additional questions asked are described in the results chapter of this document. These questions served to fill any holes or explore concepts that were briefly discussed during these conversations.

Next, I prepared the recruitment email, which was sent out to potential candidates. Candidates who agreed to participate would be invited to set up an interview time. All interviews either took place in person or over the phone and then were securely transcribed at a later time. A consent script was read at the beginning of each interview and the questions followed once they agreed to participate.

The method for recording the interviews was through the “Voice Memos” feature on my phone, if they were in person, or using the “QuickTime Player” on my computer to record phone conversations. These recordings were transcribed at the close of the interview and used as data. All of these transcriptions were sent to participants to review before any data would be officially recorded.

When it comes to confidentiality, the nature of this research constitutes some parameters on protecting the opinions and thoughts of these individuals. If in the

interviews I garnered any information that could potentially be detrimental to the interviewees' life and career, I would inform them that I would not use any descriptors that will allow identification per their request. Each interviewee was told they could request removing their name from the research if they felt like they wanted their name dissociated from what they said. If their names are included in the research, that means they did not request it be taken out.

One of the final steps of this research was identifying common themes, frequency, and overall patterns that were presented throughout the interviews. The original intent of this research was to curate final takeaways or even policy recommendations for what can be done to address concerns that were presented during the interviews.

To conclude the research, the data from these interviews will be organized based on emergent themes, and consequently resulting in policy recommendations or ideas presented by interviewees. The research questions presented at the beginning of this report will be used to connect the themes presented in interviews. These questions are: Is there an absence of educators affecting policies and if so, why?, What are the perceptions of educators' advocacy and engagement in laws passed regarding education?, What, if any, barriers prevent educators' voices from influencing laws?.

These plans and documents were created and everything, including the questions, was submitted to the International Review Board (IRB) for review and approval. While the IRB was reviewing my proposed study, I started pinpointing specific potential candidates for the interviews. I looked at the two groups of my comparative study separately to acquire interviewees. For educators, anyone who is currently a teacher,

administrator, or working in a school district was considered a reasonable candidate to participate in this study. For the government side of the study, anyone who is a current elected official at the state or local level, anyone that works in an education-related policy group (i.e. advocacy groups or nonprofits), and anyone that works in the Mississippi Department of Education was considered a strong candidate. The IRB approved my application on November 14, 2019, and I was able to start conducting my research, which is presented in the following chapter.

Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the results of my interviews with teachers and policymakers. Between December 11, 2019, and February 24, 2020, I interviewed five teachers and two individuals in the government sector, with a range of experience and professional backgrounds.

To identify these individuals, I used convenience sampling and reached out to those potential candidates, from my previous or current experience in education. Bailey Poole is currently my Clinical Instructor for my student teaching internship at Oxford Middle School, which means she oversees my day to day actions as a teacher in her classroom. I found Toren Ballard's contact information through the Mississippi First website. His title as Director of K-12 Education Policy and job description fit the scope of research perfectly, so I emailed him directly to invite him to participate. I discovered the MS Parents Campaign online, reached out through email to their office, and Nancy Loome responded to participate.

To find additional teachers, I reached out to two previous teachers of mine in the Brookhaven School District. Chad Walker and Megan Case responded to the invitation and scheduled interview times. After a handful of dead ends with potential interviewees, I found Zach Osburn, a teacher in Clinton, through an article he wrote for the *Clarion Ledger*. His article touched on points correlated with my research, so I contacted him and scheduled an interview. I then contacted Jack Patrick Sullivan, a member of the

Mississippi Teacher Corps (MTC), because of his background as a Public Policy Leadership major at the University of Mississippi and because of the nature of MTC. One of the limitations of this study is the number of individuals I was able to contact for interviews and the lack of response from both legislators and those working with the Mississippi Department of Education. The interviews are placed in the following sections based on what subgroup the interviewee is grouped in and their responses to the research questions will then be grouped in the following discussion chapter.

Section 1: Educator Interviews

Bailey Poole is a current teacher at Oxford Middle School and teaches eighth grade English and Language Arts (ELA). She completed both her undergraduate and graduate programs at the University of Mississippi in Secondary English Education. She is currently in her fourth year of teaching and has spent all four years at Oxford Middle School in the same subject area and grade. Being the first teacher I interviewed, I first asked how she got her start in education. She discussed the pull she felt to come to the classroom due to the appealing, spontaneous nature of the profession. She finds teaching challenging on a variety of levels and values the opportunity to be impactful on the lives of her students.

When asked to what extent she felt like she has a voice in her current role as a teacher, she felt that she possesses more of a voice than some of her counterparts in the school. She serves as a Professional Learning Community Leader (PLC Leader), which means she meets with administration once a week for nearly two hours and is given

information to disseminate to the other five ELA teachers. She also serves on the Faculty Council at the district level, meeting with the superintendent once a month to discuss concerns. Bailey acknowledged that she does have a voice in her district but was hesitant to claim she has a voice at a statewide level.

The next question prompted her to comment on her perception of the current state of education policy in Mississippi. She quickly stated her disapproval and instantly placed blame on standardized testing and concerns with early childhood development. Bailey claimed that the policies Mississippi has in place are not trying to achieve rigorous growth with kids.

After hearing her opinion on this issue, I asked if she believed there was an absence of educators impacting policy decisions. Again, she jumped to a resounding “yes”.

What’s the last campaign ad I’ve ever heard for somebody that says ‘As a former teacher, I can make policies to do blah blah blah’, you know I don’t hear that so it kind of begs the question: who’s in charge of education? Maybe it’s locally, regionally, nationally, who’s steering the reigns on that...not the teachers.

Barriers in place that are preventing educators from influencing policy are a central focus of this study. Bailey identified that forfeiting their PERS account is one thing that presumably keeps teachers out of directly running for office. Following that, I questioned what extent she believes educators have a say in district and state policy decisions. She claimed that Mississippi spends the most on education and we have the least to show for it and noted how the Mississippi Department of Education

Superintendent is the highest paid MDE Superintendent, yet we are one of the lowest-performing states. She explained that teachers' opinions are acknowledged but she was not confident that they were taken into consideration when policymakers are formulating policy decisions.

The next question I asked her was to consider if an educator should be at the table when making policy decisions and, if they were, what would be different. She stated that she absolutely thinks they should and the difference would mean more logical support systems for students who are struggling in schools.

Nobody knows better than an educator what students can do or what the cost is if they don't receive resources or support they need.

The next topic brought up was teacher unions and what her initial thought was on the subject. She identified a negative connotation surrounding the concept of teacher unions. Bailey mentioned that she did not know if they were effective or what the point of them really was. She told a short story about how a lady from the Mississippi Association of Educators comes and encourages them to join but she did not know what they advocate for, even though she believed she probably should.

The last routine question I asked was specifically if she believed her experience and personal expertise in education should influence education policy change in the state and why. She reluctantly said yes; however, she said that it all comes down to "your hustle to be heard" and if you choose to advocate on a particular platform. I followed with an additional question and asked if she ever saw herself leaving the classroom. She

hastily answered yes and went on to discuss her plans for graduate school and her doctoral program soon.

I love everything about teaching but it's almost like the adults are the ones who make it tiresome, and taxing, and miserable...I love everybody I work with, and I love the admins, but they're trying to meet things that are coming from the powers that be and it trickles down, you feel it. I'm doing all these things that take time away from my planning and doing what is best for these kids.

She concluded her thoughts on education by bringing up an interest in working on something in the policy or administrative realm in the future.

The next teacher I interviewed was Chad Walker from Brookhaven High School. When asked about his background, Chad discussed that he graduated from Brookhaven High School, went to a public university in Mississippi, came back to teach in his hometown, and has taught in the same district for twenty-two years. He taught in an elementary school for six years, a junior high school for one year, and the rest of his twenty-two years in high school. He has taught language arts and history classes in his secondary classrooms and has taught history classes since 2001 after No Child Left Behind passed. It is important to note that Chad had taken the questions he was emailed prior to the interview and wrote down concise answers to the questions, limiting the responses I received from him during the interview.

When we discussed if he believes he has a voice in his current role he concisely stated that he does not feel like he has a voice. He also claimed that Mississippi's education policy is more politically driven rather than getting to the core problems that

Mississippi is facing in the education system and quickly agreed that there is an absence of educators influencing policy decisions.

Moving into what barriers he believed are in place that prevent those voices from impacting policy decisions, he firmly stated that he believes teachers' voices do not want to be heard, claiming that there are administrators and political figures who think they know more about the classroom than the teachers. This question was followed by asking him what extent these voices actually have a say in state policy decisions.

Our opinion seems like it's valued at the district level, and there are some who are

in place as administrators who think they know more about what is going on in the classroom than what the teachers are doing. I know my voice definitely hasn't been heard at the state level. I don't even know of any teacher whose opinion has been asked on particular issues.

He claimed that teachers should be the main ones at the table because they are on the "frontlines" and know what is best for students in Mississippi. These teachers would offer a perspective from people who have hands-on experience with students and an overall better perspective. When asked the question about teacher unions, Chad identified that he thinks that the unions here could do good things, if they had the right agenda. He claimed he is a member of a teacher union here but says they do not have a presence in schools. He stated that you never see a representative from a union come to the schools and try to organize the teachers to be the power to change policy in Mississippi. To sum

up the formal questions, he stated that he believes his voice should matter in education policy decisions and should influence change.

We as teachers see what is going on in the classroom firsthand and we know the background of these students and the community they live in and we would best know how to help students in Mississippi.

I furthered this question with a follow-up and asked if he believed that any Mississippi teacher is qualified to have a seat at the table. He did believe there is a line. Teachers who know their subject material, who are there for the right reasons, and enjoy their career and students should be the ones at the table. He added that the ones who want to see education in Mississippi get better should be the ones voicing opinions. I followed this line of thought and asked if he felt like there is anything that prevents teachers from contacting a legislator, staying in tune with what is going on in Jackson, or even doing their own advocacy work, which he had a concluding thought about.

They probably think, you know, I got all this going on and that they cannot make a difference and that they would need other people to band with them, where their voice could be more powerful. Because individually, my one vote or my one voice can't make a difference.

Megan Case was the next teacher I interviewed for this research, who is a current high school English teacher at Brookhaven High School in Brookhaven, MS. She grew up in Mississippi and went to a public university in the state. She received the William Winter Grant, which required her to teach in a low-income district upon graduation to pay back her grant for her time as an undergraduate. She chose to return to her hometown

of Brookhaven, MS and has not left the high school for eleven years since she graduated. She has taught English classes to five years of 9th grade, one year of 10th grade, five years of seniors, and seven years of AP courses.

Megan answered the first questions by claiming that she feels as though she can talk about any issues that she has, on a district level. When it comes to anyone beyond her administration, she did not feel like she had much of a say. She had a few comments about the current state of education policy. State testing needs to be reevaluated in her opinion because she believes it is suffocating the public school system by tying teachers' hands in certain areas where they could be thriving otherwise. Other than that fact, she thinks Mississippi is doing the best it can under the circumstances we have. I followed this response by asking if she thought there was an absence of educators influencing policy decisions and she quickly stated that she believed there was an absence. Next, she identified what barriers she believes are in place.

I don't feel that there is a way for educators to share our opinions without backlash.

She also quickly added that she does not believe teachers have any say in district or state policies. Megan also vocalized that she always would want teachers at the table when discussing education policy reform. There should be different levels of educators from different areas who could bring opinions and experiences from their districts, which could greatly benefit our education policies.

Instead of guessing on a lot of stuff that I think the policymakers are just saying

'well this sounds good', I think if they had some personal testimony as to what does work and what doesn't work, and ideas from people that are on the frontlines, I think that that could make a huge impact.

Teacher unions were brought up next and she expressed that she had not heard about or even looked into teacher unions since she was a student teacher in college. When she considered having a personal seat at the table to influence policy decisions, she said she deserves a seat because she was a student in Mississippi public schools and went right back into the field after college. I followed this with a few follow-up questions regarding whether or not she believes certain teachers do not have the prerequisites to be influencing policy decisions. She thinks that those particular teachers who are at the table should have three years of teaching under their belt and have some level of higher education past their bachelor's degree. I also followed that question by asking if she thought elected officials, especially those serving on the education committees, should have previously been teachers.

I don't think they can monitor what goes on in the classroom having never been in the classroom... I don't think that they will be able to 100% understand what's going on unless they were once there to have that comparison, to have that background.

Zach Osburn was the next interview I conducted. He was raised in Clinton, Mississippi and went to Mississippi College following his high school graduation from Clinton High School. Zach explained that he was preparing to go into law but after going to the University of Mississippi School of Law for one semester, he started to feel a pull

toward the classroom. His interest in teaching was always lingering in the back of his mind so he returned to Mississippi College for graduate school, obtained a master's in history, and got his alternate route license. Getting his first job at his alma mater, Clinton High School, he has been teaching world history to 10th graders at the high school for ten years now.

The first question asked was to what extent he felt like he has a voice in his current role as an educator, which he followed with an affirmative description of how he uses his voice in his career to advocate for changes. He described himself as an outspoken person as far as his support for public education, teachers, and the public school system. Zach is known as a politically active person in his school and as an advocate for the profession and the public school system. Despite this activism, he identified his efforts to communicate with policymakers or start conversations that he felt were important to have, yet he received pushback.

I do feel like there is a bit of a disconnect in that, while I may have a voice in my own building, my own school, and among my colleagues, I don't know if that always translates to feeling like my voice is heard beyond that immediate circle.

Over the past eight to twelve years in Mississippi education policy, Zach believes that the state has been put in a dire situation. He identified what he believes to be the problem: real antagonism between state government, policymakers, and legislators and their opinions surrounding public school teachers and the public school system. He pinpointed the rise in school choice in the state as a catalyst for some “nefarious” things going on in the government sector.

I feel like a lot of the times school choice, which is generally viewed as a positive concept is used to mask a lot of underhanded things happening that are undermining and weakening the public school system here or at least continuing to withdraw support from the public schools.

Moving into the discussion regarding the presence, or lack thereof, of educators at the table when making policy decisions, Zach claimed that there is resentment when teachers speak out or try to offer their perspective on issues surrounding education, especially when it does not fall in line with the leadership, what their goals are, or where the party lines are drawn. He stated that government officials can get “very aggressive” in their response to outspoken school teachers. Zach also noted that there is an effort to keep retired educators out of state government, referencing the PERS retirement accounts for these teachers and the fact that they must forgo that money if they assume office.

These are people who have a wealth of experience, these are people who could offer their expertise in policymaking, especially when it comes to education and support for our public school systems, and they are basically being kept out of these roles in state government because of these measures to prevent them from drawing their retirement while serving.

Using the words “intentional” to describe the situation, he claimed that there is a hope from policymakers to keep former educators out of state government because of the opinions and the perspective they offer. Zach feels as though he has not experienced any barriers from his immediate community, citing our previous discussion on his outspoken personality being supported in his circles. However, he did note that there is pressure

placed on teachers to steer clear of getting too political, to not openly share what could be perceived as controversial, and to not push back against government decisions.

While I understand that is coming from a place of not wanting to rock the boat...I also feel like it plays into the mentality of keeping teachers quiet and sort of suppressing our perspective because I feel like the people working in public schools every day have the best perspective on the problems we are facing and some of the possible solutions. But I feel like there is a bit of a culture of silence or simply not being as outspoken as we want to be.

He followed this thought by admitting that there is a level of tolerance from others if teachers do feel the need to speak out but Zach noted that if he ever attempted to organize or protest, venturing into the realm of a little less talking and a little more measurable action, he might find himself in hot water. He also argued that educators are not invited to the table by policymakers and government leaders when I asked the question regarding to what extent he believed educators have a say in local and state policy decisions. Zach believes that if teachers do get included in the conversation, it is because they forced their way to the table. Group force is the only way because teachers are not invited to share their perspectives and offer possible solutions.

I feel like we got a lot of people who don't understand the plight of public school teachers and public school students. We have got a lot of people very far removed from the experience of being in these schools who are shaping policy and making decisions without actually hearing the voices of people who live this out every day and deal with these challenges.

He identified some real challenges that teachers are facing, such as failing infrastructure, large class sizes, and students getting to school in very rural areas of the state. He believes that our policymakers are not taking the challenges, stories, and perspectives that teachers have into account when making decisions for the state. If those voices were invited and those teachers were included in the process, then he claimed we might see positive changes as a result. Zach followed this statement by reiterating the antagonistic attitude lawmakers have towards teachers who are fighting for their profession and advocating for their students. Other state employees are not viewed in the same derogatory way.

I think there is a little bit of an attitude of 'well teachers just need to sit down, do their job, and quit complaining so much'. I feel like that same standard is not held to other professions that are dedicated to public service, so I feel like there is a double standard there.

Teacher unions were brought up and Zach identified that he has a positive perception of teacher unions. Mentioning that he has lived in Mississippi all of his life where he has not been able to join a union, he has always wondered what that experience would mean for his profession. Zach acknowledged that there are potentially some drawbacks but it overall seems to have positive ramifications since the states that have really strong public school systems, with really high per-pupil spending, and with the highest teacher salaries also connect to having strong teacher unions. He concluded on this topic by saying that he does not see teacher unions ever being permissible in the state but he wishes he had the ability to join a union.

Before getting into follow-up questions, I asked Zach if he believed his voice and opinion should influence policy changes in the state. He eagerly claimed he would love that. Having had aspirations to be more involved in policymaking, he wished there was a path to participate in state government and still be a teacher. He went into his work with nonprofits, his writing of opinion pieces in the *Clarion Ledger*, and his efforts to organize community meetings where he has invited legislators to come and meet with members of the community. He also noted that he “grilled” Speaker of the House Phillip Gunn for two hours once by asking him why he was voting against a particular bill for funding education in the state.

I have tried a lot to make my voice heard but it's a tough road finding ways to feel like you actually have an impact. If there were more avenues available, I would absolutely take that opportunity.

Out of curiosity and based on previous conversations with educators, I asked Zach if he had these types of conversations with other teachers he knows or if he felt like he was the only one championing this idea of teachers engaging in policy decisions. He responded by stating that his conversations with other teachers have been encouraging.

I just think that there is a little bit of a spirit of defeatism. Just the idea that things are so entrenched here and that our system is very resistant to change, that everything runs on the good ole boy network here and that it does not really matter how loud we get.

Zach went on to describe how he has talked about organizing state marches and walkouts based on what teachers have done in other states, such as West Virginia or

Kentucky, but when he has gotten to that level of conversation, teachers become hesitant. He admitted his own fears that if teachers did organize something to that level, it would ultimately fail because there is a lack of belief that these efforts would incite change.

I followed with another question regarding his interactions with nonprofits since he mentioned getting plugged into those groups to advocate for the profession. The question was if he felt like those organizations were welcome to hearing teachers' opinions or were they just as closed off as he said elected officials were. He insinuated that he felt welcomed by those people and has gotten to work closely with some, such as the MS Parents Campaign, and he believes his input has been respected in those venues. They seem to be advocating well for teachers and his experience with them has been positive, feeling as though his voice actually does matter to someone.

Jack Patrick Sullivan was the final interview I conducted in the educators' portion of this research. Jack Patrick currently works as a high school English teacher, teaching both 9th and 10th-grade courses, at Meridian High School in Meridian, Mississippi. He is a first-year teacher and is a member of the Mississippi Teacher Corps, which is a program at the University of Mississippi that selects college graduates to go out and teach in "high-poverty public schools" in Mississippi. While in the program, members receive a Master of Arts in Teaching. Jack Patrick explained that he wanted to be a teacher since middle school but moved to Mississippi from out of state and majored in Public Policy Leadership as an undergraduate at the University of Mississippi.

I decided I wanted to be a teacher for a couple of years so that later on down the road if I want to venture into education policy, I would have been a teacher for a few years first.

When asked if he had a voice in his current role as a teacher he explained that he does not feel like he does nor does he believe that the state government values a teacher's voice. We then moved into discussing what his perception of education policy is in the state and he claimed that education concerns needed to be more on the frontlines of legislation.

The state is placing little Band-Aids to just try and survive but with any Band-Aid, those get dirty really quick and they no longer work. I have seen that in my own school and I feel like the state needs to make a more systemic change in regards to public schools in the state. That kind of change would help the students for more than just a couple of weeks.

After I asked if he thinks there is an absence of educators influencing policy decisions, Jack Patrick said that he does not actually know if there are teachers helping make those decisions but that there definitely should be more. He thought that the Mississippi Department of Education makes a lot of choices without administration or even teacher approval, as I asked him what barriers he believed are in place to prevent teacher's voices from influencing policy decisions. He proposed the idea of a teacher advisory board where teachers could apply to be on a statewide board and voice their opinions at least once a semester, considering he did not think there was something like this currently.

Jack Patrick felt like teachers do not have the ability to make any decisions when it comes to the next question regarding the extent he feels like teachers have a say in policy decisions. He stated that teachers, and the profession as a whole, should not start taking on the responsibility of being policy analysts but that there should be an opportunity for those who want to be involved and help make those decisions to lift their voice at the state level. After asking him if teachers should be at the table discussing policy decisions, what extent that looks like, and what would be different, Jack Patrick reiterated his idea about the advisory board, potentially even being an elected position, and that he does not think teachers should take full control of making policy decisions for the state.

Teacher unions were the next point of discussion and Jack Patrick quickly stated that he does not know enough about teacher unions.

Obviously, I do believe that teachers as a whole should have a community where they can voice their opinions. I am not sure what the difference is between having a union versus having MAE (Mississippi Association of Educators).

To wrap up my last interview, I asked him if he believed his voice, personally, should be at the table when legislators are making policy decisions. Being a first-year teacher, Jack Patrick did not feel comfortable being at the table. He noted that there should be some sort of requirement, such as three years of teaching before a teacher should even be able to apply for the advisory board, the idea he previously mentioned. He concluded by stating that he does not feel like he should be influencing policy.

These five teachers, who offered a variety of perspectives, added extensive value to this research and provided a direct look into what educators are potentially thinking when it comes to voicing their concerns and beliefs in Mississippi's education policies. Based on the original research questions, these interviews will be connected thematically in Chapter 5, along with the other subgroup in this study.

Section 2: Government Interviews

The second group that I attempted to gain perspective and input from were those in the policy realm, not currently in the classroom as teachers. Due to numerous dead ends and lack of willingness to participate in the study, I was only able to acquire the perspective of two unique individuals. These two people were Toren Ballard and Nancy Loome, both currently working in a different policy and advocacy firms that are based in and around Jackson, Mississippi.

The first interview I conducted was with Toren Ballard, the current Director of K-12 Education Policy with Mississippi First in Jackson, MS. Toren leads Mississippi First's research and advocacy efforts in the realm of K-12 education. To learn more about Toren's personal background, I asked the first question for the individuals in this subgroup of the study, which asks them to explain their previous connection to teaching. He started his career as a teacher in New York City but, after a few years, he decided to get more involved in education policy after seeing a lot of issues in the schools he worked in. He entered a graduate school program in political science and education policy at Columbia University Teachers College. He was a teacher for two full academic years

prior to this graduate program and then he came down to Mississippi in the beginning of Fall 2019.

When trying to get his perspective on education policy in Mississippi, especially since he is new to the state, Toren said that he believes there is a lot of progress being made in Mississippi, with a lot of good things that are in the works. However, there are still quite a few problems and that is what has made him question if that small amount of progress is actually helping. The next question asked was if Toren felt there is an absence of educators impacting policy decisions, which he quickly followed by saying there is an absence. He claimed that the Mississippi Department of Education is talking to focus groups of teachers to get their input and Mississippi First's work involves a lot of feedback from teachers on the policies and recommendations they are working on.

So, I think teachers are being engaged in the process but the question is is the policy that eventually gets made...yes teachers were consulted but are we actually taking their advice.

He mentioned the topic of teacher pay following this statement and said that teachers are probably getting the opportunity to talk about how teacher pay should be raised but it does not look like that input has been considered in the Mississippi Legislature.

When we discussed what barriers, if any, were in place to prevent these voices from being heard, Toren stated that there are not any specific structural barriers in place within nonprofit work and the Department of Education. We moved into the discussion

surrounding teachers having a seat at the table when making policy decisions and he carried the conversation by stating that they should always be at the table.

The reason that I say that is that teachers are on the frontline of every issue in education...it all comes down to what is going on in the classroom with teachers and their students. And so on every education issue, these are our people that are on the frontline and they are going to have better insight and better advice than anybody else. You can find the smartest person in the world who has maybe been studying education policy all their life, but unless that person has recently been a teacher themselves they are not going to have as good of an insight into what is actually happening in the classroom as a teacher will be.

He followed this statement by acknowledging that even he, not being from Mississippi and being out of the classroom for four years now, should not be ignoring the voices of educators because things change quickly in a school setting and he needs to be talking to those who are currently in the profession. He claimed that nobody has a better insight into what problems are occurring and what solutions may fix those problems than a current teacher.

I next asked what difference he thinks it makes, working in the field of education policy, having been a teacher previously. Toren argued that it makes a big difference when that individual has teaching experience. Giving a little more perspective on what the ultimate impact of a policy may be, teachers have seen policies play out in their classrooms. Policies have been made and those who make them assume a lot of things in terms of what the impact will ultimately be, he claimed.

The only people who actually see that impact are people who are in the classroom or who have been in the classroom. Any teacher will tell you that you can come in with the best plans, whether it be a lesson plan for your students or a certain policy in a school, things don't always work out in real life in schools the way they are kind of planned to work out.

Next, we brought up the topic of teacher unions. Toren believes that teacher unions are a force for good. He did note that Mississippi bans collective bargaining and it is interesting to him because teacher unions are an important player to have at the table. Without teacher unions, he claimed, it is a lot harder for teachers to get their voices heard and negotiate points of concern. I followed this discussion with my last formal question, which was to what extent Toren believed his voice should influence education policy change in Mississippi. Being from a state other than Mississippi and not having been here for very long, he stated that he feels odd having his opinion count too much. He was not a teacher in Mississippi public schools so he believes his experience does not directly correlate with the experience of teachers here. Toren said his previous teaching experience does help him understand what it is like in the classroom but what he strives to do is talk to those who are from here, teachers who have taught in Mississippi and those who have lived their lives here.

The second interview I conducted was with Nancy Loome, who is the founder and Executive Director of MS Parents Campaign. She introduced herself by explaining her background and history when forming the MS Parents Campaign. Being a stay at home mom who was very involved in her children's education, she witnessed the impact of

high-quality teachers and the public school system on the lives of children in Mississippi. She was frustrated when she learned how her legislators were voting on public education issues so she started tracking bills, making connections with others with the same interest, and began notifying her community when important votes were coming up. After a few years of building steam, she was offered funding to incorporate as an organization with that driving purpose and MS Parents Campaign was founded in 2006. 65,000 Mississippians are currently registered to receive information from MS Parents Campaign.

Nancy started the questions off and stated that she has never been a public school teacher but has worked for a university at the administration level and taught some courses.

I was a parent who was so invested in the education of my children, all three of whom graduated from the public schools and got a terrific education. I'm an advocate and I've been an advocate since my children entered kindergarten.

I followed this statement by asking if Nancy had ever served on the school board for her children's school district. She explained that she was never on the school board but did serve on PTA boards, even the Mississippi PTA Board, but has never held an official position or served in a large capacity with a school district. The state of education policy in Mississippi is the next topic we explored. She claimed that there is both good and bad to the policies currently in place but she emphasized the idea that in the last eight years she believes we have taken some steps backward. She blamed some unfunded

mandates and lack of support and respect with those increased expectations for teachers, and this has consequently resulted in a statewide teacher shortage.

We honed in on the next question, which asked if she believes there is an absence or presence of educators influencing policy decisions. Nancy noted that in the past few years there has been legislative leadership that has actively tried to discourage educators from being involved. This leadership has worked to denote educators and make them, in some cases, even believe it was against the law to contact their legislators. Legislation was introduced, she stated, that would have made it against the law for educators, and even school board members, to contact their legislators, which is unconstitutional and would not have passed.

It had a real chilling effect on educators standing up for their students, which interestingly, their ethical standards call for teachers to advocate for their students. So it's interesting that there's been a real concerted effort to silence them and even to silence the organizations that represent educators.

She stated that there have even been pushes to silence organizations that represent educators, even by introducing laws that would have stripped funding. Following this conversation, I asked if she believed there were any barriers in place preventing educators from influencing policy decisions. When it comes to the local level, she claimed, it always depends on the district. Some value and encourage input from educators, while other districts are not promoting an environment where teacher's opinions are welcomed and valued. This is disappointing in her eyes because it is always beneficial to hear from those who have direct contact with students and parents.

The teachers are the ones who are on the frontline and they have a really valuable perspective to share.

I followed this discussion by asking to what extent she feels like an educator should be at the table when discussing policy reforms, which she quickly answered that they should be involved to every extent possible. Nancy noted that educators understand and do a better job articulating what the real impact of legislation has been on their classroom. She reiterated that state leaders are intentionally trying to intimidate educators and trying to keep them from being involved, which is unreasonable. With the new Lt. Governor, Nancy is hopeful that things will change.

If educators are not encouraged to come to the table, very often there are unintended consequences. Something may really sound like a great idea but in practice it just doesn't work. And teachers understand, they have a history working with children and parents, they understand, to some degree, how those things will have an impact.

When thinking about the possibility of legislators previously being teachers, Nancy argued that it would be very beneficial to have educators serve as legislators. They have a perspective that would benefit the policymaking process and they have a genuine concern about how that policy would affect children and parents.

Teacher unions were the next conversation and Nancy stated that she believes there is a role for them because there is a need for teachers to have a collective voice. She acknowledged that anytime someone is over a particular group, and someone in authority over them is not acting in their best interest, then there needs to be a platform for those

individuals, which are unions. Having mentioned the issue of collective bargaining in the state, she concluded with her belief that there is not someone who is really representing their interests and that teachers deserve an organization to provide them a chance at having a collective voice.

The final formal question was carried over from the educator interviews, which was if Nancy believed her opinion and voice should influence policy change in the state of Mississippi. She went back to the work MS Parents Campaign does and stated that she focuses on elevating the voices of Mississippians by getting them the information they need to make informed decisions. I was interested to find out if they do any work specifically with educators and she said that MS Parents Campaign will do presentations with any group. Additionally, they encourage those subscribed to their emails to respond and let them know what they are thinking.

Toren Ballard and Nancy Loome, two individuals working to influence education policy as a full-time job, were able to offer their perspective to the purpose of this research. Unfortunately, as previously stated, other numerous attempts to interview legislators, nonprofit workers, or those at the Mississippi Department of Education were unsuccessful. These responses will be connected thematically, along with the educators who were interviewed, in the following discussion chapter.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Policy Recommendations

For the purpose of this research, it is beneficial to take these interviews and organize the results based on emergent themes, which will result in potential policy recommendations and ideas for improvement. This chapter will use the research questions presented at the beginning of this research to synthesize the themes presented in the interviews. The original questions hinged on three central ideas: Is there an absence of educators affecting policies, and if so, why? What are the perceptions educators' of advocacy and engagement in laws passed regarding education? What, if any, barriers prevent educators' voices from influencing laws? These three questions will shape these emergent themes in the following sections, while addressing if the original hypotheses for each question were confirmed or disproven. This section will be followed by two separate sections addressing what policy recommendations these individuals brought forth and concluding policy recommendations that I am recommending.

Section 1: Absence of Educators Affecting Policies

The absence of educators affecting policy decisions was a central question to this research. Originally, there was a central hypothesis for this question and that predicted that both educators and those working in the government sector would agree that there is an absence of educators affecting Mississippi policy reform. Addressing why there is an absence, I hypothesized that maybe their absence is rooted in educators feeling like their voice is illegitimate or not welcomed in policy conversations. Another hypothesis

regarding the questions of “why” is that educators may not feel they have the tools or knowledge to be their own advocates for policy reform.

Overall, every candidate interviewed stated that there was an absence of educators affecting policy decisions. Most of the educators communicated a general feeling of absence and underrepresentation when it comes to those in the Legislature. An interesting divide in responses was between the more seasoned teachers and those in their first few years. Chad, Megan, and Zach all had similar input on this question. They all addressed a similar concern that they were not invited to the table as teachers, while Bailey and Jack Patrick broadly mentioned other ideas of educators moving into being legislators, influencing policy that way, and not really knowing how educators affect policy decisions.

When it comes to Torren and Nancy’s perceptions of this question, their input went hand in hand. They both spoke to the idea that they are being consulted, especially in their organizations, but they do not think their advice is being taken into consideration by the policymakers. Both of these individuals identified that teachers do provide the best input when it comes to analyzing how policy plays out in our classrooms. Overall, those in the educator subgroup did not believe educators were present at all in these decisions at a statewide level but no one, other than Zach, mentioned the presence that they do have in nonprofit, advocacy organizations, such as those run by Nancy and Torren. It seems like educators are being consulted within these organizations but they are not engaged at the statewide level with legislators. A simple lack of presence from these teachers is an important theme to not when looking at the connections made in the following sections.

Most of my original hypotheses were correct on this research question but the final hypothesis was not entirely correct. Educators did not directly mention a lack of political knowledge as a reason they are not engaged in policy reform. All in all, it is clear that there is a strong dialogue from both groups that educators are not present in these policy decisions.

Section 2: Educators' Perception of Advocacy and Engagement in Education Policy

The voices of Mississippi teachers, and how they are actively advocating for change, was the next question at the beginning of this research. My initial hypothesis was that legislators do not hear from educators, or hear valid and reasonable solutions rather than just complaints, enough to immediately turn to them for advice when faced with a policy concern. There is potentially a gap in communication due to an absence of avenues for educators to give their input beyond the walls of their schools. Initially, I hoped to discover a respect for educators but a lack of initiative when it comes to hearing their input on policy decisions. I hypothesized that teachers feel like their voices are not valued so they do not put forth an effort to advocate for any change.

Starting with the teachers, three out of the five pinpointed that they believe their voice holds weight and is considered within their schools and districts; however, they are not asked for their opinions at a statewide level. Jack Patrick noted that there is not a platform for teacher voices at the statewide level, which is echoing what other interviewees stated. Most importantly, these four educators did not identify efforts on their part to advocate and engage in the decisions being made at the statewide level.

Zach, on the other hand, was the only teacher to discuss his personal efforts to make his voice heard. He was the only teacher to have a personal call to action and desire to have his voice heard at the statewide level. All of these teachers connected to a theme that Zach mentioned and that is a “culture of silence” in the field of education.

Since teacher unions are a way for educators to advocate for change in other states, four out of the five teachers did not seem to have an understanding of what they look like, how they function, or what the role is of a teacher union. The only two teachers who knew that collective bargaining is illegal in Mississippi were Zach and Jack Patrick and the other teachers either assumed we had teacher unions or had a misconstrued idea of what they were. Most of the teachers had a positive or neutral stance when discussing teacher unions, except Zach who wished he could join one himself.

The other subgroup mainly identified that the lack of teacher unions is unfortunate because it could be a great way to elevate teachers’ voices. They both were aware of the collective bargaining law in place in our state, contrary to most of the teachers in the other subgroup. When it comes to the general efforts put forth by teachers to be heard, both of these candidates did have specific sentiments regarding this question. They generally both talked about what their organizations do to get those voices elevated but neither mentioned opinions or examples of educators advocating for change outside of what their respective organizations work to do.

When determining if my hypotheses were correct, only one teacher actually provided an example of contacting a legislator, which proves that most teachers I interviewed are not contacting their legislators. I had hoped to find a respect for educators

but a lack of initiative to listen to their input; however, I discovered that there may not even be respect for educators as a profession. In the end, the teachers felt like their voices are not valued so they do not advocate for change, which confirms my third hypothesis answering this question.

Section 3: Barriers that Prevent Educators' Voices from Influencing Laws

All interviews that were conducted involved a discussion that addressed if any barriers were present that are preventing educators' voices from influencing policy change. The original hypothesis was that interviewees in the government sector would address a few current barriers, such as the PERS account barrier, but that educators interviewed would not be able to identify any barriers. When it comes to teacher unions, I anticipated that both educators and those in the government sector would be aware of that ban and that educators would like that opportunity.

When the teacher subgroup was asked about this topic, everyone had something to say. Two out of five educators quickly brought up the law that requires government employees, including teachers, to forgo their PERS retirement account if they assume office. Four educators, including additional thoughts from Zach, alluded to an intimidating climate and general lack of opportunity to elevate their voices. The only specific barrier mentioned that is rooted in current policy is the PERs account barrier.

When asking the other subgroup in the study, Torren went to his work in the nonprofit sector and at the Mississippi Department of Education and said that there were no barriers in place within those organizations. Nancy, on the other hand, quickly

mentioned a policy, leaving out specific policy details, that were introduced in recent years which would make it illegal for teachers to contact legislators. This example connects with the climate of intimidation from elected officials that most of the educators identified in their interviews.

Surprisingly, a couple of educators actually pinpointed some barriers that are potentially limiting their influence; however, the majority of the teachers interviewed turned the conversation back to general comments about the lack of opportunity to voice their opinion. Educators also were not familiar with the absence of teacher unions in the state, which was not anticipated. Those in the government sector were fluent in the unionization rules for the state and one interviewee mentioned a couple of specific barriers.

Looking back at the argument based on interest group theory stated in the methodology portion of this thesis, this theory suggests that teachers would collectively or individually make their views known on policies. One could reasonably expect that educators would be engaged in this process, as a particular interest group, but this theory evidently does not hold true in Mississippi. Other professions, such as lawyers, doctors, and farmers, are frequently consulted when formulating policy decisions, proving their interests as a group are consulted; however, educators are not consulted before making Mississippi education policy. Based on these interviews, educators are not being treated as a profession worth consulting, which could be due to the lack of respect for the profession that teachers noted in this research.

Concluding these interviews and thematically connecting responses across the board, all of the initial research questions got substantial responses that call for further recommendations.

Section 4: Recommendations Brought Forth

Throughout the interviews in both groups, responses were often accompanied by ideas and recommendations for change. This section mainly focuses on recommendations that interviewees brought to the table. It is important to note that these recommendations are not necessarily policy recommendations; however, they are potential solutions to the problems these interviewees addressed.

Four out of the five teachers had specific ideas or examples for what should be done. One specific idea that was mentioned by Jack Patrick was the idea of a “Teacher Advisory Board” at the state level or within the Mississippi Department of Education. He thinks that this could provide educators the opportunity to voice their opinions in a formal setting. He noted that these could even be elected seats that are filled with experienced educators, those with certain minimum years of experience. Without specifically nailing down this idea, Megan mentioned the concept of bringing teachers together from all over to discuss their opinions on certain policies. Megan and Chad agreed that there should be a minimum threshold for years of teaching before voicing opinions at the statewide level, Megan even adding that these teachers should have higher degrees. All three of these teachers value experience before voicing any opinions, even Jack Patrick who is a first-year teacher.

During Zach's interview, he mentioned a handful of personal efforts that he works on to make sure his voice is heard. He talked about town halls in his own home where he invites teachers and legislators, whether they come or not, to talk about statewide education policies. He also talked about his experiences writing opinionated editorials for newspapers and simply talking about policy concerns with legislators. Zach was the only candidate interviewed that had specific examples of what he does to make sure his voice is heard. These examples serve as recommendations for what educators could do to make their opinions known.

Overall, these ideas from a handful of teachers prove that educators have valid and notable recommendations for what can be done to fix some of Mississippi's education concerns. The other subgroup did not offer specific recommendations, rather focusing on the work their organizations do elevate educator voices. These loose recommendations and overarching interviews that were conducted feed into the policy recommendations that will conclude this research in the following section.

Section 5: Policy Recommendations

A variety of experiences and perspectives from educators and government actors were brought together through a common set of questions during this research. After allowing them the opportunity to share their opinion on how educators interact with current education policies and those working to create those policies, some recommendations were made; however, looking at all of these interviews collectively, there are some policy recommendations that could alleviate some of their concerns.

The results of this study lead to two policy recommendations that could potentially remedy some of the concerns noted during interviews. These recommendations could alleviate some of the issues Mississippi is facing when educators interact with Mississippi education policy:

1. A clear, definitive policy on PERS accounts for previous state employees who are elected to the Mississippi Legislature. Based on the information presented in the background section of this thesis, it is clear that the debate surrounding PERS accounts is potentially preventing retired teachers from influencing statewide policy decisions. Two teachers interviewed also mentioned this current policy as a barrier to teachers' influence on state policy decisions. The Mississippi Legislature and PERS board should consider a policy change to allow retired state employees, specifically teachers, to run for the Legislature.
2. Teacher preparation programs at universities, specifically in Mississippi, should update school policies and add an expectation to educate teacher candidates on having a voice and influence in education policy. Noticing that one vocal teacher in this interview process had a law and policy background, I think introducing education policy in these preparation programs could create a new norm for teachers entering the Mississippi workforce.

These are two recommendations that can be extracted from the results of this study but the opportunity for this thesis to impact Mississippi classrooms, educators, and Mississippi education policy will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to discover if there are barriers that educators and government actors feel are in place that prevent educator advocacy and influence in the state of Mississippi, and consequently what importance their voices hold in the policymaking and implementation processes. There are three research questions that were answered during the interview phase of this research. The first question asked if there is an absence of educators affecting policies, and if so, why? As the interviews highlighted all of those interviewed thought that there was a fairly prevalent absence of educators impacting policy decisions.

The second question asked what are the perceptions of educators' advocacy and engagement in laws passed regarding education? Most of the interviewees noted that they did not feel they had a voice in policy decisions, were intimidated by elected officials, and that their voices were not valued or respected. Those from the government sector mainly noted that teacher unions could be a platform for educators to advocate for policies. On the other hand, a strong majority of the educators interviewed did not have a strong understanding of teacher unions or what they could potentially do for education policy. The majority of interviewees, except for one educator, did not offer any examples or specific answers to this question, other than commenting on feeling intimidated and undervalued by elected officials.

The third question asked what, if any, barriers prevent educators' voices from influencing laws? A substantial number of interviewees brought up the current issue of PERS accounts and forgoing pensions preventing previous state employees from running

for the Mississippi Legislature. A handful of educators brought the conversation back to the invalidation of their voices, with one candidate from the government sector mentioning a policy that was introduced to specifically limit educators from contacting state legislators. These interviewees alluded to a couple of ways that could potentially remedy these barriers, a state board of experienced educators and working with education policy nonprofit groups. One interviewee also provided concrete examples from his life on how educators can get engaged in advocacy efforts.

With a variety of responses, potential policy recommendations were offered for both the Mississippi Legislature and teacher preparation programs at universities across the state. These are just two policy recommendations from the interviews conducted but this research and the dialogue collected from these individuals could benefit both policymakers and educators in influencing education policy changes in the state of Mississippi. I intend to share these findings with Mississippi education advocacy groups and those interviewed in hopes that this conversation can inform policy and advocacy actions in the future.

Being a teacher entering a Mississippi public school in Fall 2020, I have gained numerous understandings from this research. There is a huge deficit of academic discourse addressing this topic, which confirms the value of the conversations documented in this thesis. There is a desperate call for educators, especially in Mississippi, to voice their experiences in the classroom and as a professional to advocate for changes they hope to see. I now see teacher advocacy as a facet of the teaching profession and my goal is to fulfill that call and be a voice for my students. My hope is

that this thesis topic, the dialogue revealed, and the recommendations identified will turn into conversations with educators at schools throughout Mississippi, even if that starts with fellow faculty members at my school this Fall. Education in Mississippi is a constant source of debate but my goal is that there will be one more educator at the table voicing their concerns, even if that educator is me.

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